

Wu Chi



There are numerous principles and concepts within Tai Chi and Chi Kung practice, yet the main practice that is often over looked in place of more techniques and more esoteric or complex movement routines is the simple practice of stillness. It is this stillness that underpins and brings focus and understanding to the entire Tai Chi practice, without stillness we have too much activity, too much thinking, and an excessively busy practice. Because of this natural desire to get it, to do it right, the obvious is either overlooked or simply ignored, as this poem states;

*To standstill results in the minds settlement,
Settlement of the mind results in a sense tranquillity.
A sense of tranquillity generates security.*

*To generate a sense of security leads us to clear wholesome thinking and
from clear thinking endless possibilities*

I hope readers will forgive me for repeating myself with this aphorism once more in these pages. Yet what it says is clear and succinct as to the power of stillness, for that reason the repetition is I think necessary.

In Chinese philosophy Wu Chi means absolute quiet, void of any movement, this also implies mental, emotional, psychological movement.

Wu here means nothing or to be without while Chi is the same as in Tai Chi which means ultimate or furthest limit, an expression of absolute void.

The term was first introduced by the Taoist Chou Tun Yi of the Sung dynasty (960 - 1279), philosophically he explained Wu Chi was a mind completely devoid of all worries, thoughts emotions and desires.

Wuji is the idea of quiet before the very beginning or after the very end; it is called the great stillness in Taoism and is shown visually as a circle, fig 1.

What is sometimes not so obvious in our practice is what this has to do with Tai Chi? Tai Chi is about movement, exercise, martial arts and healing. This can hardly be seen as still, can it? Even relaxation Soong called for in Tai Chi practice is not exactly still.

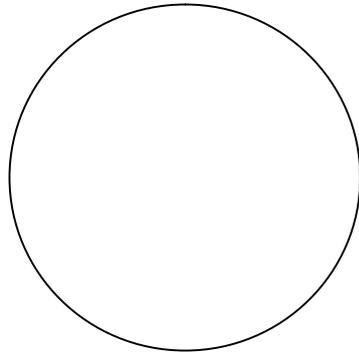


Fig 1

Wu Chi symbolically is the circle that holds together the Tai Chi which is often called Yin-Yang symbol after its two main components, fig 2. If this is so we can not have Tai Chi without Wu Chi so practically this quality has to be built into our practice.

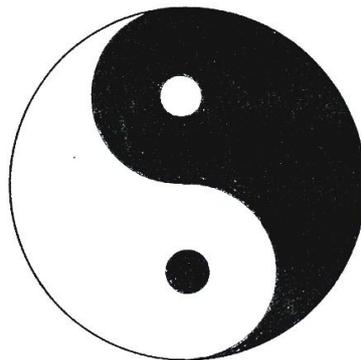


Fig 2

The implication and need for Wu Chi in Tai Chi practice then hopefully becomes apparent. Wu Chi is cultivated in Tai Chi to support the interplay of yin and yang in our movement. It is this quality of space that makes things useful; a cup or a window is useful because they have space. Space has also been abstracted in the art world beyond usefulness to become almost an end in itself likewise design can sometimes follow this path to lose the quality of function that makes a thing useful.

By developing and creating this concept of space, by cultivating this stillness we can go directly to the heart of Tai Chi practice in the ability to balance and maintain our centre or our sense of equilibrium.

The famous internal arts master Wang Xiang Zai had this to say about stillness:

*Small movement is better than large movement.
No movement is better than small movement.
Stillness is the mother of all movement*
Wang Xiang Zai

How to practice

Wu Chi is not a practice in itself it is a quality imbued into the system through correct teaching and practice. For a beginner this is sometimes difficult to grasp and like most things in Tai Chi only through constant practice can the obvious become realised. In much the same way I can not describe the space inherent in a cup that makes it useful without describing the cup, so it is the same with Tai Chi practice it is up to each individual student to find the space find the stillness, the teacher can only direct you and give you feed back and point you in the right direction. But for an immediate taste of developing Wu Chi one can use the first movement of either the Tai Chi form or the standing Chi Kung to enhance the practice. The challenge with Wu Chi is not so much as to aspire to it but to simply cultivate its quality then one learns to recognise it when it is not there.

There are no special methods. In fact to practice Wu Chi one just has to learn to stop doing, fig 1 shows two differing ways of practicing Wu Chi formally. In the Chi Kung the feet are naturally shoulder width (fig.3a), while in the form the feet are together (fig.3b), it is alright to practice this way but be aware that with the feet together the balance and stillness will be more of a challenge.

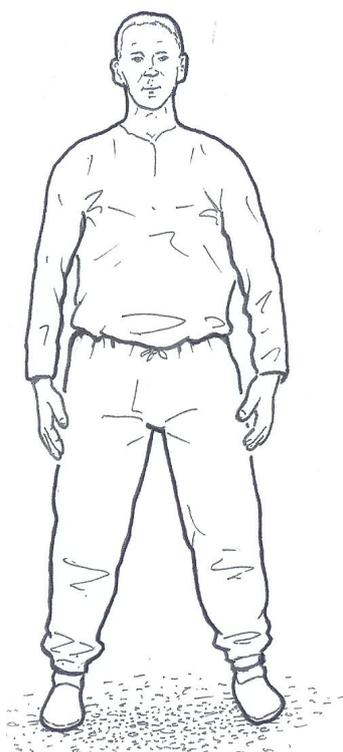


Fig 3a

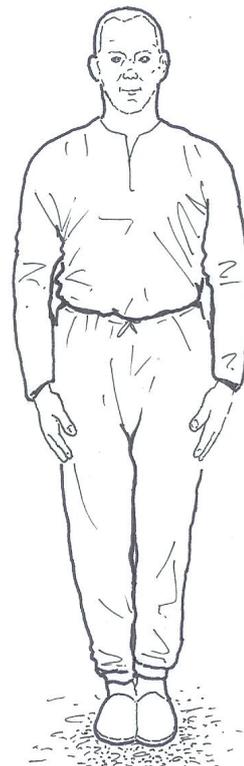


fig3b

Before you begin practice just allow yourself to standstill, let the body settle and relax. Do not try to adopt a posture or try to get it right just stop be still, letting the weight of the arms and hands hang down at the sides of the body feel as gravity draws them towards the ground feel the joints of the arms relax one by one. Shoulder to the elbow, elbow to the wrist then through the fingers. Avoid engaging

muscle or the sense of trying to feel, let go of tension from the top of the head to the fingertips. This can feel like a triangle the apex is the head the fingertips the base corners (fig 4).

