

TEACHING TIPS FOR TEACHERS

(Also Valuable For Students)

by Justin Stone

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The purpose of this material is to help T'ai Chi Chih teachers spot what mistakes pupils are making and to offer ideas as to how these faults might be corrected. It is absolutely essential that teachers be aware of what is wrong and know how to make corrections — otherwise the students will never get the full benefit of their practice. Moreover, it is entirely possible that the teachers, unknowingly, are making some of these mistakes in their own practice.

The material will probably be useful to students as well, enabling them to note their own errors and consider the hints as to how these might be corrected. Once the student is doing T'ai Chi Chih correctly, and practicing regularly, it is only a question of time before the student begins to realize the deeper aspects of T'ai Chi Chih and accord with the essence of the discipline. Then, it is hoped, he or she might be enabled to enter and accord with the great Cosmic Rhythm. What could be more important — or beneficial?

General Comments:

Two things must be realized at the beginning of study, and must be stressed by teachers:

(1) T'ai Chi Chih is not to be thought of as exercise, even though I believe it is the most beneficial of all types of movement, exercising the internal organs and circulating and balancing the great Life Force we know as *Chi*, or Vital Force. Exercise brings perspiration and fatigue, while T'ai Chi Chih practice seems to *add* to energy. It certainly does not cover one with sweat! If one runs a mile or two, the perspiration that ensues will probably bring weight loss. The runner steps on the scale and smiles, because he or she has dropped three pounds. Then a glass of water is consumed (and, later, a meal) and it will be found that the weight has returned. Weight loss through T'ai Chi Chih practice is accomplished through the drying activity of the *Chi* circulation, not through a Turkish bath procedure. If the weight is excessive, it tends to be reduced gradually through the flowing of the *Chi* and this without

effort. Most experienced T'ai Chi Chih teachers have seen many examples of this effect, sometimes with decisive benefits to the students. Also, T'ai Chi Chih is not a martial art, with the strenuous effort of throwing someone through the air or delivering a harmful chop with the hand. The teacher should stress that T'ai Chi Chih is an *inner* discipline, with great outer effects, and tends to bring about relaxation, lessening of stress, and a growing feeling of serenity. If a student wants violent action, T'ai Chi Chih is not the discipline for him or her. Most people, however, seem to want a lessening of the stress of modern life and a growing feeling of physical well-being. The effects of T'ai Chi Chih practice are very compatible with a loving, not a combative, nature.

(2) It is all-important that the student be taught how to move correctly. From the very beginning teachers note whether the student is doing the movements softly (with "the effort of no effort") and with continuity – no stopping and starting, or hesitation, during the movements. Beyond this there is the delicate matter of balance. As the emphasis goes from the back leg to the front leg – from the substantial (*yang*) back leg to the front leg, which gradually becomes substantial (*yang*) – the body weight must shift *gradually* at the same speed as the arms move. Many students shift their weight quickly and suddenly and then move the arms to catch up. This is a serious mistake. It is particularly noticeable in the different forms of "Pulling Taffy." If the weight has switched rapidly to the front or side foot, and the hands lag behind, it very often results in *both* knees being bent, so both legs are *yang* (substantial) at the same time and there is no *yin* leg. (Then how can we balance the *Chi*?) The same is true in moving from front to back, or returning to the original side. Teachers, particularly new teachers, seldom give thought to this shift of weight before they begin to teach. It is necessary, in one's own practice, to understand the fundamentals of this shift and then look for mistakes on the part of pupils. It is assumed that an accredited teacher does the movements correctly; students will tend to imitate what the teacher does in the way that he or she does them. More experienced teachers realize these matters, but they, too, can be subject to carelessness in their own movements, and also overlook such faults on the part of their students. In some cases a demanding teacher can be better than a "kind" one (one who overlooks errors), and the student will usually appreciate special attention from the teacher. T'ai Chi Chih students tend to be sincere aspirants, and they usually expect teachers to correct them.

