

# Getting Out Of The Way Of Force



Students of Professor Cheng and Yang Cheng-fu's tradition have endlessly heard this phrase. It sounds like a nice homily, but in working at the wall push more often comes to shove, or at least to stolid resistance, depending on the degree of one's rootedness.

As one of the people who worked in the early days with Patrick Watson, (the founder and Director of the School of T'ai Chi Chuan) I was occasionally put in what was for me, a woman, a terrifying role: if an outsider came to challenge Patrick—"to see what Patrick had" in the martial sense, he would often have to defeat me before Patrick would play Push Hands with him. Sometimes these events were carefully orchestrated meetings between heads of different schools, or occasionally we'd be working together in a classroom and someone—usually half crazy—would show up to challenge him. If Patrick turned to me and nodded, my mind would start racing and my breath immediately became shallow—how did I know I wasn't going to get hurt or be ignominiously defeated and not measure up to Patrick's exacting standards? Engaging in martial arts with a stranger bent on defeating a mere woman can be quite frightening.

Since I began studying T'ai Chi for its beauty, balance and its connection to the forces of nature, being told to engage with these visitors was distasteful. I hated to fail my teacher but I just wasn't interested in the martial aspect of this art. My fear and resistance made no impression on Patrick. To him, T'ai Chi encompassed all aspects of everything in life that needed doing. And right now, *this* needed doing.

I remember an occasion when the leading student of a Yang style Chinese teacher in Southeast Asia was sent to our school to check out Patrick's skill. Patrick informed the student that he would need to play Push Hands with me first. Patrick whispered in my ear "Get out of the way of force," as if it was a secret I'd never heard before. And in a way, I never really had. He was saying: *this is it—the secret, just do this.*

The experience is etched in my memory: I recall how

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Pat Gorman

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long and wiry were the limbs of the fellow I was about to engage with and I remember thinking I should have taken a longer step when my back was against the wall. Fear flooded my body because I

was about to make a fool of myself in front of my teacher and all our senior students. In this state of heightened awareness I remember our first moment of contact: I could *feel* him... he was bit harder than me. Aha, I thought, my first break. To get out of the way of force, I must at least feel him—so I must be *softer*, more yielding than him.

His hands were really "sticky," staying with my every movement so that I could not escape him. So I needed to become as "sticky" as he was, adhering to every slight change. He was also very flexible and had a good "root": his feet seemed immovable and stuck to the ground. His moves were sinewy and quick and he immediately noticed if I took the lead and then tried to trap me. In

response I tried to become more absorbent and soft, letting him lead and only following his moves. He was obviously a practiced competitor and this made me feel at quite a disadvantage: it seemed impossible to

match or catch up in that moment with his much greater experience. Panic began to overtake me as I felt my energy rise and clench in my chest. The guy really wanted to get me—to slam me to the wall!

When I felt it couldn't get any worse for me I remembered Patrick's words about *not being there*—getting out of the way, like water as your hand sweeps through it, adhering to and dissolving around the oncoming force. This experience taught me that each part of the body must be equally relaxed and responsive in each moment, not just rote responses like, "Well, he's pushing on the left so I'll just yield to the left." Rather, I must be a centrally coordinated, rooted, responsive-all-over receptor.

As we played I perceived my partner as a sinewy mass of energy surrounded by lots of empty space, into which he was leading me. But then I realized: *I could move anywhere he was not.* Suddenly I had more options because I had a great deal more room to move in. For a moment I was able to let

“Getting out of the way of force, four ounces can move a thousand pounds.”

go of the thought of winning or losing and instead stayed with T'ai Chi "principle." To my amazement, this actually worked—this was the real secret, to truly stay with principle.

As we continued I noticed a slight stiffness in his body. Although he was very willowy and yielded easily, this stiffness was like an arrow pointing to his defended, and therefore weaker, areas. If he had stayed more upright and kept his connection between heaven and earth straighter, I would not have been able to push him several times, by going where he wasn't—not directly attacking his defended areas, but guiding him off balance—without using any pressure. I was only able to do this because of my experience earlier of space being either full or empty. When we were finally done (and those minutes seemed like hours) my fear had dissolved into a peaceful internal state.

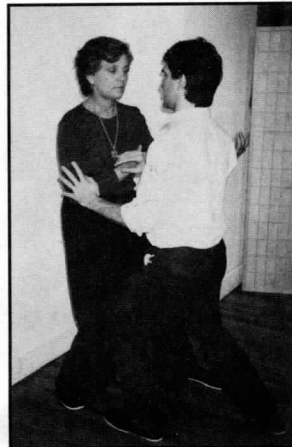
Patrick politely bid our visitor good-bye—much to his disappointment. "To get to me," he'd told him "you have to go through her—a teacher is only as good as his student." So, our visitor never got to work directly with Patrick. Later Patrick began a whole new period of work with his senior students based on the flaws he'd seen in me during this encounter.

