

Taijiquan and Qigong Principles and Visualizations

Focus on Posture and Balance

- Set your foundation and get in harmony and balance with gravity by paying attention to where your body is in space and how you connect to the earth, and notice your body's relationship with gravity. Feet are shoulder width apart when standing. A tripod is the most stable connection to the earth. Pay attention to the ball of the foot at the base of the big toe, the ball at the base of the little toe, and the center of the heel. Root each to the earth. It may feel like your toes are grabbing the earth. Raise your arch so that your knees and toes line up. Ankles, hips, shoulders and ears line up perpendicular to the earth. Chin and tail bone are tucked in slightly. The back of your head rises a little so your face is looking forward. Knees are very slightly bent, whatever is comfortable for you. Relax your shoulders, like your shoulder blades are flowing down your back. Shoulders do not slouch forward nor are they pulled back like you are standing at attention. Slumping forward is associated with feeling depressed and pulled back is rigid and inflexible. Shoulders, hips, and head are level so that if a carpenter's rule were on your shoulders or hips or across your head, the bubble would be right at the center. You are lining up your body so that organs function properly and your muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints are relaxed but ready and are not having to do excess work. Posture affects mood and mood affects posture. Changing one can change the other.
- Visualize a string attached to the middle of the top of your head, the bai hui point, pulling you up and straightening and lengthening your spine. There is still a small curve in the lower back, and your chin and tail bone are slightly tucked in. You can also visualize a string attached to the bai hui point that is a plumb bob that runs down through the center of your body, and the plumb bob points to the earth right at the center between your feet.
- Body is relaxed but ready. Only those muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons necessary for a movement or posture are engaged, but your body overall is toned and ready. Start either at your feet or the top of your head and do a slow body scan. Breathe in to any places that feel tight or tensed and soften and relax them. Let your joints lengthen and soften.
- Sink your qi. Relax your body so that you can feel yourself sinking and getting heavier, your feet rooting to the earth through the bubbling wells (yong quan). You feel like your center of gravity is getting lower. Pay attention to how your feet connect to the floor. Are they flat and the knees bowed in a bit? Bring some arch to your feet so your knees and toes line up down the center with the knees neither bowed in nor out.
- You can practice posture wherever you are – standing or sitting. Let that invisible string pull your head up and tuck your chin so your ears shoulders and hips align when sitting.

We spend so much time with our heads bent forward (reading, looking at phones or computer screens, etc.) that the muscles in our neck and shoulders are typically out of balance. Your muscles have to work harder as you lean your head forward, and we wind up with aches and pains and an almost permanent forward lean. If you carry a wallet in your back pocket, that throws your hips and spine out of alignment when you sit. You may want to consider carrying it in a front pocket.

- Check your shoes. A nice thing about taijiquan and qigong is that no special equipment or clothing is required. Just wear flat shoes and loose comfortable clothes that allow you to move freely. You can also practice barefoot if you like. Just always check the practice area for things that could cause injury before you start.

Focus on Breathing

- Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth near the back of the front teeth, where your tongue touches on the “T” sound when you say the word “let.” There are several reasons for this. In Chinese medicine, pressing your tongue here connects the governing qi channel with the conception qi channel. It also helps produce saliva which is important in Chinese medicine. It is also an acupuncture point for the vagus nerve which is important in emotional regulation. One of the points where stress manifests is the jaw and sometimes results in temporomandibular joint syndrome, or TMJ. When you press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you cannot clench your teeth and jaw.
- Breathe to your diaphragm or your lower dantien. The lower dantien is the major energy field in your body according to traditional Chinese medicine. It is located about three finger widths below your belly button and three finger widths inside. It is your center of gravity, and taiji movements revolve around the lower dantien and increase power. Visualize your diaphragm like a balloon expanding downward when you inhale. When you inhale deeply and slowly you get a better exchange of oxygen in your body. You use your inner stabilize muscles, which also strengthens your lower back support. You also slow down your breathing rate, which lowers your heart rate and blood pressure. You are disengaging the sympathetic nervous system stress response and engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. Our amygdala is our red alert system, and it engages whenever it perceives a threat. Messages are sent to the adrenal glands to release adrenalin, noradrenalin, cortisol into the body that gets us ready to fight, flee, freeze, or faint. There is another stress response called “tend and befriend” which can also be used, but typically we are honed to go with fight, flee or freeze. Our heart, blood pressure, and breathing rate go up, blood is redirected to our limbs and away from digestion, our vision is narrowed, blood sugar rises, and our choice of behavioral options is reduced and we go with what we know by rote. A feedback loop is formed in the body

