

# FEATHER WALKING

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T'ai Chi teaches us how to walk. Every step is slow and exaggerated, so we have a chance to notice and shape every detail of the process. My students and I practice what I call "feather walking" to prepare us physically and mentally to do the T'ai Chi sequence.

I flex my ankle and extend my heel, touching down light as a feather on the ground. There's no weight there yet. Then—only when I *decide* to—I roll my weight gradually onto that foot until it makes full contact with the ground. (Walking is not falling from one foot onto the other.) All the tendons, ligaments, muscles, and the dozens of bones in my foot have time to assess and adjust to the ground—whether it's bumpy or flat—and bring me into balance. Meanwhile, the heel of the foot in back is rising off the ground, flexing the sole. I'm conscious of the fact that flexing the back foot opens the yong chuan or "bubbling well"—the energy center on the midline, just below the ball—so qi can flow freely into and out of the body. I wait until I feel solidly weighted and balanced in the forward foot, then I lift the back foot off the ground and gradually extend the heel for the next step.

Feeling solidly weighted and balanced in the forward foot is the trick. I use a number of techniques to do this:

- I bend my knee to lower my center of gravity. (Even the slightest lowering enhances balance.)
- I visualize my center of gravity (which has shifted from my abdomen into my hip socket) connected by a string to the center of the supporting foot.
- I "sit" into my hip as if sitting straight down into a chair.
- I think about getting the weight of my upper body over my hip; which is a big, strong, reliable joint.
- I lift my "jade pillow," located just under the occipital ridge, so that my spine is vertical from the tailbone right up through the back of the neck and my chin points down toward my heart.

- I'm conscious of the upward pull of yang energy from the sky working together with the downward pull of yin energy from the earth to keep me vertical.

One of the most important things to keep in mind while walking is that a minimum shoulder-width stance is absolutely necessary for good balance. According to a Mayo Clinic report, our stances tend to become narrower as we age. So I look down at my feet now and then and correct myself if I need to.

Breathing and visualization—both important parts of T'ai Chi—can be added to feather walking, deepening the experience and further improving balance. Connect the breath by breathing in as you lift a foot off the ground, as if pulling new energy up from the earth through the yong chuan. Breathe out as the foot presses into the ground, as if sending the energy back down. Visualize elastic threads connecting the back foot to the ground as the heel lifts up—you'll feel a gentle resistance. Continue to feel that same sense of connection and supple support when the foot is airborne. As the heel and then the rest of the foot touch down, imagine that you're pressing a soft ball into the earth. Soles of the feet are wide open, very alive and sensitive. Your feet will appreciate the attention.

### **Adding Arms**

One of my students with rheumatoid arthritis complained of loss of balance to her physician. He recommended that she do slow walking in place while using her arms in the cross-patterned way—the way we naturally walk. This means that when the left foot moves forward, the right arm moves forward and vice versa. It worked immediately for her.

Now we've started adding arms to feather walking. The arms move in slow, exaggerated motion—the left arm lifts as the right foot lifts and it lowers as that foot presses down into the ground. The right arm lifts as the left arm lowers. I imagine rubber bands connecting the opposing arms and legs. Be sure to let the lower hand swing back behind the body—this helps with the timing.

I feel the energy between my palms increasing as they approach each other, one rising and the other falling. To enhance this sensation, I deliberately angle my palms so the lao gongs—the energy centers in the middle of my palms—are facing each other as they come close. (When energy centers face each other, they gain energy.)

My student says she does this not just for physical balance, but also when she's feeling "disconnected," meaning mentally fuzzy and discombobulated. Another member of my class says she feels more alert when she adds arms to feather walking compared to practicing it without arms. In his book *Spontaneous Healing*, Dr. Andrew Weil says that cross-patterned

movement “generates electrical activity in the brain that has a harmonizing influence on the whole central nervous system—a special benefit of walking that you do not necessarily get from other forms of exercise.”

### **Whole Body Breathing**

Feather walking with arms pumps equal, opposite forces through the entire body. As I breathe in, I focus on the rising arm, foot, and leg. Qi rises. (Simultaneously, that upward pull is balanced by qi being drawn down into my expanding dan tian with the inhalation as I belly breathe.)

As I breathe out, I focus on the lowering arm, foot, and leg. Qi falls. (Simultaneously, the exhalation releases qi upward as the dan tian contracts and air and qi move upward.)

It’s a continuous, many-faceted, and entirely natural experience involving physical, mental, and emotional awareness. Feather walking with arms gives me a lovely calm and weightless feeling. I’m rooted in both earth and sky, the three of us poised in a dynamic, balanced partnership.

