

Taking the Wrestling Out of Push Hands Exercises

By Hal Mosher

Tai chi as a martial art has many different ways of dealing with many types of attacks. The low stance in Tai Chi indicates that it was primarily meant to deal with Chinese wrestling techniques called Shwei Jiao. The elbows close to the body indicate that Tai Chi players also are trained to deal with boxers. The Tai Chi form stresses single weighted postures which indicate that you are being trained to evade and kick with the same foot. However, these practices are taught after one learns the basics of push hands exercises.

Push hands consists of very close in, hand to hand movements that stress the four words from the Tai Chi Classics; stick, adhere, join and follow, which are used in conjunction with wardoff, rollback, press and push. In the beginning, one practices push hands with these four ideas in mind until they are clear in your body. The classics of Tai Chi are the basis of our form practice and this is the same for our push hands practice. In fact, the form should help your push hands, and the push hands should help your form. In the very least, one should not sacrifice upright posture or relaxation in order to do push hands.

In this article I would like to give practitioners ways to practice push hands without losing sight of the Tai Chi classics, because in my experience, as soon as someone gets pushed they lose everything they were taught about the principles of Tai Chi.

The first advice we have from the classics for push hands is, "Use only four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds". This doesn't seem possible in most martial arts systems, and almost seems inadvisable. In Tai Chi we are trying to find a balance between martial and civil, and push hands is how we put that into practice. When someone pushes against you, you don't let them put more than four ounces on you and you don't put more than four ounces on them. In the beginning, we train this without moving the feet and later we will train to move the feet. The fixed step positions allow you to try to listen and yield to your opponent by using your waist instead of stepping out of the way. The yielding in push hands is the most important, because it causes your opponent to either use force or overextend. When your opponent over extends, you can take advantage of their misalignment and send them on their way. Yielding and using four ounces allow this to happen, by giving them nothing to push on. If there is no yielding, or more than four ounces is used, you will then get pushed. This is how push hands trains sensitivity in its players, by always listening if there is more than four ounces used by you or your opponent. The more relaxed and yielding practitioner always wins. In fact, Tai Chi practitioners that yield in push hands use the opponents force against them. The opponent ends up pushing him or herself out if four ounces is used properly.

The next idea in the classics related to the last idea of four ounces is the statement, "No resistance, no letting go."

This means to always follow your opponent. Never do what you want, but only what your opponent makes you do. If your opponent moves their waist, then yours should move as well, but not more or less than they do. This will prevent you trying to wiggle out of a bad situation or over reacting to a push. Instead, try to relax and follow their waist and try not worry about their

hands. When tension rises up in you, so does resistance, and when resistance rises up you are easily pushed. "Follow" running away from your opponent, but rather it means to stick to them. When you stick to your opponent then you always know where they are, and if you don't resist, then they never know where you are. You should never give your partner anything to push on, and if done properly this will cause them again to over extend. This type of technique however, does not appear to be very martial in nature, but in actuality it is effective in that it shows your opponent their own faults which may discourage them from further assaults. Sometimes it is best to get out of a bad situation quickly instead of instigating more attacks. Tai Chi takes the path of least resistance by using yielding and de-escalation to overcome anger and strength.

When you are learning push hands it can be frustrating getting pushed all the time. This is normal in the beginning of your practice. Instead, of getting upset, relax even more, and invest in loss which means don't be afraid to get pushed, because that's the only way one makes any progress. When you get pushed many times by someone better than you try notice how they do it, and then when you push with someone with fewer abilities apply the same strategy that was used on you. Try to remember the best strategy is always yielding because it makes your push easier once your partner is overextended. If your opponent is leaning forward or backward or side to side then this is a good time to yield and push. Make sure your alignments are plumb and this in itself can make your opponent off balance by making their misalignments obvious.

One of the most important statements in the classics for push hands practice is: "separate yin and yang in all of your movements." This means to distinguish empty and full in all parts of your body. If you're upper body is full or stiff when someone pushes you it will be impossible to yield. At the same time your lower body must be full in order to absorb their attack. So the upper body is yin or empty, and the lower body is yang or full. This empty and full is particularly important in the feet, because it allows you to shift further away from your opponent and create time to absorb their attack. Then try to feel that same empty and full in your opposite hand. This empty and full feeling is then translated to the techniques of "roll back" and "push". In "roll back", as you shift into the back leg your opposite hand is full and executes the technique. With the posture "push", as you shift forward onto your front leg the opposite hand does the pushing. This understanding should be practiced in the form every time you practice. This same understanding of empty and full is then applied to your opponents' attacks, if they push high you yield low, and if they push right you turn and yield with the right. As you yield on one side the other side responds in attack, in this way every one of their attacks is given right back to them as long as you are close enough to stick to them.

