



Painting the Rainbow Newsletter

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Community Based Tai Chi & Chi-Kung for everyone

Improvement cannot always be measured, it is something you feel

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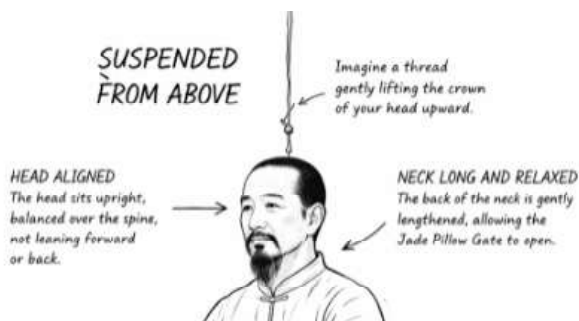
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The Importance of the Neck in Tai Chi

Due to the excellent feedback on the March ‘foot article’ we have decided to make it into a series. This month is the neck.

When we think about Tai Chi, we often focus on the legs for stability, the waist for movement, or the hands for expression. Yet one area that quietly influences everything we do is the neck. Subtle, often overlooked, and incredibly important—the neck acts as a bridge between the body and the mind.



A Simple Idea with Big Impact

One of the key principles in Tai Chi is often described as “suspending the head from above.” You may have heard this described as if your head is gently hanging from a thread attached to the crown. It’s a simple image, but it creates profound changes in posture.

When the neck is aligned and relaxed:

- The spine naturally lengthens
- The shoulders release tension
- Breathing becomes easier
- Movement feels lighter and more connected

When the neck is out of alignment—poking forward, tilted, or tense - it disrupts the whole body. Balance becomes harder, movements feel disconnected, and unnecessary strain can build up.

The Neck as a Pathway

In traditional Tai Chi Chuan understanding, the neck is more than just a physical structure - it’s an important “gateway.” It connects the body’s movement and energy to the head and mind.

If the neck is tight or collapsed:

- Movement becomes blocked
- Energy (qi/chi) feels stuck or heavy
- The body loses its sense of unity

When the neck is open and relaxed:

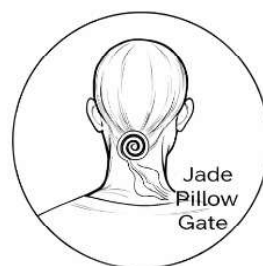
- Movement flows more smoothly through the whole body
- There is a sense of lightness and ease
- The body feels integrated, rather than in parts

This is why classical teachings emphasise the back of the neck being gently lifted and open - not stiff, but alive and responsive.

Cheng Man Ching and the “Jade Pillow Gate”

The great Tai Chi Chuan Grand-Master Cheng Man Ching placed particular importance on the neck, referring to it as a **crucial energy gateway** known as the *Jade Pillow Gate* (yu-chen).

He taught that for energy (qi) to rise through the body and reach the crown, it must pass freely through this area at the back of the neck. If this “gate” is blocked by tension or poor posture, the upward flow is restricted, affecting both balance and internal connection.



Cheng described the correct feeling not as stiffness, but as a kind of “**postural strength**” - a quality that is:

- Open and relaxed
- Structurally supported
- Light yet stable

He often likened the body to a structure built around a central column. The neck, in this sense, is a vital part of that column - helping to connect the base of the body with the top.

He even suggested that without understanding this principle, years of practice could miss something essential. That gives us a sense of just how important this small area really is.

Common Habits to Watch

Modern life doesn’t always help us here. Many of us carry habits that interfere with good neck alignment:

- Letting the head drift forward (“texting neck”)
- Lifting the chin too high
- Holding tension in the shoulders
- Turning the head separately from the body

In Tai Chi, we aim to gently undo these patterns.

Warm-ups and Modifications

- Gentle Warm-ups: Perform neck mobility exercises, such as gentle side-to-side head turns or looking down at the armpit, to release tension before starting.
- Chin Tuck: Sit/stand tall and pull your chin straight back, creating a “double chin” without looking down.