The teacher might want to explain why T'ai Chi Chih is done softly, without effort. The meridian channels in the body are the passages through which the *Chi* (Vital Force or Intrinsic Energy) flows. The importance of these channels can easily be understood from this example: Chinese physicians now routinely perform painless operations *without* anesthesia. They know that the various meridian channels connect in the ear, and Chinese "anesthetists," using needles, can reach any part of the body, external or internal, through a simple twist of the needle in the patient's ear. This is not theory; it is being done every day, and it shows the importance of the meridian channels. Tension causes them to contract, and the *Chi* cannot flow freely when the channels are constricted. With T'ai Chi Chih practice the *Chi* does flow freely, and the movements of T'ai Chi Chih are designed to balance the *yin* and *yang* (negative and positive energies) while helping the *Chi* to flow. This is the essential purpose of T'ai Chi Chih practice, and represents one of the great secrets of life. It is very well known in Indian Yogic circles, where the *Chi* is referred to as *Prana*. In many of my books I refer to the all-importance of the *Chi*, which is the force through which we are created and sustained, and, through T'ai Chi Chih, we have the power to balance and greatly enhance this Life Force. The Indian sage, Sri Aurobindo, said, "If the Universe was abolished, this *Chi (Prana)* would have the power to create a new universe!"

I want to stress to the teacher the importance of the wrists, the knees, and the waist. When a student walks through the door I can tell the degree of tension he or she is carrying by looking at the wrists and the waist. If they are free and easily pliable, there is little internal stress. But stiff wrists and waist mean internal problems, and both wrists and waists must be loose and pliable in order to do T'ai Chi Chih correctly.

Watch to see that the student does not use her shoulders to get out of turning from the waist. And be sure the knees bend as much going back as they do going forward. Also, most movements are done primarily with the wrists, not the arms, with elbows sometimes remaining close to the sides, as in "Passing Clouds." When doing "Carry the Ball to the Side," many students keep their wrists locked and do the movements with arms and shoulders, with considerable effort. Watch for this, and see that the wrists are loose and that the waist turns readily. Of course, it is necessary to stress that the torso – the top of the body – does little, remaining straight (and not leaning forward or back), as though suspended from the ceiling by wires, much in the manner of a puppet. T'ai Chi Chih is done primarily below the waist, not with the upper body. The

breathing is natural, not contrived. And don't let the student ask intellectual questions as to "why?" this is done in this manner – there is no end to such questions – and the benefits of T'ai Chi Chih come from *doing* it, not questioning it or trying to understand "why?" To practice is all-important, to discuss aimlessly is a waste of time. Be firm about this.

The soles of the feet are very important in the study of T'ai Chi Chih. They are called the "*Hsueh*" ("Bubbling Spring"); I think of them as the "Fountain of Youth."

It is important that the teacher emphasize the advisability of putting one's attention in the soles of the feet while performing T'ai Chi Chih. The soles of the feet are connected to the *tan t'ien*, two inches below the navel, by a central meridian channel. Concentrating on the *tan t'ien* is difficult, whereas concentration on the soles of the feet is easy and tends to focus the student's mind while moving; it is not good to have the mind wandering around aimlessly while doing T'ai Chi Chih. Of course, there are more important reasons for this focus, having to do with the circulation of the *Chi*, and such concentration has real healing powers.

So, from time to time, the teacher must remember to remind the students of such concentration, and to remember to use it himself or herself. Just saying it once will have no effect at all. Actually, repetition is an important part of good teaching.

Movements are usually done in sequences of nine – such as 9, 18, 36, etc. It is not necessary to do them this way, however; some students might want to allot a certain time to each movement. The Chinese believe that "9" is a lucky number, but I often use "12" or "6," depending on the situation.

Seldom, if ever, are the arms fully extended. In doing such movements as "Daughter on the Mountain Top," it will be noted that the arms are bent at the elbows, and the crossing of hands does not take place far from the face. If the student is seen to extend the arms too much, explain it is not necessary, and might lead to the student bending forward or to the side, instead of keeping the torso straight up and down as explained above.

T'ai Chi Chih is "Joy Thru Movement" not drudgery. Attitude is all-important. If a student is having great difficulty with a movement, tell him or her, "No sweat. Just skip that movement and do the others." (This doesn't apply if he or she intends to eventually take Teacher Training.) There is great room for laughter and joy in T'ai Chi Chih practice, and the power of group *Chi* is felt by almost everybody in group T'ai Chi Chih practice.

All these points are necessary in preparing students for T'ai Chi Chih lessons and in guiding him or her as classes progress. There

is more to teaching T'ai Chi Chih than simply teaching where to place the hands and feet!



