

Taiji - a meditation in movement

The most common image of meditation is something that's done sitting on the floor with legs crossed.

This article describes one approach to Taiji as a moving meditation.

For Taiji students seeking a deeper practice than physical exercise or relaxation, there are three important aspects and each of these traditionally has a different focus of practise: Taiji Form for the physical body, Qigong for the energy body, and Meditation for the mind.

In class, we usually begin each session lightly touching on all three aspects: movements or exercises that include loosening the body, stimulating the qi, and focusing the mind. Also, each of these can be found within the Taiji Form itself, however, this article is about the Meditation in Movement aspect. This requires a certain level of development where you can play, at least, a small section of Form without having to think about the outer structure of the postures: where to place the foot, or the external shape of the completed posture.

As Taiji is about wholeness, it has to include all aspects of the self, Mind, Body, Spirit, and their relationship to each other, as well as their place in the environment - your world. Therefore the practice of Taiji is to become more aware of everything without losing the connection to your centre, your Root. One aim is to expand your awareness without force so that you equally aware, outwards and inwards.

Awareness is a passive, or Yin, quality. Its active, Yang, counterpart is intention. To make use of anything you are aware of, you have to engage intention. For example; you can be aware of being hungry, but until you engage with intention you won't be able to do anything about it.

In our daily lives there are potentially many things that can pull or push us 'off centre' and create disharmony, imbalance or disconnection. Using Taiji Form as a tool to notice when we become scattered and return to harmony and balance is the formal practice that develops into informal practise as we begin to catch ourselves by recognising the imbalance more and more easily in daily life.

Here are some pointers to help you apply your practice as moving meditation.

Being present

In one sense, Time Travel is a fact, we mentally do it for a considerable percentage of each day: re-living some past event (either pleasurable or painful), worrying about some future event or looking forward to something, often *anything* that is more interesting or that distracts us from what is happening right now. It is difficult for the Mind to be present because it thinks, and thinking is, more often than not, relating to past experience or focusing on a future event or outcome. For many, the cause of so much stress, worry and fear is due to focusing on imagined events or outcomes rather than present reality. The meditation teacher, Jack Cornfield, describes what is actually happening using the example of somebody saying they are scared of bears;

it's not the bear they are really scared of, it's being chased by a bear; even if they were being chased by a bear, that's not what they are really afraid of (being chased by anything doesn't hurt); the real fear is being caught and injured or killed by a bear. The mind is disconnected from what is really happening in the present.

The body is always in the here and now, it never falls back into the past or jumps ahead into the future. Therefore, to be present, whether playing Taiji, watching TV, shopping, or simply sitting still, all that is required is to rest the attention in the sensation of the physical body. The beauty of Taiji is that it involves moving the body, not thinking about moving, just resting in feeling each movement - the reality of movement, the sensation and quality of movement.

You will know when the time is ripe for your Taiji to become a meditative practice: Notice when the Mind wanders off onto a train of thought while the Body happily keeps moving through the Form. When you can play the Form, or at least large sections of it, without having to think about the moves, it is a sign that you are ready to drop to a deeper level of practice. Now the Form can become a moving meditation and for this you need a focus of attention.

Taiji Tools

Any principle can be used as a focus of attention when playing your Form. There are many possibilities to choose from: structural, energetic, mental.

Here is a list of a few you can work with -

- Empty step
- Shoulder width
- Receiving the weight through the centre of the foot
- Use of the Waist
- Relaxed shoulders
- Alignment of the spine
- Allowing the arms to be moved
- Resting the attention in the Centre (Dantien)
- Riding the Natural Breath
- Letting go of mistakes
- Feeling the flow (wave of movement) through the body structures

There are many different things that can be used, and the above list is just a few fundamental things to explore which could keep you going for several years! Just choose one as the mental focus for an entire Form and it will certainly add depth to your practice.

The Mind *will* wander and think, that's what it does best and what it's designed for. When you notice this has happened simply come back to your chosen mental focus, without comment, and carry on.

General things such as relaxing the shoulders, aligning the spine or letting go of mistakes can readily be transferred to daily life as a means of integrating your Taiji into the everyday, staying more present, being more alive in the moment.

A Greater Mind

The thinking mind belongs to the ego-self, the part of us that thinks it is separate from other people and is really only concerned with 'what's in it for me'.

There is another Mind; it has many names - Wisdom Mind, Knowing Mind, Background Mind, Higher-Self, Spirit. When identified with this Mind I can observe the small, thinking mind without getting caught in its drama's. Playing Taiji from this place the meditation of Taiji begins to become a spiritual practice and this will be the topic for a future newsletter.