

Considerations for Taiji Partner Training

Paul Fretter, 22nd August 2021

After running a ‘partner training’ day, I wrote this paper as a follow-up for the attendees. Whilst I often teach, I am still learning as much as anyone else, and I don’t profess to have a superior knowledge or skill, but here I present my current understanding in the hope you may find it useful. As always, I reserve the right to change my opinions from time to time, as and when my understanding evolves.

If in doubt, you should refer to the Taiji Classics and then to your own practice. Wee Kee Jin has written extensive commentaries on the Classics, and details of his books can be found at the end of this paper.

THE PURPOSE OF PUSH HANDS (TUI SHOU)

First, PUSH HANDS is a very misleading name for the exercise! According to Wee Kee Jin, a more accurate description of *tui shou* is an “exercise to sense and feel”. The *tui shou* is a set of sensitivity exercises or drills, either fixed or free-form. In a confrontation, the instant you establish physical contact with an opponent you are relying upon the sensitivity developed in *tui shou* practice, to understand and respond appropriately to what is happening right now.

As Wee Kee Jin also says, “‘push hands’ has nothing to do with pushing, and nothing to do with the hands”. If you spend your time trying to look for an opportunity to ‘push’ your partner, you will not be paying attention to your own movement and stability, and you will be more easily led into a vulnerable situation. Also, in Taiji you should not push. Instead, you should learn to receive and let the opportunities for issuing come to you and then release (issue) with a ‘relaxed force’ at the right moment. Listen to the situation, move from the base (feet, legs and hips), not from the arms and note that any part of the body can be used to make contact. In fact, if you persist in keeping your palms in contact all the time your partner will more easily be able to understand your movement, so you really should learn the art of ‘folding’.

The sensitivity developed in *tui shou* practice is one *component* of fighting skill, but it is not the only component, and the aim should not be merely to throw your training partner around.

Tui shou is not competitive

In *tui shou* exercise you are not trying to beat your partner, e.g. by pushing them over more times than they push you over. If you do these exercises with the idea of beating your training partner, you are robbing yourselves of the chance to learn and improve. The *tui shou* is just an exercise, in a similar way as a tennis player hitting a ball against a wall, or a soldier shooting a paper target on a range. In *tui shou* you should create the environment for you and your partner to train and develop your awareness and sensitivity. **If you always compete, when practicing, you will stagnate at your current level of ability and you will not be focused on listening, understanding, and improving.** Please re-read the previous sentence, several times, because it is very important.

In *tui shou* practice, create the environment for you both to train and improve.

If you always have the attitude of a duel in *tui shou*, your mind will be focussed on looking for a weakness in your opponent, and you will not be paying proper attention to your own situation, structure and movement ... and you will learn almost nothing from the encounter. It is necessary to let go of the ego's desire to win, to gracefully accept being unbalanced or thrown as a learning opportunity, and to keep in mind a long-term purpose for your practice. Only when you've been thrown hundreds or even thousands of times will you begin to understand how to throw someone yourself.

***Tui shou* and push hands competition are not the same**

There is nothing wrong with having organised competitions, and surely it can be instructive and a lot of fun, provided you are clear that it is a completely different thing from the purpose of *tui shou* training. It can be useful and instructive to test your current level of ability sometimes, but a continual drive for competition works towards a very different aim. Competitors will specialise their pre-match practice in only a narrow range of movements and tactics that can safely be relied upon to score points according to the rules, while minimising their own risk of being 'pushed'. So, if you really want to win at competitions, you must train specifically for them, like any other athlete would, because your opponents will also develop specialised tactics. Beware that, in the heat of competition, the outcome can often be achieved at the expense of adhering to the Taiji principles and of any practical application outside of the arena.

***Tui shou* alone does not make you a good fighter**

Just because you can easily throw someone around in *tui shou*, do not make the mistake of assuming you could beat the person in a fight. Regardless of which fighting art is used, the situations are completely different. Even full contact Karate, kick boxing and cage fighting tournaments, all of which are based on extremely powerful and effective arts, are not the same as a real fight for your life in self-defence. This is because the environment and the starting conditions are different, and of course there are rules which must sensibly be adhered to. In a duel, both contestants arrive ready and focussed for combat, whereas in self-defence one person is prepared to attack and has the initiative, while the other is initially unprepared and vulnerable ... and note that others may also join in the fray against you.

For all the above reasons, my personal view is that the *tui shou* exercises, as I understand them to be, should not be practiced competitively. For competition it is better to have something clearly different, perhaps called Taiji <something else>, and let that fulfil the perfectly reasonable and understandable desire to compete. My personal view is to keep the two separate, each with a separate mindset and training regimen, so that we do not confuse one with the other ... otherwise both might suffer restriction of growth and eventual stagnation. In my own experience, the same separation already exists in Karate, where the traditional and competitive practices are very well understood to be different.