### **Walking Sideways**

We feather walk sideways and backward too. Sideways walking is used in the movement commonly known as “Wave Hands in the Clouds.” Feet face front at all times. You land on the ball of the foot with each step, slowly lowering the heel to the ground with the gradual transfer of weight. If you’re moving to the right, step to the side with the right foot so your stance is a little beyond shoulder width. Then bring in the left foot just far enough to return your stance to shoulder width. As usual, avoid bringing your feet closer than shoulder width. Practice walking to both left and right. Breathe in as you pick up a foot, visualizing qi flowing up from the earth and coursing through the leg to the dan tian—the energy center in the middle of the abdomen. Watch the energy pass through the dan tian and fall back down into the ground on the other side with the weight and the outflow of breath. It’s like pouring water from one glass into another. Settle downward into each hip and find your balance before picking up the other foot.

### **Walking Backward**

In the Wu style that I teach, we walk backward while doing “Trapping Tricky Monkey.” Instead of using the knees to take the foot backward, we use the big joint—the hip. Thus the step is rounded and the foot describes a low arc in the air. You may choose to just use the knee. With each step, land on the ball of the foot. As the heel goes down in the back foot, the toe of the front foot comes up. You’re like the runners on a rocking chair. It’s extremely important to preserve a shoulder width stance while walking backward—it’s hard enough without putting ourselves “on a rail” as if we’re confined to a balance beam. A

mirror can help here. If the back foot is partially hidden by the front foot, you're in trouble. This is a great hip sitting exercise. Establish yourself in one hip before using the other to move the foot back. Of course we combine breath and visualization here too. It's fun to add arms while walking backward. The mental focus shifts to the arm swinging back instead of the arm swinging forward. It pulls the opposite-side leg back with it. Our elbows don't bend backward the way they bend forward, but that's the only difference. Although it takes some getting used to, it's surprising how quickly our bodies respond to training. Walking backward with arms becomes noticeably easier with each try.

### **Playing Red Light-Green Light**

After we'd been practicing feather walking for a while, I decided to play music during the exercise and stop it at random intervals for a few seconds at a time. When the music stops, the students stop; when the music resumes, they resume. It's challenging and fun and reminds me of games I played as a kid—"red light-green light" and "statue." You might be caught with one foot in midair, or an inch above the ground, or with the heel or toe barely touching so that you're in "empty stance" with no weight on one leg and all the weight held by the other. You will eventually be caught in every conceivable position. Our legs strengthen and our balance improves. We learn a lot about the molecular progression of weight transfer and about how all the parts of the body combine for walking—one leg and another, one foot and another, and the upper and lower body. If you're using arms, it becomes abundantly clear how helpful they are in maintaining balance.

One of my students brought in a tape called "Stop Music" that he'd gotten from the Arica Institute in New York in the 1970s. The music is quietly evocative and mysterious. Random stops of several seconds' duration are built in. They get longer as the tape goes on. This means everyone can participate—we don't need a disc jockey.

Everyone laughed when I suggested we use "stop music" while doing T'ai Chi, and so did I. Then I thought, why not? This has turned out to be one of my students' favorite exercises. There's a wall of mirrors in the studio and if you can sneak a glance at yourself while frozen, you might see some surprising departures from basic T'ai Chi principles and posture. You can also *feel* your mistakes when required to hold them. You may have thought you were focused before, but doing the sequence knowing you may have to stop at any moment brings awareness and balance to a new level. This single-mindedness can be carried over into every (nonstopping) practice of the form. The heightened concentration makes me feel even more calmed and refreshed by T'ai Chi.

When the classes moved outside for the summer, I started using a gong to signal students to stop and the tapping of a mokugyo (a Buddhist wooden bell) to tell them when to go. Many people prefer this over the music. I'm careful

to turn away from the class when I do this so no one thinks I'm persecuting them by repeatedly catching them in hard-to-hold positions—in the middle of a high leg lift, for instance.

As you can see, our practice of feather walking takes different forms and has evolved over time. One of the intriguing gifts of this exceedingly simple and exceedingly profound exercise is that it reveals to us, often for the first time, our physical quirks and asymmetries. We learn things about our bodies and gait that we didn't know before. We can even remake our way of walking. It's also a form of moving meditation that's stimulating and relaxing at the same time—just like T'ai Chi.

When I practice T'ai Chi, I try to make every step a feather-walking step. There are the inevitable tell-tale clunks here and there, but it's fun to try to get through the entire form without ever falling from one foot onto the other.