

## ***Push Hands Competitions-Why Bother?***

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Chinese martial arts tournaments in this country have included taijiquan push hands competitions only since the late 80's. It has been controversial from the start.

There are those for whom taijiquan is strictly a "moving meditation", and the very idea, I say, the very idea, of introducing "competition" of any sort is quite disturbing.

The opposite end of the spectrum is occupied by those who feel that anything less than a trip to the Steel Cage is the work of "nancyboys" in frilly collars.

The colors in between are those who object to this or that rule or style of play. Or that the restrictions of a match foster "bad martial arts". Or that the judges aren't fair. Or that "winning at any cost" is rewarded over good taiji principles. Or that push hands champions can get an over-inflated view of their martial prowess.

There is some validity to each of these criticisms. And others. Tournaments of any sort are decidedly imperfect. They attempt to give a certain experience to all participants, providing a sense of authenticity while operating within agreed upon bounds of safety. Everyone can find something about a tournament that they don't like. But if it is your cup of tea, it can be a useful tool to expand your martial arts experience without having to start a bar fight.

### **What is Push Hands?**

Push hands, is a two-person exercise designed to give students an opportunity to explore and integrate taiji principles, generally in a non-threatening manner. There are many types of exercises ranging from choreographed patterns (to show what types of moves are possible) to free-style (stressing spontaneous responses utilizing taiji principles). It can look like a graceful minuet or a sweaty sumo fest, depending on the intentions and inclinations of the participants. Generally there is no striking. Some styles encourage sweeps, joint locks, throws. Most do not.

At its simplest, you try to keep your balance while causing your partner to lose his. It's really a contract with another to test and improve each other's abilities. You try to maintain your central equilibrium despite gradually increasing challenges.

Taijiquan emphasizes that you do that while using the least amount of muscular effort. That is a key element in taiji training: do what you have to do using the least amount of gross physical force. This helps you to develop your internal energy and connections by discouraging dependence on old programmed responses. At lower levels the need to dominate at any cost will naturally be emphasized. And early on

you can often get more obvious results by using other techniques. Some get so enamored of these early successes that they never embrace the core elements of taijiquan. But as you get more confidence in your skills, you have the opportunity to advance by "investing in loss"-- placing yourself in more vulnerable positions to see how to handle those.

## **The Place of Push Hands in Taijiquan training.**

Taijiquan has a wealth of tools to assist the student in developing martial skills. A variety of empty hand forms, weapons training, internal energy cultivation, push hands, and sparring all contribute. Few, if any, can go from form training to apply those skills in fighting. Push hands provides an opportunity to check out what you learned in form class with some immediate feedback from a partner. The internal connections of taiji are subtle and not immediately apparent. Push hands lets you know when you are connected enough to do you some good.

A very small handful of athletes benefits from being thrown into the deep end of the pool. But for most of us, a gradual slope of learning lends to integration without overwhelm. Push hands lets you contact those subtle internal energies and physical connections without the added stress of someone smacking you upside the head. What we seek in taiji starts out as a small ember that must be cradled and nurtured. Too much stress and that ember is put aside in favor of cruder tools that are at least familiar, even if not terribly effective. It takes years for most of us to develop confidence in the power of these internal skills, with many temptations along the way to discard them for ones more easily gotten.

## **My Experience.**

I am a middle-aged white-boy of modest athletic gifts. My interest in taijiquan lies primarily in the areas of healing and consciousness studies. My native gifts will never be confused with those of a Muhammed Ali or a Carl Lewis. But I'm not bad at push hands. After winning a number of push hands championships as a middleweight, I competed in the superheavyweight classes and won there. The taiji classics encourage us that size, speed, and strength are not the most important factors in an encounter. I wanted to test that and am happy with the results.

For over ten years I have been involved in various tournaments, as competitor, coach, judge, spectator. I have seen things evolve (devolve?) and witnessed the numerous missteps along the way. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly. Consequently, I have some opinions about what push hands competitions are and are not. What they should and shouldn't be.

"He who wrestles with us, strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper." Edmund Burke

## **Tournament Push Hands. What it is. What it isn't.**

In his book, *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, "The challenges of competition can be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, enjoyment tends to disappear. Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun."

The rules have varied somewhat over the years. Getting players to agree on them is like counting ballots in Florida, but certain conventions have been more or less accepted over the years.

The three most popular formats in the U.S. are Fixed Step, Restricted Step, and Moving Step. In Fixed, the feet stay planted and any movement is penalized. In Restricted, one step back and forth is allowed (provided you keep the same foot forward at all times), with points awarded for making an opponent take one off-balance step. In Moving, you are allowed free movement within a small circle, with points given for making an opponent take two or more off-balance steps, leave the circle, or fall down.

For those involved in more wide-open combat, the limitations of taiji push hands could be stifling. For those of us who like to let the beast out on occasion, but still have to go to work tomorrow, the mayhem of a Fight Club just doesn't work. In push hands you can vigorously explore the fighting energies of taijiquan without much danger of injury.

What tournament push hands is: An opportunity to play with players of various skills and styles in an energetically charged atmosphere; a way of testing what you will actually do when faced with an opponent intent on pushing you into the cheap seats; a test of how effective your taiji form is when faced with opposition; a test of how well you have integrated your taiji principles; a chance to display your stuff before your peers; an opportunity to experience the rapture of pure timelessness that comes from having your entire consciousness focused in the NOW of competition; a chance to say that on such and such a day, under certain rules, you were able to defeat those players that showed up and competed in your event; an opportunity to FACE YOUR FEARS (fear of failure, of performing before others, of another body in close proximity, of that much energy, etc.), and purge a few demons.

Probably the most important thing that tournament play provides is the chance to meet and connect with taiji players from the four corners of the globe at a deeper level than seems to be possible in a workshop, a convention, or a class. You

exchange information and insights in the backrooms and hallways before and after your events, often more valuable than the matches themselves.

What tournament push hands is not: Proof that your taiji is "better" than anyone else's; proof that you do anything that remotely resembles taijiquan; proof that you are a great martial artist or that you can defend yourself competently; an open door to fame and fortune; proof that your teacher is the greatest; an example of the "right" way, the "best" way, or the "only" way of doing push hands.

In China and Taiwan, winning major tournaments is your ticket to ride. Winners are awarded cash and university educations, much like we treat football, baseball, and basketball players in the U.S. When I was in Beijing last year, I showed some of my tournament footage to Huang Kwang Hui, eight-time National push hands champ of China and professor of Taijiquan at Ti Yu Da Xue. He was impressed by how traditional the rules were in the U.S. (more so than China), and even more impressed by how much fun we were having. In China, it is very serious business, and can make or break your career.

## **So, Why Bother?**

So, winning a gold medal in your weight class probably won't get you fame and fortune. The way most tournaments are run, most of the crowd and other martial artists will have gone home before you even get to play. You have to pay to enter and you won't see any cash prizes. You may object to the rulings of the judges and the rules of play themselves.

But you will have an opportunity to hang your butt out a bit and show your stuff. You get to see what you actually will do when you are threatened with losing a point or a match. You see how much you really trust the taiji you learned in class and how easy it is to revert to schoolyard bullyboy push-and-shove. If you are really lucky, you will get to play someone much better than you, and get a chance to see how much more is possible in the art you study. You can see if you can win gracefully and lose gracefully. You learn a little humility and that the taiji universe does not begin and end with walls of your school. It is really global and push hands is a language spoken everywhere they play taiji.

And you may make a bunch of new friends that may turn out to be friends for life. As one friend described the special bond we share, "Because we met IN THERE!"