

Three Practices to Improve Your T'ai Chi

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T'ai Chi has a number of well-known complimentary practices like *Shibashi* and *Qigong* to help improve your T'ai Chi and health outcomes.

Here are three lesser-known traditional and relatively easy to do adjunct practices to advance your T'ai Chi and wellbeing.

1-Hold a Specific Posture

Between each posture there is a cusp of moment when and where forces meet and Yin becomes Yang, or vice versa. This is referred to as the "t'ai point" and it is a moment of transition - a miniscule slice of time where your energy poles fully reverse direction, even as the flow of Yin and Yang continues its course.

Here's how to find the t'ai point in your T'ai Chi, and more.

- When doing a form, at the *completion* of any posture, simply stop and hold the final position. Check your alignment and weighting. Are you in a proper stance? Are you stable, balanced and grounded? Is your heart / mind (*shin*) engaged? Are your eyes looking in the proper direction? Are you stable and prepared for the next posture?
- Patiently hold the posture for as long as it takes for you to feel your body comfortably adjust to an easy, static, rooted position. When ready to continue to another posture, make sure you feel the oncoming body position, foot unweighting, where to go etc., and then visualize moving into the next posture before continuing.

2-Standing

Standing still for extended periods in a proper physical alignment is as ancient as T'ai Chi itself and can really up ones internal energy while building strength. In T'ai Chi, the Chinese name for standing is *zhan zhuang*.

Standing has a purposeful goal: creating physical, emotional and mental stillness; by rooting deeply to the earth's gravity, while simultaneously extending your energy to the stars above, using proper body alignment for optimal energy flow.

Ancient Taoists believed that humans are uniquely capable of this powerful connective work, as without a human physical body to use as a go between, this kind of universal energy convergence would not be possible. As the paternalistic Chinese might say, it's "man (*ren*) connecting heaven (*yang*) and earth (*yin*)".

Counter intuitively, a rooted and aligned body, standing still with a quiet mind over extended periods of time, *creates a great deal of energy movement* in the body. The longer you stand, the more energy and strength is returned to you. For health purposes, a fifteen minute to one half hour session can bring noticeable results over time. Standing forty five minutes to an hour or longer can greatly improve martial arts performance. It's not as easy as it may seem – start with a short duration, say a minute or two, and then extend your standing time longer as you progress.

Here is a traditional Taoist "Iron Shirt" Qigong standing exercise called "Embracing the Tree". (Figure 1). You can also do this posture with the hands at your sides, with either palms facing forward or backward. Be sure to leave a small space between your arm pits and body and keep the scapula rounded when experimenting with different arm positions.

- Stand still with feet comfortably apart at about shoulder width.
- Tilt the hips forward slightly by gently tucking in your tail bone without out clenching your buttocks.
- Relax your lower back (*song yao*).
- Relax your pelvis (*song kua*).
- Soften the knees and feel your feet connect with the ground like roots of a tree spiraling into the earth.
- Open some space between your inner thighs and pelvis
- Make sure your back is basically straight (one can employ a gentle backwards thrust at the T11 vertebrae to assist with straightening the lower back (Figure 1). A wall may can initially be used to get awareness of a flattened spine, but the stand itself should not utilize a wall for support).

- Relax your shoulders (*chen jian*) and round the scapula (shoulder blades).
- Drop your elbows (*chui zhou*).
- Tuck the chin in slightly (slight backwards thrust at C7 vertebrae).
- Feel a light energy rising to the top of your head (*Xu Ling Ding Jin*).
- Extend both arms outward, creating a circle of space in front of the chest - like wrapping your arms around a big tree trunk - with relaxed fingers pointing closely at each other but not touching.
- Focus the eyes softly forward so that you can see both the tip of your nose *and* your fingertips. Imagine and feel energy flowing through your arms and between your fingertips like a mild electrical current.
- Clear your mind and breathe softly through the nose while allowing your body to naturally relax and sink into the standing posture - from the top of your head (*bahui* point) all the way to the bottom of your feet (*yongquan* point). Feel your energy moving downward towards the earth in this basic practice by beginning at the top of your head and feeling the body relaxing and floating downward.
- Stand for as long as you can comfortably do so and remain in the moment. Keep the body aligned and keep the shoulders and elbows relaxed.
- If you lose alignment or simply “space out”, check your position, breathe, settle in and begin again, dissolving downward from top to bottom.
- When finished standing, take a few deep, cleansing breaths and walk around a bit to help circulate your energy.