An extremely important point to emphasize is "swimming through very heavy air" (without effort), a seeming contradiction. If the student feels that he or she is "exercising," the movements may be rushed, particularly on the back swing. The true feeling is one of swimming through heavy air, and, if this is done slowly and evenly, the maximum benefits can be attained. This is part of teaching the student how to move correctly, and the teacher should repeat this instruction from time to time during the course of the lessons.

The Movements And Their Keys (Or, what to look for):

We open T'ai Chi Chih with the simple "**Rocking Motion**" movement, one of the two so-called "preliminaries." Swinging the hands up, we rise on the balls of the feet, which is not difficult to do. When we turn the hands over and come down, we should first come down to flat feet, *then* raise our toes to give the same effect as rocking back on our heels. The reason for this is obvious: the teacher will find that most students will lose their balance if they try to rock back on their heels without first flattening the feet. The teacher should be able to demonstrate this to the students. Be sure they can see you plainly, particularly the positions of your feet. This is important.

The second so-called "preliminary" movement is "**Bird Flaps Its Wings**," usually a favorite with new students. The hands flap out rapidly, but they come together, with the palms facing each other, slowly — the polarity of the two hands approaching each other is important. The teacher should watch carefully to see that, in moving the hands to the side, the knees not only bend but bend quite a bit to the side. If the student fudges on the movement, and the knees scarcely go out to the side, the student will not get the full benefit of the movement. Practically all students can bend the knees outward, in varying degrees. Of course, the teacher must never ask a student to do more than he or she can comfortably do, particularly if the student is overweight or well along in years. T'ai Chi Chih is "Joy Thru Movement," and the student must never be asked to strain or attempt more than he or she can do comfortably.

The third movement, "**Around the Platter**," is a great favorite and easy to do. Remember that the platter is round. Some students develop the habit of swinging out to the side and then coming back straight down the middle; they do not know they are doing it. The circle should look like

this  and not this . You should extend as much on the far side as you do on the near side. Be sure to notice if the student is cutting the circle short and coming straight back; then correct it. It is not necessary to swing far to the side, but both sides must be equal.

Also, be sure the student goes forward to a *bent* knee and comes back to a knee that is bent just as much – actually, it means sinking down on the knee as the weight shifts to that knee. If there is physical disability, of course, then the student should be told to do the best he or she can.



The next movement, "**Around the Platter Variation**," begins with the student forming a ball as the circle starts. The hands are not placed to hold a ball before the movement begins, but form the ball as the circle begins. This is important. If the hands begin the movement already holding the ball, it would eliminate one circle. Done properly, there is a circle within a circle: the small circle comes from the forming of the ball, and the large circle is the movement of the hands and wrists around the platter, which is round.

"**Bass Drum**" comes next, and it is one of the simplest movements. The hands are held about a foot apart, with the palms facing each other. The wrist circles are performed mostly with the wrists, not the arms. There is little chance of error in the performance of this movement, except that the student may move his or her hands farther apart or closer together, whereas they should stay at approximately the same distance apart. The student will usually note that the early T'ai Chi Chih movements are relatively simple, with movements progressively becoming more intricate, though not really difficult, as the practice continues.

"**Daughter on the Mountain Top**" is a great favorite. It should be explained that we start "low" because we are going "high." Again, the movement is done mostly with the wrists, not very far from the chest (we do not extend way out so that it is the arms that are moving). After the two hands cross and start to come down, the fingers still point upward until the last minute, when we begin the next swing. Some students have the tendency, when the hands cross, to then point the fingers down and to make arrows of the hands. This is not correct. As the hands come down the wrists are still cocked and the fingers point upward as the elbows swing out slightly to the sides.



When doing this "Daughter" on the right side (right foot forward), the student may ask why the right hand *still* crosses in front of the left, as it did when the left foot was forward. The

proper answer is, "Yes, the right hand crosses outside the left, which is closer to the body." This does not answer the question. There is no end to such "why" questions, and the teacher would be wise not to try to explain. Again, remember that the benefits come from the *doing*, not the discussing.

