

Dr. Suzanne Droleskey



Dr. Suzanne Droleskey's interest in Tai Chi began in 2003 when she saw a presentation of Tai Chi sword performed by the Chinese Student and Scholar Association at Texas A&M University. When she asked if anyone taught Tai Chi, the students told Droleskey that she could simply join them in their daily practice sessions. Just as with Tai Chi practiced all over the world, these informal gatherings took place outside, in a park. Droleskey joined the group and has been practicing Tai Chi ever since. Through lessons with various Chinese practitioners as well as several visiting Tai Chi masters, Droleskey has learned a number of Tai Chi forms and styles. Among these are the Yang and Chen styles and Tai Chi performed with a sword, a fan, and the sword with long tassel.

When asked now why she enjoys Tai Chi, Droleskey says, "Originally, I was attracted by the dance-like quality of it, but I never expected something so slow to be both mentally and physically challenging with the overall experience resulting in relaxation. From the practice of Tai Chi, not only am I physically stronger and more flexible, I have better balance, I lost weight, and I am better toned."

Droleskey began teaching Tai Chi in summer 2010 at the request of the Director of the Confucius Institute at Texas A&M University. At that time, she was the only Tai Chi instructor teaching this martial art through a Confucius Institute. For several years, she also taught at the Brazos Healing Center, a joint program with the Confucius Institute. Later she began teaching for the Department of Kinesiology at Texas A&M University, and has had sufficient demand to teach a class twice a year. When the Confucius Institute closed in 2018, Droleskey continued to teach Tai Chi on campus through Public Partnership and Outreach because of the ongoing demand. She has taught specialized courses both for those visually impaired as well as those with Parkinson's disease.

About her teaching, Droleskey states, "I love teaching adult learners. It is fun to help them think through how to make the different moves and to adjust what I teach to their different learning styles and capability levels." Droleskey indicated that some people are afraid to try Tai Chi because they think they do not have the 'athletic ability' or 'grace' to manage it. "They don't realize that Tai Chi was designed as a health management exercise and that the majority of practitioners world-wide are over age 50. Like anything, it takes practice to gain proficiency, but my students consistently tell me that after only a few weeks of doing Tai Chi, they can see gains towards their personal goals of improving, for example, strength, flexibility, or balance."

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Photo Credit: Ms. Gracie Lara took the photos of Dr. Droleskey used throughout this manual.

Use It or Lose It: Gaining Balance, Flexibility & Strength

Tai Chi for Health Exercises

Session Handout

What is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi focuses on internal movement, balance, harmony of movement. Intentionally internalizes focus vs. relying on strength and speed with an external opponent like external martial arts (judo, karate, etc.). Most often practiced for health purposes as a lifelong learning activity because there are no barriers to participation, no equipment needed, and progress occurs at an individual pace.

Balance

Unless someone has an inner ear problem, balance is a consciously learned skill that relies on body strength and knowing where your weight is concentrated and how you want to move it. The parts of the body outside the inner ear that are essential to balance include core muscles (in the back, across the stomach, and in the chest), and the feet, ankles, knees and hips.

- **Core Strength:** There are many core strength exercises available. Refer to the handout on seated core strength exercises.
- **Ankle and foot strength:** There are a number of foot strengthening exercises described on a separate handout (e.g. calf raises, foot scrunches).
- **Knee and hip strength:** There are a number of exercises mentioned in a different handout to help with this (e.g., leg raises and leg kicks).

Resources

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/multimedia/balance-exercises/sls-20076853>

This website provides five balance exercises with photos that rely on already having strength in the above-described areas. Therefore, you may need to build up a little strength before trying them.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/balance-training-to-boost-health/art-20270119>

This resource provides written descriptions of other ways to challenge your balance.

<https://wellness.unl.edu/pdf/physicalactivity/Strength%20and%20Balance%20Exercises.pdf>

This is a printable document showing some balance and strength exercises.