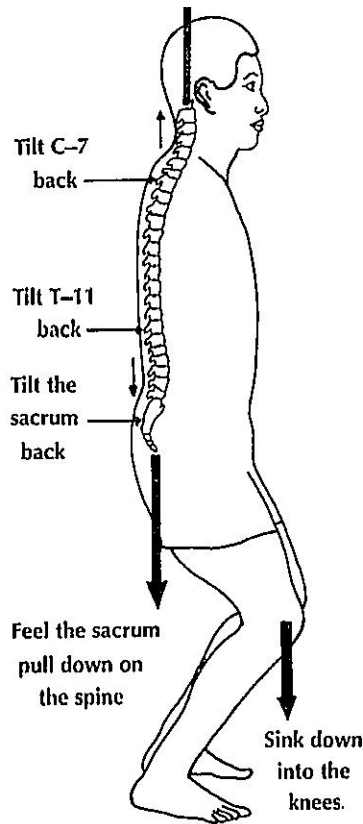
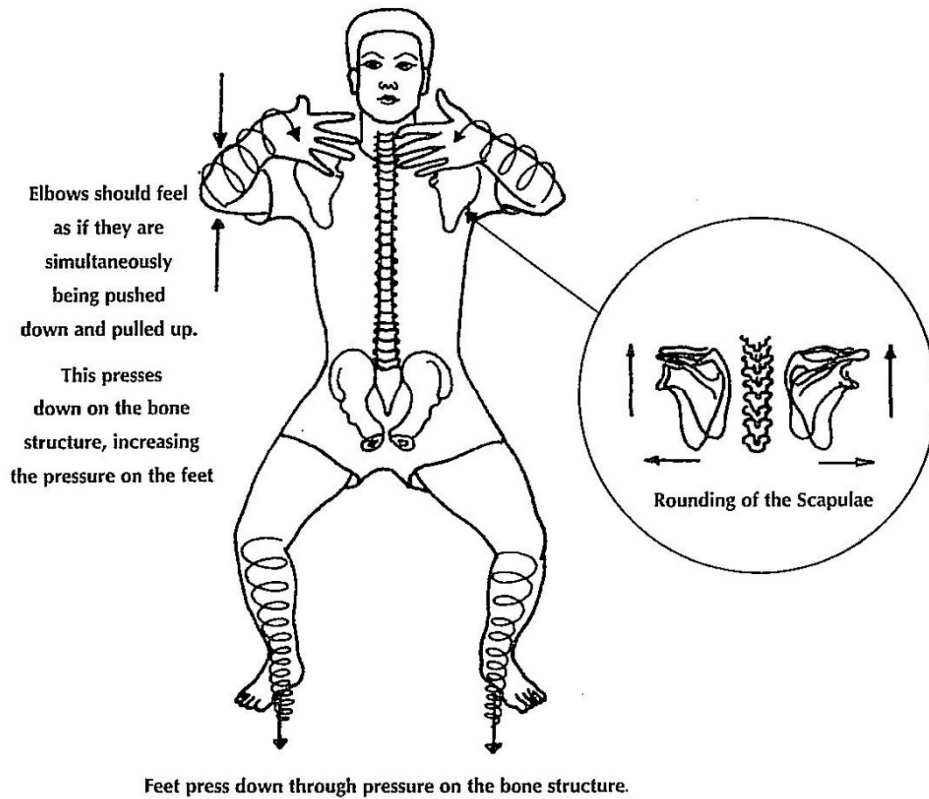


Figure 1
 Embracing the Tree
 Image courtesy Mantak Chia

3-Walking in a Circle

Walking is one of the best physical exercises you can do, and for millennia prior to domestication of beasts of burden, walking was the only practical mode of human transportation. Our bodies are literally built for walking. While walking is healthy, simple, practical and efficient, finding space to walk a meaningful distance can be difficult, especially indoors, or if safety or weather while outdoors is a concern. Circle walking allows one to cover a great distance in a limited area.

Circle walking was created in Taoist monasteries and is older than classical T'ai Chi, dating back over 4,000 years. Circle walking is the progenitor of today's internal martial art called *ba gua chang*, and the people who created *ba gua* made circle walking core to developing their external health and highly-regarded internal strength and fluidity of movement.

Circle walking improves both external and internal balance, relaxes the nerves and creates great stamina. Walking the circle is a complete and ultimately powerful meditation and there are myriad ways to perform the walking actions. Curious students can find many examples of circle walking on the internet.

Here are a few guidelines to help get you started with basic circle walking and get you walking more!

