

# Keep Practicing

The South Puget Sound Tai Chi Newsletter

Empty Step Tai Chi Association

Vol. 1 No. 3

<http://www.emptysteptaichi.com>

## Turn The Waist

The third principle that we are encouraged to follow whenever we practice Tai Chi is to 'Turn the waist.' We take this to mean that we are conscious, deliberate and meticulous about the position of our waist as we move through the Form.

In our practice, the shoulders follow the hips at all times. There is never a place in the Yang style Short Form where we twist the torso (that is, when the shoulders point in a direction either grossly, or subtly different than the hips).

When we perform Tai Chi, the shoulders always follows the hips, by association, the waist is oriented in the same direction as the other two. But it is important that we recognize, while the instruction may be 'Turn the waist,' the performance of this is that we turn the hips, waist and shoulders together, as directed throughout the Form.

In the Tai Chi Classics, it is said that 'the waist is the commander.' We are told that the Chi is drawn up from the root (in the legs), focused with the waist (hips) and expressed through the arms. So we see that the waist (hips) play a crucial role in properly directing our force and energy.

As this is so, we must be meticulous in how we position our hips (and from here on out, I will refer to the hips, but mean the hips, waist, shoulders and, most of the time, the head) to be effective in our movements. The instructions in the Form direct the hips very distinctly throughout the form. They are almost continuously moving, to the corner, square to the front, then to the other corner, and so on. They enhance, and indeed accentuate the tidal motion of  
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*Join us for the Empty Step Tai Chi Association Holiday gathering!  
Saturday, December 14<sup>th</sup> at 1 pm at the Morgan Family YMCA.*

## On Rooting and Postural Alignment

By Gary Wessels

If you have been practicing Tai Chi for any length of time you're aware of the importance of rooting. What is rooting and how do we accomplish this and when is it appropriate?

Rooting is the connection we establish with the ground. When we are rooted we feel, well, rooted to the ground. We feel a stability, a solidity with and to the ground. Like the name implies, we feel as if our weight extends down from our bodies into the ground, like roots extending down from a tree. Ideally, the lower portion of our bodies is very heavy and solid, while the upper portion of our bodies is light and soft. This is similar to the old boxing toy of my youth, the Bobo doll: an inflated punching bag with a weighted, rounded bottom. When punched at any point above the midline, it tipped over and bobbed right back up to its original position. It could, however, be moved off of its

base if punched at a very low point on its body. That's the basic concept of what being rooted looks like to our opponent.

When is it appropriate to be rooted? When we are going through the form, every step should be rooted. Every time we shift our weight from one foot to the other foot, we should root down in that foot. That's right: Every time we shift our weight we should root down into that foot. No exceptions. When we are in a 70/30 posture, the front foot should have 70% of the root and the rear foot 30% of the root.

How do we establish our root? There are two aspects to this; one is passive and the other active. The passive aspect relies on both relaxation and correct postural alignment. The active aspect is based on making a positive energetic connection with the ground. First I'll address the passive aspect.

The initial part of the passive aspect of rooting is simple relaxation. The body must be relaxed. Don't try to fight gravity. Let your weight sink unimpeded from the top of your head through your foot. Your foot must be soft and pliable. Don't try to grip the ground. The more relaxed and soft the foot is, the wider it will spread out and the more stable your base. When relaxing the body, don't relax just the large muscle groups; try to keep the ligaments and tendons soft and pliable also. This especially applies to the connective tissues in the hip area. When every portion of the body is relaxed, then the weight can naturally sink unimpeded into the ground.

In addition to this the body must be in the correct postural alignment in order to get the maximum amount of rooting. In single leg postures the correct alignment is simply the posture Steve or I have been telling you to get into since you started to come to class. This involves keeping the shoulders over the hips; the hips level, the knee on the substantial leg extending in the same direction as the foot, the center of gravity directly above the foot (and the bubbling spring or well) and keeping the head suspended loosely and evenly on top of the spine. There is nothing new here. For 70/30 postures, the same basics apply: suspended headtop, shoulders over hips, hips even, front knee extending up to the end of the toe, rear foot flat. Again there is nothing here that you haven't heard before. But these are the minimum basic requirements for rooting. If these basic Tai Chi body alignments aren't being followed, it will severely reduce your ability to root.

Now that the passive body  
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Turn The Waist

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the weight as it flows from root to root and foot to foot.

And while we might, in our practice, have begun to see and grasp the hips role in the application of force against our opponent (similar to how the hips power a golf swing, drive a batter's swing or power a pitcher's throw), we should not overlook the Yin aspects of the working of the hips to neutralize.