Use the *tui shou* practices to develop your ability to sense and feel changes, and develop an understanding of every situation, leading to appropriate responses. Listen, sense, feel and understand when the situation is yours, and when the situation is not yours, then respond appropriately. Learn to receive and accept. As Wee Kee Jin also says, *Taiji is the art of receiving*.

So then, in free-form *tui shou*, how can we measure progress without keeping count of who has pushed over whom more times than the other? **If you really feel the need for numbers to help you track your progress, then just keep a count of the number of times in a bout that you successfully and completely neutralise your partner's attempts to throw you, while you remain properly grounded throughout, and finish in an advantageous position.**

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Stand opposite your partner, just far enough away that they cannot reach you with hand or foot without stepping. In self-defence, you should use this distance to force the attacker to have to give away their intentions by making the first move. Use the partner training as an opportunity to develop this habit.

Then you can each take a step to make contact and begin your practice.

CONNECTING YOUR OWN STRUCTURE

To connect your structure, soften the muscles in the feet to draw the calf and thigh muscles, which in turn will 'sit' the hips and help you drop/tuck the tailbone. The sitting of the hips and tucking of the tailbone will draw (lengthen) the muscles of the upper body, i.e. in your abdomen, chest and (importantly) your back. As the back and chest muscles lengthen, they will draw and move the shoulder blades, which creates the arm movements.

When you connect your structure, it then manifests as a subtle whole-body connected chain of muscular movement, initiated from the feet.

INITIAL CONTACT WITH YOUR TRAINING PARTNER

Make sure you have established the feeling of being connected in your own structure BEFORE contacting with your training partner.

Try using a repeat of the connecting feeling to create a subtle whole-body movement to contact with your partner. If you wish, you can isolate this to practice on its own, perhaps starting with your palms just one centimetre away from your partner, and then repeat using the connecting feeling to bring your palms into contact.

DO NOT put your hands on, or make any other contact with, your partner if you are not already connected.

LISTENING

Listen to every situation, sensing the changes and try to understand clearly when the situation belongs to you, and when it does not belong to you. When the situation is yours, you can choose to take over the lead. When the situation is not yours, you must follow the other person until you feel that again you can take over the lead.

From the moment of contact you must listen to the situation. As an exercise, you could make contact with your partner, and then spend a few seconds just 'listening' to what happens between you, without trying to do anything else and without moving. If you listen carefully

you may notice small perturbations due to both you and your partner's bodies subtly adjusting and breathing.

Technically, you are not really listening directly to your partner's movement; that's impossible because your brain is not wired into your partner's nervous system. However, what you CAN do is listen to how your own body feels, and from that you can INFER what might be happening in your partner's body. To say that we can listen to our partner's force and intention is METAPHORICAL and it can be useful as an 'image' at a certain stage of learning but, understand that a metaphor is a tool to aid understanding and is not the same as reality. In the same way, a map of Norwich is not the actual land and territory of Norwich; a map is a graphical metaphor that helps us to understand the ground, without actually being the ground. If I own a map of Norwich, it does not mean that I own Norwich, and nor does it mean that I understand the city and how to get around.

For the same reason, you cannot ever DIRECTLY feel your partner's force; you can only feel your own body's response or resistance to the force.

If you try too hard to listen 'directly' to your partner's structure, your focus will narrow such that you are less aware of your own situation, and then inadvertently disclose your intentions through your movement. This would be like trying to listen to someone speak to you, by pressing your ear hard against their mouth!

BREAKING THE BASE

Make sure you are already connected in your own structure.

Listen to the situation and try to determine whether the situation is yours, or not yours, to begin the breaking. You need to practice a lot of "trial and error" to discover which situations are good, and those which are not so good.

After a while, if you are properly connected, you may find that as you make contact your partner's base will immediately begin to be affected, even before you have begun to move your base in. So, if you feel that your partner is already beginning to 'float', then you have a clear opportunity to move in and fully disturb their base.

TIMING OF RELEASING/ISSUING

You should only release when your partner's base has been broken and they are 'floating'; when the situation is yours, and not theirs.

When your partner's base has been broken, it is not always appropriate to release. For example, if their broken base causes them to lean forwards you must not release forwards because your force will be going against their force ... thus committing the classical error of "double heaviness". Instead let them fall forwards and either lead them out to the side or the back or wait for another chance.

In the Taiji Classics it says, "seek the straight in the curve". The curve represents neutralising and the straight represents issuing/releasing. It means that the (best) opportunity for releasing is during the neutralisation of the other person's incoming force or movement. As

you neutralise, their base will be momentarily disconnected, so you can use this moment of opportunity to issue, if you have the time.

