

Taijiquan - The Art of Receiving

By Wee Kee Jin

Taijiquan is no different from any other exercise or martial art if it is practiced without understanding the principles and without putting the principles into the movements. Regardless of the various different Taiji styles or Taiji forms, they are all based on the same set of Taiji classical texts. They are: The Chang Sang Feng Taiji Classic, The Wang Ts'ung Yueh Taiji Classic, The Song of Thirteen Postures, The Understanding of the Thirteen Postures, The Song of Substance and Function, The Song of Push Hands and, in the case of the Yang style, The Ten Important Points of the Yang Family. Practitioners should put the principles into the movements, rather than going into the movements to look for the principles. To put the principles into the movements, the practitioner must constantly read and understand the classics and, when practicing, the mind must 'ask' and the body must 'answer' (respond).

The foundation of Taijiquan practice is in the Taiji Form. By neglecting the Taiji Form and only focusing on push hands, it is like working on the function (application) without the substance (body). By knowing yourself and knowing your opponent you will excel in push hands. Knowing yourself comes from the practice of the Taiji Form, where you learn to be relaxed, balanced, connected and synchronised without any external forces affecting you. The relaxed force of Taiji is cultivated and developed in the practice of the Taiji Form.

In the Chang Sang Feng classic it is stated, "At the moment of movement, the body should be light, agile and most importantly connected (synchronised)". To achieve this, the central equilibrium must be maintained in position, in transition and in the release of the force, both in the Taiji Form and in push hands. To maintain the central equilibrium the practitioner has to keep in mind the following principles: The Song of Thirteen Postures", Tuck in the tailbone and keep a consciousness on the crown of the head (*pai hui* meridian point), the body will be agile if the head is held as if suspended from the top. "The Wang Tsung Yueh Taiji Classic, "Do not tilt or lean. Stand like a level scale". Only when the central equilibrium has been achieved, can one talk about changes and relaxation. The central equilibrium is the foundation of Taijiquan. It is one of Taiji's 'Thirteen Postures' and all the other twelve postures must have the central equilibrium within them.

The practice of the Taiji Form is not about whether you know the whole Form, nor is it measured by the number of different Taiji Forms or styles you know. It is about putting the principles into the Form and understanding the movements in the Form. The Taiji Form is only a tool for you to transfer the principles from the Taiji Classics into your body, and eventually the Form should become Formless because any movement you make should have the principles within it.

Besides having the Taiji principles, the practitioner must also understand the movements in the Form. After learning the whole Form the practitioner must seek to understand the sequence of changes that creates the movements and get the sequences to change in relation to each other, and in so doing, achieving the principle that is stated in the Understanding of The Thirteen Postures, "Remember, keep this in your heart, when you move every part of your body moves, when you settle every parts settles". In different postures in the Taiji Form, the arms, the legs and the body might be in different positions and you might face different directions, but the sequence of changes and what happens in it is the same. That is why the great Taiji teachers of the past always say, "when you understand one movement, you understand all the movements". In fact the most effective way of practicing the Form is the single

posture practice.

The changes within any movement always begin from the base (feet, ankles, knees and hips joints) and the letting go of excess tension from the calves and thighs muscles. The base creates the body (trunk) movements - the relaxation of the chest from within, the melting sensation of the body muscles and the letting go of excess tension from the upper, middle and lower back, creating movements in the back. The body creates the arm movements – the sinking of the shoulders and dropping of the elbows. The movement of the body comes from mind cultivation, so the mind awareness must be in the body to imagine and visualise the body's movements happening. After prolonged cultivation the movements will materialise. The base and the arm movements will only be connected if there are movements in the body, otherwise they are only coordinated.

Relaxation in the Taiji Form: there is a difference between relaxation and being 'soft and floppy'. "Fang Sung" (relaxation in Chinese) means to 'let go'. To let go what?, to let go any unnecessary tension in the posture (body) and movements. In Taiji we use the minimum amount of tension to sustain postures and movements, anything more than is necessary we call it tension. As our awareness of our body increases so does our ability to let go of unnecessary tension. When the upper body becomes lighter and the base become heavier, it is the sign of relaxation taking place. In the end, the upper body becomes yin and the base become yang and, when the practitioner reaches the highest level, only the feet are yang the rest of the body is yin.

Sinking: Sinking is a mental process and it is very important in Taiji practice. It can only come after the practitioner is able to relax. Sinking develops the root in Taiji, to enable the practitioner to 'borrow the energy from the earth'. Sinking is also a training to take any incoming forces into the ground (internal neutralising) in push hands. The sinking should start from the *Pai Hui* meridian point (crown of the head), and this is to 'swallow the chi of the heaven'. It should go through the body, legs and feet, through the bubbling well into the ground.

To borrow the energy from the earth, the practitioner must visualise the sinking awareness rebounding from the ground, traveling through the bubbling well, up through the legs, the body and the arms, past the *Lau Kung* meridian point and to the fingertips. When the practitioners master the Taiji Form, then they will have a structure to receive the forces in push hands.

