



Linda's T'ai Chi Weekly Handout

January 31, 2021

Focus on the Foot Work

The T'ai Chi form is grounded in the feet and relies on solid but graceful footwork. We are constantly transferring our weight from the front foot (the forward foot) to the back foot (the angled foot). We use our feet to push off as we rock forward and back. This rocking motion is like the ebb and flow of the tide or the transition of day into night. As the sun begins to set, the light makes way for the darkness. This transition is seamless. Day becomes night and night becomes day in a gradual way. That is how we transfer our weight from one foot to the other; gradually and softly; seamlessly.

There is a lot of movement in this transfer of weight and the only way to ensure our footwork is not clunky or awkward is to understand the concept of empty and full. Master Yang Chengfu (1883-1936) called this the "first fundamental" of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. We are reminded that T'ai Chi is built from the feet upward. The hands and fingers are the expression but like a tree, our feet ground us and give us the stability needed to create the flow, stability and energy of T'ai Chi. The hands and fingers are the end of the story, not the beginning.

The full foot (the weighted foot) is considered Yin, because it is solid, stable and unmoving. It is also rooted into the Earth. The empty foot (weightless) is Yang, because it is active and able to move freely like the air. Your knee, chin, nose and eyes should always be over the full foot when the other is empty. Once you are clear on this important principle, and conscious of how one becomes the other and vice versa, you will never again move on a full leg or balance on an empty one. (A caveat: there are a few times that we pivot on the weighted foot like at the end of each section as we pivot from the 9 o'clock position to the 12 position. It is important however that we pivot on the heel and not the toe)

Starting in a bow stance, we shift our weight back and forth slowly, from one foot to the other, with one foot slightly in front of the other. Feel the sensation of weight pouring, like sand, from the full leg to the other, as one leg empties and the other fills. As you shift your energy from the full foot to the empty one, sink your body weight, and your Qi,

into the full leg until the empty foot has no weight on it. Though it doesn't have a proper name, teachers often call it empty step.

Once your foot is empty, you can safely pivot. To test if your foot is truly empty, you should be able to lift that foot without jerking, repositioning your body or falling. Everything above the waist should feel light and fluid, while everything below the waist should feel full and heavy. Sinking the Qi also promotes blood and energy circulation, while removing chronic tension from your daily movements. This takes time to feel so begin with "act as if."

When you step with an empty foot, you should feel your foot rooted to the ground below and determine whether or not there is stability. If the ground doesn't feel stable, you should move your foot to another position before you commit. Notice when you walk that your legs transition by shifting weight back and forth; from full to empty. Keep this in mind as you move through your form. As you become more comfortable with the principles of empty and full, begin feeling it in your arms and the rest of your body. It is more subtle than you might expect.

Of course, in Tai Chi, you are constantly shifting between empty and full. For example, in bow stance, the front leg is 70% full and the back leg is 30% full. As you shift your weight from full to empty, envision the transition from day to night and night to day. The transition is gradual. As you transition from one posture to another, the flow is like the gradual transition from day to night or like the transition from one season to another. If you use imagery as you perform T'ai Chi, your form will improve and your enjoyment as well.

A reminder of the bow stance:

1. Place your left foot at your 12 o'clock position.
2. Place your right foot at your 1- 2 o'clock position.
3. Make sure there is space between your heels. This is called the channel. You have the best stability in this stance.

Now, change feet. Place your right foot at the 12 o'clock position and your left foot at the 10-11 o'clock position. Make sure there is a channel between your heels for stability.

The bow stance is the safest and most stable for many of the activities we do- shoveling snow, leaves, standing for long periods of time.

If you continue to practice your balance improving exercises, you will also improve your weight shifting abilities.

"T'ai chi is grounded in the feet, controlled by the waist and expressed in the hands and fingers".

Peace,

Linda