

Taiji

BASIC MOVEMENT PATTERNS & BODY COHESION

BY SAM MOOR

When I was a college student I used to give guitar lessons. It was a great way to earn money without being too time consuming and I soon realised that I really liked the teaching process, not to mention the independence of being my own boss. My students would start out by learning the basics; how to hold the guitar, simple scales, chords and so on. The only way to play more complicated tunes well, I would always explain, is to be competent at the basics, which requires diligent daily practise. How boring and not very rock 'n' roll at all! The students who followed my advice over the years went on to become decent musicians able to play almost any tune well by being forearmed with a fundamental understanding of and an essential basic skill in music.

The students who were most difficult to teach were the ones who were either tone-deaf or had no sense of rhythm (sometimes both!) especially when they didn't realise it and thought they sounded amazing! To begin with they would have no frame of reference as to whether something was in tune or in time. They would make a horrible din – lots of noise but no discernible tune or tempo – and they couldn't hear the difference between what I was playing and their cacophonous attempts. So with these students it was a really interesting teaching process and very educational for me. Slowly but surely I had to teach them, step by step, to really listen and pay attention to all the variations and nuances in tone and timing. Nothing could be assumed. Even more than usual we stuck to basic practise with lots of repetition and comparison of simple riffs. Students gradually build up a more accurate frame of reference. At times it was frustrating for both parties but when they improved they often couldn't believe just how far they had come to understand something so simple. I guess it's only simple when you know how.

Krueger-Dunning Effect-Unconscious incompetence: The individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not recognize the deficit. They may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize their own incompetence, and the value

of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage.

In this article I will discuss how learning basic movement patterns, and building body awareness, like learning the basics of playing guitar, should be the first part of call in Taiji classes. Otherwise it is like trying to teach Mozart to someone who is tone deaf.

During my two decades of teaching and training Taiji the most common problem I have encountered is that people spend a lot of time trying to learn the choreography of forms but do not actually learn how to move well, often lacking the most basic level of body cohesion after years of practise.

The big difference between music and Taiji is that while most people have some basic sense of music, many people are completely lacking in body awareness and have poor habitual movement patterns without even realising or conceding that such attributes have much value.

Basic movement ability and awareness are two of the most essential life skills – without them we are seriously compromised as individuals.

Taiji is often associated with oriental mystery and assumed to be an art of confusing subtle energies and spiritual ideals barely comprising a physical activity at all. My experience is that Taiji training principles are based on a long history of optimal body/mind training gained through highly perceptive heuristic movement, astute observation of natural phenomena at both micro and macro levels and rigorous testing through application (fighting/self-defense/life). Over a long period of time this experience culminated in a most natural and optimal way to train the human body and mind for health, movement and martial arts that we know as Taiji.

More often than not people immediately get bogged down with trying to learn and remember forms and as a consequence almost completely forgo the forging of basic body cohesion. Furthermore, by trying to remember choreographed movements rather than improving the basic nuts and bolts of human body-mechanics, people can compound the problems that they may have in the first place.

‘The more details you give people, the more they ask for details’ Nassim Taleb, Antifragile

Body cohesion is the essential fusion of balanced, connected, relaxed, 3-dimensional whole-body movement, strength and awareness that underpins all good movement and is especially emphasised in Taiji and other internal martial arts as a key-stone principle. The increasing popularity of intelligent movement training as opposed to superficial ‘exercise’ (check out Ido Portal and Conor McGregor for example) means that Taiji teachers really need to step up what they are doing otherwise we will all be perpetually condemned to that abysmal umbrella understanding of Taiji as a pseudo-spiritual, faux exercise for the infirm.

Body cohesion is the heart of Taiji training and more than anything else building this whole-body

connection will benefit the vast majority of people in terms of their physical and mental health and overall ability to move and function well.

As a teacher, I want my students to experience significant change in the way their bodies operate and not spend years worrying about remembering sequences of movements or theory. Ultimately I want to teach a person to improve the way they move, the way they use their body and the way they use their mind. As the vast majority of people are not used to learning movement or indeed moving much at all, the most significant benefit is gained from establishing the basic exercises (Jibengong). In most of my classes we spend at least 50% of the time training basics.

For people taking their first steps into Taiji training the last thing they need to do is to learn a form. Learning a Taiji form offers very little benefit if instead of learning how to move well people simply retain their old, habitual way of moving. This is especially true if their bodies are in poor condition and since many people come to Taiji because they think they are too damaged to do anything else this is a particularly salient point.