A Note on Cervical Spondylosis

Many people, especially as we get older, experience some degree of **cervical spondylosis** - a natural age-related wear and tear of the joints, discs, and bones in the neck. It's very common and often develops gradually over time.

You might notice:

- Stiffness or reduced range of movement
- Occasional aches in the neck and shoulders
- Sometimes headaches or tension at the base of the skull

The good news is that gentle, mindful movement - like Tai Chi - can be very helpful when practised correctly.

By focusing on good alignment and relaxation, Tai Chi can:

- Reduce unnecessary tension in the neck and shoulders
- Improve posture and spinal support
- Encourage gentle mobility without strain

The key is to **work within your comfort zone**. Avoid forcing movements or pushing through pain. Keep the head softly aligned, the neck relaxed, and let the body move as one coordinated unit.

If you've been diagnosed with cervical spondylosis, think of your Tai Chi practice not as something to “push,” but as something to **nourish and support your neck over time**.



Practical Tips for Your Practice

Here are a few simple ways to care for your neck during practice:

1. Let the Head Float

Think of your head lightly rising upward, not pushed or forced. The neck stays long and comfortable.

2. Soften the Chin

A slight tuck- just enough to feel the back of the neck open - helps align the head over the spine.

3. Keep the Eyes Level

As you turn, let your gaze stay level with the horizon. Avoid tipping the head up or down.

4. Move as One Piece

Instead of turning the head independently, allow the movement to come from the waist, with the head following naturally.

5. Release the Shoulders

Tension in the shoulders often travels straight into the neck. Let them drop and soften.

6. Stay Within Comfort

Never force a position. Gentle, pain-free movement is always the goal.

A Small Area, A Big Difference

When the neck is aligned and relaxed, something subtle but powerful happens: the whole body begins to organise itself more efficiently. Balance improves. Movements feel smoother. There is a sense of calm and connection.

You may even notice that your Tai Chi feels less like “doing movements” and more like “being moved” from within.

Final Thought

Next time you practise, bring a little awareness to your neck— not with tension or overthinking, but with curiosity.

Let the head float.

Let the neck soften.

Let the body follow.

Sometimes, the smallest adjustments create the biggest changes.

A student's comment:

“My name is Anna, and I have been attending classes at Tamworth for 11 months. At Christmas, I had a fall and ended up with a frozen right shoulder. After some rest, I attended classes twice a week and found them to be very helpful with increased mobility and strength. I enjoy the relaxed movements and believe they have aided in my recovery immensely. Thank you”

I wake on Monday morning
And ache from top to toe
My body says, just lie here
My brain says, I've got to go
I go through the motions
Of breakfast, ablutions and dress
Then fight with the sock aid
Do I really need this much stress
I'm in time for my lift
I think we all feel the same
Is it really worth all the effort
I think 'couch potato' should be my name
The session starts at 10
And do you know what
By 10.05 on the clock
I'm fit to trot
As soon as I'm standing
Feet shoulder width apart
And start gently moving
My aches soon depart
Sarah's amazing, so calm and relaxed
And with her at one end
And Ruben the other
Though my moves often falter
I'm quick to recover
I leave at 11
Feeling not quite so old
And am certain that at the end of this rainbow
I will see that famous pot of gold.

Rita Wright

Lichfield Painting the Rainbow Student

PLEASE NOTE:

There are additional pages in the online edition of the newsletter

Impact and feedback on the feet article

It appears the March newsletter article on balance and the function of feet really struck a cord. Here are two articles from students on how it impacted them:

Why the Feet Matter

The March newsletter launched into this as an opening statement. Having just had surgery on both feet I can assure you – Feet do Matter!

Earlier this year I underwent surgery to correct the badly injured joint on my right foot, and the arthritis in my left foot caused by overcompensating when I walked.

I was persuaded by the consultant to have both feet done together. He assured me this would be beneficial as the recovery/recuperation time would be much shorter.

I sure did hate that man a few days after surgery, when it became very obvious, Feet Matter!

I wore wooden shoes, day and night, which tipped me backwards to ensure I did not bear pressure on the balls of my feet. Moving from A to B walking on heels only was agonising, and damned hard work!

