

Li Yaxuan's 35 Points on Push Hands Training

Part A: Points 1 - 30

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October 2010

1. Relaxation is absolutely essential in push hands, but this relaxed formlessness must be filled with a lively awareness. Only with a formless sensitivity will you be able to counter anything he may unexpectedly throw at you. This is an attribute you need to cultivate from the very start of your push hands practice.
2. You really need to work on that kind of sensitivity. Even before physical contact, with a single glance you join contact with the opponent or partner, establishing a firm connection with him. Adherence can begin even at this stage, prior to physical contact. This is important because when you are working in a more intensive competitive or combative mode, if you depend on physical contact to start your adherence, that's too late and you're going to be too slow to exploit any advantage of timing or positioning.
3. The basis of ordinary push hands practice is being compliant and merely conforming to his movements, but when it comes to competitive or combative applications of push hands, this isn't sufficient.
4. When you find yourself working with somebody who has a really strong unbreakable root, and at the same time has very soft yet powerful and flexible arms and you find it's really hard to get onto him, you must understand that any kind of hard force is going to be useless against him. In this case, you have to direct and control all your actions with your waist and spine, using large circular turning motions.
5. There's a certain teacher who specializes in using this kind of extremely deeply rooted energy, but it works only against his own students and people of his own school, strictly among themselves. When one of them goes up against an outsider, they can't apply this kind of energy effectively because it depends on having their opponent grab them or attempt to wrestle with them before they can issue their particular form of energy. But when they push with outsiders, nobody will offer them that kind of ideal setup.
6. Establish an attitude of enlivened emptiness even before you join hands with your partner or opponent. Then you must use a very light refined energy to probe and sound him out with your hands. When you feel yourself pressured by a really skilled partner, you need to use a deeply relaxed touch that's based in your dantian to issue energy that bumps him away. Another approach to this situation is to really open up large, and deploy your energy in huge circles and turns performed with absolute, total hyper-relaxation. This enables you to catapult your energy off his shoulders to bounce him out. Essentially, this kind of hype-relaxed big-circle movement can shake and then break his foundation, enabling you to uproot him.
7. When it comes to push hands, neutralization and transformation of substantial to insubstantial

is the primary concern. Real skill in neutralization and transformation involves using the spirit to evade and the qi energy to change, resulting in a presentation to him of only emptiness, without even the slightest hint of substantial force. When you present only this emptiness, he won't be able to detect any reliable target for his attack and even if he could potentially issue some really powerful energy, he won't be able to bring his skill into play. At that point, I can use a kind of elastic force from my sunken, relaxed arms to push him out. Before issuing energy, I must empty myself of physical force and become empty. I absolutely must not employ any kind of static power, rather, I will use only my empty awareness to probe him and only issue energy when I perceive the right opportunity. You must never issue energy rashly or abruptly.

8. When you push hands, what's the best way to handle those situations where your partner or opponent comes at you with hard, strong attacks? You need to use softness to borrow his power and turn it against him. Once you have him off-balance you can easily topple him from the side.

9. Whether you are practicing push hands as a drill or with more combative intensity, your training must be based on deploying refined energy, understanding insubstantiality, and using your powers of spirit, intention, and qi energy. Don't get stuck forever at the elementary level of just trying to snake and twist out of his grasp like a wet noodle.

The 'Song' says:

The techniques of Tai Chi are infinite; based on deep postures of refined elegance. They appear as the perfection of quiet and comfort; while their action remains invisible. With an unspeakable lightness within formlessness; they embody an infinity of transformational power.

It also says:

Both shoulders sunk and relaxed; the spirit of insubstantiality rises.
The power is deployed in absolute spontaneity; and with invisible variation.
The spirit power is engaged suddenly from the dan tian; and issues deeply into his chest like an arrow.
When you issue your energy without reserve who can stand against you?

10. At a military command exhibition in 1962, I showed my method of push hands against a variety of partners with excellent results, so I consider this method worthy of writing up for your consideration. You begin by completely relaxing and softening your shoulders and then, by widely opening and turning your waist, you begin to push. This method de-stabilizes your partner or opponent, and he loses his balance easily. At that point, you employ a kind of elastic flexible energy against him to bounce him out. This kind of approach does not waste any of your energy or tire you out, so it's far superior to any use of hard physical force employed in striking or grappling. So from now on you should pay attention to this and try to figure it out.

11. Just before issuing energy, you need to focus on your chest for an instant, and assume a powerful posture. Then as you assemble your energy, you suck in a breath of air, and concentrate your mind while you blast out your energy. Only in this way will the energy be at maximum power, otherwise it won't have much effect.

12. When you spontaneously issue relaxed instantaneous energy from the dan tian it can cause your partner or opponent to jump out, or collapse when it penetrates deeply into him. You may push him far away, or you may hurt or even kill him. This is not ordinary physical energy. It is deeply sunk, completely relaxed, and issues instantaneously without any chance of detection or interception.

The ability to issue this kind of energy results from daily practice of total relaxation. From that this kind of energy will jump to your hands, but if you don't devote your daily practice to complete relaxation you'll never get it.

You have to achieve relaxation, but without forcing it. When you practice, think of relaxation, the concept or even the word, with your whole heart and mind. With consistent high-quality practice of a long period, you'll begin to achieve real relaxation. And only then can you issue energy as described above. If you practice with adherence to the concept of "balancing hard and soft", you'll never get anywhere near the real state of relaxation, even if you practice your entire life. So just keep working on relaxation alone in your daily practice, keep thinking only of that. Holding the idea of "balancing hard and soft" will guarantee that you'll never realize the power of true relaxation.

