

## Tai Chi Warmup Exercises

It is important to warm up your body before beginning exercise of any kind. These tai chi warm-ups also have an added component of opening up your joints and strengthening the flow of qi. Work within your comfort zone for all these exercises. If you have any problems with balance at any time, feel free to use a chair back or wall for support. If there is any unusual pain, stop immediately and consult a medical professional.

These exercises are from Dr. Paul Lam's Tai Chi for Health. I have completely rewritten his descriptions and added quite a bit more information to explain how you can use the exercises to help your tai chi. As far as I have been able to learn, this is the only detailed write-up of these exercises available on the internet. I strongly recommend that you view Dr. Lam's Tai Chi for Arthritis videos for more information.

### Beginning

The exercises start by working with your hands. Walk in a small circle, opening and closing your hands, and smile. This gets the blood flowing and your energy moving. Smiling promotes good energy and good feelings.

In Depth: Keep your body upright and avoid tensing up. Visualize that your spine is a string and you are gently pulling the string from both ends to stretch your torso. The top of the string is at the Bai Hui point at the crown of your head. The bottom of the string is at the Hui Yin point at the center of your perineum. Breathe slowly and be aware of transferring your weight, gently touch down your heel, and slowly shift your weight. Work within your comfort zone. If possible, practice [dan tien breathing](#) while walking.

### Main Exercises

There are two exercises each for six main body parts. There are two exercises each for the neck, shoulders, spine, hips, knees, and ankles. Do three repetitions of each exercise before beginning your tai chi forms.

Move into [wu ji](#) and keep your body upright during these exercises. Allow your body and mind to relax. Let your shoulders drop and loosen the neck and shoulder muscles where you build up tension during the day. Work with your knees slightly bent at all times.

### Neck

1 - Head Down. Start with your chin down toward your chest. Inhale and slowly raise your hands in front of you with your palms down. As your hands move, follow the movement with your chin. When your hands reach shoulder height, you should be facing straight ahead. Turn your hands so that your palms are toward your face. Bring in your hands toward your chin and move your chin backward, as if your hands were pushing it back, keeping your head upright. This straightens your spine. Exhale, turn your hands so the palms are forward, and push your palms forward and then down. Allow your chin to follow the hand movements by extending your head forward and bending it down.

In Depth: Keep your elbows slightly below your shoulders and gently push your shoulders out. This loosens ([song](#)) your shoulders and improves your flow of qi. With

practice, you should eventually be able to feel the qi in your hands. During the entire exercise, imagine that you are moving against gentle resistance to develop your inner force. In addition, focus on your qi and allow it to sink to your dan tien. This allows you to generate force in opposite directions to loosen your joints.

2 - Side to Side. Raise one hand to shoulder height in front of your shoulder with your palm facing in. Move your hand out in an arc to the side. Keep your hips still and turn at the waist. Follow the movement by turning your head. Return to center and switch hands. Repeat to the other side.

In Depth: Stretch your shoulders outward and maintain a small space in your armpit to open up the shoulder joint. Keep your elbow below your hand and shoulder and imagine stretching your hand out and up to stretch the arm tendons. Optionally, add some spiral force and rotate your dan tien to the side. Be sure to turn your head to get that neck stretch.

### Shoulders

1 - Shoulder Roll. Roll your shoulders forward three times. Then do it again by rolling them backward three times.

In Depth: Stretch your shoulders outward and maintain a small space in your armpit to open up the joint to promote the flow of qi.

2 - Hands Up and Around. Inhale and bring your hands around from the sides toward your body in a big circle, bending your knees slightly and gathering qi as you move. Exhale and press your hands down in front of you.

In Depth: Imagine gathering qi into your hands from the universe around you. Reach out to expand all the joints in your arms as your move. As you exhale, sink your qi to your dan tien.

### Spine

1 - Stretch up & Down. Slightly tuck in your chin to straighten your upper spine. Hold your hands in front of you with one hand about chest height and palm down and the other at your lower abdomen with the palm up, as if holding a ball. (Alternatively, hold your hands at the same level with fingertips pointing toward each other.) Separate your hands and inhale, moving one hand palm up over your head and one palm down at your hip. This is a gentle stretch with your elbows bent. Repeat to the other side.

In Depth: As you inhale, visualize that your spine is a string and you are gently pulling the string from both ends to stretch your spine. Feel your qi flowing up your spine to the top of your head. Pause briefly without moving and feel your spine stretching and the space between the vertebrae opening up. Imagine yourself growing taller. As you exhale, bring your hands back to the center and visualize that your qi is flowing down the front of your body.

2 - Side to Side. Hold your hands in front of you, right palm down and left palm up, as if holding a ball. Rotate at the waist in the direction of the top hand. When you reach your limit, reverse your hands and rotate in the other direction. Try to separate the movement of your hips and your waist and keep your hips still. There is no need to turn more than about 45° each way.

