

## Effortless Effort

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Watching clouds high up in the sky drift and move and change so effortlessly, melding from one form to another; watching a leaf balanced on the surface of the water of a gently moving stream, floating effortlessly ... these images capture the feeling we strive for in our T'ai Chi Chih practice. It is the feeling of absolute effortless movement, when the arms seem to float through the form. When we try too hard to make the movement right, we usually use more physical effort and muscle than is necessary. When we play it safe – not wanting to lose our balance, or fearing physical pain, or not letting go into feeling the form – we create tension and limit the potential of what the practice of T'ai Chi Chih can do. Often we are not aware of using effort or holding back. By experiencing a contrast we are able to feel other possible ways to move.

This exercise can help a practitioner to feel that effortless experience, when the hands/arms are moving in synch with the weight shift without effort. Before doing this exercise I explain to the students that during some of the movements I will be asking them to do the hand pattern too large or too small. Then we begin with Rocking Motion and Bird Flaps Its Wings as usual. After a few reps of Around The Platter, I ask the class to continue to move doing the arm pattern too large. After a few reps of doing it too large, I ask them to do it too small, to really hold back. After a few reps I ask them to let go and find the effortless path. During the time of "too big" and "too small" I ask them to be aware of their bodies, to notice what it feels like. Then when they let go, without trying too much or holding back, there should be a feeling of effortlessness. The arms should float through the movement. After experiencing the muscular effort of "too large" and the tension of "too small," the arm/hand pattern can be performed without thinking one's way through it. It will be done from a feeling and sensing way of moving. It is important when moving from "too-large-too-small" into the effortless middle ground that the focus drops to the soles of the feet (from the upper body) and remains there.

When doing this exercise I don't do it with every movement during the practice. After doing it with two or three movements, on one or both sides, the practice resumes as usual for a few movements. Then one or two are tried again using this technique.

The goal is to feel the contrast of effort, tension, and effortlessness. Some students comment after trying this: "I felt like a monk on a mountain top;" "no one was there doing T'ai Chi Chih." Most often they remark about how soft they felt and how effortless the movement became.

One note of caution when doing this exercise: Since a lot of attention is focused on the hands, it is vitally important to bring the focus to the soles of the feet in the rest position and when not doing the "too-big-too-small" part.