

Developing Root In Tai Chi Practice

By Hal Mosher

The strongest trees have the deepest roots. Borrowing their strength from the ground, trees are able to be upright for hundreds of years. Tai Chi tries to utilize this vast amount of energy in the earth as a means to strengthen our bodies. Developing Root is so important in Tai Chi because it is root that enables all movement. In push hands, root is so important that you can't yield or push without it. Therefore, developing root is of utmost importance in Tai Chi practice, and any other martial art that stands on two feet. Luckily however, a strong root can be cultivated, and its effects can be felt. A root develops the more one is able to separate one's weight clearly onto one leg; this is what is called "separating yin and yang." Root is also developed by bending your legs using the proper alignments. Lastly, once these two aspects are in place one can to develop both a stable and a mobile root. There is also a fault of becoming too rooted which then forces you to loose mobility. This over abundance of root is called double heaviness which has its antidote in lightness mixed with the heaviness. In conclusion, I will explain how to apply root to push hands practice using simple two-person exercises. Developing Root is at the core of our Tai chi practice and it effects everything we do in Tai Chi, so it crucial we understand how to apply rooting to our practice.

Separating Yin and Yang

When thinking of moving in Tai Chi we apply the Yin and Yang symbol to our movements. The yin and yang are one symbol but separate entities, like two fish swimming next to each other in a circle each chasing the others tail. When you're shifting from one leg to another you should feel the weight go out of one leg and into the other. This shifting produces movement in the hands across the body. For Example, if you shift to your right leg, then the left hand becomes active. This shifting is like two fish chasing each other in that they are in constant and connected movement. In rooting practice, it is this sinking into the leg that must be distinguished clearly. This must be done by putting the weight squarely on the foot, and in particular on the bubbling well behind the big toe. The foot should not grip the ground in order to root, instead the foot must adhere to the ground like you are sinking in the mud. When the weight is squarely on the foot then either side of the foot fails to lift off the ground. In effect, it should be like you are standing on tofu without squishing the sides. In the beginning, shift the weight very slowly to the foot in the form of small increments: 10%, then 20%, 30% etc. until you are at 100%. If you are upright and balanced, this will create a clear distinction in your mind concerning the weight sinking clearly into the foot. An upright posture is critical for keeping and developing root, otherwise you can easily be toppled in the direction you are leaning.

Using an Upright Posture to Develop Root

Rooting involves remaining very stable, upright and balanced. Without embodying these qualities, it will be difficult to practice Tai Chi. The first part of being upright is keeping the back straight. This completely upright spine is then placed right over your full foot so that the spine rests right over your bubbling well on that foot. As the spine rests over that foot it enhances your ability to sink onto that foot, and then try to bend your legs deeply and feel a connection between your bubbling well, and your sacrum. As your sacrum approaches your bubbling well, your

center of gravity lowers, increasing the power in your legs while relaxing your upper body. Practitioners can hold any one legged posture such as play guitar or step back to ride the tiger in order to help feel this connection with the ground. The longer you stand in this posture the more important it will be that your back remain straight, if it doesn't then you will feel the tension made known to you in the form of pain. Being upright and balanced is to your advantage try to use that upright posture to help you sink onto your root. Try to keep your shoulders over your hips, while keeping your knees in line with your elbows. This streamlining with gravity will help you relax and sink onto your root like a tree reaching to the sky with its branches while still having its roots deeply sunk in the ground.

Two Types of Rooting Practice

There are two types of root: one is static the other mobile. Static root means that you remain still while developing root. This is done by holding postures for long periods of time with an emphasis on alignment. With practice, the chi will naturally be cultivated as the legs are strengthened and your body becomes more relaxed. When your legs start to burn this is the time to focus on your breathing directed by the mind to the Dan Tien. Then focus on feeling the earth's energy come up from your heels. It is important in both types of rooting practice to watch your alignments carefully so as not to cause any tension or distension of the spine. Make an effort to have the full leg be vertical and try to have the knee, hip, shoulder and big toe all line up with the navel. During moving root practice this orientation changes as the weight goes into the next leg. In effect, you are pulling the root out of one leg and putting it into another, re-establishing the alignments above. When the weight is clearly on one leg the alignments naturally line up with that leg like a door being slipped onto its hinges. The root then drops into the bubbling well like the pin being dropped onto its hinges. This type of sinking into the root then creates the posture in the hands and rest of the body. The sacrum then creates a connection to the root for the upper part of the body. Eventually, as your sacrum drops throughout the Tai Chi form it connects you to the ground by dropping in to the hip joints, which in turn lines up with the feet. All the bodies' movements then derive from the sacrum and function through the root. This is how to combine rooting with your movement.

Correcting Double Heaviness or Lightness

The Tai Chi Classics also state that double heaviness and double lightness are both faults in our practice. Double heaviness makes your form too hard or limp. Double lightness creates floating in your form and it makes you lose your sense of root. We can't have double heaviness or double lightness in our practice; which means we need a balance of lightness and heaviness. The easiest way to understand this is to see the lower body as being heavy and the upper body as being light. This is done by bending your legs deeply as mentioned above. However, this does not complete this practice because there still has to be some lightness within your heaviness, and visa versa (the Yin and Yang again). The technique of feeling the root move the arms and legs through the sacrum will accomplish this balance of heaviness and lightness. Every time you shift into the leg there is heaviness going down into the outside of the leg while at the same time lightness coming up the inside of the leg. This sinking is very active and very subtle at the same time. It only comes after years of practice, but you can start practicing it mentally and after a while it will develop. This kind of sinking relies heavily on being relaxed while practicing, and going slow in

order to feel this sinking come up through the hands. In fact, this type of sinking comes mainly from push hands practice. It is the lightness within your heaviness that creates an ability to yield and respond with the proper amount of force. When this sinking with lightness gets to the arms, it is reversed, where the full arm is heavy on the inside and light on the outside. Looking at Brush Knee Twist Step for example, the ability to lift the arm is accomplished through the sinking of the opposite leg. In this way, every part of the body has its full and empty aspect, depending on the individual posture. Sinking into the root by shifting is the first part. This shifting is then felt in the arms, which is connected to the root of your foot. Later in your practice any movement and any part of the body will have root as needed. This ability will create an ability to listen and yield to any opponent as needed.

The best way to develop root with another player is to sit on one leg with the other leg extended forward. Have your friend push on different parts of your body while you absorb their push by sinking and turning into your back leg. Start with one shoulder being pushed and the move to the next, move to the hip joints, and then press one arm against your body and the other. Pushing on each place should be done five or six times making sure to follow the hand back after it pushes you. This will help you to sink down and turn the waist while going into the root.

In Conclusion, developing root is necessary for movement in Tai Chi. Root is developed in many ways: by lining up your weight with the foot as you sink onto it, learning to relax by using your alignments, and learning the two types of root; mobile and static. All of these types of learning root are then applied to two ways of turning the waist: one from left to right, and the other from up to down. The combination of these two turns creates all the various motions of the waist in Tai Chi. Sinking into the root then creates these turns which then creates the movement in the hands. Developing root is the beginning of Tai Chi practice and determines how the rest of the body will move.