

In many Western texts much is made of the different Chinese terms used in Pushing Hands. This is often carried to ridiculous lengths. How, for example, do we meaningfully differentiate between “sticking” and “adhering” when in English the two are synonymous? In a similar way, the range of skills presented as necessary for proficiency in Pushing Hands can be quite wide and daunting. Pushing Hands is difficult enough without making it more complicated than it needs to be.

We take the view that it is better to simplify and reduce the list, since many skills naturally follow from others and do not need to be mentioned separately.

In our teaching, there are only three primary activities to consider:

1. **Contact**  Unless we first *make contact*, we cannot stick.  
Unless we *keep* contact, we cannot **follow**.  
 *Stick*
2. **Follow**  Unless we first **follow**, we cannot blend.  
 *Blend*
3. **Neutralise** Unless we first blend, we cannot **neutralise**.

### Contact

The objective of Pushing Hands training is to develop the sensitivity needed to “read” the intent of an opponent from his movement, whilst hiding your own intent and energy from him. In short, we want to read them and ensure that they can’t read us.

When we first make contact, our touch should be light and sensitive; like a fly landing – so gentle it is barely noticeable. We want to avoid at all costs using so much pressure that our opponent is alerted, put on his guard, and deviates from his intended course. Moreover, a light and sensitive touch which does not try to obstruct or influence an opponent’s move and gives no signals itself is un-nerving and immediately creates a psychological advantage for us. This in turn can translate into physical tension which we might be able to exploit.

Having made the initial contact, we have to keep in touch (or “stick”), ensuring we do not increase pressure at the point of contact. Keeping in touch means we have to actively follow our opponent’s movements.

## Follow

To harmonise (or “blend”) with an opponent’s movement, we must at all costs avoid resisting and giving any cues which might cause our opponent to take evasive action against us. This calls for us to get rid of our own mental and physical tension and not let our ego get in the way. We must not get fixated on “winning” as that only makes us anxious or overtly aggressive. Anxiety makes us lose our sense of timing; we rush and snatch. Aggression will also cause us to take risks, become impatient, tighten up, and expose our intent. We actually have to lose in order to learn from our mistakes. Hence the saying “*Invest in loss*”.

To follow smoothly, we need to relax and stay calm. Keep soft. Use the whole body as one unit, keeping the *Dantien* supported, the *kua* open and loose, the body balanced, and all parts co-ordinated.

Do not have any pre-determined responses; do not try to manoeuvre your opponent into a particular position because you want to use a particular technique. Simply follow them and see where that takes you. There will come a point where you sense that his position is becoming more precarious and yours more favourable.

Control the space between you. Go forward as your opponent goes back; withdraw as he advances.

Focus your attention on the flow of the movement and on going with it. Concentrate. This is referred to as “*listening*” in Tai Chi circles. (*Tingjin.*)

## Neutralise

Just as we should try not to resist, we must fight the urge to keep our partner at bay. The skill in Pushing Hands lies in detecting and neutralising force, NOT overcoming it with even more force. This is described as “*Yang against Yang*” and is sure to fail against a skilful opponent. Instead, aim to draw them in. Follow their line of attack first **then** re-direct it at the point of least resistance or add to it when they are at their limit so that they lose their root and their momentum works against them. This is the idea behind the Tai Chi saying: “*If he wants some, give him more*”.

Timing is critical. Match their speed. If we move too soon, or too quickly, there is nothing for us to neutralise. Too late, or too slow, and we’ve missed our chance.

It is only with prolonged practice and repetition that we are able to instinctively absorb and re-direct an incoming force aimed at any part of our body. It is important to understand that we neutralise with the waist (*Dantien*) and the legs, **not** the hands and shoulders.