

Introduction

You can't learn tai chi just by listening to someone who's telling you how to do it. You need to see someone doing it correctly, do it yourself, and then get feedback on how well you did what you saw.

Though this book can't give you feedback, which is one reason why your primary source of instruction should be a skilled teacher, it can help you to learn the underlying principles that form the foundation of tai chi practice and to improve your ability to "see in your mind" the correct postures.

As you watch someone doing tai chi, you create visual memories, which are what allow you to repeat what you saw. The better you are at creating accurate visual memories, the faster you'll progress in learning tai chi forms.

Because of the importance of visualization in tai chi, in this book I present visualization exercises for you to do. As no one will be watching over your shoulder as you read this book, it will be easy for you to skip them or to do them half-heartedly. However, if you do, you'll gain significantly less benefit. The exercises will help you to develop your visualization ability, which is one of the more important benefits you can gain from following this book's direction.

How much difference does visualization practice make? To me, it's made a big difference, which I relate later in this book.

One of the best write-ups of the value of visualization practice appeared in the book *Visual Tennis*. In it, its author, John Yandell, a tennis coach, shares the following story about how visualization practice benefited John McEnroe, a former top tennis pro.

In 1991 McEnroe was in the midst of a comeback; however, his once dominant serve was no longer so. In particular, his successful first serves were only in their mid-nineties (HR: a speed which, in baseball is excellent, but in professional tennis, isn't). McEnroe sought help from Yandell.

Yandell noticed that McEnroe "had developed a severe deviation"¹ in his serve's backswing. To remedy the problem, they reviewed a video that had been made in which McEnroe's serve technique was correct and focused on one image in the video, which Yandell referred to as the "key image." That image revealed a position McEnroe needed to be in during a serve but no longer was.

Here's Yandell's description of what he did next: "I had John stand in position to serve and move through his windup in slow motion until he reached the key position. I had him close his eyes and make a mental image of this model position, and asked him to visualize what this position looked like and felt like inside his mind.

I told him to project that mental image into space behind him like an imaginary template or blueprint, and simply move his arm and racket through the model image we had created. Then I

¹ John Yandell, *Visual Tennis*, (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999)

had him move through his motion to this new position with his eyes closed."²

The training lasted for two days and also included on-court practice and play.

Yandell wrote that "the test came that March in Chicago when John played his first tournament since the training. His motion held together beautifully. For the tournament John served 60 percent, with his serve consistently registering in the 108- to 115-mile-per-hour range. He won the event, serving 15 aces in the final."³

Visualization practice isn't just used in athletics. It's been used in Tibetan Buddhist meditation for many years. In his book, *Boundless Healing*, Tulku Thondup wrote that "visualization is a pillar of Tibetan meditation."⁴ He described four steps in successful visualization practice, steps that you can integrate into your tai chi practice. I've modified the steps for tai chi practice.

First, visualize yourself standing in the correct posture. Hold the image in your mind as long as it's comfortable to do so. (Over time, doing this visualization exercise will improve not only your visualization ability but also your concentration.)

While visualizing, avoid both physical *and* mental strain. Whereas, in most American sports it's "No pain, no gain," in tai chi it's "Pain, no gain" or "No pain, gain." It doesn't matter whether you're actually doing tai chi or just visually doing it. You don't need to experience pain to gain benefit.

² Yandell 15

³ Yandell 15.

⁴ Tulku Thondup, *Boundless Healing*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2001) 33

Second, verbalize the positive attributes in the image you're visualizing. For example, if you're visualizing someone else doing tai chi, such as your teacher, you might say to yourself "He's really relaxed," or if you're visualizing yourself doing it, you might say to yourself "I'm relaxed." Feel free to use descriptive labels, such as "He's in the bow stance."

Third, feel the image's qualities. For example, if you're visualizing yourself standing in the bow stance, feel the stance's stability.

Fourth, believe that you're benefiting from doing visualization. Belief is a powerful mechanism for success. Even if you're not fully convinced that it will work for you, pretend that you are. Even pretending can make a difference. Almost every time an actor gives a performance he's pretending to be someone else; yet his performance can be quite believable.

A visualization exercise

1. Study the picture on the right for a minute.
2. Close your eyes. How well can you see the picture? If you can't see it well with your eyes closed, repeat steps 1 and 2 several times until you can see it better.
3. Describe what you see in the picture. For example, Mr. Ma's right hand is near his right hip; he looks very stable.
4. Imagine that you're standing in the posture in the picture. Describe how it feels (focus on the positive).

