



## Preparation

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### 1. How to Begin Practising Tai Chi

*Practising Tai Chi should start from an understanding of its essence.*

*There are hundreds and thousands of permutations on the Tai Chi movements, but they should all be based on the fundamental principle of “whole body movement”. At the core of this is the formation of the Dantien’s central status. The Dantien is located approximately three finger widths below the navel.*

*The formation of the Dantien’s central status is dependent on the co-ordination of all parts of our body. Tai Chi Chuan has very specific requirements for each part of our body, such as relaxing the shoulders, sinking the elbows, hollowing out the chest, sinking the waist, opening the “kua” (pelvis), flexing the knees, opening the crotch, and so on. All of these elements are meant to adjust our body in order to form the Dantien’s central status. If every part of our body is adjusted to meet its specific requirements, the central status of the Dantien will be formed naturally. If any part of the body deviates from the ideal, like the “kua” tilting forwards or the shoulders tensing up, then this can adversely affect the formation of the Dantien’s central status.*

*On the other hand, once the Dantien’s central status is formed, it can in turn lead the whole body in its movements. Leading movement with the Dantien enables chi to flow through our whole body, connecting all parts to each other. As a result, when we make any movement, we move the body as a whole and not the individual parts in isolation. Therefore, the relationship between the Dantien and the whole body is that of mutual interaction. All parts of the body support the Dantien, and in return the Dantien enables the body to move as one, co-ordinated unit.*

### 2. Standing posture and Preparation for the Form

*Once we have understood the concept of whole body movement, the next step is to try to establish that mechanism in our own body. To achieve this, we start with Preparing the Form. Standing posture is, in effect, enhanced form preparation. Preparing the Form looks very simple; just separate your feet and you are done. Actually, there’s much more to it than that. Like any other movement in Tai Chi Chuan forms, Form Preparation requires that we establish the Dantien as the centre for the whole body. Our body has to be balanced, quiet and relaxed, enabling chi to flow freely throughout*

*it. Our mind has to be balanced, and our weight has to be balanced; in other words, supported in all directions.*

*If we compare Tai Chi Chuan's body mechanics to a car, then Standing is just like fixing and adjusting the vehicle. If there is a problem with a single tyre, the whole car will handle awkwardly. If we are leaning, the Dantien's central status will be compromised, and the corresponding problem will be evident in every move from the form. We fix a car by resolving all its problems, adjusting each part to its optimal state. Then it will drive smoothly and quietly. Similarly, we fix our movement problem through Standing. By resolving all the problems contributing to bad posture, we can eventually form the Dantien's central status and so enable the body to move as one integrated unit.*

*When preparing for the Form, we need first to calm our mind, then separate our feet. Many people have problems with their knees, pelvis, or 5<sup>th</sup> thoracic vertebra. These problems will show themselves once our two feet are separated; either our left foot is straight and the right one is angled, or the other way round. This has to be corrected or the whole body cannot be balanced. The outside edges of the two feet should be the same width as our shoulders, The toes can point either straight forward or slightly outwards. The important thing is that the two feet are symmetrical. When adjusting our feet, our pelvis also needs to be adjusted accordingly to make the whole body balanced. Looking from the side, our ear, shoulder, hip and ankle should form a straight line. This is just a general rule and is not applicable to everybody. For example, overweight people may find that their ears are not in line with their shoulders. What really matters is the inside structure. All the joints have to be properly aligned so that the weight of the body goes straight down into the ground. The body should not be leaning at all. The head naturally points upwards and the ears are listening behind. Listening behind maintains mental balance. If we look forward and listen in front, chi will float upwards. If we look forwards but listen behind us, chi will automatically calm down. Also, from the standpoint of actual fighting, we need to be aware of movement all around our body.*

*Calm our mind, separate our feet, ensure the weight drains straight down into the ground, and maintain a balanced and relaxed body. This is proper preparation for the Form, and the first stage of Standing posture.*

### **3. The Meaning of Relaxing**

*We all know the requirements for relaxing our body; relaxing the shoulders, sinking the elbows, hollowing the chest and sinking the waist. The difficulty lies in determining how much to relax. We relax to serve a purpose. It is not a case of "the more, the better". The aim is to establish the Dantien's central status. Just like tightening the front and back forks of a bicycle, if they are too tight, the wheels jam and cannot turn. If they are too loose, the wheels will wobble as we ride...even worse! If the forks are*

*tightened just right, with minimal divergence, the wheels can turn freely but will not wobble.*

*It is the same with Tai Chi Chuan. We want to be relaxed to the point where all the joints are aligned properly and chi can flow through our body with no obstacles. That is the correct degree of relaxation. Too much relaxation causes deviation and therefore affects the Dantien's central status. If we relax our shoulders, sink the elbows, hollow the chest and sink the wrist to the correct position, the Dantien's central status will form naturally. Not relaxing enough or relaxing too much are both deviations and can negatively affect the formation of the Dantien's central status.*

*The head is erect, we listen behind, calm our mind, and ensure that our ears, shoulders and pelvis are in a straight line. All these requirements are to ensure that the body is properly balanced. When standing we need to relax the Dantien, check every body part to make sure each one is supporting the Dantien, thus forming the Dantien's central status. This enables chi to flow through the whole body, forming support in all directions.*

*Many people ask about the bottom: should we tighten or relax the buttocks? This is again a matter of how much. If we tighten too much, then we need to relax a little. If we relax too much, we need to tighten them up a little more. The judgement is on whether it supports the formation of the Dantien's central status.*

*People also ask about the position of the two hands: how far apart should they be and how high should we raise them? The judgement is again to see if they support the formation of the Dantien's central position. When our spirit and energy are high, we can open wider and raise the hands higher. The same position will feel tight if we are tired, and the connection to the Dantien might be broken. To avoid that, we lower our hands and do not have them so far apart. The objective is not to hold the hands in a fixed position but to always maintain the connection to the Dantien and support the Dantien's central status.*

*In addition to adjusting large body parts, we also need to pay attention to small details. One example is the Tiger's Mouth on both hands. The Tiger's Mouth is the angled part of our hand connecting the thumb and the index finger. If the Tiger's Mouth is opened too wide or not enough, our armpits will feel tight. Only when the Tiger's Mouth is opened by just the right amount will our armpits feel relaxed. Each hand is connected to its own side of the body. The relaxation of the hand and of its side of the body are interrelated. If the body is tight, the related hand will reflect that. Conversely, if the hand is not relaxed, its side of the body will not completely relax either. The Dantien's central status can only form when the whole body - both the large and small parts - have achieved the proper degree of relaxation. Only then can chi flow freely through the whole body.*

*Slowly raise both hands, relax, adjust all body parts, enable chi to form support in all directions, maintain the dantien's central status.*