Countless hours spent trying to remember sequences of movements and puzzling over which body part goes where, when and why is almost a complete waste of time, although perhaps intellectually satisfying in a superficial sense. Instead the initial and ongoing aim should be that students look to the body and mind and build; build their awareness, build their body and ultimately build their body/mind connection. For all the major health, movement and functional (martial or otherwise) benefits our art has to offer this is the absolute foundation and without it the majority of training is a false economy.

Taiji is a martial art with a difference. Instead of learning fighting techniques the first port of call should be simply learning how to develop body cohesion. Moving well, being at ease with one’s physical existence, being immersed in down to earth sensory experience and possessing freedom of movement are vital attributes for life and are the basic skills we seek to develop in Taiji.

Ultimately this means that our training is much more physically and mentally rigorous than most people might expect. Creating a relaxed, stable, balanced and connected body requires a lot of physical work; and you have to learn to calm and focus your mind, to pay attention completely, in order to succeed.

So having said that, here’s a rundown of essentials we train in my classes and what I focus on in my own training:





FIND YOUR BODY FANSONG GONG

All of my classes begin with Fansong Gong, Chen Bing's unique loosening/conditioning method. Consisting of a wide range of simple though not particularly easy exercises, Fansong Gong follows a general theme of opening the soft tissues of the body along the main fascial lines. Not only does this build a body that is loose, elastic, resilient and connected but also teaches you how to feel the main kinetic chains within the body and how they are woven together to form the three dimensional body structure in a simple and tangible way. Fansong Gong also incorporates lots of variations of balancing on one leg. Some of the exercises are strenuous for not only do they create a strong stretch but also continuously emphasise developing a base that is sufficiently stable to facilitate balanced movement from the legs and centre that emanates through the whole

body. Fansong Gong thus emphasises a number of key elements that people greatly benefit from in developing body cohesion:

- Basic movement of the hips and spine. Flexion, extension, lateral motion (side-bending) and rotation are explored throughout Fansong and seeing that these are areas which are restricted in most people, and of course vital for all movement and for developing ones Taiji, it generates delightful results.
- Balance and leg strength. Squatting motions and balancing on one leg help to build the body from the ground up whilst facilitating functional hip mobility. As unstable bi-peds, being able to balance well and having a stable base is one the most important skills we can develop.
- Connecting the arms to the back and freeing the shoulders. Our arms are not independent levers that are separate from the body, their strength and dexterity depends on how well they are connected to and stabilised by the back so that movement and power generated by the legs and body can flow through them
- Connection. Developing a clear felt sense of how all body parts are woven together, from the toes to the fingertips, through the elastic facial web.

ZHANZHUANG STANDING MEDITATION

Learning how to stand up is the next step after the elasticising endeavours of Fansong Gong. Zhanzhuang is simple and superb: it stabilises the body, stabilises the mind and develops a clear sense of the tensegrity of the human body structure. Tensegrity structures, such as the human body, distribute forces and movement throughout the entire system via the spring-like and elastic fascial web rather than being dealt with locally as they are in lever systems. A body that exhibits tensegrity in an optimal way is tensionally balanced in all directions under the reliable and constant pressure of gravity:

“Tensegrity describes a structural-relationship principle in which structural shape is guaranteed by the finitely closed, comprehensively continuous, tensional behaviours of the system and not by the discontinuous and exclusively local compressional member behaviours. Tensegrity provides the ability to yield increasingly without ultimately breaking or coming asunder” R. Buckminster Fuller

Tensegrity reverses the centuries-old concept that the skeleton is a frame upon which soft-tissue is draped and replaces it with an integrated fascial fabric with floating compression elements

enmeshed within the interstices of tensional elements.

‘Being natural is the first and foremost principle in Taiji’ Chen Bing

Zhanzhuang is the epitome of reorganising the perceived separate parts of the body back into the homogeneous whole of a tensegrity structure. What separates the body is habitual tension and restricted movement underpinned by a lack of awareness in the corresponding parts. Usually we are not aware of the restrictive patterns that have become enmeshed in our structural fabric over the course of our lives. Everybody has them but they are essentially unfelt. Standing then, is to help us feel, locate and relax restrictions in the body structure. It’s not that we want to replace one habitual posture for another but instead return to a settled state so that the body becomes less segmented and more integrated; a malleable mass free to be directed by our will. Through gentle and perceptive coaxing

of the body we discover how it can support itself effortlessly from the ground upwards utilising the natural power of ground reaction force. The key is to quieten the mind by simply feeling and observing. Curious observation through the lens of stillness allows one to discover the inherent qualities our bodies possess and work with them rather than against them.

