

How to teach seniors Tai Chi?

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Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei

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Due to its tremendous health benefits, [Tai Chi](#) (Taiji) is being recommended by doctors more frequently than ever to seniors. [SilverSneakers](#), a national preventive health program for 12 million seniors on Medicare in 13,000 locations, offers free Tai Chi classes to its members. Faced with increasing demand, Tai Chi instructors have to be mindful and keen to their students' physical conditions and modify their teaching method accordingly.

During the recent the Light of Tai Chi Camp held at the end of May in Seattle, Washington, Chen Style Tai Chi Lineage Holder Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei urged his students pay close attention to the needs and bodily constraints seniors may have and make necessary adjustments. Chen Style Tai Chi is the origin of all modern Tai Chi styles and possesses the most features from both [martial arts](#) and health promoting perspectives. A standard routine has a mixture of high-stance, medium-stance, and a couple of low-stance postures. Grandmaster Chen emphasized that for health purposes, it is not

necessary to exercise a form at medium or low stances. Grandmaster Chen stated it is not required to do a crouching step and practitioners can descend to a level that feels comfortable to complete the movement. He stressed the importance of the adherence to the essential body requirements. He divided a body into three sections to discuss the Tai Chi fundamentals: the top, the middle and the lower sections.

The top section includes the head and the neck. It is essential to keep the head suspended without tilting it forward, backward or sideways during any movement. The head turns only as the body turns. It is imperative to keep the head naturally hung without stiffening it. Chen cautioned beginners against using muscle strength to push the head up, which will cause stiffness in the neck and block Qi from traveling. The eyes look straight ahead and move according to the head movement with the peripheral vision focusing on the middle finger of the leading hand. Oftentimes, a practitioner bobs his head up and down or circles it simply to follow the hand without realizing it.

The middle section includes the torso, arms, shoulders, hands, collarbones, chest, waist, hips, spine, and buttocks. It is essential to pay attention to this section for health and self-defense purposes. He mentioned if a practitioner cannot correctly execute the middle section, he is really not doing Tai Chi chuan. The fundamentals of proper body alignment (Sheng Fa) include keeping the spine upright with a slight natural curve, tucking the chest, relaxing the waist, loosening the shoulders, and sinking the elbows. He also mentioned that tilting pelvis forward is a mistake. During the arm movement, he cautioned practitioners to make any linear movement. The spiraling techniques of Silk Reeling should be applied to hand rotation and arm movement to create the maximum health benefits as well as self-defense mechanism.

Chen stated that if the lower section movements are not clearly executed, it would cause the instability of the entire body or is considered lack of rooting. The lower section includes the Kua (hip joints), the groin area, the knees and the feet. Precise footwork and stances are critical to ensure flexibility and agility in a Tai Chi form. Relaxing or sinking Kua is similar to sitting on a high stool. Pivoting the empty foot inward can help to form a rounded groin area, which makes body movement flexible and powerful. The toes, outside of the feet, and the heels should be comfortably stick to the ground during movements.

Low-stance postures are not limited to the Chen Style. The popular Tai Chi 24 Form, sanctioned and promoted by the Chinese government, consists of three low stances, namely “Left Lower Body and Stand on the Left Leg” (*Zuo Xia Shi Dul*), “Right Lower Body and Stand on the Right Leg” (*You Xia Shi Dul*), and part of the “Closing” movement (*Shoushi*). I have witnessed seniors trying to imitate the crouching step on the right side by bending and leaning forward with their back hunching up while maneuvering the high-technical move. Their feet were twisting to make the 180-degree turn, which put horrible stress on their ankles and knees. This reflects the poor teaching and lack of proper training on the instructor’s side. For health and safety reasons, it is critical for students to clearly express Yin and

Yang in the footwork especially during body weight transition. An instructor can demonstrate the low stances to inspire students; nevertheless, it is critical that he knows how to teach based on the body physics of students’.

It may not be correct to proclaim that seniors are less flexible and strong. Some of the practitioners that I met in the Light of Tai Chi were in their 70’s and still nimbler than many of their younger peers.

Truthfully, it does not matter whom you teach; know your students and make adjustments based on the body requirements as needed.

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