

Winning or Losing, Habit or Learning, Technique or Principle

Push Hands Meeting Hannover, Germany 2007

by Ronnie Robinson

For six out of the seven years Nils Klug has been running the International Push Hands Meeting in his native Hannover, I have been privileged to be a regular teacher. During these years I have become aware of a continued development of those who regularly

attend and the general openness and eagerness to learn of most in attendance. Every meeting brings new experiences which help us to reflect on our own work in push hands.

There are many methods, approaches and paths to plough when working with tui shou. Whilst we are now able to experiment with many varied techniques through an increasing range of workshops, meetings and ongoing regular training, these opportunities can also seduce us into looking for the golden key to open up our partner to find a way to his weak spot, whilst, at times losing sight of the core elements of the art.

Recently, when teacher 3 x 3 hour sessions and 3 x 3 free-pushing exchanges I noticed a number of recurring themes.



connection from their hand to my body. It is even less likely that they were aware of my counter-push as all this was going on. So they tried to replicate the physical movement (technique), which they thought they saw, and didn't

Technique Not Principle.

On more than one occasion a student would ask me how I did something when neutralising a particular push. If I showed them the physical aspects of what was applied, they then got caught into trying to replicate what it was, that they thought they saw. So what's wrong with that, you may ask. Well they then got lost in trying to apply the technique (which they thought they saw), and in doing so, they sacrificed basic core principles. If, for example, a push is directed at a central point in the lower body, I may have yielded a little to absorb it, turned my waist to get out of the way, and applied a push directly towards their centre with my other hand. The student, more often than not saw my arm inside theirs, perhaps they also felt their (soft) contact with my arm and perhaps they were also aware of the decreased

yield enough to absorb the push, or push back against the now open space, created in the opponent's centre (principles) when his attention is caught predominantly with his (mis) application of technique. So how can we overcome this dilemma? Simply by training in the core principles (of the inter-change of yin and yang) often enough so that they become second nature - a natural instinctive response, appropriate to the situation without aforethought. If your instinct is trained enough to allow you to go with the push (force) either large or small, without thinking, then the technique can be learned quicker, trained effectively until it becomes an instinctive process, not an intellectual exercise. When it is merely an intellectual exercise, the brain takes some time to process all the information - too much time to allow the effectiveness of the



technique. I strongly encourage push hands players to train their responses through a series of relaxing exercises and focus work so they become able to yield instinctively and counter-push in the same moment or even slightly before.

Habit or Learning

How often have you encountered a push hands partner, who has a particular technique which, irrespective of what's going, or whether your teacher has given a particular exercise to work with, will continue to do his own thing?

During both my teaching sessions, and open free-pushing practice, I encountered this creature during a number of encounters. Perhaps, being in the role of teacher, they felt they had something to prove and used what they thought to be their best resource (or favourite technique) to achieve maximum effect. Trouble was, more often than not it was either unsuccessful or limiting.

During the event I had the fortune of working with two highly experienced practitioners, one of them aided my own development, the other didn't.

One of these individuals was a large, strong, effectively competent player. He stood a reasonable distance away, side on and placed his large hand on the centre of my chest and banged me! He was very good and it worked. He did it again and again. I tried to reach him, get my hands somewhere towards his centre but he continually kept me at bay. The only sensible course of action for me was to go with his push and step backwards when it came, otherwise my chest would be damaged. He was better than me, no doubt.

The second individual worked quietly and sensitively. I felt him, and he felt me. Slowly

he worked his way to my centre and when he found it he slowly let go. I knew he had me. Sometimes I even felt myself coming out from my centre. The inter-change was informative and highly educational. He helped me to find my weaknesses, let me become aware of them, and gave me some space to try to find a solution.

In one of my teaching sessions, when leaving a space for questions, a woman expressed her deep frustration at getting stuck. She was working with a big guy, who although was not being unpleasant, made it difficult for her to find a way to neutralize him. She tried and tried – tried every trick in her armoury but still couldn't find a way through. She asked me what she could do. I felt her frustration, her deep inner sense of fighting for a solution. I then suggested she stay for a minute or two to feel what it felt like. She did. She felt what it was doing to her and how it affected her emotions. Then, once she felt what was going on, she calmed down. I suggested that many of us get into situations where we feel the only course of action is to fight or flight. Sometimes its good just to stay with the feeling. Just be still and get a true sense of being in the moment. If we are able to hold the feeling sometimes we can find or create a space for opening up. Once we open, we can establish a greater sense of clarity about who we are and what our capabilities are. Often we repeat the same patterns of behaviour and they can stop us from progressing. Finding a place to be there in the moment allows us to move forward, to rid ourselves of recurring patterns that prohibit our potential growth.

A few days later she sent me this email and although she is happy for me to include her name I feel it's better not to:



Dear Ronnie,

I thought you would like to know that your workshop in Hannover on February 15th (2007), last week, helped me a lot in my personal psychological and taiji progress. It may not sound that special to you, but to me it was a big, BIG thing that I finally could FEEL that ALL I have to do is: 'just be there'. No more fighting or flighting. This is the answer to the questions I've been asking myself for years and years: 'Who am I, what am I doing here, what is it that I really want?'

I am just here.

I feel and act a lot calmer now.

THANK YOU,



Winning, Losing, or Learning

During the same session another woman asked how best to deal with an open push-hands session where someone is continually using too much force and thereby creating an unpleasant dialogue for working.

I suggested that 80 – 90% of participants are usually very cooperative and have similar aims – to increase the mutual learning experience. I told her that I was also acutely aware that there were always a few individuals who just wanted to win, whatever the cost. I suggested that if you're working with someone who continually uses way more force than can facilitate your learning experience, perhaps you should try to find a way to ask them to work a little slower, a little gentler to enable you to feel what is going on. It may work if you say, "That was a good push, and I'm having difficulty doing something with it, I feel stuck, can you do it again a little slower, or help me to do something?"

Often in push hands some people want to win at all cost – if they're successful they're pleased with themselves and if they're not they get angry – with either themselves or their partner. Then they get stuck.

They close down and inhibit their potential for learning. Winning can be fun if genuine technique and skill is applied and losing can be equally enjoyable if you learn something. Feeling where you get stuck, working creatively to find a solution and being thankful for the opportunity of defeat to help you to discover some other area of weakness is highly creative and helps you to grow a little more.

Invest in Lost

The game of push hands is a field of unlimited possibilities for growth and if approached in a clear open manner it can pay wonderful dividends. For me the art allows us to get closer to our true selves, to find out a little more about what blocks us and, through this education we can perhaps learn to stand with a good inner structure and a soft relaxed openness. Perhaps we can never totally achieve this but at least we allow ourselves another opportunity to discover a little more.

Open up a little, let go a little and enjoy it.

<http://www.push-hands.de/>



