

## Taiji Notes

By Abhayamati

These notes are for the use of members of my class and as such are a supplement to practicing Taiji – they are not intended as a substitute for experience with a Taiji teacher. They are a combination of my own reflections as well as notes written by my teacher Wee Kee Jin, head of the School of Central Equilibrium.

### 1. Approaching practice

None of us is born to do Taiji. We all start with poor posture and awkward actions. Becoming aware of the accumulated tensions in the body is the first step to relaxing. This is why I came up with the aphorism “feel tense, be relaxed”. Usually, if we feel tense we compound the tension by becoming frustrated and impatient with ourselves. This can be the case particularly as we start out on the Taiji path – “if only I wasn’t so tense, then I could start doing Taiji.” But this awareness of tension in the body *is* our power to relax. The Chinese refer to tension as being like blocks of ice: hard, frozen and inflexible. The mind is like applying warmth to the ice; gradually the ice turns into water (the tensions loosen and our movements become more fluid) then the water turns into steam (the tension dissolves away leaving the body loose and soft).

We can use other methods to help us relax: having a hot bath or a glass of wine are pleasant ways to calm our minds and relax our bodies. But, they are only temporary and when we are in a different environment – such as having a busy day at work – our tensions return and the cycle of stress begins again. So, in Taiji we cultivate the habit of remaining relaxed whatever comes our way. This takes time and to begin with we must work with the accumulated tensions we have built up in our lifetime. Rather than pull away from our experience we allow ourselves to settle into awareness of what is actually there. We cannot force ourselves to relax because force is the opposite of relaxation. Instead, we learn to behave in the very way that we would like to be all the time: receptive, aware and relaxed.

Taiji is to be enjoyed and the more we enjoy it the more we relax; and the more we relax the more we will be doing Taiji. To start with we may not enjoy practice very much. We might even become disillusioned; we wanted to do Taiji to relax and enjoy ourselves, but instead we feel awkward and tense whilst doing it. Many people decide Taiji is not for them at this stage. This is a shame because as I have described above they have already taken the first step towards greater relaxation. So, to start with our practice is a discipline; we go through the exercises not knowing whether anything is happening all the time feeling more of our habitual tensions. But, gradually, our body changes and our practice ceases becoming a discipline: we do Taiji because we want to.

A final word on tension. There is always tension in the body. If we had no tension at all, there would be nothing to hold us together, and we would flop like a big jelly on the floor. In Taiji, we learn to use just enough tension to carry out our movements. If I lift a heavy sack off the floor, I might lift my shoulders, tense my lower back and pull a strained facial expression. This is using excess tension. However, I could lift the sack with the shoulders relaxed and the back soft, with a stable grounded posture and face relaxed. I could lift more weight in this way because I am using my body structure and the ground to help me. I am also helping myself to learn to stay relaxed in whatever I do.