TAI CHI WUJI

Tai Chi Practice Self-Check Guide

A Practical Guide to Observing, Understanding, and Improving Your Practice

Free companion guide to

taichiwuji.com/how-to-do-tai-chi-correctly

How to Use This Guide

This guide is not a replacement for a qualified teacher. It is a tool to help you become more aware of your own practice, notice common patterns, and know when to ask for guidance.

What Self-Check Can Do

- Help you notice obvious tensions and misalignments you may have missed
- Give you simple things to observe during practice
- Suggest safe, basic exercises you can try on your own
- Help you prepare better questions for your teacher

What Self-Check Cannot Do

- It cannot tell you if your form is "correct" — that requires a teacher's eyes
- It cannot diagnose pain or injury — stop and seek guidance if something hurts
- It cannot replace the feeling of song (relaxation) and root that develops over time
- Different styles, teachers, and body types may have legitimate variations

> **Important:** If you experience knee pain, sharp discomfort, or anything that does not feel right during practice, stop that movement. Do not push through pain thinking it is "correcting" something. Consult an experienced teacher.

Tools You Will Need

- A full-length mirror, or a phone to record short video clips (side view is most useful)
- Enough space to perform your form slowly
- 5–10 minutes before or after practice to run through one or two checks

You do not need to check everything every time. Pick one observation point per practice session and focus on that.

Four Self-Checks for Every Practice

☐ Check 1: Shoulders Rising

Observe | Mirror or video

What to look for: As your arms move upward or outward, do your shoulders lift toward your ears? Can you see tension in your upper trapezius?

Why it matters: Raised shoulders block energy flow to the arms, break the connection between torso and hands, and create unnecessary fatigue. Traditional instruction says the shoulders should "sink" (chen jian).

Try this: Before starting, take a breath and let your shoulders drop away from your ears, releasing any holding. Maintain that sense as you move. Practice a few simple arm circles keeping the shoulders settled.

> **Remember:** Sinking shoulders is not forcing them down or hunching forward. It is releasing unnecessary upward tension.

☐ Check 2: Knee and Foot Alignment

Observe | Mirror — front view

What to look for: When you shift weight onto a leg, does the knee track in the same general direction as the toes? Does it collapse inward or twist outward?

Why it matters: Twisting the knee under load is the most common cause of knee strain in Tai Chi. The knee is a hinge joint — it functions best when it moves in line with the foot.

Try this: Stand in a basic bow stance (gong bu) and slowly shift your weight forward and back. Look down or use a mirror to check that your front knee points roughly over your second toe, without drifting inward.

> **Note:** There is no universal rule that "knees must never pass the toes." In deeper stances and certain postures, knees naturally extend beyond the toes. The key safety principle is avoiding *twisting* under weight, not an arbitrary forward limit.

☐ Check 3: Stability During Weight Shift

Observe | Video — side/front view

What to look for: When you transfer weight from one leg to the other, does your upper body sway, bounce up and down, or make sudden adjustments? Do you pause or stiffen at the moment of full weight transfer?

Why it matters: Wobbling indicates that the weight transfer is being controlled by the upper body or local leg strength rather than rooted movement from the kua (hip area).

Try this: Practice shifting weight very slowly between legs in a stationary stance first, without any hand movements. Keep your height constant — imagine a string from the top of your head to the ceiling, keeping you at a steady level.

☐ Check 4: Arms Connected to Torso

Observe | Video — any angle

What to look for: Are your arms moving independently, as if disconnected from your body? When your torso turns, do your hands move with it, or do they stay behind or move separately?

Why it matters: In Tai Chi, movement originates from the torso (yi dao, qi dao, li dao — intention leads, energy follows, force arrives). If arms move on their own, you are using local arm strength rather than whole-body coordination.

Try this: Practice a few simple waist turns with your arms resting loosely at your sides. Let the turning of your waist swing your arms gently, without any intentional arm movement. Notice how the torso can move the arms. Then apply this feeling to your form.

> **Good sign:** When your arms feel heavy and connected, like they are hanging from the spine rather than being held up by the shoulders.

Common Issues & What to Observe

These are patterns many practitioners notice. Not every observation means you are "doing it wrong" — they are starting points for awareness.