"All things are balanced upright and even." This statement is important in push hands because it keeps you from creating any holes, projections, or inconsistencies or excess movements. Holes means having your hands move away from your body, and in particular, away from your shoulders and hips. This is like other forms of boxing because you need your arms close to your ribs for protection. Projections are places where your arms extend past your body. This is dangerous because the extended limb can be broken by your opponent, or be pulled by them, throwing you off balance. Inconsistencies are places where the waist is not connected to your movements. When your movements are not connected to the waist, this will register as tension in you by your opponent. This tension will telegraph to him when to push you. More form practice will help connect your movements to the waist.

"Make sure there is some yield in your push and push in your yielding." This means don't think that each technique is separate but instead think they are connected to each other, and then connect both actions to your sacrum. Moving the body as a unit allows the yield and push to take place naturally and spontaneously. If you follow your opponent completely this should not be a problem. As soon as you start getting greedy and thinking how easy it would be to push them all is lost. Try to wait for them to make a mistake instead, and then yield, and if necessary, push. Listening is the objective in push hands not pushing, and it is the listening that creates yielding. When yielding and pushing are like one, then you can move on to moving step push hands, Da lu, and San Shou. This is a long process before we get to learn how to deal with a punch or a kick, but if you can practice push hands three hours a day this will expedite this process. In the end you will be able to handle any attack with stick, adhere, join and follow. Here are some exercises that will also help you along quickly.

THE PRACTICE:

1. From Mr. Huang: one hand on the chest of your opponent who is on one leg, alternating fingers so that you opponent can yield to each finger individually.

This develops sensitivity and listening, takes the focus away from your ego's tendency to get involved, and puts the emphasis on listening.

2. Mr. Liu, his single hand exercise. Both players are on one leg with their opposite hand touching at the wrist. As the waist turns the hands turn over simultaneously. One person pushes with the hand palm down the other yields with the palm up and then switches roles. The weight does not come forward as your hand goes out. This one focuses on moving the waist in response to an attack and at the same time listening now with the arm not the chest.

3. Mr. Smiths': roll back exercise. Both players alternating roll back and push only. The person pushing over extends and the person rolling back sits completely on his or her back leg and uses roll back on the shoulder and elbow while turning the waist. Then immediately the roles are reversed putting you on the offensive in push. This puts the emphasis on yielding and relaxing, while listening to your opponent as they shift forward and back. Now instead your focus is on your opponent's weight shifting, if there is a loss in momentum or going up and down then this is telegraphing tension again. Roll back is the main technique used to entice your opponent to over extend. If done correctly, the person pushing should fall forward on nothing as you execute roll back.

4. Mr. Smith's Ti-feng exercise: This consists of one person pushing and the other with his or her hands down on their body until the person being pushed lifts up his or her foot. Then the person pushing relaxes a little bit, making the person being pushed think that he or she is not being pushed. When the person is pushed falls onto you, repeat three times, and then drop your sacrum and gently push them. Use only the full hand to push your opponent and at the same time use only four ounces. The person being pushed gets the best learning experience from this exercise because it helps them relax and yield when getting pushed. This exercise works well when using a wall to push them against.

5. This exercise combines both #3 and #4. First alternate roll back and push and then decide on one person being the attacker and the other defender and then switch roles after one person pushes three times. After doing this for many months have attacker and defender be spontaneous in their movements, thus developing more listening abilities.

6. Combine #3,#4, and #5 with press. Adding press makes yielding more difficult. Press is done after push and is inserted in the sternum. Press is more difficult because you need to turn in across your leg. If you practice the three part exercise; this will help with this turn. Make sure you both turn the waist during these movements in order to help you yield

You might want to spend a great deal of time on each one of these exercises before moving on to the next one. The easier ones were numerated first, so start at the beginning. Try to find a partner that agrees to not use too much force and listens instead. Go very slow at first and see all the possible angles of attack and defense in each move. Each part of the form has elements or techniques that help you to understand how to attack and defend, look for them in the four actions of rollback, ward off, press and push. Let your bodies shift naturally back and forth like a pendulum together, and let the techniques then come naturally from the shifting without too much strain. Be patient and invest in loss by letting yourself get pushed, remembering this is how we learn how to yield. Every time you get pushed this brings you closer to an ability to yield. Yielding is the part that must be learned, pushing is innate, so emphasize yielding in your training.

In general, there are two extremes that can take place in push hands practice; one is that people just use brute force in push hands; the other is that they are limp in their practice. I advocate a middle way between these two extremes, a middle way that tests your ability to use the techniques correctly without violence. I personally don't see the need for more violence in the world, but I do see the need for more reconciliation and dialogue. This type of push hands is fun and safe for all body types and at the same time reinforces good form practice and relaxation. With time, the more aggressive functions will make themselves clear as your push hands develop. Each posture in the form has a specific function which must be discovered through two man practice; there is no better way. This is quite a large undertaking which could take many years, so make sure your practice is genuine and makes you healthier not upset or angry. Tai Chi in its modern context is about longevity and exercise, and if push hands is taught according to the classics, then it will be a longevity practice. More importantly, push hands should make you more peaceful and less angry which is the perfect balance of martial and civil.