

To build skill in Pushing Hands we have to be:

1. **Balanced** (*upright*)
2. **Grounded** (*rooted*)
3. **Co-ordinated** (*synchronised*)
4. **Aware** (*of opportunities*)

All these qualities are inter-related. If we are deficient in one aspect, each of the others is compromised.

1. Balanced

Postural integrity is crucial. The body must be aligned vertically and horizontally; not leaning forwards or backwards, left or right. Nor should there be any misalignment between the hips and shoulders as this causes the spine to twist, producing differential tension between the two halves of the body.

The *neck* must be relaxed with the chin tucked in slightly to gently stretch the spine and support the head.

The *chest* should be slightly concave so that you feel a gentle stretch across the shoulder blades.

The *back* should be straight, allowing *chi* to sink to the *Dantien*, whilst the lower back should be relaxed to enable the pelvis to tilt slightly and enable the *tailbone* to tuck underneath. (Note: There is **no** requirement for the lumbar spine to actually be flat, merely to be relaxed. Any attempt to force the tailbone under will create tension in the lower abdomen.) The *tailbone* should be centred so that the *Baihui* point on the crown sits directly over the *Huiyin* point between the legs (perineum).

When the body is correctly aligned and the mind is calmed, we can relax; a natural balance is established.

2. Grounded

It is difficult to over-state the importance of relaxing; in other words, consciously letting go of any excess muscle tension. (*Fang sung*.) As the upper body settles down into the hip joints (*kua*), pressure in the supporting foot increases and the weight is channelled straight down into the ground providing a very stable or “rooted” stance.

/ 2. Grounded (cont.)

Pushing hands involves moving one's root smoothly from foot to foot to ensure that the *Dantien* is always supported and free to turn in all directions.

3. Co-ordinated

Tai Chi theory tells us that all movement should be co-ordinated by, and synchronised with, the *Dantien*. The *waist*, therefore, plays a key role in keeping the body balanced whether we are still or moving. It contributes both to grounding and to co-ordination, since relaxation of the hip *Kua* facilitates both stability and mobility of the *Dantien*.

As a result, when we are uprooted or become trapped, the first thing we should check is the *kua*/waist connection to see whether it is sufficiently relaxed and sunk, or "*sung*". If we have a natural tendency to thrust the hip forward, this will prevent the *kua* from relaxing and the joint will not seat properly, preventing us from grounding and so impeding *Dantien* rotation. This phenomenon, known as "double heaviness", results in restricted movement and general clumsiness.

To be proficient at Pushing Hands we have to understand the principles of whole body movement: *when the Dantien moves, everything moves. When the Dantien stops, everything stops.* To help us, we have the concept of the *3 External Harmonies*.

The 3 External Harmonies

Footwork links to the hands, ensuring the upper and lower body work together at all times. The other pairings, likewise, ensure the body works as one unit.

In the early days there is a tendency to move the arms and hands independently. The legs and arms lack co-ordination. As we improve, we reduce extraneous movements, building better (i.e. tighter) connections between the *Dantien* and the extremities. This is like taking up the slack on a rope. Movements become more compact and less energy is wasted. The full leg should be screwed into the ground by relaxing the *kua* and the *Dantien*. Our intent should be concentrated a fraction deeper into the ground itself. This creates a firm, well-rooted stance. With a firm, solid stance, the full foot should be flat on the floor with the toes drawn back slightly for better grip. With this firm foundation, a well-executed weight transfer can go straight through to an opponent's feet and uproot him.

Stepping

In Stepping Pushing Hands the footwork must be light and agile with a clear ability to differentiate between the “full” (weight-bearing) leg and the “empty” (non-weight-bearing) leg. Failure to fully transfer the weight prevents the kua from settling properly and again produces double heaviness. Our movement is easily smothered by an opponent and we are unable to adapt in response to an attack. If we fail to grasp this, we have no real understanding of Tai Chi at all. Weight changes must be smooth and natural, sinking into the kua and folding the waist.

Advancing involves stepping into an opponent’s space. There are two techniques for doing this; Hooking (*tau*) and Planting (*qa*).

1. Hooking (Surrounds and constrains)

Our front foot presses up against the outside edge of the opponent’s front foot to restrict and control his movement.

2. Planting (Penetrates and unsettles)

We step forward into the space between the opponent’s legs to intimidate him by crowding him and making him vulnerable to shoulder or elbow strokes.

The *knees* can be used to uproot an opponent (or prevent him from uprooting you!) by turning them in or out and exerting pressure on the other person’s leg.

The empty *foot* can be used to sweep his foot.

4. Aware (of opportunities)

Awareness of opportunity is developed over time. Wu style master, Wu Kongcho, talks of three levels of awareness:

1. Unaware
2. Aware after the fact (i.e. when it’s already too late)
3. Aware before the fact (i.e. able to “read” events and anticipate)

Sensitivity (also known as *Ting jin*, or Listening Energy) is not simply a matter of touch. To be truly aware, we need to draw on the senses of **touch** and **sight** supported by hearing.

Touch

Our hands and arms act like an insect's feelers. They should be light and relaxed.

The hands each have 9 "sensors":

- 5 fingers
- 2 edges of the palm
- Front of the palm (inner *laogong*)
- Back of the palm (outer *laogong*)

The wrists and the palms together are the contact points for controlling an opponent's arms by smothering the movements of his wrist, elbow and shoulder. We can also use them to apply joint locks (*Qinna*).

The elbows should be relaxed down, not raised and tense.

The shoulders should be relaxed with the *kua* open and mobile.

Sight (Visual Awareness)

We must be aware of visual cues. Each movement is directed by the intent; the eyes follow the mind and this brings about reactions in the trunk and the four limbs. Sight is vital in assessing an opening to advance or attack or the need to retreat.

In Pushing Hands we aim to protect our own centre whilst taking control of our opponent's. We do this by undermining their structural integrity and, by extension, their root. We stay balanced and grounded as we make them double heavy. When our opponent starts to lose control of his centre, his structure deforms. For example, his body may start to incline or his shoulders may tilt. The shoulder *kua* might close up or his hip *kua* block. Sight is critical in helping us to decide if there is an opening for advance or attack. It helps us to withdraw under control and manage distance and angles.

In a confrontational situation, we can also use the eyes to intimidate an aggressor. A steady, level gaze full of resolve will often make an opponent less confident and more apprehensive. We should avoid giving visual cues with our own expression. We want to focus naturally and avoid either staring or letting our eyes dart around anxiously.

Never practise Pushing Hands with your eyes closed or, worse still, with eyes shut and your head turned away to the side.