What You Notice	What to Check First	What to Try
Pauses or stutters in movement	Are you stopping to "get into position" before moving to the next posture? Is the transition between postures as smooth as the postures themselves?	Practice more slowly than feels comfortable. Connect the end of one movement directly to the beginning of the next without a stop. Think of water flowing continuously.
Sore knees after practice	Check knee-foot alignment (Check 2). Are you in a stance deeper than your current leg strength can support? Are you leaning forward or back unevenly?	Raise your stance higher until you can hold it without strain. Practice standing (zhan zhuang) for 3–5 minutes daily to build leg strength gradually. If pain persists, see a teacher.
Feeling tired or winded	Are you holding your breath? Are you using muscular force to maintain positions? Are your shoulders and arms tense?	Breathe naturally through the nose. Let go of any unnecessary gripping in muscles. Slow down. It is normal for legs to feel work, but you should not be gasping or feeling exhausted.
Not sure if "relaxed"	Can you let your jaw soften? Is your forehead smooth? Are your fingers slightly curved rather than straight or clenched?	Scan from head to toe before practice: release jaw, soften eyes, drop shoulders, let hands hang heavy. Song (relaxation) is not collapse — it is alive, alert softness without unnecessary tension.
Looking down at feet	Is your chin tilted down? Is your neck craned forward? Does your head move independently of your torso?	Imagine the top of your head being gently lifted upward (xu ling ding jin). Let your gaze rest softly ahead, about eye level. Your head follows the turn of your torso, not leading it.
Feeling off-balance	Is your weight fully on one leg before the other moves? Are your feet too close together or in a straight line? Are you shifting weight gradually or suddenly?	Confirm clear empty/full (xu/shi) distinction: one leg substantial, one insubstantial. Step wider if needed for stability. Shift gradually like pouring sand from one hand to another.

> **Practice tip:** It is better to practice 10 minutes daily with awareness than an hour once a week while thinking of something else. Consistency and attention matter more than duration.

Five Essential Principles

These principles come from traditional Tai Chi Classics and generations of teaching. They are not separate "techniques" but qualities to cultivate throughout your entire practice.

1. Tranquil Mind (Jing)

Practice with a calm, focused mind. Let go of planning and worrying. The movements follow the mind's intention (yi), not brute strength. When the mind is quiet, you can feel what is happening in your body.

Simple practice: Take 3 slow breaths before starting. During practice, if your mind wanders, gently return attention to the feeling of your feet on the ground.

2. Light Agility (Qing Ling)

The Classics say "move like a cat." Movement should be light, agile, and rooted at the same time — not heavy, plodding, or stiff. Lightness does not mean floating or being ungrounded; it means moving without unnecessary weight or resistance in the limbs.

Simple practice: Feel the weight in your feet before each step. Let the soles of your feet sense the ground. Move as if walking on thin ice — alert, sensitive, gentle.

3. Slow Practice (Man Lian)

Practice slowly so that you can feel and observe. Speed hides mistakes; slowness reveals them. Going slowly does not mean moving sluggishly or stopping — it means maintaining continuous, even movement at a pace that allows awareness.

Simple practice: Choose a section of your form and practice it at half speed. Notice points where you tend to rush or skip over. Smooth those transitions.

4. Precision Alignment (Zhun Que)

Pay attention to the basic alignments: head upright, shoulders sunk, elbows dropped, chest relaxed, waist loose, knees tracking with feet. Precision is not about rigid angles — it is about placing the body so that structure, not muscular force, supports you.

Simple practice: Pick one alignment point per practice session. If working on shoulders, notice them throughout the form, not just at the beginning.

5. Perseverance (Heng Xin)

Tai Chi develops through steady, patient practice over time. You will have good days and frustrating days. You will notice things, then forget them, then notice them again at a deeper level. This is normal. The practice itself, over time, is the teacher.

Simple practice: Set a realistic minimum (even 10 minutes) and do it daily, regardless of how you feel. Quality emerges from quantity of attentive practice.

A 30-Minute Practice Session

You can use this structure as a template for daily practice. Adjust timing to suit your needs and what you are working on.

Time	Activity	What to Focus On
0–5 min	**Preparation & Standing** (Zhan Zhuang)	Stand in wuji stance (feet shoulder-width, arms loosely at sides). Settle feet, release shoulders, soften chest, breathe naturally. Let the mind arrive. Scan for unnecessary tension.
5–10 min	**Warm-up Movements**	Gentle waist turns, arm circles, weight shifts, knee circles (if comfortable). Move every joint gently, no force. Keep the quality of relaxation you found in standing.
10–12 min	**Choose One Self-Check**	Pick ONE item from the Four Self-Checks (pages 3–4). That is your observation theme for today. Do not try to fix everything at once.
12–25 min	**Form Practice**	Practice your form slowly and continuously, keeping today's single observation point in awareness. If you notice something, simply notice it and continue — do not stop to analyze. Let awareness gradually inform the movement.
25–28 min	**Repeat a Difficult Section**	If there was a transition or movement that felt awkward or forced, repeat it slowly 3–5 times. Look for the source of difficulty — it is often in weight shift or waist movement, not the hands.
28–30 min	**Closing Stillness**	Return to wuji stance. Stand quietly for 1–2 minutes. Notice how you feel compared to when you started. Breathe naturally. Bring practice to a clear close.

> **Short on time?** Even 10 minutes — 3 minutes standing, 5 minutes form with one focus, 2 minutes closing — is genuine practice. Quality matters more than duration.

Personal Practice Notes

Bring this guide with you to practice. Use these pages to record what you notice, what felt difficult, and questions to ask your teacher. Noticing itself is the beginning of improvement.

Date / Practice Session

What I focused on today:

What I noticed in my body:

What felt difficult or awkward:

Questions to ask my teacher:

Next session, I want to observe:

Make copies of this page for ongoing practice notes

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