



Rockhampton 'Special Needs' Tai Chi Classes

Welcome to a program of tai chi provided in association with the Australian Academy of Tai Chi. An AATC *Special Needs Instructor* since 2002, I continue to learn and hope that you'll find it challenging and fun as we learn together.

Tai chi is meant to provide exercise without undue stress—adapt your practice to your own skill level and physical capability. In other words, adjust your movement, posture or stance if it causes pain, upsets your balance, etc.

Wear comfortable clothes and bring a water bottle and other personal items to make your experience enjoyable. Shoes, if worn, should have flat soles and provide firm support.

Classes concentrate on balance and relaxation to help to maintain our physical health. While evening AATC classes may have several instructors and provide instruction at individual levels, this group will include individuals who have been doing tai chi for years as well as those who've just started.

We'll work together, integrating novice and experienced practitioners in a less formal setting as we review tai chi basics and expand our repertoire of *shibashi* and similar exercises.

Lynn Zelmer, Special Needs Instructor

What the Class Involves...

While Tai Chi is based on Chinese martial arts we use it for health and relaxation. As a relaxed, almost ballet-like form it combines balance, breathing, movement and relaxation. It can be performed at your own level and shouldn't place undue stress on your body.

"The idea is to learn to do simple things in a relaxed manner and then with improved skill take on more challenging things."

Grand Master Khor, AATC Founder

Our classes include warm-up and stretching exercises, Qigong or shibashi type exercises and the first three levels of the tai chi form. Shibashi

and other repetitive exercises are easy to master, their rhythmic and repetitive nature promotes relaxation and meditation, usually with a balance of left and right side movements.

The tai chi set can be more complicated for beginners as movements flow, rather than repeating, but they are built on the basic forms and encourage a slow, relaxed and graceful movement from one posture to another.

Practical Tips

Normally you should mirror the instructor's movements is s/he is facing you, copy the movement if facing away.

Warm-up and stretching exercises require full extension while still remaining loose and relaxed. Tai chi/shabashi movements are softer with ~85% extension only.

Don't force the exercises. Everyone has different limits and you're the only one who knows yours. Modify the way you perform the exercise or stop and rest before you reach your limits. **And remember that you can do many of the exercises while sitting or you can use a chair or other balance support.**

Relax and flow with the exercises. Avoid making sudden movements, leaning to one side or forward/back or over-extending yourself (usually losing your balance).

Keep your body upright, know your balance limits and keep movements within those limits. Bending the supporting knee slightly will help your balance. If necessary slide your foot (so that it still provides some support) rather than lifting it when balance remains a difficulty.

Turning the upper body starts with the waist. Except during warm-ups the shoulders and arms should follow the waist rather than swinging loosely. A "twist" to the back similarly starts with the waist, followed by the mid and upper

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back, shoulders and arms, with the head turning to complete the movement.

The tai chi form is based on the martial arts — stay relaxed and alert — guard with the off hand and avoid looking down.

Relax and sink, weight to feet, keep head and spine upright but without strain. The face and chest remain relaxed. Clear the mind of all intruding thoughts.

Focus your thoughts inward on your form, posture and breathing, rather than being distracted by what other people are doing.

Go as far as comfortable but never stress or strain!

Why do we Fall?

Humans are bipedal with relatively small ground contact for our height/mass, and an uneven distribution of weight and mass.

In some senses, falling (moving from a higher to a lower level, typically rapidly and without control) is our default state, with movement (striding: eg walking or running) essentially being a controlled fall.

So what are some of the "causes" of loss of control?

- Distractions and inattention (phone/texting/loud noises/conversation)
- Fatigue/stress/injury (uneven gait?)
- Dizziness from rising too quickly, and other health conditions
- Inappropriate or poorly fitting footwear (flip flops, slippery soles, stepping on one's own footwear/laces)
- Turning quickly, not looking before turning or moving backwards without due care
- Unexpected surface changes (including stairs/edges of footpath, tilted footpath sections, gravel/dirt path)
- Poor lighting, vision difficulties, etc...

As with the "fatal five" of driving, the loss of balance resulting in a fall is often preventable.

Breathing

Most movements begin in a relaxed stance. Breathe even and deep through the nose (it helps slow you down), the tongue resting on the

roof of the mouth. Breathe out fully, rather than trying to take in a big breath.

Try to coordinate your breathing with the movements: keep it smooth and avoid holding your breath.

As you become more adept you should work at breathing in when lifting or pulling back, and breathing out when lowering down or pushing out (as when punching).

While tai chi and the other exercises are not primarily breathing exercises, breathing "with the move", and breathing all the way down to the abdomen can help improve your form.

Most importantly, keep your breathing smooth and do not allow it to distract you from the exercise/form.

Tai Chi Stances

Horse Stance: Feet hip width apart and close to parallel, knees slightly bent with weight evenly distributed, hands at the side; body and head upright, shoulders rolled down back, tailbone slightly tucked under.

Bow Stance/Square Step: Relaxed, one foot ahead, about a hand width space between and back foot turned 30-45 degrees, weight balanced evenly, hands at side. Sink weight, both knees bent, body and head upright.

Empty Stance: Sink all weight into rear leg, body/head upright, either heel or toes of front foot in light contact with ground ahead of you.

Movement: Firmly establish your [3 point] balance on the standing foot before lifting a foot to move. Lift from the knee and lightly place the foot where you want to step.

Weight Transfer/Moving: When transferring your weight from side to side, or front to back, adopt a relaxed but upright posture—think of your head being suspended from the ceiling by a bungee cord.

Sink into your balance before moving or turning, and bend/straighten your knees to transfer your weight without bobbing your head up and down.

