

The Three Ways of Shifting and Three Ways of Turning as a Method for Determining Your Progress in Tai Chi practice

**By
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Learning Tai Chi can be difficult without understanding some basic foundations of the movement. Shifting the weight and turning the waist is different than most people think of them in general. For example, when you shift the weight the spine must be vertical, which forces you to move from your legs. Normally we fall forward as we walk and our feet and legs keep us from falling. Tai chi practice demands the exact opposite. Turning the waist is the same in that normally we turn from the shoulders in order to turn the waist. However, in Tai Chi practice the shoulders line up vertically with the hips, which only permit the hips and shoulders to move in unison. At the beginning stages, the alignments of the body are most important, which can be surmised in the words, upright, balanced, uniform and even. These four words define the perimeters for turning and shifting in Tai Chi. The three types of shifting are: shifting horizontally, shifting vertically, and shifting using the elevators. The three turnings are: a vertical turn of the waist, a horizontal turn of the waist and turn that combines both preceding turns. The first shift and the first turn are the beginning of learning to turn and shift in Tai Chi and the last two are the final stages of your practice. These turnings and types of shifting will develop reeling silk gradually, which will then develop the understanding of yin and yang. The types of shifting and six turnings are combined flawlessly creating a union of moving the body as a unit and central equilibrium.

Shifting is something we do every time we walk. Tai Chi uses what we know already and takes that thing a bit deeper. The first horizontal shifting is the easiest because you can actually see and feel it. Try to imagine you are on rollers like a sliding glass door as you shift from one leg to another with your legs bent. This shifting should be done at length until mastery is completed. A common fault is going up and down as you go from one leg to another, or having your hips tilt as you shift. The antidotes for these problems are trying to relax the leg as you take the weight out of it, and keep your tailbone vertical. The second shifting is more subtle because it is not visible to the observer only felt by the practitioner. This shift is vertical in nature and it feels like your sinking in mud. This shift develops root in the foot you sink onto and prevents double weighting, for this reason it is more important than the first shift. The common fault in this shift is to

lean over the foot you shifting onto. The antidote is to try to sink into the middle of the foot or into the bubbling well point. Once this is mastered then the third shift will arise naturally. The third shift is the most subtle because it's hard to feel as a beginner, but eventually it will supersede the first two ways of shifting. This shift only uses what I call the energy elevators, one elevator going down the outside the full leg and one coming up the inside that same leg. In the beginning, this shift is activated by the second vertical shift, but later on it will happen with the use of intent. This type of shifting leads to an understanding of yin and yang in your movements during Tai Chi. As your elevator sinks down one side of your leg, the other goes up the inside of your leg into your opposite arm. At first this is hard to feel but later it becomes natural as you sink more and develop reeling silk.

The turning of the waist is a result of shifting the weight, so it's important to understand the shifting first. The first turn is what I call the vertical turn. This turn is not going to feel like a turn in the beginning but more like a vertical shifting. It is from this shifting that this turn develops. The turn itself starts by going down and ends by going forward, or the down forward turn. The second turn is horizontal but it too has a vertical sinking that initiates the left right turn. The turn is done by shifting all the weight and then the weight going into one hip joint and releasing from the other which in turn creates a horizontal turn. The fault with both of these turns is trying to use your shoulders to turn. This is a fault because it will make you lean the direction you turn which is also telegraphing. The antidote is to focus on moving with the hips led by the tailbone. As with all the movements in Tai Chi these turns and shifts must be upright, balanced, uniformed and even. The third turning combines the first two: the down forward turn and the left right turn. This turn creates gyroscope ability of the body to move as a unit. This is only a brief discussion of the three turns, more can be read in my article on the Two Turns of Tai Chi.

The beauty of Tai Chi is its ability to blend many aspects of movement together into a unified whole. Blending these three shifting and turning is difficult at first, but with diligent practice it becomes clearer and more precise. The first turn and shift are relatively gross levels of movement in Tai Chi practice and the last of the two are more subtle. Study the first turn and shift carefully before moving on to the more subtle ones. These levels will be completed as your push hands skills develop, in particular your ability to yield to your opponent. As you are able to yield you will see how important these three shifting and turning are. Yielding characterizes the more subtle levels of a Tai Chi practitioner. Yielding creates these levels of practice by listening to ones own body and then by listening to an opponent.

Reeling silk develops the internal aspect that is needed for yielding, the understanding of yin and yang the external aspect of yielding. When the three turns and three shifts are perfectly blended with all the postures of Tai Chi then reeling silk is completed externally. When yin and yang are blended while remaining whole with the three turns and shifts, then the internal aspect of reeling silk is complete. Eventually reeling silk and yin and yang aspects are combined as a whole then moving the body as a unit has been perfected.