

Why Push Hands is Important in Developing a Good Tai Chi
Practice
By Hal Mosher

Tai Chi uses the postures of the form to create weakness in ones' opponent by making them fall on nothing. The postures use proper alignment to turn your opponents force against them. Through relaxing and yielding to your opponent he feels as if you disappear, and as result he will fall forward. This type of martial application of Tai Chi is widely misunderstood and misrepresented. Tai chi is unique in that it tries to find a balance between martial and civil, or yin and yang. In Tai Chi philosophy you try to use martial arts to protect yourself and the ones you love, which doesn't necessarily mean killing your opponent. It is a bit like taking fire away from the kettle to keep it from boiling, or a knife away from a child. Tai chi only uses the amount of energy necessary to dissuade an attacker, one doesn't continue the attack unless necessary. The principles of non violence say that conflicts only escalate into more conflict. A good Tai Chi player uses words to diffuse a hostile situation before a conflict starts. Push hands practice is learning how to diffuse an attack in this way. Ultimately, push hands trains you to diffuse your ego when you are confronted with an attack. It is our egos that can push us into fights that usually hurt oneself and perhaps another. In Martial Arts, our real enemy should be our ego, and the arrogant self inflation that dominates our thinking. Good push hands practice is a method for conquering this arrogance by investing in loss. The more you give up to invest in loss, the more you will get out of push hands. In push hands, you begin with the most dangerous position first, that is, only a few inches away from your partner, and later on farther away as you progress from fixed step to moving step practice. This type of close in fighting serves two functions. One is to train the waist to turn, the other is to train sensitivity of touch so you can read your partners feints or real attacks.

The basics of push hands are based on the four words: stick, adhere, join, and follow. These four words seem synonymous but they are not. However, all of them can be subsumed by the word follow. The best way to start

understanding these words is to push and get pushed. After a while you will start to notice you won't need as much strength as you thought in order to push someone. This realization will come as your form improves as well. The idea in push hands is to avoid using your hands and try to push using your waist. In order for this to happen, all of your previous knowledge about pushing has to be transformed into moving from shifting your weight and turning your waist. Until this happens the stronger and larger person will always win. If you keep getting pushed repeatedly, you will start to notice what happens to your body before the push happens. Eventually the push won't bother you anymore, and instead you will come to welcome it. When this happens then you will start to feel your opponent and invest in loss. This is the first stage in learning to stick and follow. As this becomes more attuned as you start to relax more you will begin to apply the principle of no resistance no letting go. When you push, you should allow no more than four ounces to be put on you and you should put no more than four ounces on them. This develops strong listening and sensitivity. This sensitivity is used to detect full or empty in the hands. If both hands are equally hard this is called double weighted-ness, which has the antidote of making one hand light and the other heavy. The hand that is heavy is the opposite of the leg that is full. This sensitivity to yin and yang in your opponent will become very refined into different ways of dealing with the angle of attack. At the beginning of your practice, make sure one hand is full and the other is empty.

There are four ways to deal with an attack in Tai Chi, or four directions to yield in. The first way is using the square. This is when someone pushes on one side you use the other side to push. The points of the square are your shoulders and hips. This is the most basic way of yielding by turning off the centerline; you will also find this turning in most other martial arts systems. The second way is using the circle. This is using the arms as a shield that can turn horizontally to protect your center line. When the attack comes in then you rotate horizontally on the circle of the attack. The circle will always defeat the square. The third way is the sphere. The sphere now uses the circle in three dimensions. When someone attacks on the surface of the sphere then the attack is brought back to them. This way is unique to Tai Chi and is equated with the down up turn and left right turn together. The sphere can

defeat both circle and the square. The fourth is the point. The point combines all three in one indistinct posture. The yielding and attacking happen simultaneous and effortless. The point can overcome any of the first three attacks and is very unique to Tai Chi and is at its highest levels. These four ways of yielding are developed by learning to do the three turnings and three shiftings (see previous article). Shifting and turning allow more response time and direction ability in your yielding. In this way the form helps the push hands and the push hands helps the form. In the Tai Chi classics it says, "if there is a problem in responding to an attack, look for antidote in the waist and legs".

When you start understanding how to yield in these ways you will soon be able to redirect their energy. This redirection is possible when you have a strong root to the ground. The best way to develop this root is to bend your hip joint and drop your tailbone towards your foot. The root helps you sink and absorb their energy which then gets projected back at them. It is like a wave. When the water goes under the wave it pushes it up higher, so the more you go in your root, the easier it is to transfer their energy back onto them. You will then draw them forward and once they lose their root they will be easy to move or project. Eventually, you will feel their weight shift very precisely and be able to predict their movements by feeling their breath and blood rise to the occasion. There are many exercises to help with this process as I have described in my article on Reeling Silk. The important point is to push with someone just a little above your level and to agree to not use too much force. Pay close attention to the advice of your teachers in order to reap the full benefit of the Tai Chi form and its functions. The postures of the form and their functions when done correctly will become evident in your push hands practice, so pay close attention to your alignments during push hands. Try to have fun with the exercises and never stop practicing.