

# THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TAI CHI



# THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND TAI CHI

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## INTRODUCTION

Tai Chi Chuan is noted for its graceful beauty and subtle power. Its practice requires an attention that is both inwardly focused and directed outward to all that surrounds us. It is the realization of the Taoist practice of doing through non-doing. As such, learning Tai Chi presents the student with apparent paradox overlying paradox. Its subtlety is a promise and a fascination.

Many of the principles of Tai Chi Chuan are similar to those of the Alexander Technique, discovered by F.M. Alexander over 100 years ago. If the principles of each were the same, there would, of course, be no reason to study both of them. The Alexander work brings students' attention to their habitual ways of using themselves, and teaches a process by which any activity can be approached with conscious awareness of those habits and the alternatives. Tai Chi presents its practitioners with fascinating challenges in movement and attention, challenges that ask us to fundamentally change our habitual way of being. The Alexander work is a very powerful tool helping us to make those changes.

The Alexander work may even be more Taoist than Tai Chi. It has no form, no exercises to do, not even a set, prescribed process. As my teacher, Marjorie Barstow liked to say, "It's just a little bit of nothing." However that "nothing" is a clarity of attention that allows you to make profound changes in the way you interact with the world - in how you do what you do, even in what you perceive.

In the following paragraphs I will present some thoughts on a few basic

Tai Chi principles as I have grown to understand them from the perspective of the Alexander Technique. I hope that this presentation will not be construed as a criticism of Tai Chi, or as implying that Tai Chi has shortcomings. What I hope is that if you find this perspective interesting, and follow up by taking Alexander Technique lessons, that it will help you understand what your Tai Chi instructor may have been trying to tell you all along. Tai Chi is a subtle art, and I think we need all the help we can get in learning it.

## **"LET THE CHI RISE TO YOUR HEAD-TOP"**

I have heard this principle expressed in various ways, for example, "move as if suspended from above," or "imagine a string tied to the top of your head." I think all of these are ways of expressing a particular experience in movement. They also point to the basic principle of movement discovered by Alexander. In his work he noticed that we all have one habit in common, although manifested in many different ways. In particular he noticed that in beginning a movement, we tend to tighten our necks, which pulls our heads down. This habit of movement is so small and so familiar that almost no one ever notices it, although almost everyone at one time or another complains of a tight neck. It is interesting that no one ever says "I am tightening my neck," but instead "my neck



is tight." Who do you suppose is tightening it?

It is possible to begin to notice that habitual tightening, and to prevent it. This is often felt as if your head is being lifted or is floating. What has really happened is that the release of tension in the neck has allowed the head to move more freely. And since muscular tension blocks the flow of chi, releasing tension in the neck allows "the chi to rise to your head top."

Please note carefully the order of this process. Releasing downward pressure in our necks results in a feeling of free movement. Attempting to achieve the same result by imagining your head to float, or be lifted, is really putting things in reverse order. We can only feel something after it has happened, so attempting to imagine a feeling only tempts us to tighten our necks in a different way to create a different feeling. Careful observation of this relationship between your head and body, and its redirection, is the center point of any Alexander Lesson. Alexander realized that this relationship is the beginning of all habitual movement, and that becoming conscious of it, and changing it by subtle redirection, is the key to becoming more conscious in all our activities. It is the key to releasing tension throughout our bodies - tensions that are associated with our habitual way of moving.

"Pluck up the back and hollow the

chest". This principle of Tai Chi is sometimes expressed as "depress" or "sink" the chest. I think what these suggestions are getting at is the almost universal pattern of tightening the muscles of our backs to "stand up straight," which in turn causes our chests to lift or project forward. Interestingly Alexander approaches this pattern with the suggestion for "my back to lengthen and widen." These directions are aimed at undoing the pattern of over-tightened back muscles, which narrow and shorten it. The idea of "hollowing" the chest is more subtle. A friend who has studied ancient Chinese once explained that the character for hollow indicates something like a hollow log. That is, our chest should be hollow from the inside, not depressed downwards from the outside. This then is a direction that directs our attention to an opened chest, one that is free to move to support respiration, and to connect (and separate) our arms and legs.

#### A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In a sense the Tai Chi principles point to, or describe, a state of being - i.e., how we would like to be. The Alexander work provides directions with which we can move toward that state. In the next few paragraphs I will describe what I have observed as a fairly common problem encountered by Tai Chi students, habitual then the way most



students tend to approach improving it, and finally how Alexander work can help unravel the puzzle.

Practicing the Tai Chi form encourages us to take a long stance, with our legs well bent when weight is on one foot. Our legs do a lot of work. And yet we need to remain free to move at the hip joint, so that we can turn freely to address a different direction or move a foot. When our hips are tight, it restricts open movement around that joint. In working to open the hip joint, it is pretty common to see students twisting their torso in the direction they wish to turn. The idea seems to be to “work the joint” and hopefully thereby to loosen it up. What I have observed is that the desire to “work hard” to loosen the hip joint in fact does the opposite - i.e. it tightens the hip. Looking at the picture from the point of view of a mechanical system, the only way I can work harder to push or pull my hip to turn more, is to increase my resistance to turning - i.e. to hold on to my hip even more tightly so that I can feel the pressure of pushing against it. I know this is true because I have observed many people do it, including catching myself at it many more times than I care to admit.

What is the alternative? When practicing a particular movement in the form that requires the hips to open, when reaching what is a comfortable degree of turning, test turning a little farther, and direct your attention to what tightens. Then ask yourself, “What has to let go in the muscles of my legs and buttocks to allow my pelvis to turn relative to my leg?” Or, “Where am I holding on that is making it difficult for me to turn?” Make the “testing” of your limit of movement as delicate as possible, and your questioning of what needs to open as wide as possible. When you realize what it is that needs to release to allow the turning to continue, then the turning movement can occur effortlessly. Notice

that in this process you have redirected your attention from what you feel you have to do, to what you can undo instead.

The process I describe in the previous paragraph can be a very useful tool by itself. However if you also consider that the tightness in your hip (in this example) does not exist in isolation, then you have a chance to find out some very interesting things. Tai Chi (and Alexander) principles tell us that “if one part moves, every part moves.” The tightness in your hip is really part of a pattern of use of your whole self, perhaps even having emotional associations. Part of that pattern of use is the relationship of your head to your body. In all this fooling around with hip joints, it is not rare to forget the first principle, to free your neck so that your head can move freely, relieving the downward pressure on your torso, then amazingly to free the movement in your hips. The Alexander work is an ordered redirection of our attention to the whole of ourselves - no matter what the presenting cause of difficulty.



## CONCLUSION

I hope these paragraphs have given you some ideas that you can use on your own to begin to experiment. If you find this discussion interesting, you can find your way to Alexander teachers all over the world by going to the Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique. I am listed under the Alexander Technique International (ATI) link on the page: Alexander Technique: How can I find a Teacher? If you find this discussion interesting, and have observations or questions, please feel free to email me at StacyG@drizzle.com (I'm in Seattle!).