JOINING

Stick, adhere, connect and join; not resisting and not disconnecting. That all sounds rather complicated, and thankfully Wee Kee Jin summarised this by saying they are all just components of 'joining' with your partner's movement.

When your opponent initiates, join with their movement until you feel they have committed or are reaching a limit, and then you can take over the lead. Again, you should practice and make plenty of mistakes to learn how to recognise when the situation is yours, and when it is not yours.

When the other person advances, you should yield and lead them further than they intended to go, encouraging them to over-reach. When the other person retreats, you should advance and sink very slightly faster than they do, causing them to compress and lock up in their own structure.

RELEASING/ISSUING

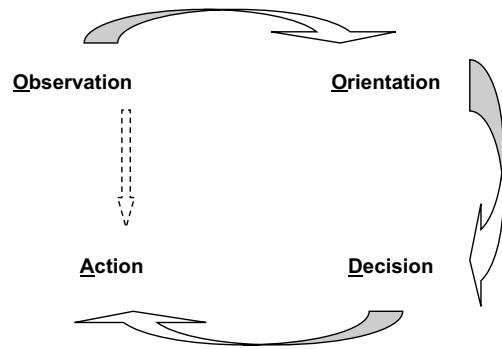
When releasing via the arms, the shoulder blades sink, causing the joints to subtly rotate in position. The shoulder joints should not be pulled forwards relative to the torso, as this would stagnate the movement of the body muscles, leading to a disconnection from your own base.

In the Taiji classics it says "[even] when the body disconnects, the mind must not". In relation to issuing (releasing) this means that even when you have released and your partner has fallen away from the contact, you must keep projecting your intention into the distance, and your whole body should remain connected. It is for the same reason you must "follow through" with the intention when shooting an arrow from a bow, using a rifle/pistol to shoot, playing golf or snooker or pretty much any other projectile sport. This is important because by the time you have made the conscious decision to stop your intention, your (sub conscious) mind will have already told the body/muscles to stop, a fraction of a second earlier! When shooting, the rifle barrel will begin to drop before the bullet has left, and it will then miss the target. In other words, your conscious awareness of your decision appears to be AFTER the decision has already been made and the change initiated. So, to counter-act this, we must continue to project the intention *after* the physical contact has already disconnected ... after the bullet has left the barrel of the gun ... after the arrow has left the bow. I do not profess to fully understand how this happens in the brain, but it seems to be a well-recognised phenomenon.

WHY TRAIN SLOWLY?

When you move fast, as a reaction or without thinking, your body will move according to whatever are your current habits; whether trained or not, useful, or otherwise. To improve or replace a habit you need to move slowly, so that you have time to train a better response

that is both appropriate and useful. Consider the application of a psychological process map called the **OODA loop** when developing a new habit or refining an existing one. When moving slowly, you can first **Observe** the situation, which is a relatively fast sensory perception. Then you mentally **Orientate** yourself to it and how it might affect you, to then allow you to **Decide** what you are going to do; both of which are relatively slow and error-prone thinking processes. Then finally create the **Action** or movement you decided upon. By repeating this cycle consistently many times, your brain will begin to lay down a shortcut from **Observation** straight to **Action**, in other words it becomes a new **HABIT** which bypasses the relatively slow processes of **Orientation** and **Decision**. The new habit will be very efficient and potentially very fast, requiring minimal conscious thought to enact.



The OODA loop, and the shortcut for a trained reaction.

HOW MUCH PRACTICE?

Ideally, we should spend 70-80 percent of our monthly practice on solo exercises and the forms, with the remainder divided among fixed, semi-free and free-form partner training. If partner training were cutting wood, then solo practice is akin to sharpening and oiling the blade and practicing how to move better with it. If you only cut wood and neglect to maintain the blade, it will become dull.

MOST IMPORTANT

Some time ago, Wee Kee Jin wrote an article called “Taijiquan – The art of receiving”, which I recommend that you read.

The most important thing in *tui shou* is not learning how to push; the aim is to learn how to receive. If you can receive (accept and neutralise) whatever comes at you, without resisting or disconnecting, without losing your balance, and while finishing in an advantageous position, then you have nothing to fear. If there is any opportunity for releasing/issuing it will present itself to you naturally. If you wish, when training, you do not need to release and can choose to let your partner keep attacking and losing their balance until they are exhausted.

Best wishes

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Footnote: For a detailed explanation of the various Taiji classics, please consult the following:
 Tàijíquán Wúwéi – a Natural Process . By Wee Kee Jin , Published in 2003
 Tàijíquán - True to the Art . By Wee Kee Jin , Published in 2011
 Both are available from Wee Kee Jin at <http://www.tcsose.com>

Taijiquan & The Art of Receiving (article) by Wee Kee Jin, can be found on www.taiji.org.uk