

Conference 2017: Grounding Presentation

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Introduction

The perspective on grounding that I would like to play with involves our capacity to merge with the force of gravity and to root deeply into our bodies and the earth.

There is a wonderful Chinese proverb that says, "When the *Chi* (energy) starts at your center, goes down through the hips and knees and out through the *Bubbling Spring*, this spirit of lightness comes up through the *Bubbling Spring*, the knees and hips and when it reaches the top of your head, all dullness vanishes."

These two currents, the downward and upward are directly proportional. The amount of energy that can flow up through the soles of our feet is equal to the amount of energy that we allow to flow down through the soles of the feet.

This is maybe why Justin said that you should begin T'ai Chi Chih as though you have a hangover, no friends, and just lost your last penny. Just hearing this, your energy drops.

What I would like to explore is a principle in our TCC practice that has one of the greatest impacts on our capacity to allow this downward flow of Chi and that is alignment. We know that energy flows best through a straight pipe. We also know that when the body leans, tension is created; and where there is tension, the energy cannot flow.

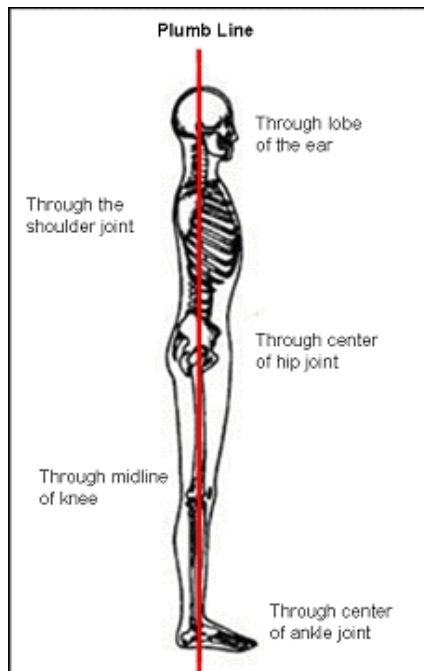
I remember Ed Altman saying once, "Alignment and stance prevent 1000 problems in the form. You cannot compensate for poor alignment." It is one of the first things he said he addresses with his students and it is one of the first things I also address with my students.

I understand there is an argument that if you teach a student to flow from their *tan t'ien* they will be in alignment and that is true. The problem that I have found is that most of us have been disconnected from our *tan t'ien* for a very long time. We think we are flowing from our *tan t'ien*, and are in alignment, but we are not. Our habit energies or our conditioned ways of moving are very, very strong and for most of us unconscious.

Let me give you an example in my own practice. I have a strong habit energy to shift my weight forward with my knee going inward and my weight ending up more towards the left of my foot versus being centered in my foot. I spent many years not even aware of the problem, just the result of it, which was tension, imbalance and unstableness in my forward weight shift. Eventually, I became aware of my misalignment but was not able to consistently shift my weight without the habit pattern taking over. In fact, last year at the Accreditation here, Pam Towne noticed it and brought it to my attention. I told her I was aware of it and was continuing to

work on it. With continued persistence, I finally had a breakthrough this past year. I became aware of the root cause of the habit pattern. It was a deep resistance in my right hip to allow the *Chi* to flow through it. At a certain part of the weight shift my restricted hip had more power than my presence in the *tan t'ien*. This deeper awareness or understanding empowered me to make a choice. The choice to let go of the resistance in my hip and to allow my *tan t'ien* to lead.

So let us now play a little with alignment. What does proper alignment look like?



Proper alignment happens when we let our skeletal system support us rather than our muscles. We want to stand in our bones. This happens when our ears are over our shoulders, our shoulders are over our neutral pelvis, and our pelvis is centered over our feet. It is only when we are in alignment that we can let go, relax and allow our energy to flow downward.

When we are misaligned the only way we can support ourselves is through tension in our muscles and joints. For example, when my shoulders are behind my pelvis, my toes grip the earth, my knees tighten and I feel tension in my lower back. The energy also gets stuck in my torso and cannot flow down my legs to the earth.

Demonstration (Bring up a teacher)

Most students who start TCC do not understand proper alignment. Their pelvis is too far forward and their shoulders are behind their pelvis. With permission, I will gently push with my finger on their upper chest. They easily lose their balance. I then help them find their proper alignment and push them again. They are shocked to experience such greater support and stability. This excites them since so many come wanting to improve their balance. They often share that when I put them in proper alignment they feel that they are leaning forward. I explain that it will take time to re-train their inner ear to the correct alignment.

