

The Four Principles of Tai Chi Walking

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The Sword Master Who Could

To emphasize the importance of mind focus in Tai Chi Walking, I want to tell you the story of a modern Japanese sword master. In his middle nineties he was still working out, sparring and teaching his art to much younger students. He explained that in his sixties he noticed that his legs were weakening. By his seventies he realized that he had to do something to slow the decline of his muscle strength. He began to pay more attention to his mind as a means to discipline his body. He found that the power of his mind could compensate for the loss of muscle strength. It worked. Even at his advanced age, he moved with incredible grace and power.

You can also employ your mind to improve your balance and your ability to walk. So what do I mean by ‘Mind Focus?’

1. Mind focus

Tai Chi principles using mind focus can help you walk better. For example, the Tai Chi practitioner moves with a concentrated focus on the way his or her body moves, from the shifting of weight to the suspension of the head. This means that Tai Chi is practiced with an ‘internal awareness’ springing from the active participation of the mind’s eye.

Everyone has this internal awareness. When you feel pain, for example, you know exactly where it is located. The conscious mind not only has the ability to focus on certain areas of the body, it can also direct the body in the way it moves. To use mind focus, you must look inside yourself to find the answers that will improve your ability to walk. This is a great challenge but well worth the effort. These exercises will take time and of course practice. However, internal awareness with the mind’s eye is achievable for everyone.

2. Upright Body

As we move in Tai Chi, we try to keep the body upright, meaning vertical between the ceiling and the floor. This is the unique way in which human beings were made. When done correctly, an upright posture permits people to move at peak efficiency. The image often used in Tai Chi is that of a string gently lifting the head and neck toward the sky. In this way the spine eventually finds its natural balance, which has two positive results.

- 1) When the spine is vertically balanced, it relieves the back muscles from the stress of overworking. This reduces back pain.
- 2) When the body is properly balanced, it is less likely to topple and crash to the floor. This assumes that the legs are sufficiently strong to support the body and is the reason why you also need to strengthen your legs using the exercises in the previous chapter.

3. Weight-Separation

Weight-separation using mind focus is another important principle. This means that the Tai Chi mover is constantly aware of the way in which his weight shifts from one leg to the other. We do this with our mind’s eye. Weight-separation in the following walking exercises strengthens the legs and reinforces the leg strengthening exercises of the previous chapter. It also improves balance by providing you with a solid connection to the floor and teaches you where you have balance problems in shifting your weight from one leg to the other. These dangerous points on the weight-

shifting continuum are precisely where you are most likely to fall.

Weight-separation can also point out that one leg is weaker than the other and that the weaker leg then requires more concentrated work. Weight-Separation and the discipline of 'checking,' which you will learn in the third exercise, will teach you to lift your feet higher when you walk. This will help to prevent tripping on uneven surfaces. Once you have identified your particular problems, you can begin to overcome them through mind focus and diligent practice.

4. Slow is Best

Tai Chi weight-separation is done very slowly with focused concentration. It should never be hurried. The reason is that weight-separation is a learning technique. As you slowly shift the weight from one leg to the other, you are identifying problems with your walking and working on solutions. It's not about getting from one point to another but rather each point along the way is equally as important as the beginning or the end of your walk. Slowing down will help you to remain focused on your walking. Going too fast and a lack of concentration are often the causes for serious falls.

Practical Walking Principles

1. Wear shoes that fit comfortably and promote balance. Look for shoes that are stable from side to side and are well-cushioned. They should enable you to walk smoothly and comfortably and provide you enough room to wiggle your toes while being snug in the heels.
2. When you step forward, always step with the heel first. Then roll your weight onto the bottom of your foot. This is the natural way to walk. If you can't do this, then you need to ask for a diagnosis from your physician or physical therapist. If you are stepping with the flat part of the foot or the ball of the foot first, you will be unbalanced with each step.
3. Allow your weight to sink into your ankles and knees as if they were springs. This will impart a sense of buoyancy to your body as you walk. If your knee and ankle joints are held in a rigid or locked position, your gait will lose its fluidity and thus increase the probability of falling.
4. As you walk, be aware of the shifting of weight - Tai Chi Walking
5. Walk from your belly button. The Chinese call this area, Tan-Tien (pronounced "Dahn T-yen"). It is approximately the center of the body and the storage place of Chi energy. Imagine that you have a belt around your body with a piece of it extended out from your belly button. When you walk, allow yourself to be gently led as if someone was pulling the extended piece of belt. Remember that this is only an image. You should not walk with your belly sticking out. No one from the outside should know that you are using this image.
6. Walk with an Upright Body. The idea of your headtop being lifted toward heaven by a string is an important image in Tai Chi Walking. It works against the tendency to lean. When you lean, you are likely to fall in that direction.
7. Before you change direction, first turn your head and look in the direction you want to go. Then turn your body in that direction. Many falls occur when turning too fast.
8. The arms should swing naturally at the sides of the body. This is important because the arms provide balance and momentum. If they are held in the pockets, they cannot be used to prevent or to cushion a fall.

9. Breathe deeply in a natural way to relax the body. A stiff body is like a pole ready to topple over. Breathing deeply will also mitigate the mental fear factor.