



Three Pieces on Push Hands  
by  
Ken Van Sickle, 2022

## What Push Hands Is and Is Not

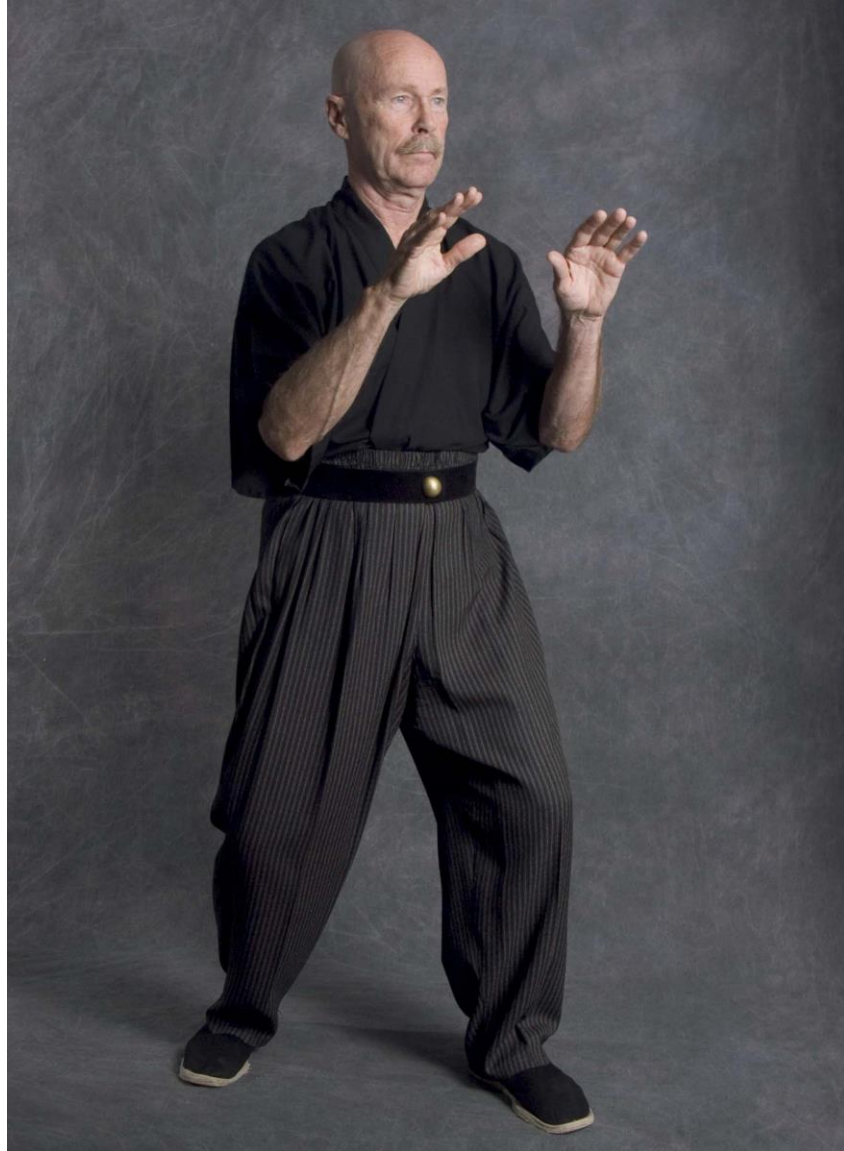
Many people I have seen doing push hands are trying to push and not be pushed. They are trying to win, to prevail, to beat the other person and by doing this, they lose a great opportunity.

To vie and struggle to win is not doing Cheng Man-ch'ing's tai chi. The tai chi form began as a repository of fighting techniques. Push hands was devised as an interim physical dialogue to test the students' abilities to relax, align, center, balance, root, energize, reduce chi blockages, and to acquaint and refine the players' abilities to handle close quarters fighting techniques.

The only reason to push our partners is for them to learn how to *not* get pushed. Tai chi is an evolving art. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we no longer need to protect our lives with a martial art, particularly when the art offers us ways to improve our vitality, health, and ability to relate to others. These benefits can be achieved by exchanging energies and body intelligence in direct physical contact.

As we play back and forth with a partner in constant physical contact, we become more familiar with their bodies and our own body. First, we acquire the ability to feel the other's energy. We feel their anger, fear, and other emotions. From there we begin to feel the more subtle energies of mood or conditions, physical, psychological, or spiritual.