<https://www.silversneakers.com/blog/fit-for-life-exercises-improve-balance/>

This U-Tube video provides 12 exercises that improve balance and comes from the Silver Sneakers editors. Silver Sneakers is a health and fitness program designed for adults 65 and older that is included with many Medicare plans.

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Balance: How to Stand - Body Alignment

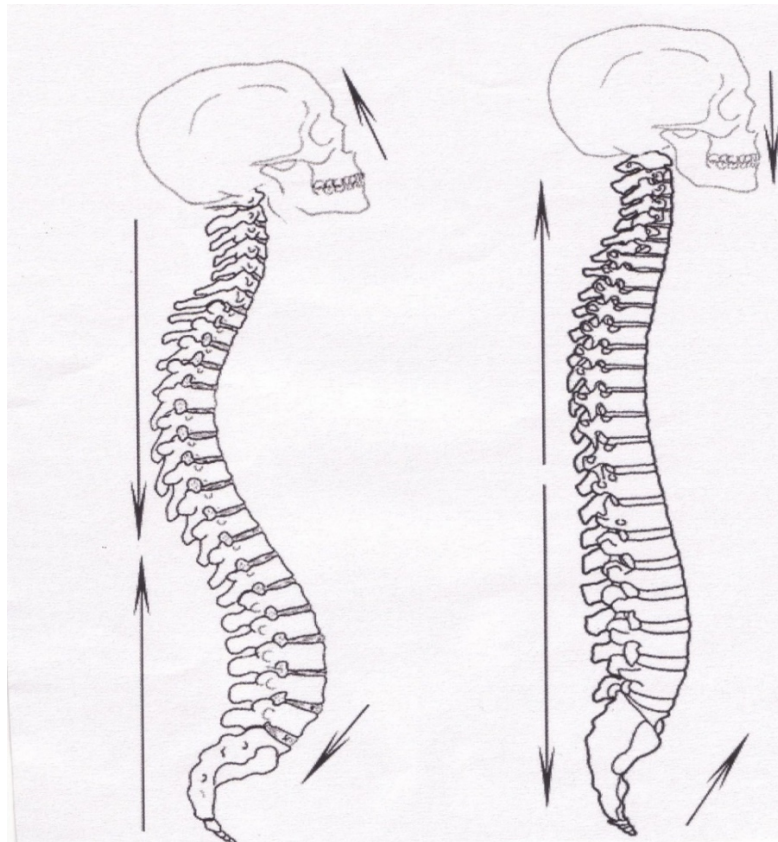
Having a correct stance is one of the principle keys to improving balance and the foundation to all other movements in Tai Chi.

Become conscious of checking yourself and making the adjustment into proper alignment any time you can. You may be surprised at how often you let yourself slide out of alignment and at how much work it is to maintain it. If you have very poor alignment, you will be doing frequent adjustments and you may become fatigued. If you get too tired, just stop adjusting so much and build up your strength slowly. Remember, it took you years to develop your current stance – it is not going to correct itself overnight.

There are five body points important for correct alignment alignment: **head** (pull up toward the ceiling), **chin** (down), **shoulders** (placed so arms fall to the sides of your legs), **pelvis** (straight vs. angled forward or back) and **unlocked knees**. Stand with feet shoulder width apart. The diagram below provides a look at the changes in the spine if you are doing this correctly.

Incorrect Alignment

Correct Alignment



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Flexibility

Flexibility is a reference to how “moveable” certain body components are. These include joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia – essentially the soft tissues of the body. Consider a stiff rubber band. After you stretch it a few times, it becomes more flexible. The same is true of these body parts.

Any sort of stretching and movement will facilitate gaining or maintaining flexibility. However, once you start on a program of stretching, be aware that it will need to become part of your normal routine in order for you to maintain the benefits that it provides. Also, remember that it is easy to overstretch, so work gently.

Resources

There are many exercises that facilitate development of flexibility. You can find many on your own, but here are a few links that may be helpful.

<https://www.ramfitness.com/stretching.html> -- These are free printable stretching guides for different parts of the body.