In Depth: Use your waist to lead the movement as you turn. Your hands follow your waist. Exhale and sink your qi to your dan tien.

Hips (It's OK to hang on to something for balance as you build leg strength)

1 - Forward & Back. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Lift your left leg and extend it toward the front, touching your heel down. Keep most of your weight on your right foot. At the same time, push your hands back from your sides toward the back. Lift your left leg, bring it back to where you started, and extend it behind you, touching down on the ball of the foot. At the same time, raise your hands in front to about shoulder height. Repeat for a total of three stretches. Repeat on the other side. For best balance, keep your feet apart so you are not “walking a tightrope”.

In Depth: Maintain an upright posture to keep your qi flowing properly. Make sure your movements are slow and continuous. Stretch your hip joint from within by keeping your crotch in an arch.

2 - Side Stretch. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Extend your left leg out to the left and gently touch down. Raise your hands with the palms facing to the right, right hand above the left. Press your hands to the right as if against a wall on your right side. Repeat the exercise to the left side.

In Depth: Visualize that your hip and knee joints are stretching and opening. Imagine that your arms and legs are being stretched in opposite directions from your center. This improves your balance and improves your flow of qi.

Knees

1 - Step & Punch Forward. Make your hands into loose fists and place them at your waist. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Slowly lift your left foot slightly, place it forward, touch down on your heel, and touch the rest of your foot down. At the same time, shift your weight forward and slowly punch forward with your right fist while exhaling. Keep your back heel flat on the floor so you don't become overbalanced. Keep your feet apart so you are not “walking a tightrope”. Shift your weight back, pick up your left foot, bring it back, and touch down where you started. At the same time, bring your fist back to your waist while inhaling. Repeat to the other side.

In Depth: Focus on slowly, gradually transferring your weight. Your internal force (intention) is delivered from the back foot, through the waist, and then the spine, shoulder, arm, and fist. Your punching fist is yang and your other fist is yin. Focus on both to maintain your yin/yang balance. Rotate your hips toward the front as you step and punch. Be aware of the kuas opening and closing to store and deliver power.

2 - Kick & Punch Forward. Make your hands into loose fists and place them at your waist. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Slowly lift your left leg, raising it until your thigh is horizontal. Slowly kick out with your left foot. At the same time, slowly punch forward with your right fist while exhaling. Bring your foot back in and touch down where you started. At the same time, bring your fist back while inhaling. Repeat to the other side.

In Depth: Focus on your posture and stay upright. Be sure to avoid hunching over. Slowly punch against a gentle force to develop your internal force. This exercise helps you focus your mind on delivering energy and at the same time it builds leg strength and balance. Additionally, as you step with your left, slightly rotate your waist and hips to the right. This helps you align your femur with your knee so that your weight is more directly over your knee. As you shift your weight forward, rotate your waist and hips back to the center. As you step with your right, slightly rotate your waist and hips to the left. This minimizes strain on your knees.

#### Ankles

1 - Heel & Toe. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Extend your left foot and touch down on your heel. Lift your foot slightly and touch down on the ball of your foot. Alternate for a total of three touches on heel and on toe. Repeat on the other side.

In Depth: Focus on slowly, gradually transferring your weight. Be aware of your weight being placed evenly on your foot. Be aware of sinking your qi. Make the ankle movements very slow and concentrate on opening the joint.

2 - Side to Side. Shift your weight to your right leg and bend your knees slightly. Extend your left foot and touch down on the outside of your foot. Lift your foot slightly and touch down on the inside of your foot. Alternate for a total of three touches on outside and on inside. Repeat on the other side.

In Depth: Focus on slowly, gradually transferring your weight. Be aware of your weight being placed evenly on your foot. Make the ankle movements very slow and concentrate on opening the joint.

Cooldown Exercises These are exercises to be done after completing your forms practice. They help you learn to relax your body after exercise.

1 - Gently Punching Thigh. Make a light fist and gently punch your thigh. Repeat with the other hand on the other leg. If you can, raise your leg so that your thigh is horizontal as you punch.

In Depth: Your legs get a good workout practicing tai chi. A gentle punch relaxes your thigh muscles and gets rid of any residual tension caused by the exercise. This helps with qi flow.

2 - Tense and Relax. From wu ji, make a fist, inhale, and rise up to your full height. If your balance is good, rise up on your toes. Relax and repeat.

In Depth: This exercise relaxes your entire body. The tension caused by making a fist and rising up is released when you relax. This helps make you aware of any residual tension anywhere in your body.

3 - Gathering Qi. This is the same as the shoulder exercise Hands Up and Around. Inhale and bring your hands around from the sides toward your body in a big circle, bending your knees slightly and gathering qi as you move. Exhale and press your hands down in front of you.

In Depth: Imagine gathering qi into your hands from the universe around you. Expand all the joints in your arms as you move. As you exhale, direct your qi to your dan tien.