"**Daughter in the Valley**" begins "high" because we are going "low." Some students mistakenly bring their hands up the side, waiting almost to the top of the arc to bring them together . This negates the important polarity of the two hands rising close together, the palms facing each other . This latter way is correct. Many students begin to move their weight back, toward the rear leg, before the two hands reach the top of the arc. Actually, the weight continues shifting forward until the top of the arc is reached; then, as the hands swing out to the side, the weight begins to settle back. Teachers should watch to see that the weight does not begin to switch back until the hands swing out to the side, and the teachers might well check their own form to see if they are doing it properly.

"**Carry the Ball to the Side**" is one of the more complicated movements, though not difficult. First of all, it is done primarily with the wrists, not the arms. Since this is the first movement that uses the T'ai Chi sideways step, the teacher should demonstrate this step before teaching the movement. The foot snakes out to the side, toes pointed out, and the knee bends slightly. The foot then comes down on the heel (not flat on the foot), with the foot quickly flattening out. Don't let the student get in the habit of just falling to the side. After each sideways step, as the hands come to the side in the "rest" position, be sure the knees are slightly bent. All through the series of movements it is necessary to make sure the student bends the knees and does not do "stiff-leg" T'ai Chi Chih.

Only when the student has learned the entire movement should the matter of emphasis be taught. As we move to the left, the emphasis is on the right hand, but, as we bring the hands over the top and back to the right, there is no emphasis. It is important to understand this. After we have done the three steps to the left and begin to move back to the right, the emphasis is naturally on the left hand, as described above. Do not forget to teach this emphasis and change of emphasis; it is an important part of the movement.

In doing "**Push Pull**" we do not push straight ahead. The hands dip slightly—not way down, as some do—then come up again as we near the end of the forward push. Thus, from the side, the movement looks like this  and not like this .

It is important to explain that, with the left foot forward, we emphasize the right hand as we push forward (but remember, there is no emphasis when we pull back). It is 60% right hand, 40% left hand. When the right foot is forward, naturally it is 60% left hand, 40% right hand. But remember, not as we pull back, when there is no emphasis.

"Pulling in the Energy" is simply "Around the Platter" upside down, with one important exception. The student visualizes great energy coming in to the finger *tips* (not the hands or full fingers) from the most distant star. This will greatly enhance the flow of energy. It is not necessary to explain about the different colored Pranas, etc. that the teacher has read about in the Teachers' Training Manual. This move has great power. One time the writer and a top student performed this movement for a considerable time, and both felt a great stimulus in the heart, almost like a shock.

"Pulling Taffy," all four variations, may be the most difficult movement to teach, but that is often the teacher's fault. It must first be stressed that the movement of the upturned hand is horizontal. Some students want to make a graceful dance movement out of the pull, gradually raising the upturned under-hand while bending both knees and turning sideways. This may be a graceful dance movement, but it certainly is not T'ai Chi Chih!

The upturned hand moves to the side, still upturned, after the two hands have crossed in the taffy pull. That move started with the upturned hand going to the opposite elbow *past* the top hand; from there the pull begins. Many start the movement with the two hands together, and this does not allow for the pull that ensues as the two hands cross each other.

As the hand pulls to the side, *both* feet remain flat on the ground. Many have the tendency to raise the back leg's heel in a graceful gesture, but the back foot actually remains as flat as does the front foot. Teachers must check on this. Also, be sure the student does not shift the weight too quickly; the weight should shift in direct coordination with the pulling hand, and no faster.

The hand that has the palm turned down pulls to the side and slightly down so that it finishes alongside the back leg, palm turned down. Actually, this is the substantial hand in order to balance the Yang leg, the one that supports the weight at the end of the movement.

Once the student understands how the basic "Pulling Taffy" movement is performed, the three variations should be easy to learn.

In the first variation, "**Pulling Taffy, Variation #1, Anchor**," we turn the body to the right and step forward, but the back leg does not turn, so we are pigeon-toed. Then, when we come back to the starting position, the back leg is already in place for the basic pull to the side.

"**Pulling Taffy, Variation #2, Wrist Circles**" finds us circling the wrists, two full turns and then a half turn, starting our sideways pull from the top of the circle. It is easy for students to rise on their toes for the first two circles, then to remain flat on the feet for the third half-twirl and the pull on the side, but the teacher must watch carefully to see that the students do remain flat on their feet the third time. As with all "Pulling Taffy" movements, look to see that the student does not make an exaggerated turn to the side with the head. Some students want to do a stiff-legged "Pulling Taffy," compensating with the head and the hands, and this is incorrect.

