

Taiji Notes

By Abhayamati

3. Synchronisation

Having established the physical structure, our movements must become synchronised. In Taiji we say that when one part of the body moves every part of the body moves; when one part arrives all the parts arrive: the destination may be different but the time of arrival will be the same. So, there is no localised movement of a single body part; all parts move as a harmonious whole. To achieve this synchronisation in our movement, we learn a process of relaxation. All movements in Taiji come from this process. To understand and learn the process, we divide ourselves (metaphorically!) into three parts: base, body and arms. The Taiji classics say that all movements are generated at the base, turned by the waist, are made manifest through the hands and expressed through the fingertips. This sequence is fundamental to Taiji. We can imagine ourselves being like a tree: our feet 'rooted' in the earth, draw the earth's energy up the legs, through the 'trunk' of the body into our arms and finally to the finger tips. Similarly, a tree feeds its leaves with water from under the ground.

Let's look in detail at this process and see more clearly how it enables our movements to be synchronised, graceful and harmonious. The 'base' refers to the feet to the hips. First, we relax the feet, then the ankles, followed by the knees and finally we relax and 'sit' the hips – as if we were going to sit on a small stool behind us. Next, we relax the body: letting go first of holding in the belly and then softening the chest. Finally, we 'drop' the shoulders – i.e. they are not lifted, but sit comfortably in their joints – 'drop' also the elbows, so that they are not above shoulder height, and finally relax the wrists and straighten the fingers. In this way, the energy comes up from the feet, through the legs, through the body, through the arms and is expressed through the fingertips. Expressed means to deliver or 'issue' the energy. This is something that we learn to do in partner practice.

When we first learn this sequence, each section feels discreet and separate but as we practice we experience one movement flowing from the base to the fingertips. We then learn to apply this in all our Taiji movements. This way, our body stays connected. Let's come back to the image of the garden hose. Imagine that the hose is connected through our feet to an underground stream and goes all the way through the body to the fingers. At every joint of the body there is a connector where the sections of hose are joined together – i.e. one at the ankles, one at the knees, one at the hips etc. Provided we move in a synchronised way, the hose will stay connected and will spray water (energy) out of the fingers. But, if we hold up any part of the body, the connection will be lost and so the water (energy) will not be able to move through.

In conclusion, one could say that synchronisation is the method for maintaining our structure during movement; so that there is a continuous 'stream' of chi through our bodily movements. As we practice, our body and mind become increasingly relaxed and our chi more refined and abundant. Eventually, our physical body is free of all excess tensions and our chi flows freely. We also learn to direct the chi using our mind awareness, so that our movements are effortless and quick, following spontaneously the direction of the mind.