This process can fine tune our relations with others while touching in physical contact which is usually only achieved in dancing or having sex. I know of no other system that offers this dynamic.



## *Shr Jung The Right Time*

Cheng Man-ch'ing did have secrets, and he shared them with us when we were ready. When they were misunderstood, they remained secrets; when they were understood they became keys.

Many people have heard the story that a student asked with reference to a certain move, "When do we do that?" and Cheng Man-ch'ing replied, "at the right time." Cheng Man-ch'ing then gave us an example of a *Shr Jung* event.

The two-person saw has a long blade with a post at each end. The handle is long enough to be used by two hands, with one person on each side of a tree or log. As Person A pulls the saw, Person B must let it go with just enough downward pressure to make the saw cut, and at the same time match the speed of Person A's pull. Here is where the timing is crucial: as the blade gets just about as far as it can go toward Person A, each person must reverse their direction and their pressure *exactly* at the same time. If either one is a fraction of a second off, the blade will either bend or bind. I have experienced the two-person saw so I more-or-less understand how this principle relates to push hands.

Here is another example. Ask a student to hold his or her fist out in the tai chi punch position. Tell the student to keep it in that position (for the demonstration). Then seize the student's wrist and pull it toward you. The student will resist your pull by pulling back toward his or her body. Now you release the student's fist which will cause the student to move backward. *Here* is where you can push the student effortlessly because you are pushing along with the student's momentum in the direction the student is moving, at exactly the right time.

This is an example of how the same principle is used in push hands. You push toward your partner's chest. Your partner resists, so you pull away from your partner's resistance just enough for your partner to feel as if he or she is falling forward, toward you. To stop this falling forward, your partner will probably push themselves back with their forward foot, in which case your partner will lose their root and begin to move away. If you push your partner at *exactly* this time, joining your partner's

momentum, the push will seem powerful, but it will be effortless--and perhaps require only four ounces.

I watched the Professor do this push, called *Ti Feng*, over and over. For years I didn't understand it. I never heard this explanation translated. When I finally did understand it, I tried to do it and it almost never worked so I more-or-less gave up.

To do *Ti Feng*, one must be extremely awake to feel the moment your partner changes his/her energy from toward you to away from you.

*Ti Feng* was beautifully demonstrated in the movie, *Push Hands*. Cheng Man-ch'ing did the push sideways from his shoulder, but it was still a perfect example of *Ti Feng*.



# Connections and Disconnections

## Full and Empty

Yin and yang are the opposites that Taoist philosophy deals with, light and dark, high, and low, movement and stillness. Tai chi is called a soft martial art, yet the tai chi classics state that it works with yin and yang; therefore, we also use the hard.

Most of the people I see doing push hands use strength and struggle to push or not get pushed by their partner. They do this by using muscular contraction. Cheng Man-ch'ing stated, "It is wrong to use the muscles to bind the bones into a rigid framework."

On the other hand, many students stay soft when they shouldn't. We have seen films of Cheng Man-ch'ing in the ward off posture holding off the pushes of ten men lined up against him. This was a demonstration of rooting and connecting. The accumulated energy of the line of men feels like it is hitting a wall. The wall they were hitting is the ground they were being connected to through Cheng Man-ch'ing's body.

If you watch how cats walk, you will see an example of connection and disconnection. As they step forward, their fore legs reach out, but their paws remain completely relaxed and swing forward until they arrive at their destination at which point, they are placed and connected at the same time.

When Homo erectus walks naturally, the back foot pushes off and lands on the front heel. The back leg then begins its journey by moving the knee forward which causes the calf and foot to swing forward, relaxed, like a lion's paw, until it connects to complete the locomotion.

If the calf and foot move forward *with the intention* of stepping forward right from the push off, it is not natural--and one hopes the toes don't hit anything hard on their journey forward.

Other more picturesque examples of connection concern the bullwhip and the bow and arrow. A bull whip's movement is initiated by the arm of its handler, but its goal of the snap is only achieved by its connection to the hand.

"The bow string is soft but if it is not connected to the bow tips, the power of the bow cannot be transferred to an arrow," Cheng Man-ch'ing stated.

A bow string alone has no strength. The energy that drives the arrow comes from the string's attachment to the bow tips. Likewise in tai chi, the arms using muscular contraction have no strength. The energy that moves the arms comes from their connection to the tan tien.

Photographs by Ken Van Sickle