Push Hands: In the old days it was known as an exercise of 'sensing and feeling', but somehow it was later called push hands. Push hands is a very misleading phrase because actually it has nothing to do with pushing and nothing to do with the hands. Most Taiji push hands we see is just like a wrestling match, or like two goats locking horns, using brute force and thus deviating from the Taiji principles. The reasons are that one person wants to push, the other doesn't want to be pushed. The bigger one use his body weight and strength, while the smaller one tries to dig in to hold his ground. It always take two hands to clap!

We have to look into the principles, understand them and then proceed into the practice. One of the Ten Important points of the Yang family says, "Use your mind ,not your brute force", as long as you use your mind the door to Taiji push hands is open for you to enter; if you still want to use brute force it is just like locking the door and try to get in again. If you still want to use brute force, don't come to learn Taiji because even you have ten lifetimes you cannot achieve the essence of Taiji.

In the Song of Push Hands it says, "Let him use immense (brute) force to attack me" and "Lead his

movements with only four *tael* to neutralise a thousand *katty* of force". This clearly shows that a greater force will not stand a chance if it is dealt with using the Taiji principles.

The foundation of Taiji push hand is receiving, not pushing, and the highest form of Taiji force is the Receiving Force (*jie jin*), and so therefore the practice of receiving should start from the beginning. Professor Cheng Man Ching said that "If you are not prepared to receive (incoming force) do not come to learn Taiji because you will be wasting your time in your lifetime you will not get the essence of Taiji". In the Wang Tsung Yueh Taiji classic it is stated, "A feather cannot be added, a fly cannot settle" and in the Ten Important Points of Yang family it says, "I am not a meat rack". All of these points emphasise that you should receive and accept the forces, not resist against them.

In the practice of Push hands the body should have all the elements that are experienced in the Taiji Form. The key to receiving is to throw away self (ego) and invest in loss. "Invest in loss; small loss small gain, big loss, big gain", what beautiful words spoken by professor Cheng Man Ching. It seems that by receiving (yielding) you are losing but that is not the case because the person pushing is actually giving you "Taiji money". As he keeps pushing he gets poorer and as you keep receiving you get richer. When the day comes that he can no longer push you (that means he is Taiji bankrupt), then perhaps you could give him some interest on the "Taiji money" he gave you! In the beginning the practice of receiving can be very frustrating because you get pushed over all the time. As you progress you start to realise where you get stuck, and why, but you will still get pushed over because you can't yet do anything about it. Gradually though, you learn how to 'unstick' yourself and take the force down into the ground. Receiving must be done with total acceptance, in the process of receiving if you have even the slightest intention or thought of countering, then it is receiving without total acceptance. When you master the art of receiving, you will be able to perform the principle that is stated in The Song of Push Hands, "Draw him into emptiness, gather the force and send it out".

Receiving (yielding and neutralising) is not to receive the oncoming force on to the body as the body has only a limited capacity to absorb the force, but to take it into the earth, which has a relatively limitless capacity. The process of receiving the force into the earth is similar to the sinking process in the Taiji Form except that it starts at the point of contact[, rather than the *pai hui*].

The upper body is yin and the base is yang, so any adjustment to incoming movements and forces must begin from the base and, as in the Taiji form, the body and arms follow the changes of the base. The hands are used only to stick to the opponent, and at any chance to release your force it should be released through the legs with the feet remaining firmly grounded to the earth. As it is stated in the Chang San Feng Taiji classic, "The root is in the feet, discharged through the legs (relaxed force), controlled by the waist (direction) and expressed into the fingers". No matter how big or small the issuing is, the hands never extend more than a space of one inch (the extension is only the result of sinking the shoulders).

In push hands, you do not go into it to look for a push or plan to set up a chance to push, you just follow the changes of your opponent and let the push happen by itself. If there is a will to push, then there will be intention and desire. 'In the principle everything is based on the principle of yin and yang. When the yin reaches its extreme it will become yang and vice versa. So whenever you think you are in the most advantageous position you are actually in the process of going into a disadvantaged position and whenever you are in a most disadvantaged position you are in the process of going to an advantageous position. It is always better to change from a disadvantage to an advantaged position, rather than the other way around. When you reach the highest level of push hands, there are no pushes

from you. Your body structure is an empty void and any force that comes into contact with it travels into the earth and rebounds back, returning to the person issuing the force. This is the highest level of Taiji force, the Receiving Force, where the practitioner neutralises without neutralising and issues without issuing. To attain this level one must be able to “Forget yourself and follow the other without your own opinion, follow the heart and mind and let it be natural”.

To borrow the words of professor Cheng Man Ching when speaking about push hands, “It is an idea without motives, an act without desire. What a wonderful art Taiji is; it has nothing to do with pushing, it is all about receiving”. As practitioners of Taijiquan we should be true to the art, not only preaching the principles, but also practicing and adhering to them. Taiji is not only an exercise for health or a martial art for self defence, it is most importantly the Dao (philosophy) of life.

Wee Kee Jin, 2006.

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