It is mainly due to our distinct lack of body awareness and an incorrect, intellectual understanding of movement that we do not experience the body as a homogeneous whole and thus capitalise on its inherent, natural attributes. For usually when we exercise we immediately try to force the body to change in some superficial way rather than learning how pay attention to what it does naturally without interference, intervention or biased-control. It is the ability to pay attention accurately which allows us to discover the inherent structure of our human form, something that is with us whatever we are doing.

A very important point with Zhanzhuang is that tactile cues and posture corrections are essential for students to learn how to stand. One’s habitual posture is usually so engrained that without regular feedback from a teacher’s hands-on body adjustments it is very difficult to perceive. If your teacher doesn’t give you tactile cues then you should find one that does.

Thus Zhanzhuang training facilitates a number of key developments:

1) More than any other training, Zhanzhuang, due to the absence of deliberate movement, allows one to gradually perceive and use the body as a whole unit, a tensegrity structure.

2) Strengthens and stabilises the body and mind at the most fundamental level.

3) Highlights how busy the mind is and as such provides an opportunity to learn how to focus on direct sensory experience and not thinking.

Learning to practise meditation is probably one of the most useful skills that anyone can invest their time in. The



mind is such a busy little monkey; always trying to pin things down, categorise and judge most inaccurately. It constantly craves information and fixed points of reference. Aside from this relentless activity the mind is also capable of quietly observing. Learning how to strengthen this observational aspect of the mind comes from deliberately paying attention and forms the most basic and most useful aspect of meditation. However, sitting down more is the last thing most people need to be happy and healthy so throw away the meditation cushion and practise Zhanzhuang.

WALKING THE WALK (ZOU BU)

After Zhanzhuang the next basic skill I like to work on with students is being able to step well. Taiji walking has many variations but all follow the theme of learning how to maintain structural integrity, balance and connection whilst stepping slowly (to begin with). It is challenging to do well and without the distraction of waving the arms around students can really focus on moving in a balanced way.

CHANSIGONG SILK-REELING EXERCISES

“The general consensus has been to think of only one or two muscles participating in any given movement but no matter how common this misconception may be, the reality is that any movement is essentially a whole-body movement. For movement is not simply the mere coordinated bending of separate hinges but instead expansion, repositioning and contraction of the tensegrity of the body as a whole via the fascial web” Steven Levin

Simple Chansigong builds upon all of the preceding basic exercises and offers students the chance to discover how good movement flows smoothly and naturally through the whole body, from the feet to the fingertips, organised by the centre (Dantien). Training simple isolated, whole-body movements gives one a chance to get into the nitty gritty of what one is doing and most importantly how one is doing it. Any Taiji form is basically a collection of chansigong variations but as one goes from one move to the next any mistakes are usually glossed over and forgotten immediately. Practising Chansigong gives you a chance to discover and then iron-out any

deviations in one's basic movement patterns using all of the preceding work as a tool for accurate cross referencing.

CONCLUSION

When people have a good grasp of the basics they become much more physically capable, confident and independent. From here they can use their new skills to learn a form successfully with meaning and without being a slave to irrelevant details or the teacher.

I first came across the term ‘Heuristic’ in Nassim Taleb’s superb book ‘Antifragile: things that gain from disorder’. The word heuristic comes from ancient Greek meaning to find or discover for oneself. I had not really thought about it too much prior to this but at that point I realised that this is how I learn and teach Taiji. In Taiji we have the general movement principles (one principle, three kinds of motion) or rules of thumb and it is through inquisitive tinkering via lots of basic training that you discover, realise and then own them for yourself rather than trying force oneself to adhere to them and/or just blindly following a teacher:

Heuristic: Serving to indicate or point out; stimulating interest as a means of furthering investigation. Encouraging a person to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on his or her own by experimenting and evaluating possible answers or solutions or by trial and error.

I always encourage my students to pay more attention to their own body feeling rather than thinking about things too much. As soon as people start thinking they start to forgo their whole-body experience. I want students to learn how to learn from their own felt experience of their training rather than trying to remember things. It is because many peoples’ felt experience, their sensory perception and proprioception are so limited that the mind takes over to fill in the gaps. That’s one of the reasons why people crave details, in-depth theory and spiritual mystery rather than relying on their own practise and experience. Since we are so used to being spoon fed information from external sources it can be quite a big step to become more self-reliant. Training Taiji basics for body cohesion gives you all the tools you need. But don’t take my word for it, try it for yourself.

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