Alignment Exercise

The only way to get aligned is to feel it. So let us feel our alignment by first feeling our weight centered over the soles of the feet. Now, since most of us have a tendency to move our pelvis forward take your two index fingers and push your hips back till you feel your sit bones over your heels. Now gently tuck your tailbone to level your pelvis. This will naturally bring your shoulders forward but sense in and see if you can actually feel your shoulders directly over your pelvis. Lastly, bring your chin in to align your head over your spine. Note, your core muscles need to be awake and

engaged to maintain alignment. You have to be present to stay aligned! You leave the core of your body and you will lose your alignment. Now let's play with it. Gently move your shoulders back till you feel tension creep into your body especially your knees. Now move your shoulders forward till you feel that tension release. When I am properly aligned I can bob up and down without tension. I sometimes jokingly call this my gorilla pose.

Alignment in your Forward and Back Weight Shift

I would like to now look at alignment in the forward and back weight shift. I will just share some of the more common issues I see.

- I often see people not getting their hips back enough and aligned over their foot before starting their weight shifts and in the back weight shift. Justin knew the importance of this, which is why we heard him often say, "sit on the back leg."
- In the forward weight shift I often see the pelvis hold back and the knee compensating by lunging forward. Lifting up the back leg and balancing on the front leg helps you get an idea of what it feels like to be aligned over your weighted leg. Remember, your knee should never be forward of your toes.
- Another place is the beginning of your weight shift back. The tendency is to lead with your shoulder, taking you out of alignment. It takes a lot of presence to begin the shift back from your *tan t'ien*.

Lastly, I would encourage you to be aware of your alignment before you sink down to close at the end of each movement. I especially make a point to check my pelvis because it has a strong tendency to move forward. Proper alignment in the rest position will support a greater downward flow of *Chi*.

Spiritual Aspect

In the book, *Chi Walking*, Danny Dreyer shares that his T'ai Chi teacher used to have him practice his posture stance in class for 90 minutes a week twice a week. His teacher would tell him to just stand there, without moving and then walk away. The teacher would come back in 20 minutes only to make a small adjustment to his posture and then he would leave Danny for another 20 minutes. That went on for the whole first month of class. What a powerful awareness exercise of inward attunement to our alignment.

I invite you now to stand in alignment as I share some closing thoughts. If you need to sit though, please do so. As you stand, imagine a golden thread from the ceiling connected to the crown of your head, supporting your bones and lifting your spine upward. At the same time, feel your muscles letting go, relaxing, allowing your energy to sink through your center, through your hips and knees and down to the *Bubbling Spring* (soles of the feet). Let yourself feel both the downward current and the support of upward current at the same time.

Our physical alignment is really a mirror to our alignment with the Truth of who and what we are. It is only when we are aligned with the Truth of who we are that we can experience life without gripping and grasping. We know we are aligned with truth when we feel peace, comfort and an inner relaxation at all levels of our being. The subtle vertical core of our body is both our deepest connection with ourselves and the basis of our connection and oneness with others.

I would like to read something to you now from the book "*The Enlightenment Process: A Guide to Embodied Spiritual Awakening*" by Judith Blackstone. "Fundamental (Cosmic) Consciousness is realized through inward attunement to the internal space of the body, and in particular, to the subtle channel that runs through the vertical core of the body. This means that realization is based on inward penetration to the center of our being. The subtle channel is called *sushumna* in Hindu yoga, and the central channel in Tibetan Buddhism.

Most people live their whole lives without any contact with the vertical core of their own body. This is because access to the core is obstructed by psychological defenses, repressed memories, and emotions that become embedded in the tissues of our body, making them too dense and rigid to be easily penetrated by our consciousness. One of my more humorous students told me, after his first experience of being in the vertical core of his body, "I've been most places in the world, but I've never been here before."...

For each of us, the subtle core of our body is our entranceway into Fundamental (Cosmic) Consciousness. ...We know when we enter the vertical core of the body, for it has a specific quality. It has a fine, electrical charge and within that, stillness and a quality that we can recognize as truth, or essence."

My journey in TCC has been and continues to be the journey to this inner subtle core. Exploring my actual physical alignment in my TCC practice has been fundamental to this journey.

Justin Stone was also aware of the importance of our vertical core. Chapter 1, in *Heightened Awareness* is titled, "Posture & State of Mind. Here is a quote from that chapter, "After a few days of watching your posture and your state of mind, you may make an unexpected discovery - that your posture is influenced by your state of mind and your state of mind has a great deal to do with your posture."

I thank you for playing with me and may the exploration of your alignment bring you many delightful discoveries!