An opponent's attack is an attempt to apply force (or energy, depending on the sophistication of our opponent) against us. We can idealize this interaction as an arrow of force directed against a point, which is seen as our Center of Gravity. If the force is adequate, and if the Center of Gravity is squarely met, the result will be displacement of the Center of Gravity by some amount related to the size of the force and the mass of the Center of Gravity.

If, however, we imagine the force again as an arrow, and the body being attacked as a sphere, it now becomes important to know how large the sphere is, how easily it turns on its axis and how well-directed the arrow is, if we are to determine the success of the arrow at displacing the body.

And this is the key to understanding how 'Turn the waist' is so important to neutralizing (and also to turning our opponent's energy or force back on itself). Taking the same system as before, but this time imagining that the body being attacked is infinitely frictionless and turns very easily, we can clearly see that any force, even slightly wide of Center, will cause the sphere to turn, and the force of the attack to slide harmlessly off to the side. (That is, turning the hips re-directs our opponent's attacks to one side or the other.)

Extending this situation, as we practice to become more rooted, flexible and able to turn frictionless-ly, we effectively become 'invisible' to our opponent. He can see us, but whenever he tries to apply force against us, it just slides harm-



Happy Holidays!  
From  
Empty Step  
(Gary & Steve)



lessly off as we neutralize his attacks by subtly turning the hips and shoulders in response to his attack.

Not only that, but our Push Hands practice trains us to begin to utilize the circular momentum created by our opponent's attack as the basis for a corresponding and instantaneous counter-attack. If our opponent pushes our right shoulder, we respond by emptying our right shoulder, and indeed our whole right side and moving it back out of the way, and by correspondingly filling our whole left side and moving it forward, turning on our vertical axis, and coordinating the left arm in Push or with a fist to strike our opponent. So the motive force for the counter-attack is just a re-direction of the energy of the attack, moderated by the turning of the hips.

If we are truly frictionless, the harder our opponent pushes, the more forcefully our push or punch becomes. Done effectively, we become a mirror, reflecting back the power of the attack upon our attacker. Hopefully, he will quickly realize the folly of punching himself, and will retire.

So, 'Turn The Waist,' is key to both advancing and applying our force or energy effectively on offense, and also to neutralizing or re-directing force or energy applied against us on defense. Each of the Five Principles we follow requires the others in concert to be effective and coherent.

So, Relax, Separate Yin and Yang, Turn the waist, Keep the back straight and the body upright, and Keep Beautiful Ladies' Hands. This is Tai Chi. ☺

On Rooting

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alignment has been established we can work on the active, energetic aspects of rooting. One portion of the body we haven't mentioned that also needs to be relaxed is the mind. Is the mind part of the physical body or the result of electrical activity in the physical neural centers of the brain? No matter, it must also be relaxed. (Don't write to tell me I'm misrepresenting the nature of the brain and mind, this was just a random, tangential thought.) This aspect is the most difficult to explain, in part because to verbally express it makes it sound pretty far out. What I'll be trying to explain is mainly an awareness or consciousness of an energetic connection. While we are rooting, once the physical aspects as discussed above are established, you want to actively be aware of your connection to the ground. Feel your connection with the ground at the bubbling well (spring). Don't try to imagine or invent any specific feeling, but try to open your awareness to see if you can feel an active connection. Basically, can you feel your internal energy (chi) flow into the ground or from the ground up into the foot? Just relax and open your awareness.

There are some other important energetic connections that are tied to the postural alignments discussed above. These are best discussed in connection with Push Hands practice. For this example think of yourself as being in the Push posture which is a 70/30 posture. Your hands are controlling your partner's wrist and elbow. Get the picture?

Okay. As you shift your weight to the full 70% in the

front foot pay attention to the bubbling well. You should establish your root as you reach the full 70% on the front foot. At the same time the other following connections are being made: bring your awareness to the base of your spine. Your torso is balanced on top of this point with the top of the head energetically aligned with the base of the spine. You should feel a connection between these points and the front root. Also at the same time bring your awareness to the center of your palms. As you establish contact and load on to your partner's arm, feel the connection between the palm, the base of the spine and the root. If you have excess tension in your back or shoulders you may be cut off between the shoulder blades. The arms and shoulders should move effortlessly with no tension, no obstruction between the palms and the base of the spine.

So what is happening is that as the root is established, the body is energetically connected at the point of contact with your partner and at the base of the spine. As mentioned, if you are holding on and fighting gravity this effortless connection will not be made. But with relaxation and correct postural alignment the body disappears- and the connections with the partner, the base of the spine and the root are the primary points of awareness.

How does breathing and the dantien come into play in all of this? That's an explanation for another day. Keep on practicing! ☺

Empty Step Tai Chi  
Association

Upcoming Events

- 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.