"**Pulling Taffy, Variation #3, Perpetual Motion**" may be a little difficult for the teacher to explain in words, and it will be much easier to teach it by demonstration. After the first pull to the side by the upturned hand, the opposing hand sweeps over to the other side, moving past the upturned hand, and then the two reverse roles. The key here lies in the turn of the waist, which sweeps the down-turned hand across, setting up the pull to the other side. Do not let the student rush any of the movements, and remind him or her to swim through heavy air. Keeping the knees bent all through the "Pulling Taffies" will make the movement look much better; a low "Pulling Taffy" gives a much better appearance.

"**Working the Pulley**" is a wonderful "exercise" for the waist. On the left side, the student starts by pushing forward the left hand as the body turns right from the waist; then, as the left hand pulls back and the right hand pushes forward, the torso (waist up) turns nearly 180 degrees to the left so it is facing the left side, not facing forward as careless students are apt to do. The turn is completely to the opposite side, not facing forward, but in the opposing direction. Also, it should be stressed that the hand that is pulled back, palm up, comes back in a horizontal line at the waist or slightly above it. Then the hand pulls back slightly *behind* the body and comes up and over the shoulder (not way out to the side) in a swimming motion. The ending will have to be taught by demonstration, so that the two hands come down together. The movement can be ended either by stepping forward or stepping back, but most teachers prefer to do it and teach it by stepping back.

"**Light at the Top of the Head**" is done softly. After the hands above the head swing out and back three times, the two hands are *slowly* twirled to the count of six (silent count), and then held stationary for a count of six, before swinging out again. On the descent to the "rest" position, be sure the right hand goes under the left.

"**Joyous Breath**" is the only movement done with pressure, creating tension. After pushing down into the ground on an out-breath, we pull up to the chest, rising on the toes, with a *deep* in-breath. Then, after a very short pause (do not keep the student standing on the balls of the feet!) we come down stopping at four levels, each time breathing out more of the breath. By the time we are flat on the feet, with turned- down hands along the legs, all the breath should have been exhaled. I have known students who like to do this movement at the beginning of practice, before "Rocking Motion," and there is nothing wrong with that.

The key to "**Passing Clouds**" is to bring the hand sweeping low close to the opposing elbow. The elbows are held close to the side all through the movement; do not allow a wild, free-form waving of the hands. Naturally the sweeps are close to the face and the body, and the lower hand is almost fully extended toward the ground.

It may be easier for the teacher to work with one hand at a time, then putting them together in the opposing circular motion. Be sure the weight shifts from side to side. Do not allow the student to anchor the legs, then stand rigid and straight as the hands and arms do the work. The "yinning and yanging" of the legs is all important, with both feet flat on the ground.

It should be explained to the student that the sounds of "**Six Healing Sounds**" are from ancient China and certainly did not originate with this writer, though the movements to which the sounds are set did begin here. It is not important that the student know which sound belongs to which internal organ. Actually, there is some controversy over one or two of the sounds, almost inevitable when we consider how long these sounds have been passed down by word of mouth. They were kept for really sincere seekers.

We push out and breathe (not shout) the sounds vigorously, aspirating them rather than saying them with the vocal chords. When we turn the wrists and push to one side or the other, the hands are at waist level, not hanging all the way down. This means the wrists are cocked, and both hands are turned in the same direction.

The "**Cosmic Consciousness**" pose concludes practice, and it can be held for any length of time the teacher desires. Be sure to point out that the left heel is held against the little knob on the right leg (ankle bone) that separates the foot from the ankle. If a student has problems with balance, suggest that he or she practice the posture at home, and usually the difficulty will go away.

Conclusion:

These instructions were not meant to teach the movements, which the teacher already knows, but to point out important points, in each movement, that should be emphasized. Basic posture and manner of moving in T'ai Chi Chih must necessarily come first at the beginning of classes. As previously stressed, movements are easy to learn and to do *if* the student has been taught the proper way to move.

T'ai Chi Chih is doing so much good for so many people that the teacher has great incentive to see that it is done properly. Do not be lazy and overlook faults. Every T'ai Chi Chih teacher has made a strong commitment, and the sincerity of teachers will insure that they do the very best possible. Good luck!

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