

Centering is the act of achieving balance. We'll show you how to get there. Then, staying centered is up to you.

Why do we use the term "centering" to describe balance? Think of the potter at his wheel. He has a lump of clay and a spinning disk on which he hopes to create an elegant pot. If he tosses the clay anywhere but dead center, his pot will be thrown across the room, ending up like a kindergartener's ashtray . . . if he's lucky. It takes hundreds of failures for an amateur potter to learn how to use his materials and his machine so that he will be able to get to the part where he makes delicate flares—in short, to where he can begin to create.

Martial artists have spent at least a thousand years studying the art of balance, not only to increase their skills with sword, bow and arrow, and so forth, but also to enable them to meet life and its conflicts in a relaxed but alert manner. They cannot face an oncoming swordsman while hysterical and off balance, any more than we can face an irate friend while our center of gravity is somewhere above our left eyebrow.

In Attack-tics, as in Aikido, your main balance point or center of gravity is located approximately two inches below your navel. Called the *tantien*, or "one-point," this center is where you should be living, whether you are under attack or

space, it is a reservoir of calm, it is an “organ” which can sense attack faster than the intellect—it is what we sometimes call (because nobody ever taught us about it) “the pit of the stomach.” If we listen to it, we’ll be better protected than if we hired a part-time bodyguard.

The center, the one-point, is not shown on the average anatomy chart in American medical texts. If it’ll make you feel better, you’re perfectly free to think of it as an imaginary spot. The center will work for you no matter what you think it is. It’s not mystical. It just works.

To get and hold your center, to experience what we’re talking about, first lie comfortably with your back against the floor and relax all your muscles. Don’t try to hold yourself in any position. Let your body find its own relaxed state. Pay attention to your breathing. Don’t push it, just let it slow down and regulate itself.

Now place your hand on your center, your one-point, approximately two inches below your navel. Relax and gradually let your concentration be on that spot where your hand is resting. Imagine that all your focus, all your energy, is coming down from your forehead (where most of us live), down from your chest (where we imprison most of our energy), and into that spot. Again, pay attention to your breathing to make sure that the effort of lowering your concentration hasn’t become too strained.

Once you begin to feel that you are succeeding, that your focus has arrived in your center, concentrate on keeping it there. If it helps you, visualize that spot and imagine that your eyes have become relocated there. What you should begin to feel when you are centered is a further relaxation of all your muscles, especially your shoulders and chest. You may notice a sensation of warmth which spreads down your thighs and legs, relaxing those muscles. Unless you’ve taken

the relaxation part too seriously and dozed off, you will also notice a heightened awareness of yourself in space and time. In effect, you have returned to yourself and are one with the moment.

Practice locating your one-spot for ten to fifteen minutes a day. If nothing else happens for you as a result of Attack-tics, your cardiologist will appreciate the extra relaxation you're giving your heart. As you become more comfortable with the idea and with that part of your body, begin to gain your center without the use of your hand. Simply concentrate on the spot, feel it warm up as you get into it, and hold it. If your mind slips off into worries and fears, don't push it; gradually allow your center to reassert itself. Try not to tense up with each minor failure of concentration. You'll get it back, and soon those interruptions will be fewer and fewer.

There's no way to say how long this overall process should take. Those of you who have had some experience with yoga or t'ai chi will be able to do it faster. Others may take longer. Nobody can fail at it unless he or she gives up. Your one-spot is your center, and everybody has one.

The next step in the process of centering is to begin to experiment with finding and holding your center while sitting or standing. The act is the same—there are just more distractions than when you were lying on the floor. If you are sitting, imagine that the one-spot has real weight; when you lower your concentration, allow yourself to feel heavier, sinking farther and farther into your chair. Adopt a relaxed and alert posture and sink down.

Next, try to center while in a standing position. Stand with one foot slightly forward of the other—if you're right-handed, you'll be more comfortable with the left foot forward; if you're left-handed, slide your right foot forward. Experiment until you find a comfortable position, with your weight evenly distributed on both feet and your knees very

slightly bent to absorb your weight and allow you to move quickly. The advancement of the front foot will turn your body slightly away from dead center; in the martial arts this turn of the body offers an attacker a smaller target, and that's not a bad idea when you are involved in any face-to-face encounter where conflict is possible. You don't offer your full front to an angry enemy.

When you've become comfortable in this stance—and it is difficult at first, because we're so used to locking our knees and standing flat-footed with our feet next to each other—you can repeat the centering process, lowering your concentration, moving it down to the floor and even through the floor. Remind your other muscles not to tense up; stand easily and comfortably, keeping your center.

