



Teaching Rocking Motion

For beginning students who have never been exposed to *T'ai Chi Chih* before, *Rocking Motion* is one of the most difficult movements in the series for them in which to experience "softness and continuity" early on. Instead, they frequently experience balance problems, momentum challenges and locked knees. So, to address these issues, before moving I have taken to starting the first class out with a multi-sensory tactile exploration of softness. Amy Hackenberg, my teacher, first exposed me to this idea and it has proven to be quite helpful. Students experience holding, touching and feeling a very soft cloth (called Suede Rayon at the fabric store) as their first concrete connection to "softness."

Then, after demonstrating the movement in its whole to give them a visual imprint, I first address the feet and the weight shift. The t'an t'ien is key in this explanation, as it is the guiding element (not hinging at the hips, bending forward, and sticking out their behinds to shift backwards or locking their knees and catapulting up on their toes to come forwards). I ask students to place a hand on the t'an t'ien as they very slowly (very very slowly!) begin to shift their weight forward (not up!) Finally, as the weight comes forward enough, the heels may rise, more as a response to the weight shift (and the chi) rather than a self-propelled pushing with the toes. There is a big difference! Softly, evenly, the heels return to the floor and the essential, subtle but important release occurs: that of the knees. The instant the heels touch down, the backs of the knees must soften to absorb the weight shift backwards, to allow the balance to remain centered, to ground the movement. This is their first exposure to one of the key elements in T'ai Chi Chih: allowing the weight to shift onto a softened knee. Slowly, still with hand on the t'an t'ien, students are encouraged to feel their way through flowing backwards until the toes are motivated to rise, but only the toes. The ball mound of the big toe stays on the ground. If students are wearing shoes, I instruct them to allow the toes to rise inside their shoes, but that the shoe will not come off the ground at all (balance is too adversely affected in shoes otherwise). As soon as the weight begins to shift forward again, the knees soften to allow the centering and flowing of the movement to occur.

Key elements in the arms: the weight shift forward and backward of the legs must guide the arms. This introduces another key concept for the rest of the series, so I make a big deal of it: the arms are simply responders to the weight shift, not initiators or leaders of the movement. Arms come only to chest level at the "high" point, hands softly turn over as the student "sinks down into sand", softening the knees to allow the weight to flow back. As the hands pass the hips, make sure there is a complete release of the wrists. At the "low point" hands go past the hips just a bit before they gently turn palm up to repeat the cycle. The synchronization of the

arms and legs in Rocking Motion is challenging mostly due to locked knees (which affects balance), moving too quickly or "over-efforting" (being at the mercy of momentum rather than a receptivity or responsiveness to the weight shift) or overzealous "alpha" arms. These are three places I ask students to examine in themselves when they are having trouble with balance.

Another image I call on to describe the movement of Rocking Motion is that of a rocking chair. How effortlessly can students embody the motion of a rocking chair, with the movement emerging from the ground up?

We end class with another contact with the cloth--to reinforce the softness that it is theirs and will develop as their bodies learn to allow the chi to move them, and not the other way around.

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