

# Keep Practicing

The South Puget Sound Tai Chi Newsletter

Empty Step Tai Chi Association

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<http://www.emptysteptaichi.com>

## Separate Yin / Yang

The second of our Five Principles of Tai Chi practice is 'Separate Yin and Yang.' Yin and Yang are polar opposites and embody the Taoist conception of the flow of all things in the universe from one state to its opposite state and back. Yin and Yang spring from the Supreme Ultimate, the Tao, and are manifested in many things in our world. Day and night, Light and dark, heavy and light, everything from the natural progression of the seasons to the waxing and waning of the moon and tides. Yang is the masculine principle, aggressive, assertive, strong and moving forward, while Yin represents the feminine principle, accepting, peaceful, composed, yielding, weak and moving away.

The whole of the practice of Tai Chi is thought to be an expression of the Yin form of martial application, to counter the Yang martial expression of the hard martial arts (Kung Fu, Karate, Tae Kwan Do, etc.). In the hard martial arts, muscle and bone are used to apply force to an opponent. In Tai Chi Chuan, we master our movements, our Chi, to be able to avoid, absorb, or deflect force from an opponent. And, just as the softest of elements, water, can eventually overcome the hardest of stone, so the softness of Tai Chi was its greatest virtue, and allowed the proficient Tai Chi Master to overcome his opponent through yielding and be considered the Supreme Ultimate martial artist.

In the beginning, we can take this principle to mean we should separate our weight. By making clear and distinct weight shifts as we practice the form, and by being aware and deliberate about where we hold our weight and how we move, we begin an exploration into this principle.

All of the postures we perform have very specific admonitions and instructions about where our weight is to be held, and how it moves around as we perform the transitions. Following these instructions, and bringing our awareness to our movements as

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*A beautiful World Tai Chi Day in Point Defiance in 2013.*

## Do We Really Have To Practice Push Hands?

By Gary Wessels

This is a question Steve and I hear all the time from our students. Do we really have to practice Push Hands? The short answer is "Yes". If you're satisfied with that answer you can skip the rest of this, if not, read on.

To fully answer this question we need to step back (so to speak) and look at why we practice Tai Chi in the first place. Most of us started for some variation of the following reasons: 1) we saw other people practicing and it looked graceful or relaxing or exotic or just interesting, or 2) we heard about the health related benefits and wanted or needed those benefits for ourselves.

If you are at the point where you have started some Push Hands (or Agreement Exercises), you already have a working knowledge of the solo Form. Frankly, that's why most of us continue to practice: we like and enjoy the solo Form practice. We like the feeling of the integrated movements in the Form, we like the feelings of graceful movement as we develop our root and we like the fleeting feeling of having our mind being completely

integrated with our bodies. We like these feelings and we want more of it. If that's what we want and like about our Tai Chi practice that brings us back to the question of "Do we really have to practice Push Hands?"

The Push Hands exercises serve a couple of purposes. We have all heard that in addition to the health benefits Tai Chi is a martial art. With a name that translates to "Grand Ultimate" it's a safe bet that this is one of the more advanced martial arts. One of the purposes of Push Hands is as a gateway to the martial applications of Tai Chi. This purpose should not be underestimated, or understood solely in the context of formal martial sparring.

The other primary purpose of Push Hands is to provide a vehicle to enable us to learn the more subtle and advanced aspects of the Tai Chi Form. These are not the specifically martial aspects, but both the subtle postural, body mechanics and

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## TAI CHI CHUMP

By Dorothy Wilhelm

I have a history of falling in unusual places. I've fallen going upstairs. I've fallen going downstairs. I've fallen just standing around. Once I fell into the Dairy Case at the supermarket, displacing several gallons of milk and completely demolishing 13 gallons of ice cream. I've accepted these unexpected spills as a fact of my life but when I spent a recent holiday in the Emergency Room, I realized that what I've learned from this experience, is that I really don't want it to happen again. Ever.

Not when falls have become one of the top causes of death for Americans 65 or older. nor when 338,000 adults, mainly those older than 65, fall and fracture their hip each year and only half are ever able to live independently again, according to the Centers for Disease Control. One reason for the swift rise in fatalities from falls is that as we live longer, we become more frail, so core strengthening exercise is very important in fall prevention. An Emery University study shows that people who practice Tai Chi, for instance, are 50% less likely to fall. Tai Chi improves balance and core strength and because of that, I'm now taking the Beginners Class in Tai Chi at the Morgan Family Y. For the eighth time. The trouble is that I'm terrible at it. There are 37 separate postures in the Yang Short Form, Well, there might only be 34 or 35. Doesn't matter as it has become apparent that it will be my life work to master *Ward Off Right. Catch the Sparrow's Tail* is out of the question altogether. I'll never graduate from Tai Chi kindergarten. The other thirty-five postures must fend for themselves. My instructor, Tai Chi Steve says, "Perseverance is the key. Just keep trying. It's not a race." He says lots of annoying things like that. But imagine my surprise at a recent Physical Therapy evaluation when I found that although my Tai Chi form hasn't improved much, my strength has risen incredibly. When I started Tai Chi, I was evaluated as weaker

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### Tai Chi Chump

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than the average woman my age, whoever the poor thing may be. Today, I'm rated as stronger than that fictional average. So the important thing is don't give up. As Tai Chi Steve and the Inscrutable Gary say, "Perseverance really is the key." ☺

### Why Push Hands?

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energetic aspects of the Form.