An excellent way to test the effect of your centering is to ask a friend to help. First, imagine that your center is at the top of your head. Place all your concentration there and think upward. Then, while standing, have a friend lift you into the air. He or she can grasp you from behind and lift up from the waist, or push upward under your arms.

The next step is to ground yourself, center, and think downward. Even go so far as to imagine that your feet have grown roots into the floor. Now ask your friend to lift you. If you've concentrated and kept your center while being lifted, the friend should notice a dramatic difference in your apparent weight. Proficient students of martial arts can even get to the higher point where no one can budge them off the floor; we have seen weightlifters strain at lifting an eighty-five-pound person!

Nobody's quite sure why this phenomenon works. It really doesn't matter. The grounded, centered person cannot be budged, and yet he or she can move quickly and sense danger better than the ungrounded, uncentered person. Just as important, grounded, centered people appear different from the

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Nobody's quite sure why this phenomenon works. It really doesn't matter. The grounded, centered person cannot be budged, and yet he or she can move quickly and sense danger better than the ungrounded, uncentered person. Just as important, grounded, centered people appear different from the

other kind; attackers seem to sense their stability, and pick on other people rather than confront those who live in their one-spot.

When you've gained some experience in centering, you can start to hold it while moving, walking, playing tennis, dancing, or driving down the highway. Depending on the activity, imagine that you are led forward in space by a string attached to your center. It's hard at first, but begin by trying it while walking down the sidewalk, pulled along from your center. Very quickly you'll discover that you're making much more solid contact with the pavement, your feet stay close to the earth, you have a better sense of balance. As we noted earlier, you should also find that your attitude is much calmer, that you feel less scattered and more competent to deal with whatever happens along the way. It is precisely this feeling we're working for in Attack-tics. In any conflict, whether you are walking, sitting, standing, or running, the centered attitude is the one which maximizes your chances for making the right choices, for responding successfully, for surviving in the best, most harmonious way. If you carry yourself from your center, people will not stare at you on the street or wonder who the weirdo is. It's a normal gait, and needn't be exaggerated for effect unless you're practicing. Keep reminding yourself to keep your center. You'll find it wanders on occasion, but you should be able to regain it with a minimum of effort.

The real test of your newly developed skill will come when you are tired, irritable, or, most crucially, in conflict. Fear can often send your concentration and energy right up through your chest, into your throat, and out the top of your head. Your breath stops momentarily, and all those marvelously relaxed muscles go right into spasms of tension. When the boss yells at you or someone insults you, you must pay primary attention to restoring your center, not to striking

back or running like a dervish. Sure, you'll lose it. Survival depends on your getting it back quickly.

For contrast, let's see what normally happens to the un-centered person. The energy and concentration shoot upward, sometimes lodging in the muscles where the neck and shoulders are joined. This upward thrust pulls the person off-balance physically, and, simultaneously, the spirit and intellect are dislodged. He stammers or trips while trying to escape, and has a good chance of being caught one way or another. He'll stumble physically, or create some inane reasons for his exit, or trap himself in an intellectual maze. We've all experienced getting caught and having to invent excuses right and left, only a few of which make sense: "I would have done it right away, sir, but my, uh, my, uh, my mother was, er, uh, taken to the hospital and I had to be by her bedside . . ." Five minutes later your mother walks in and your lie comes apart like a dollar watch. TV's situation comedies are built around characters being off center! Your ability to harmonize and survive depends on exactly the opposite.

Let's suppose you're a salesperson behind a counter. You're going along, holding your balance, keeping your center, and doing okay. A customer comes along, and your center signals you that something's not right. But before your mind can assess the situation, the customer is all over you, yelling about this or claiming that. Your center gets lost in the shuffle, and your mind, now off balance, begins madly to think up all those put-downs you remember from Don Rickles or your grammar-school teacher: "Listen, mister, if brains were dynamite you couldn't blow your nose!" Fortunately, you keep your cliché to yourself, even though your eyes are burning and you feel what you consider to be a legitimate urge to kill. Instead, you shift your weight and come back to balance, turning your body slightly, unlocking



your knees, and finding your center. You check your breathing to slow it from the hysterical puffing that adrenaline seems to demand. Now you can handle it. You listen to what's going on, assess the situation on the basis of everything you've learned thus far, and make your choice or choices. You find a way to help the irate customer regain his own balance, calm down, and rejoin the human race with you. You give him the gift of harmony.

So it's okay to lose your balance—temporarily. All the shifts and reshifts of balance in the preceding scene take place in less than a second once you get good at it. And when you get really proficient you stay centered no matter what.

It's all about balance, whether in diet or soul or body. They're all the same, anyway.