– the brain notes the higher stress hormone levels and behaviors and sends more signals to release more hormones. It can take quite a while to calm down from a stressful event. Just breathing can help, but it needs to be abdominal breathing. As we get older, and as we live more stressed, we tend to breathe more and more from our upper chest and more shallowly. Upper chest shallow breathing by itself can induce a stress reaction. You can change how you feel mentally, physically, and emotionally just by improving your posture and breathing. You can also change your self talk and move more to a tend and befriend method. When stressors come, approach them with a sense of curiosity and see what they are trying to tell you, and then look for a win-win outcome. Breathing to calm yourself will help make this possible.

- As you breathe in and out, you can focus on the breath by paying attention to the change in temperature of the air as it goes in and comes out. You can also visualize a color to the air – cooler blue on the way in, warmer red on the way out. You can breathe with sound and focus on the sound of the air going in and out.
- You can also incorporate pelvic floor exercises into your breathing to strengthen the inner stabilizer muscles which has many benefits including strengthening the muscles inside that support the lower back.
- You breathe in on the yin part of a movement (gathering energy) and out on the yang part (using energy).
- You can practice your breathing wherever you are. The more you practice, the more relaxing abdominal breathing becomes second nature and the calmer and more mindful you become.

Soften Your Eyes

- In "Classical Northern Wu Style Tai Ji Quan" by Tina Chunna Zhang and Frank Allen, the authors say that the "development of relaxed eyesight is a special training method of taijiquan. The concept is to simply let images come into your eyes and stop projecting vision out to the images. This results in a wide-angle vision that might at first be slightly soft-focus." When you are able to do this, you have a "much larger range of vision and perception. Relaxed vision also relieves eye strain." I have been taught in Yang style that the eyes follow the dominant hand. This is still the case, but you are able to see much more than just what is beyond that hand. Think of it as increasing the depth of field in a camera's lens to infinity. Everything near and far and to the far corners of each periphery is in focus. When you relax and soften your eyes, you also increase your sense of relaxed readiness and increase attentiveness. When you are stressed, the muscles in your face tense, you may squint or otherwise tighten the muscles around your eyes. You have tunnel vision with your eyes and your mind when you are tense. Soften your eyes

and you are more attentive to everything in your visual range and in the options that appear in your mind.

Focus on Movement and Balance

- Movements should be flowing, smooth, soft and slow. The soft and flexible overcome the hard and rigid. Move as though you are in water and flowing through a gentle resistance.
- Mind moves qi (energy) and qi moves the body. Begin with intention. You are one with and a part of everything. Masters at push hands can feel the opponent's intention before the opponent has become aware of their own impending movement. We do make decisions unconsciously and our brain and body do know what we are going to do before we are consciously aware of it. Use taiji and qigong to increase that connection and awareness of becoming aware of intention and directing its flow. You are connecting that alert system with the frontal cortex thinking part of your brain.
- Movement and qi begin at the feet, are directed by the waist, and are expressed by the hands and fingers. A wonderful example of this is wave hands like clouds.
- Turn on your central axis. Visualize an axis running down the center of your body, like the hinge of a revolving door. When you move, your body is upright and you rotate on that hinge. The plumb bob stays between your feet,
- Step like a cat – no sound. Pick your feet up and lower your body using your legs into the next movement. Do not fall into the movement. Improve your strength and balance with slow controlled movement. Stride length should be within your comfort range. Shorter steps and a higher stance are easier on your knees and hips.
- Remember the 70% rule. Only move and bend to about 70% of your range of motion. Taijiquan is not a contest or a competition. As you grow more balanced, stronger, and flexible, the range will increase. You may find in a single session as your tendons and ligaments warm up, the 70% may increase during that session. Be gentle with yourself. If there is pain, there is no gain, but regression.
- Joints are always kept soft and flexible. Never lock a joint. Locking your joints makes you more susceptible to injury.
- In any type of bow stance, you should be able to see your toes – your knee never goes beyond your toes. Your knee cap and toes should line up in the same direction.
- Make your stance as high or as low as you are comfortable and pain free.
- Hands often move in conjunction with the feet, elbows with the knees, and hips with the shoulders. Elbows typically are below shoulder level.
- Hands are relaxed like you are holding a ball, fingers not touching each other.

