



PHILOSOPHY

Symmetry Clinical Applications of *Tai Ji Quan* and *Qi Gong* Principles

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Symmetry in form and movement is one of many aspects of *Tai Ji* and *qi gong* to be aware of through observation and feeling to identify imbalances and benefit health.

Good *qi* circulation engenders good health. Uneven posture generates tension and blocks *qi* flow. In the practice of *Tai Ji* and *qi gong*, observing and establishing symmetry in movement or form related to posture brings about a deeper level of relaxation allowing *qi* to flow more freely. As a health practitioner, observe how your patient stands, sits and walks. Look for any asymmetry in posture. Make your patient aware of such imbalances and offer exercises to promote symmetry like some *qi gong* loosening exercises outlined below. For self-care, use a mirror to view your posture. With practice, eventually you will increase awareness through feeling to identify unevenness or tension in your own body. Being more aware without relying on a mirror is more efficient and will increase your ability to routinely self-correct throughout your day. As I mentioned in a previous article this is what I call "taking it with you."

Here are some examples of asymmetry or poor posture to observe: uneven shoulders, uneven hips (i.e. excessively tilted anteriorly or posteriorly), head tilts or favors one side, leaning while standing or sitting, limping or uneven gait, uneven weight distribution on the feet (observe soles of shoes for uneven wear and tear), slouching or hunching over. Consider combinations of such, asymmetry, for example, poor driving posture with the head tilted, one arm and/or leg higher than the other, one shoulder more forward with the body leaning forward or to the side. Some examples might not be obvious like a musician standing for four or five hours with a 20-pound guitar strapped on one shoulder, or a receptionist squeezing the phone between one shoulder and the head throughout the day to free up the hands to write. Also, note any history of injury to one side of the body. When I was a teenager, a leg injury required the use of crutches for almost two months. This caused an imbalance in leg strength. I struggled with knee and back pain for years until I learned *Tai Chi* to correct such physical imbalances.



In general, observing the performance of a *Tai Ji* sequence appears asymmetrical. My first teacher of Yang style *Tai Ji Quan* was John Conroy of Rhode Island. After learning all the postures with corrections, John asked me why I was only performing half of the sequence when I knew more. With that said, I carefully articulated the following utterance to my teacher, "huh?" Something I'm sure he heard quite often. John told me I had to flip the sequence and perform it in the opposite direction. The more familiar you are with the sequence the easier it is to flip. The *Tai Ji* sequence does activate one side of the body more than the other, which forms a greater potential difference to generate *qi*. If you're looking for symmetry, however, practicing the whole sequence or portions of the sequence in both directions is key. Therefore, if you are learning a *Tai Ji* form and have completed the sequence in one direction, flip it in the opposite direction to promote symmetry. Where you turn right, now turn left. Where you punch left, punch right and so on. If your goal is to promote symmetry in posture, then practice the sequence or portions of it in both directions to establish balance in movement.

Loosening Exercises to Promote Symmetry

Keep in mind these movements are called "loosening" exercises as opposed to tightening. Apply these exercises to loosen and open the joints promoting more flexibility, full range of motion and *qi* flow. The joints in the body are a natural break in the continuous tissue mass positioned between the joints and need to be mobilized to encourage *qi* flow. Arthritis is a good example of *qi* stagnating in the joints. In particular to joint health, participants of a recent study based on the Arthritis Foundation *Tai Chi* Program showed improvement in pain, fatigue, stiffness and sense of well-being². I've outlined only a partial set of exercises below because of limited space but if you would like a complete set or need clarification please contact me via email.

Three examples of cyclical movement to promote symmetry:

To encourage *qi* flow through the legs we focus on three major joints: hips, knees and ankles sequentially in this order. Encourage slow circular patterns focused on the joints. Compare clock-wise movements with counter-clock-wise movements. Take note of any pain, tension, uneven movement or lack of coordination. The goal is to articulate the movement in a slow, mindful, fluid, comfortable, coordinated motion that is circular and even in circumference. In addition, observe the 80 percent rule - only move within 80 percent of your ability to avoid injury and encourage a continuous and progressive practice.

Step 1: Circle the Hips (hula-hoop style). Stand with feet parallel and about shoulders-width apart. Make a circle with your hips clock-wise 20 revolutions then repeat in a counter-clock-wise direction. Keep the head and feet still and focused on hip movement. Notice how every joint between the neck and ankles are activated more or less.

Step 2: Circle the Knees. Bend slightly forward to place your palms on your knees to support your back. As a starting position lock the knees back. Next move the knees in a circular fashion - to the side, to the front, to the opposite side and back to the locked position. Move slowly and continuously. Rotate your knees clock-wise for 20 revolutions then repeat counter clock-wise.

Step 3: Circle the Ankles. Shift your weight to the right leg and slightly raise the left foot a few inches off the ground with the toe elevated slightly higher than the heel to start. Draw a circle with your toes. This move will circle the ankle. Again, circle it clock-wise 20 times then repeat counter clock-wise. Switch feet by shifting your weight to the left foot, raising your right foot, and circling the toes to loosen the ankle. This step can be done sitting or standing to condition the ankles. As with each step, observe, compare and encourage symmetry in movement regarding left side from right side and CW from CCW.

In the practice of integrating mind, body and breath - move mindfully with good posture and synchronize your breathing. Inhale as you revolve through one circle, exhale on the following revolution. Repeat in a continuous fashion.

References

- A Tai Ji Quan classic text references the Five Steppings (Wu Bu - Forward, Backward, Beware of the Left, Look to the Right, and Central Equilibrium¹), in part to develop 360 degrees of awareness in your surroundings. Symmetrical awareness in the body is a beginning; unifying mind, body and breath with a sense of symmetry offers more.
- 1. Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming. Tai Chi Secrets of the Ancient Masters. Roslindale, MA: YMAA Publication center, 1999.
- 2. University of North Carolina School of Medicine.
 - [www.med.unc.edu/www/news/2010/november/study-tai-chi-relieves-arthritis-pain-improves-each-balance-well-being/?searchterm=arthritis foundation tai chi program](http://www.med.unc.edu/www/news/2010/november/study-tai-chi-relieves-arthritis-pain-improves-each-balance-well-being/?searchterm=arthritis%20foundation%20tai%20chi%20program)

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