

About Push Hands

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Ever since I started to play Tai Chi in my new hometown in the U.S., I have received phone calls from people who are interested in learning Tai Chi. Sometimes the first word or the first question, without even a self introduction by the person on the other end of the line, was: "Do you teach Push Hands?" I was often puzzled, or speechless, because I knew that the person had no Tai Chi experience or never had seen Tai Chi before.

I think the intentions many people have to learn Tai Chi have changed these days. In many cases, Tai Chi has shifted away from its original purpose. I have begun to see a different kind of Tai Chi community. Maybe it is because of the rapid changes in our society or a lack of well-trained teachers. More people are interested in just the image of Tai Chi. They do not work on refining their movement postures (outside) or learn the moving meditation (inner) part of Tai Chi. Without the marriage of these two it will be impossible to achieve better health, martial arts skill or self-enlightenment. Many players are simply not aware or informed about each postures' martial arts background or the meditation that is behind each quiet, slow movement of Tai Chi. They think that Tai Chi is just a slow moving sport. People who are trying to hold onto the traditional Tai Chi are worried. On a broader scale, similar discussions are also happening in the martial arts community. What are we learning Tai Chi for? What is Push Hands for? What is Wu Shu (martial arts) for? Will Tai Chi eventually evolve into group dancing? Will no one really know the true practice of Push Hands? Will Wu Shu become an acrobatic show? Will the only place we can see "real martial arts" be the movies...?

Push Hands may already have 300 years of history. Many styles of Tai Chi have Push Hand forms. Push Hands is performed or played by two people where both players' arms or hands are in contact with each other. During play, they should never lose body contact. In the stationary format, players concentrate on different standing stances. In the moving format, the players follow a designated pattern; they could be moving forward, backward or in different directions and in circles. Players use the main 13-techniques of Tai Chi: ward off, roll back, squeeze, pushing, grabbing, split, elbow, shoulder, as well as step forward, step back, watch your left, guard your right, and stabilize in the center in order to un-balance the counterpart. It is a form of martial arts practice of Tai Chi. The player would learn the ways to deflect or borrow the force from his/her counterpart as well as the ability to sense the intentions, force direction, and the magnitude of the strike from the other side.

Push Hands also has its entertainment and health value. You and your friend can have fun from a friendly competition. Push Hands not only reflects your skills on

the martial arts side of Tai Chi but also the philosophical side. During Push Hands, the player will experience the transformation between Yin and Yang, inner and external, mind and action, true intension and fake move. A skilled player can chat with his/her friend during Push Hands and never lose his/her focus on the opponent. The circular posture movement and the constant shifting of your body weight stimulates your inner Chi's movement. Your focused mind takes you into the meditation mode. The moving meditation stage lets you tune out the distraction from your surrounding environment while you keep your awareness of what is happening around you.

But, Push Hands is not the black belt of Tai Chi. It is not the ultimate goal for a person who learns Tai Chi for health reasons, or even for those with the mind to eventually use Tai Chi as martial arts. Push Hands is not the MMA version of Tai Chi. Push Hands is just a peaceful tool for practice, for understanding the martial arts side of Tai Chi, or a fun way to exercise with your friends.

In the old days, only the Master or teacher knows when his/her student is ready to learn Push Hands. The requirement is the student should be able to do his/her Tai Chi routine well and know how to be relaxed, how to shift weight, and the correct way of breathing. Otherwise, there is no way he/she can use the Tai Chi techniques in Push Hands. Without years of Tai Chi practice, learning Push Hands will simply turn your practice into a hard, stiff, physical muscle competition.

To walk up to someone you have never met and ask for Push Hands is not the way to use martial arts to make a friend. It is rude, arrogant and immoral. It can be seen as a provocative challenge.

I remember watching some movie clips many years ago of some people in a gym, somewhere in the U.S. In each circle drawn on the floor two people wearing helmets tried very hard to push each other out of their circle. The titles of the videos were "Tai Chi Push Hands Competition." I was shocked.

"I want to come to your Tai Chi class for two weeks and come back to my XYZ town and teach," one person called me. "No, there is no way you can do that," I tried to explain to the caller. Without dedication, commitment, and hard work I do not believe a person can learn Tai Chi. The routines may not be that hard to grasp. Repeat the movements N times and you will learn them. But then you have to refine your movement and learn the "inside" of it. No one can declare he/she is a Master of Tai Chi, although many of the Master's followers may look at him/her that way.

I like "Americanized Chinese food" and "Americanized Italian Pizza," even if they have evolved in our country and have changed from their origins. They are still tasty. They have their new styles. But I do not like to see Tai Chi evolve in the same fashion. Generally speaking, Tai Chi has its way to play. You may play a martial art routine in a Tai Chi way to form a new style; but you cannot play a

routine of martial arts or some strange, meaningless movement in slow motion and call it Tai Chi. A well designed Tai Chi movement sequence will tailor your internal Chi's movement like flowing water. The correct way of shifting your body weight and breathing will stimulate the movement of your internal Chi and help you achieve your goals of self-healing, meditation, or martial arts.

We play Tai Chi not for a set of cool silk costumes, the photo opportunities, or for domination or political purpose. We play it for our own health, enlightenment, protection, and for the ability to help others.

A hard style "fast-food" Push Hands or fake Tai Chi will only waste your time. Find a skillful teacher and learn the real thing.