While I never relished being put on the spot in this way I see the value in being forced to take the principles of T'ai Chi literally—to really get out of the way of force with the entire body. And on a higher level, to get out of the way of my own forceful thoughts which inhibit the seeing and experiencing of principle in action. ▼

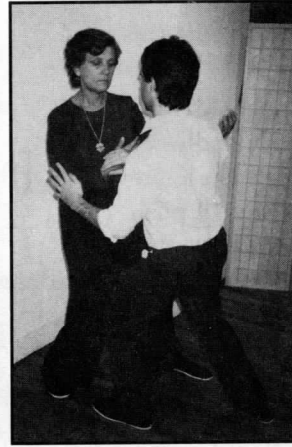
— IN THE NEXT ISSUE —

**Moving 1000lbs with 4 ounces...  
Can this be for real?**

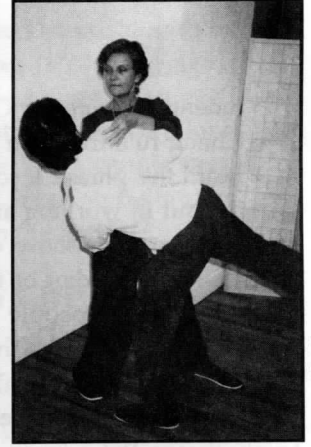
**“IF YOU CAN'T GET AWAY STANDING STILL,  
YOU CAN'T GET AWAY” Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing**



He pushes on her Ward-Off in a slightly upward and inward direction.



She rotates left, eluding the directional force of his push, "rolling back," keeping her left arm extended.



Since his push is too heavy and lands on nothing—she has moved—his upward energy is returned with none of her own. She keeps her balance as his forward motion, now overbalanced, breaks at the waist.

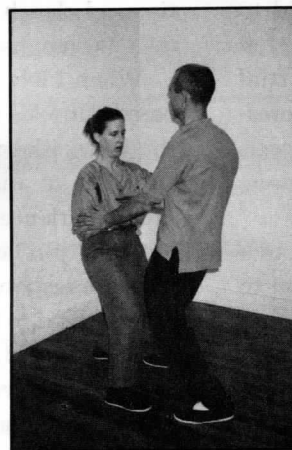
**P U S H H A N D S**

is a form of physical engagement with others, often referred to as *playing* by T'ai Chi students. When playing, the feet are "rooted" to the ground, through relaxation, and do not move. Professor Cheng would say, "If you can't get away standing still you can't get away."

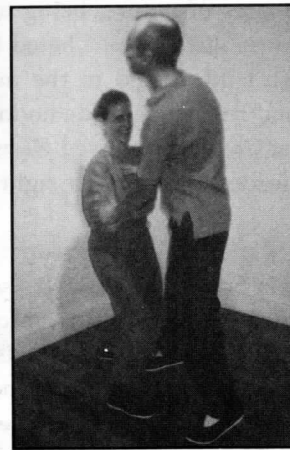
Often, one person's back is to the wall, so that if they are "pushed" off balance and fall, the wall is there to "catch" them. Very light-four ounces-adhering, or "sticking" contact is made, as the participants move through a series of efficient and economical movements which involve shifting, rotating, deflecting, warding off, pushing

and pressing. If done lightly and correctly, i.e. "starting after" any force and "arriving before" the force can land, while keeping oneself balanced and moving freely, any force can be escaped, deflected or returned without using more of your own strength than the initial four ounces. In this way, one never attacks in true Push Hands: energy is returned only to show one's partner where they are off balance.

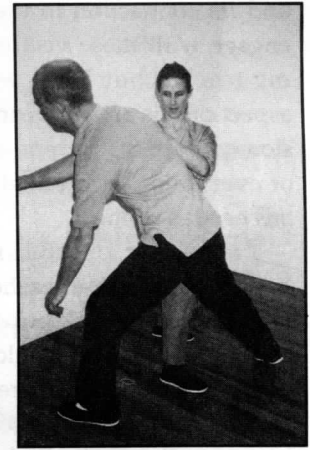
Push Hands makes tremendous demands on self-discipline, as it challenges the ego's desire to "defeat" an opponent through force. In this way it is an integral part of the T'ai Chi path towards enlightenment. **Pat Gorman**



He pushes, in and slightly down on her Ward-Off, apparently trapping her on her back leg.



Deflecting and escaping his push by relaxing any resistance in her own body she lets his force pass thru her, which uproots his downward pressure.



Since she has gotten out of the way without using force herself, she is balanced while he must step forward to catch himself.

Photos: Pat Gorman

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