- The circle size one walks really doesn't matter and can be adjusted to fit an allowed space, or can be determined by how much turning and twisting one wants to do to stay on a circular path. Walking larger circles is easier than smaller circles, yet walking smaller circles brings up a greater vortex of energy from the earth and creates deeper internal spirals and energy development. The walking practice for beginners typically contains about 12-16 full steps to complete the circle. (Figure 2). You can mark the center of the circle visually in your mind or place an object in the center to refer to as you move around it. Once again, the size of the circle and number of steps to get around it are flexible. Just walk!
- You walk the circle using either a typical "heel-toe" T'ai Chi step, or a somewhat more difficult step called "mud walking". The heel to toe step is more appropriate for those whose balance is poor, or have lower back problems. This method is also essentially the same as everyday walking

making it more natural for most people. The mud walking step involves the unweighted forward-moving foot skimming forward just above the ground, like slipping on a muddy surface, before the forward flat foot plants and the weight shifts to the forward leg. In either stepping style, the weight is fully transferred to the forward leg before the rear leg moves.

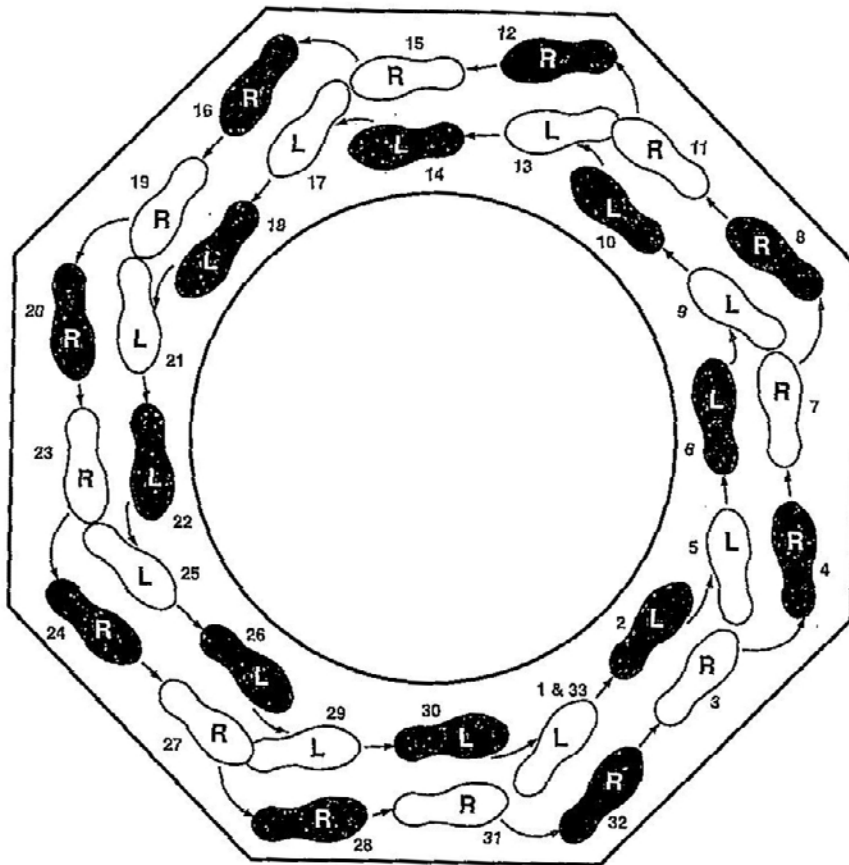


Figure 2 –beginner’s circle walking

The octagon shows walking a beginner’s 16-step counter-clockwise circle. The left foot is on the inside of the circle, the right foot is on the outside of the circle. A black footprint represents a foot touching the ground. A white footprint represents a foot off the floor and moving forward. Step 1 is the beginning of the exercise. Step 33 is the first step of the next time around the circle.

(Ref. B.K. Frantzis)

- There are many foot placement variations employed in advanced circle walking but the basic stepping shown in Figure 2 is a great place to start (you can also step in a straight line if you wish, but walking in a circle is better).
- The tip of your inside shoulder should point towards the center of the circle. There are specific arm and hand positions employed in advanced practices, but in general the arms and hands extend across and away from the body towards the center of the circle, without locking the elbows. Your arms should remain extended towards the center of the circle as you walk, shoulders relaxed, with the hands consistently attentive to the center of the circle as you move around it. Keep the head up and the spine straight. Breathe naturally and easily through the nose.
- Pay strict attention to your feet and the space they move through, but avoid looking at the ground too much. This will slowly lead you into a meditative state as you walk. As you walk the circle more and more, your mind will begin to slow down and become quieter.
- The walking direction may be reversed after completing one circuit around, or you can continue in a single direction for a longer or shorter period before reversing directions. Avoid becoming dizzy from continually walking in one direction too much. How long you walk is up to you.
- At the end of your circle walking, slowly come to a stop, let your hands come in front of your belly and let your mind become as still as it can. Let your energy concentrate in your belly until it feels like it is filling with energy. When the energy in your belly becomes calm, you have completed the basic circle walking meditation.