As the body naturally begins to relax be aware of the whole body weight settling downwards again as if gravity is exerting its force upon your body. From the top of the head to the shoulders to the hips knees ankle and then feet the toes relax and spread out like roots of a great tree. You start to feel a strong positive contact with the ground. Again a simple triangle is formed from the head again as the apex with the feet as the base corners (fig 4).

Now relax the chest and abdomen allow the breath to arrive at the abdomen naturally, (Tan Tien) do not force it nor ignore it simply allow the breath to enter and leave naturally. Sometimes the legs might shake or the body may jump as one loses the physical reference point that we hold on to, this also happens on occasions when relaxing on trying to get to sleep. It is perfectly natural but do not encourage it. By focusing in on the breathing and the abdomen we start to rein in our scattered thoughts and feelings. Sometimes when our body is still it only serves to highlight how busy our mind really is and this is when frustration can occur.

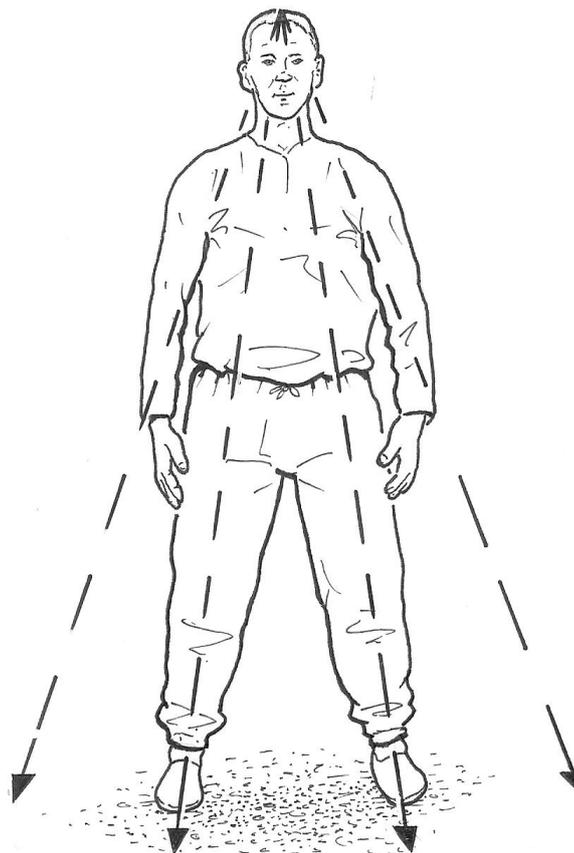


Fig 4

It is a useful tip to rein in these thoughts and feeling is by acknowledging them so they do not hold power over you. A simple phrase like I am thinking, I am feeling, I am listening etc usually suffices this can then bring your awareness back to the breathing and the stillness.

Now slowly move in to the first Chi Kung posture keep the movement as gentle and effortless as possible slowly open under the arms allow the shoulders to open up bring the hands to the side of the legs this allows clear Chi circulation. Or if you are practicing the form; start to sink and open.

With both postures the eyes can be open or closed; the preference though is for the eyes to be open. It is important to fix the gaze so the eyes do not move about, this is difficult as the eyes are trained to respond to the environment, but if you soften your gaze so you become part of your surroundings not just someone watching them separate from them. Similarly try not to move any part of the body and do not react to the various sensations itches or twitches that one feels one has to do, once you can do that try slowly working your way through each of the Chi Kung postures keeping this quality, hold the mind and body still so you learn not to react.

Through practice you can learn to develop and then own the space that you create. The tests come when one then tries to maintain this quality in form and then push hands practice. Here the stillness is part of the movement so that rather than reacting to pressure and movement one can feel and respond appropriately maintaining one's equilibrium, and by doing so allow unhindered circulation of Chi.

This stillness is not just one posture each posture in the Chi Kung each movement of the form has to have this stillness. Stillness is as much a part of the form as movement. When you see a Tai Chi master move it is as though everything about them is moving but they are still at the eye of the storm so to speak.

Also for those wanting to enhance their martial ability remember it is from stillness that clear listening skills can develop and from the ability to listen we begin to understand what your partner is doing almost before they know themselves.

Being centred is in reality maintaining a quality of space in our practice and maybe a sense of proportion in our lives. Yet in our busy lifestyles stopping is the last thing we think of doing. So we are constantly thrown off balance or out of step, it is like we are trying constantly to catch up with ourselves or others. By giving ourselves over to practicing Wu Chi on a regular basis and bring it into our Tai Chi practice we can begin to reign in and control the negative effects of a busy life style society exerts on our system.

This stillness is simple yet ultimately profound; it is the quality that underpins many of the Tai Chi concepts like meditation, healing, self development and martial skill. When there is quiet we can truly listen to ourselves as the Taoist Chuang Tzu said;

Cease listening with the mind and listen with the vital spirit

Then we will be close to what T.S Elliot called 'the still point of the ever turning world.'

