

ADVICE ON ACHIEVING CHIN-TO-TOE

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Introductory Note

Master Jou, author of *The Dao of Taijiquan: Way to Rejuvenation* and owner of Tai Chi Farm from 1983-1998 is my grand-teacher through my teacher, Dr. Jay Dunbar. My suggestions for the chin to toe stretch fall along the lines of Master Jou's four essentials for the practice of internal arts: "Know yourself, do your best, don't overdo it, and make a little progress every day." Really that would be enough. As a note in a Hebrew source regarding the Golden Rule states: "That is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary."

That said, these are all practices that I think could help you make progress toward chin to toe. Although I didn't do all of them all the time, I'll include them all because a different subset may appeal to each of you.

Know Yourself

- Go for progress, not only the goal.

Do what your body is ready for each time you stretch. Some will start out closer to their toes than others, but with consistent practice, I'll bet everyone can make noticeable, even impressive progress in a few weeks.

- Respect your flexibility cycles.

The way I understand it, over the month for both women and men flexibility of muscles and tendons varies. I know that over the day spinal length changes (I have to adjust my rearview mirror by the end of the day because I'm so much shorter in the back!) So breakthroughs can come at any time. It probably helps to get enough horizontal sleep time to let your spine uncompress.

- Start gently.

I have three compressed discs and didn't know if this stretch was a good idea for me. In the end it wasn't a strain on my back anyway, and I felt better than when I started.

- Try different times to stretch.

In the shower or after may help relax your muscles to stretch more at first.

Do Your Best

- Keep at it.

I tried to stretch twice a day or whenever I thought about it.

- Stay in the stretches long enough to relax into them.

Muscles can morph a lot if you're patient.

- Stretch all areas between chin and toe.

First I worked on hamstring, then foot, ankle, hips, back, and toes. I bet I could still make more progress on neck and even jaw. In general I thought about removing obstacles and identifying muscle tension then consciously relaxing it (especially the knee of the straight leg during the chin to toe stretch.)

Hamstring: I just stretched this by bending forward over the straight leg.

Foot: I stood with toes on the curb and heels on the street waiting for the bus.

Ankle: I bent forward over the straight leg and visualized toes pointing to chest.

Hips: I did several stretches. The hips are important.

1. Sit spread legged wide and roll up onto the bones at the bottom of your pelvis. Bend forward from the hips and try to lay flat. I did this watching TV.
2. Stand on one leg then bend forward in the “golfer's stretch” putting the other leg straight out behind you. The leg you're standing on is the one that gets stretched out to become the straight leg.
3. Sit then put the leg of the hip you want to stretch on the ground in front of you, outside of ankle down, bent at knee. Lean forward over the leg with other leg straight out behind and try to lay your chest on floor. Try to feel the stretch on the very outside of your hip very low, almost bottom.

Back: Stand feet wide and 1) bend forward, hanging from the hips and let gravity uncompress your spine or 2) slide one hand down the outside of your leg and stretch the other arm over your head to stretch your side and back. This is like a yoga stretch and may be easier to do by backing up to a wall to keep in one plane.

Toes: I just grabbed my toes and pulled them toward my chin.

- Take off your shoes.

When you can make contact with your foot to some part of your head, take off your shoes. This makes the last foot progress easier and lets you know where you really are. No fair wearing clown shoes! It's not chin to shoes, after all.

- Do as I say, not as I do?

If you really want to do this stretch and you have a few pounds to lose around the middle, now's a good time. I went on vacation and gained a few extras I had to reach around, this made it harder.

Don't Overdo It

- Be patient.

I had several setbacks where I was close to some goal (toe to hairline then forehead then nose then lips then chin) and stayed in the stretch too long or pushed it just a little too

hard. Then I spent several days just trying to get back to where I was. Better to just do what your body is ready for each time.

- Be gentle.

Ladies, its probably a good idea to be especially careful when hormones are loosening your tendons. Although progress seemed more available to me then, it's easier to tear something. I've heard that an incredible percentage of female basketball players who have torn tendons in their knees were in that part of their cycle when they tore them.

Make A Little Progress Every Day

- Use distraction to keep yourself positive during plateaus.

Some progress is visible and some not; it doesn't mean you're done. Remember *gongfu* is “work over time.”

- When you're at a plateau...

If you're not making visible progress on one side, keep up with it, but try the other side to see what you can do until a breakthrough comes on your primary side. I'd recommend stretching both sides for balance, although I focused on the closer one only after I realized it really might be possible to do this!

- Breathe.

I always find it helpful to breathe into a stretch. Use the exhale to relax if you need a little something extra to clue your subconscious.

Know yourself, do your best, don't overdo it, and make a little progress every day... I'm more careful how I use the word “impossible” now!