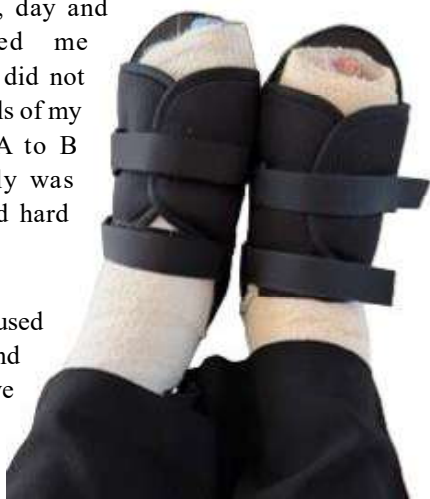
Eventually my feet got used to walking this way, and when I was told to remove the shoes and walk in trainers I realised my confidence was shot –

I was convinced I'd never walk without crutches again !

Simple things like stepping into a shower cubicle were overwhelmingly difficult, and the fear of falling once in there came close to causing me to stop showering altogether - but my husband was having none of that !!

Stepping over a cobbled step in the garden, which previously I did without thinking, now seemed impossible. I knew if I stepped wrongly the pain would be intense, and I could undo the surgery with one misplaced footstep, and as I had no balance I was afraid of falling.

My confidence to go out of the house deteriorated very quickly. But slowly, I began to walk around, standing slowly, relaxing, breathing, and thinking about how I moved. Basically every time I put my feet to the floor I had to make sure I had made a connection, not only with the floor, but with my brain, to make sure I was standing evenly, correcting my balance before moving. Every step required my full attention, and I am told by my consultant that over the coming months my brain will re-train my feet to walk properly, connecting to the floor in ways they haven't done for years.



I am having to re-train and strengthen my feet, balancing by careful weight transference, and I truly do believe that Tai-Chi has helped enormously in this process.

By being calm and thinking about where I've placed my feet, how I'm moving, I am starting to regain balance, and with it confidence to move around unaided. I can now take the step into the shower without thinking about it, cross over wobbly slabs in the garden, cautiously, but successfully.

I just need to think about how my feet connect to the floor, position my body so I'm balanced before I start, and 'go for it'. Without Tai chi, I think I would still be in my wooden balance shoes, using two crutches, and lurching from one furniture item to the next.

I celebrated as I threw the wooden shoes away at the end of March!

I've still got a long road to go to full recovery, but I am convinced Tai chi helped speed the process on, so I'd like to say a big "thank you" to Heather and the team, and to the "tai chi" friends who have encouraged me in class, and over the cups of tea afterwards.

I'm really grateful to you all..... and to Jenny for her excellent article.

Sue Waterman - Rosliston Kai Ming



Finding My Feet: a Tai Chi Reflection

I've been attending Tai Chi classes for the past 18 months, and what an incredible journey it has been despite my initial doubts and reluctance to go. When I first started, I could barely stand on one leg without stumbling over. Since then, I've learned a wide range of practices—from warm-up Qigong to the calming Wudang Mountain warm-down exercises, along with exploring the form and now involving the fan and stick weapons. Each session has brought new insights and benefits, both physically and mentally. Recently, during our Wednesday evening class in Lichfield, our Instructor, Heather, shared a lesson that truly resonated with me. She spoke about something we often overlook in Tai Chi practice in any detail: our feet.

When practising Tai Chi, we tend to focus on posture, breathing, and relaxation. Yet, as our Instructor pointed out, our feet are the foundation that supports everything we do. Every time we shift our weight, each step and turn begins with our feet.

She encouraged us to become more mindful of how our feet connect with the ground—paying attention to each contact point: the heel, the ball, the sole, the outer edges, and even the toes. By tuning into these areas, we stimulate sensory awareness and deepen our connection to movement as well as strengthening this vital part of our body.

As we practised this in class, I began to notice subtle changes. By focusing on how each part of my foot engaged with the floor, I felt more balanced and experienced a distinct sensation of being firmly rooted. It was a simple shift in awareness, yet profoundly effective.

