

On the development of Natural Movement

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In [Tai Chi](#) we talk about natural movement and tend to think of it in quite specific, almost jargon, terms – as the movement which develops when the body is relaxed and moving from the centre.

But it is worth asking: doesn't everybody move naturally? What is the difference and how do we get from one to the other?

Well, it seems to me that we learn most movement by copying others, by modelling. As a baby we see others walking and seek to copy them – we use a hit and miss process to find what works and start to put in place habits of movement that we build on for life in a relatively unconscious way, unless we specifically and consciously choose otherwise.

It may be considered that in evolutionary terms a semi-quadrupedal gait is “natural” for human beings – a bit like chimpanzees – however we have accumulated a long history of upright movement which each new generation takes on for itself.

In this process of learning to walk we necessarily use tension in order to stand upright and move – we then add further tensions throughout our lives from our other experiences and training such as sports or daily sitting at a desk or in a car.

Over many years this unconscious “training” has a cumulative effect on our posture and ability to move easily – our joints become stiff, our muscles lose elasticity and we come to believe that these limitations are “natural” consequences of aging.

We notice, for example, back problems, stiff shoulders, knee problems, etc., inactivity leading to obesity, difficulty in doing things we have taken for granted – e.g. gardening, walking, getting out of chairs etc.

Even “young” people are subject to these negative changes as they use their body less over the years and are subject to more stresses in their lives – actually once we start “work” and don't have time for relaxed activity, once we become driven about anything.

This is a process which begins at roughly age 1 year old when we learn to walk in a very ad-hoc fashion, and by late teens can already be well advanced. By the time we reach middle-age it is well entrenched and generally unnoticed until we reach our 60s and 70s and begin to feel physically limited and vulnerable on a daily basis.

From personal experience I know that the process is to a certain extent reversible. This reversal is initiated by loosening the body slowly by degrees, enabling improvements in posture and balance. Often by later years this alone takes a significant commitment of soft daily exercise and mindful gentle correction in classes and at home, together with daily attention in all our general physical activities. This can productively include learning to walk again – this time in a very conscious way.

Building on this work we can also seek to re-build elasticity in the released tissues by further gentle, slow, passive working of the fascial tissues.

Tai Chi training seeks to promote this relaxed and passive elastic way of moving – this is not a quick fix – rather it requires much dedicated effort over a long term, probably indefinite period.

However, once the process of loosening, postural correction and development of passive elasticity has begun then we also find growth of what we term connectedness, or connectivity. This refers to the way that once freed from tension the soft tissues can begin once again to work together, each working with its neighbours – in a way somewhat similar to a tug of war team, or any other team, each building on the work of the other. This results in a segmental movement whereby a ripple/wave type of internal action occurs with all parts of the body moving together in a synchronised way – leading to the idea that “one part moves – everything moves; one thing stops, everything stops.”

As this development of new habits of body usage and movement proceeds, it becomes natural, especially in so far as it is relaxed and integrative.

Within the [Tai Chi program](#) therefore we learn to:

- Relax – e.g. informally, massage, stress management
- Relax in stationery posture, e.g. Chi Kung
- Relax in standing movement, e.g. exercises
- Relax in walking movements, e.g. forms

Then we learn to relax when acted on by external forces, e.g. when involved with a training partner.

Ultimately, we can then learn to use this relaxed movement in our daily lives and in our martial arts practice if that is our interest.