- In general, keep space in your arm pits and groin like there are tennis balls keeping you from clenching together.
- Root to the earth. You can even visualize roots coming from your bubbling wells going into the earth bringing energy into you.
- Movement is typically in circles and arcs. Your body coils or spirals in silk reeling.
- When you are standing like a tree (or standing stake or standing pole - standing meditation) you are equally balanced on each leg. Weight distribution is 50-50 and the plumb bob is directly below you equidistant from the center of each foot. The foot or leg that is carrying the most weight is the substantial and the leg or foot carrying no weight is insubstantial or empty. For example, in wave hands like clouds, weight flows from one foot to the other as you step, and your body turn on the center axis from one corner to the other. When weight is 50-50 you can visualize each leg as filled halfway with sand or water. As you shift weight to move the water or sand flows like an hourglass from one leg to the other. When one leg is in the air moving, it is insubstantial or empty. The leg supporting all your weight and rooted to the earth is substantial. The plumb bob is at the center of the substantial foot, and that invisible axis of the revolving door hinge runs from the bai hui down the center of your body to that plumb bob (where the bubbling well is located in this instance). The movement is smooth and constant so that substantial and insubstantial are constantly flowing from one to the other,

Focus on Wu Wei

- Pronounced “oo way”, wu wei translates as “effortless effort”. It is similar to what is called the flow state in the west, but wu wei is more than just losing yourself in athletics or work or some other task. It is a way of life. In taijiquan and qigong, do not try to force the movements. Do not judge yourself harshly. Let your body flow into the moments. You are almost an observer watching it happen. Pay attention to the movements. If you feel tingling or heat in your hands or body, that is a sign that energy or qi is flowing and you are moving efficiently, in harmony, and in balance. When distractions come into your mind, observe them with interest and let them go. Do not push against them. That makes them stronger. Thinking too much and trying too hard can take you out of flow and wu wei and actually make learning more difficult. Remember beginners mind. Let go of judgment and embrace curiosity. When distractions and judgment come, be soft, join with compassion, and let them go of their own momentum. Let four ounces divert a thousand pounds. Smile and have fun.
- Moving in wu wei, you improve physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance.

- In Chinese philosophy, qi is energy, and we get it from our parents, what we eat and drink, from the air we breathe. Part of taijiquan and qigong is paying attention to what we put in our bodies, and treating ourselves with respect and compassion.
- Don't compare yourself to others. You adapt the practice to your body. The way you practice will not look exactly the way someone else looks. The way you practice now will look different in a year. Make your practice your own. There are five major families of taijiquan, but within each family there are many, many variations of the family styles. Within qigong, there are many variations of movements. There are even different locations on the palate and ways to place the tongue to the roof of your mouth in breathing. Find what works for you, and realize that what works now may change later as you change and adapt. An elderly person once asked me if she should start to learn taijiquan. She didn't know if she had enough time left in life to master the art. None of us know how much time we have left. What is nice about taijiquan and qigong is that you can always get better no matter how long you have practiced or how old you get.
- Remember the 70% rule and stay within your capabilities. Relax, breathe, settle into your posture, move like a flowing stream, smile and have fun.

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