Only sink as far as is comfortable in sinking exercises. Maintain a comfortable stance at all times, ensuring your balance.

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Tai chi walking involves sinking into a balance position and knowing exactly where your next footstep will be placed "heel and then toe".

"Walking is a practical example of the importance of not having the limbs extended. If you stand with the knees in the lock position and extend one foot you will find that it does not reach the ground in front. Only when you bend the supporting leg does the other leg reach the ground."

"So how do those people who habitually walk with their knees almost in the lock position walk? Basically they fall forward onto the front foot!"

"Apart from damage to joints this is a very high fall risk manoeuvre. In Tai Chi you should 'Walk like a cat', that is the foot comes forward first and only transfer the weight when the foot is safely on the ground." [Grandmaster Khor]

Warm-Up/Stretching Exercises

While we always start sessions with 'warm-up' exercises, in practical terms we are gently stretching muscle groups and joints, preparing you for tai chi activities. The warm-up session should help you relax; and is an opportunity to set the mood, refresh fundamentals and improve balance.

An instructor will lead the warm-ups in class, but you should follow the same principles when practicing yourself. Be consistent in general form with the warm-up exercises: for example starting with the same stretch and working from head to foot helps you know what to expect and promotes relaxing.

- Work all parts of the body, not just the upper body.
- Work both sides of the body (or direction) for single-sided exercises.
- Stretches should be followed by a rest or contraction to relax the muscles.
- Practice tai chi breathing through the nose, tongue against top palate, and coordinate breathing with the movement: generally breathing in while stretching, breathing out when relaxing.

- While it is often useful to hold a stretch at its fullest point before relaxing and returning to a rest position, you shouldn't hold your breath at stretch extremities.
- Include at least some balance and/or weight transfer exercises as part of the sequence.
- Don't hurry exercises; repeat each step enough times to ensure that the stretch-relax sequence has been successful.
- Keep to academy-approved exercises, either the standard warm-up exercises or single exercises from shibashi or tai chi sets, etc.
- When working with others give directions in a quiet, clear voice: some individuals may be hard of hearing or have their eyes closed.

The shibashi exercises are a great source for warm-up exercises as most can be done as a stretch or as a gently calming exercise. At some point, however, it is useful to consider the differences.

Alter the number of repetitions or type of exercise as appropriate for the class, time of day, etc. Evening classes or computer users, for example, may need more relaxation exercises and/or neck, shoulder, and wrist exercises, while older students may benefit from more balance exercises.

We encourage our students to do shibashi and tai chi sets slowly with breath and movement coordinated. It's often useful to do similar movements as stretches or warm-up exercises that exaggerate the movement. This helps understand the move and practice transitions, etc., without the need for internal focus.

Weight transfer exercises are perhaps the best example of this and can include waist and arm movements without necessarily requiring you to move to/from the horse riding or bow stance.

Visit AATC-Qld (www.livingchi.com.au) or the local web site (www.zelmeroz.com/taichi) for additional resources or to purchase academy books, videos, music CDs, etc.



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The Lotus Exercise

The Lotus Qigong set tells a story from the time of China's Yellow Emperor and includes many of the basics of tai chi. Start standing relaxed, feet together and open as with the set.

- Wave hands in air
- Turtle treads water
- Rabbit digs earth
- Fair lady scoops water
- Reach up and pull down
- Lotus flower blossoms
- Face the wind (each side)
- Lift the sky (bend knees and extend)
- Press the earth (bend waist, press down, then bend knees to return)
- White crane spreads wings
- Rabbit ploughs earth
- Wave hands in air and close

Shibashi Exercises

Shibashi sets have 18 movements incorporating components of the tai chi form. We normally repeat each movement four times, twice on each side if the move alternates side to side. The exercise becomes more meditative with increased repetition (eg 8/4).

Shibashi requires coordinating hand movements with moving and/or balancing. Adapt your form to only move as far as is comfortable while retaining an upright posture.

We alternate between the Shibashi sets during the year to provide variety and ensure that we don't become too complacent with the regular exercises.

Tai Chi Set: The Postures

The *tai chi set* has six levels of low-impact sequential routines (postures and transitions) to encourage relaxation and balance. While based on the 'hard' martial arts, they are slow, soft and meditative in practice. Special needs classes practice the first three levels; attend an evening class if you wish to go further with your tai chi.

Start relaxed with the feet together. Grace and form come as you learn to transfer weight and practice 'tai chi walking'.

Level 1

Preparation, separate feet

Commencement, raise and lower arms

Holding the Ball, on right

Grasping the bird's tail, in left bow stance

Holding the ball, on left

Ward off, in right bow stance

Pull back, in right bow stance

Press, in right bow stance

Push, in right bow stance

Single whip, in left bow stance

Play guitar, in left empty stance

Level 2

Shoulder stroke, with right shoulder

White crane spreads its wings, in right empty stance

Brushing knee, in left bow stance

Play guitar, in right empty stance

Block back, in right empty stance

Slant flying, in left bow stance

Forward deflection, with right fist

Kick and thrust, with right heel

Parry, with left hand

Punch, right fist in left bow stance

Close the door, in left bow stance

Cross hands, central stance

Level 3

Embrace the tiger, in right bow stance

Needle at sea bottom, in left empty stance

Fan to back, in right bow stance

Snake creeps down, left crouch stance

Seven star punch, in right empty stance

Jade lady shuttles to four corners

Punch under the elbow, in right empty stance

Tai chi, like any exercise activity, is very easy 'not to do'. However spending even a few minutes each day on simple weight transfer or movements from the shabishi sets can quickly improve your form, balance and well being.