A very superficial example of the postural and body mechanics is that we all know that the movements in the Form should be soft and relaxed. But, 100% of us, if only exposed to the solo Form, would practice with substantial amounts of excess muscular tension and stiffness. By submitting to the often uncomfortable practice of Push Hands, in which another person controls when we move, where we move and how much we move, we are given the opportunity to see how much tension we are carrying around and how our posture may be working against the relaxed, rooted movements we want to attain in the Form. In Push Hands we can see how un-relaxed our movements are. This comes about as a direct result of the interactions with our Push Hands partner. Because we are not solely in control, but are subject to the external stimulus from our partner, we are forced to be wholly in the moment and immediately responsive to our partner's actions. By doing this we can see both the amount of tension we are carrying around and how our postural alignment, which might seem fine in the solo Form, is actually not the most efficient postural alignment. These are postural corrections that can mainly be made by you. As a teacher I cannot identify just by looking at you the subtle postural changes that can make a big difference. The gross alignment problems are easy to identify; the subtle corrections must come from you. We say 'We learn Tai Chi from the Outside-in, but we perform it from the Inside-out.' These subtle adjustments and corrections we are discussing can only be recognized and made from the inside.

From an energetic viewpoint, the Push Hands practice gives us the opportunity to be exposed to a much wider range of energetic input and interaction. In the solo Form it's hard to get past the phase of just waving our arms and legs around and to feel the motive source of the



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movements and what their effect is or should be. In Push Hands, we are exposed to a wide range of energetic inputs from our Push Hands partner. With this practice we can begin to identify this energetic input and to see how it impacts our movements and level of relaxation. Postural Alignments and Energetic Interaction are both very important to our continued progress in learning Tai Chi.

The primary sources of concerns regarding Push Hands practice are that: 1) the physical proximity necessary for the practice is uncomfortable and 2) since we're not really interested in the martial application, the practice seems unnecessary. We've already addressed the second issue—it's not about the martial application, it's about getting more input that directly leads to learning what the solo Form is really about. That's one of the reasons why I usually call this practice "Agreement Exercises" and not "Push Hands". This is an attempt to step back (so to speak) from the martial implications and address the internal orientation that

applies to the solo Form.

Regarding the physical proximity—there is no way around it. This practice has to be done in close physical proximity, closer than many of us Westerners feel comfortable with. That's why I strive to have a friendly, supportive atmosphere in my classes. This is the context in which the learning takes place. To get this learning experience, we have to pay our dues. Is the price worth it? Absolutely! The social un-ease we may feel is a small price to pay when the potential benefits are immeasurable. By this practice we have the opportunity to learn some things about ourselves and others that are not readily available in almost any other context. This is a rare opportunity.

So the answer to the original question is simply: "Yes"; to start to grasp the higher levels of attainment possible in Tai Chi, it is necessary to practice Push Hands. I hope to see you in the Advanced Classes where we will have the rare opportunity to learn more about Tai Chi and ourselves. ☺

### Yin / Yang

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we do them, we begin to see the rhythmic, cyclical tidal flow of our weight back and forth from foot to foot throughout the form.

With Tai Chi, as we move our body, we move our Chi, or our internal energy. Once we have learned the movements sufficiently to be able to perform them without having to spend all our attention on the movements themselves, we can begin to turn our attention to this flow of energy that occurs as we move.

We can begin to notice, if we are doing the moves properly, that our movements are balanced and coordinated. As one side of the body moves forward (becomes Yang), the other side moves backward (Yin). As we continue to practice, and to deepen our awareness and experience with this flow, we can perceive the Substantiality and In-substantiality that occurs as a result of our flow of Chi.

And, with even more practice, we continue to deepen our understanding and perception, expanding our awareness first to encompass our whole body, and then to include our opponent, and ultimately everything in our environment. Realizing that the flow of Yin and Yang is just an aspect of the undifferentiated whole (that is, the Supreme Ultimate), we have arrived back at the starting point of our journey, but with an understanding, perspective and experience that was not available to us when we began.

Knowing all that can be known, we can forget everything, and just align ourselves with the flow of Chi of the Universe. This is Tai Chi. ☺

## Empty Step Tai Chi Association

### Upcoming Events

- Nov 9 – Advanced Class
- Dec 14 – Xmas Workshop
- Jan 11 – Advanced Class
- Feb 8 – Advanced Class
- Mar 8 – Advanced Class
- Apr 12 – Advanced Class
- Apr 27 – World Tai Chi Day

*For more information, find our website online at [www.emptysteptaichi.com](http://www.emptysteptaichi.com) or call us at 253-973-7887.*

## Practice Tip of the Day

In Push Hands the hands are not needed.

The whole body is a hand  
and the hand is not a hand.

But the mind must stay in the place it should be.

– Song of Form and Function  
Cheng Man-Ch'ing