

T'ai Chi and Improving Balance

What We Can Learn From T'ai Chi to Help Us Improve Our Balance and Prevent Falls

Posture

Cultivate an upright and balanced posture. Avoid a habit of leaning forward or back or to either side which can lead to instability. Leaning forces you to combat more frequent instability as you fight yourself to keep from tipping. Try to keep nice and evenly balanced over your feet.

Keep each part of your body balanced over the part just below it. Keep your head balanced over your shoulders. Keep your upper torso balanced over your lower torso. Keep your entire torso balanced over your hips. And keep your entire body balanced over your feet. Feel your feet evenly planted on the floor - neither back on your heels nor up on your toes.

If you like, you can visualize that your entire body is made up of a string of pearls, with your head as the top pearl being suspended from above. All the pearls are balanced above each other.

Relaxation

Do your best to release any tension in your body. Instead of "holding on", relax the muscles and aim for more fluidity of movement.

A good way to start relaxing is to breathe from your stomach instead of your chest. In other words, rather than having your chest rise and fall while you breathe, allow your abdomen to expand and contract. If you can imagine your breath sinking as deeply into your abdomen as possible, this will also help to lower your center of gravity, giving you more stability.

Muscle Strength

Do your best to keep yourself from locking your knees. (Be sure to do this only within your ability. It is better to build this up over time rather than push yourself too far.) Locking your knees will make you more rigid and therefore less stable.

Try standing with your knees just slightly bent. Make sure to sit if your legs start to get tired. And if you need to, you can start out by using some support for stability.

Over time your legs will get stronger. Over time you can cultivate an ability to keep your knees slightly bent for longer periods of time or while walking.

Awareness of Legs and Feet

In T'ai Chi we try to cultivate an increased awareness with our connection to the ground underneath us. As we age, we tend to have a reduced sensitivity in our lower extremities. This leads to a slower reaction time to instability or surprises underfoot.

Try taking a few moments and feeling your feet connecting with the earth underneath them. If you like, you can visualize your legs filled with water so that they are heavier (lowering your center of gravity). You can take this even further by imagining that this water is spreading out into the ground and that you are becoming a part of the ground.

If you want to take a step, feel that leg empty of water while the other leg fills with more water. The lifted leg becomes light while the "rooted" leg becomes even heavier. When you place your leg down, it immediately fills with water again.

Stable Movement

Typically when we are walking, we will lean forward and plop our feet down on the ground. When we do this we are in a state of falling forward. Then we need to try to catch ourselves from falling too far. If we fall too far forward, or are unable to catch ourselves as quickly, we can be more prone to a greater likelihood of a fall.

Instead of plopping your foot down, try to lift your leg slowly and remain balanced on your rooted foot. Then, before shifting your weight, slowly *place* your lifted foot down on the ground. Once your foot is connected to the ground you can then shift your weight. As always, be sure to work within your ability.

This will most likely take some practice to get the hang of it. In T'ai Chi we work to cultivate all movement in this way. Over time this helps to move in a more stable and relaxed manner.

Questions?

If you have any questions about what I have discussed or about T'ai Chi, feel free to email me or call me. I will do my best to answer your questions.

It was a pleasure speaking with you today.

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