<http://www.stretching-exercises-guide.com/exercises-for-seniors.html>

This is an online stretching guide for seniors, with a variety of types as well an explanation about the science of stretching (how to do it, how long to do it, and muscle physiology).

http://www.printablee.com/post_printable-seated-exercises-for-seniors_178652/

This website has images that are printable to show seniors how to stretch while seated. There are seated yoga stretches available; yoga is an ancient stretching exercise.

<https://www.belmarrahealth.com/best-stretching-exercises-for-seniors/> This is an article describing some stretching exercises. Unfortunately, there are no photos of each exercise.

https://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Documents/NHS_ExercisesForOlderPeople.pdf This is a printable document from the National Health Services of the United Kingdom. It describes seated exercises. It has photos and targets specific areas of the body, so people can choose what area needs more work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Uzk6f2GnO8> This is a 10 minute video showing a chair workout for seniors.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Uzk6f2GnO8>

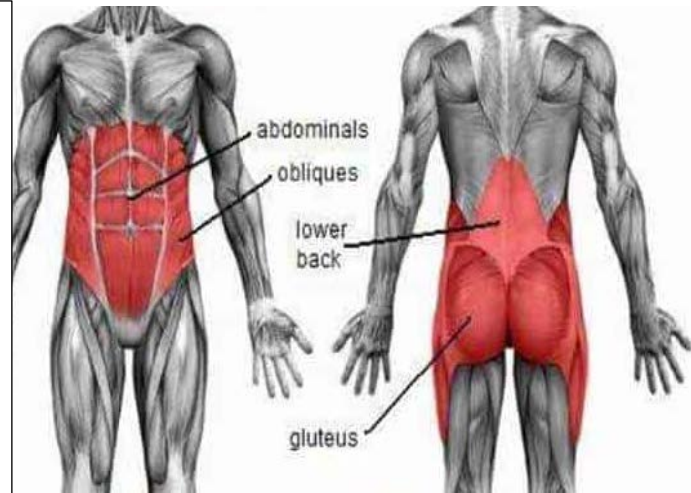
<https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/fitness-beginners-guide#1> This website provides a “beginner’s guide to exercise”, which covers stretching as well as weight reduction and even targeted exercise for lower back pain.

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Strength

As you have likely already realized, strength, flexibility and balance link to one another. It is difficult to have one without the others and difficult to find exercises that do not use at least two of the three. However, without strength, balance is nearly impossible. The foundation for practicing Tai Chi is to have sufficient strength and flexibility to control one's balance.

It is common when speaking of strength to hear the need for strengthening the **“core” muscles**. Exactly what does that mean? According to Wikipedia, “the core of the body is broadly considered to be the torso. Functional movements are highly dependent on this part of the body, and lack of core muscular development can result in a predisposition to injury. **The major muscles of the core reside in the area of the belly and the mid and lower back (not the shoulders), and peripherally include the hips, the shoulders and the neck.**”



Resources

There are many ways to exercise the body's core muscles and all other muscles used in balance and walking. Here are a few resources that may be helpful.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/multimedia/core-strength/sls-20076330?s=2>

Here are illustrations from the Mayo Clinic for some core exercises with a fitness ball. Click on each exercise name to see more photos showing that exercise.

<https://eldergym.com/exercises-for-the-elderly/>

ElderGym has a variety of fitness exercises that may be helpful for weight training.

<https://www.parentgiving.com/elder-care/building-core-muscles-key-to-longevity-and-independence/>

This article describes some core exercises.

<https://aparadiseforparents.com/9-easy-senior-resistance-band-exercises/>

Using resistance bands is an excellent strength building exercise. This resource has videos, too.

<https://www.sparkpeople.com/resource/exercises-printable.asp>

This website has printable exercises for a variety of different uses.

<https://www.acefitness.org/about-ace/aarp-fitness-wellness-program>

For AARP members, there are varieties of resources available online. This is one of them.

<https://dailycaring.com/video-15-minute-senior-exercise-program-for-balance-and-strength/>

This is a 15-minute video showing both balance and strength exercises.

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