The real surprise came the following day. I have recently started a new job in Birmingham city centre, which involves a walk from Grand Central to the office. The route includes a variety of surfaces—raised paving, cobblestones, and ridged bumped accessibility path markers. Normally, I would walk this route without giving it much thought. But after that specific lesson, I decided to focus on my feet.

What I experienced was remarkable. As I walked, I became aware of how each part of my foot adapted to the changing textures beneath me. The sensation of our feet's component parts working together in harmony felt almost surreal. I felt more in control, better balanced, and grounded in every step I took.

It made me realise just how extraordinary our feet are—and how often we take them for granted. This simple lesson has changed the way I move, not just in Tai Chi, but in everyday life.

I couldn't wait to share this experience with Heather and the class the following week. It was a truly thought-provoking session, and a powerful reminder that every part of our body plays an important role in practising this wonderful art of Tai Chi.

There was a superb detailed and illustrated article on feet in far more detail in the March newsletter.

Thanks to my Kai Ming Instructors and class for making me so welcome, having patience, making new friends and even having lots of fun into the bargain.

Bryan Marks - Kai Ming, Lichfield



Tai Chi a martial art for modern times.

When I first started to learn tai chi some 30+ years ago I was really interested in it as a fighting art that was less aggressive than Karate or Kung-Fu and more in line with Aikido but with less throwing. That is an overly simplistic view of external and internal martial arts, but enough to give an idea of my mind-set at that time. I remember trying a few martial arts out and reading a book about tai chi by Danny Conner. The search for 'real tai chi' led me to training in the UK and Asia, compete in the UK, America and Taiwan, and to continue to research, and refine my understanding and application of this fascinating art.

My study of how to apply tai chi as a martial art had a massive paradigm shift when I was asked in early 2000's to teach Tai Chi to NHS staff for falls prevention. I started to explore how to put

people back into balance rather than just take their balance. This shift in functional application helped me realise that tai chi is actually a muscular skeletal rehabilitation system; a real 'self-defence for life' that enables us, as human-beings, to strengthen our balance and reduce the strain of daily life.

For me, the real bonus of tai chi is like a super market offer of "buy one get one FREE" in that when you buy the martial art you get the health art FREE and visa-versa.... One does not function without the other. Just moving slowly doesn't make it tai chi.

The focus of this short article is not to consider the mindful and relaxing benefits of tai chi chuan but to remember and practice practical self-defence, which is often overlooked now we are all getting older. As a martial art, tai chi works by removing muscular strength/tension from your hands and arms, aligning your body and misaligning your opponent. If somebody grabs you, attack their balance don't fight their strength; if somebody punches or kicks you, reposition and attack their balance, don't fight their strength. Tai Chi is an art of relaxation (sung) and balance (zhong-ding).

Push-hands helps train these skills even though at first it can seem a little baffling. Work with a partner to overcome tension and find their balance. Tai Chi and dancing have this in common, it is only the finish that is different, usually... start slow and when you get stuck, don't tense up but work with your partner to explore. A simple first martial application to practice is lift-hands; ask your partner to grab your collar with both hands and use lift-hands to take their balance whilst keeping your own.

As you learn the tai chi form, ask for martial applications so you have a clearer idea of what the postures are for, its shape, its flow etc. and remember if strength is needed then it's not being done correctly. Developing these skills does not necessarily mean you plan to be a fighter but does mean you are developing your balance and spatial awareness.

You can choose how to use those skills in your life... maybe we'll see you on 'strictly'.

by Mark Peters - Principal iInstructor



Every month we write newsletters for our tai chi & qigong students. Some months we get contributions from the classes but most months it is down to myself and Jenny (my wife) to 'pull the rabbit out of the hat'...

What I'm saying is "We need you, please help". Send in articles, poems, pictures, recipes, funny thoughts (tai chi related hopefully). You all have stories to share of how training in tai chi and qigong has impacted you, what you enjoy, what you struggle with etc. so please share it. You can email to kaimingtaichi@outlook.com or give to your instructor or even post it the good old fashioned way.

Thank you
Mark & Jenny Peters