13. If you can't use your combative skills, it's because you don't understand transformation. If your energy doesn't penetrate, it's because you haven't relaxed thoroughly. If your energy is too weak, it's because you haven't concentrated it in your dan tian. If your issuing energy doesn't blast people away, it's because you have applied it from the wrong direction or in the wrong location. If your energy is always pre-emptively detected by your opponent, it's because you haven't issued it cleanly and crisply. If your energy is neutralized by him, it's because you didn't issue energy instantaneously. If your energy lacks sufficient power, it's because your internal cultivation is inadequate.

14. When you issue energy, it must be crisp and instantaneous, issued with determination, it must be issued maximally, and it must be sunken and flexible. Your action must feel immediate like a sudden inspiration, and your mental activity as well as a feeling of heroic resolve must be coordinated with it.

But sometimes even if you understand this kind of energy you still find yourself unable to apply it effectively against an opponent who really moves flexibly and smoothly. Then you need to know how to instantaneously issue potential energy against him. When you issue energy in this way, he'll find himself unable to neutralize it.

Song of Issuing Energy:

Energy concentrates within emptiness, a potential power concealed within the postures.
Energy deployed suddenly from the dantian obliterates the opponent in an instant.

Song of Issuing Combative Energy

The subtle methods of Yang family Taijiquan are of almost infinite extent
Its refined variations raise it above the common run of martial methods
Stable as Mt Tai, quick as a lightening flash
It shocks the mind and jolts the spirit, choking off the enemy's very breath
The Yang family legacy is the method for cultivating this energy
Practice that day and night, concentrate on it every moment.

15. Issuance of energy is done quickly and immediately as you send the energy straight to your hands whenever the two of you commence interaction. It is never applied rigidly, statically, or forcefully as certain practitioners are known to do.

16. Push hands as taught in the Yang family style is always based on tracking your partner or opponent's movements in a relaxed, light application of insubstantiality. It never consists of forceful grappling as certain teachers would hold.

17. Even before he realizes he's in trouble, I have already created the chance to deploy my energy against him. He can't get out of it no matter what he tries. This kind of energy is something I had to find for myself. The point is that within the natural following motions of the practice I detect the chance to issue energy as it presents itself and smoothly take advantage of it. This is entirely distinct from the methods of certain practitioners who need to establish a forceful grappling lock on their opponent before issuing energy, indicating that their level of skill isn't high enough.

18. The foundation of push hands is the essential principle: no gaps, no resistance. But this isn't simple to do. For one thing, it depends on your body and your postures having sufficient ability to extend and retract. For another, your hands must be incredibly sensitive, embodying the listening energy, so that you know what he's about to do before he even starts. Only when you have these pre-requisites can you expect to master neutralization. Just never even slightly violate the principle of no gaps, no resistance. If you depart from this principle you are no longer practicing Taijiquan, you are just bashing each other around pointlessly.

19. When you issue energy, you must soften, sink, and relax your shoulders, only then will you be able to issue truly penetrating power. And it isn't only a matter of relaxing and sinking, you must also cultivate extreme sensitivity in your hands. If you don't follow this teaching, you'll be like certain practitioners who can only do well when practicing among themselves and can't apply any real skill against outsiders and strangers from any other school.

20. [Translator's note: I am censoring Point 20 because this teaching is so central and so

powerful that frankly I'm keeping this perfect statement of the succinct and entire essence of the art of issuing energy for myself alone. But don't worry - the key ideas of Point 20 can be found scattered through the rest of the other translated material.]

21. When you move your hands, they must be relaxed and sensitive to the ultimate degree, without any trace of clumsy strength or rigid force.

When his attack comes into me, I evade easily and smoothly with my body and waist movement while keeping to the principle of 'no gaps no resistance'. Bend and turn along with him, while using your breath to drop into insubstantiality to neutralize his actions. Use the movement of your mind, your qi energy, and your spirit energy to transform substantial into insubstantial and vice versa. No matter what he comes at me with, I can yield and conform to it, and reduce it to nothing. Then I can apply my power to him at will. This is our tried and true method which has proven itself in numberless encounters, have no doubt about it.

22. The real Taijiquan skill is invisible. The application of Taijiquan is to be found in understanding of insubstantiality, formlessness, and mind alone. The taste and feel of real Taijiquan cannot be had from any application of visible technique or obvious force. That just drifts you farther and farther from the real art of Taijiquan. Students need to understand this very clearly. Nowadays there are many so-called Taijiquan masters who claim to teach and embody the original ancient forms and methods of Taijiquan, but they stamp their feet, wildly bouncing and banging themselves around - what kind of relaxation is that?

23. To have skill in the basic practice of Taijiquan, and to be good at push hands, still isn't sufficient. You must also practice free-sparring and competition fighting regularly. If you don't have these opportunities to train your agility of movement, sharpen the energy projected from your eyes, and your understanding of sudden and ferocious issuing of energy, when you face an enemy intent on hurting you for real you won't be able to handle it.

Song of Issuing Energy:

With a calm spirit and comfortable body, you will be firmly rooted and stable.

Your qi energy threads every bend and reaches everywhere, and there is only invisible action of your mind.

Subtle deflection of one thousand pounds, the power of neutralization appears miraculous.

Energy concentrated then issued like an arrow from a bow, relaxed and sunken so it penetrates instantaneously.

Song of Hand to Hand Combat

[Omitted by me - Translator.]

24. Only when your postures are formless, your changes are mysterious, you open the door wide, without the slightest obstruction or resistance - only this way is Taijiquan. You concentrate

energy like drawing a bow, and issue it like releasing the arrow. It issues suddenly and invisibly.

25. On the result of issuing energy: sometimes although not much energy is applied, the partner or opponent is blasted back, while at other times a great deal of energy is applied without much result. What's the reason for this? In these cases the result doesn't depend on the quantity of energy that's applied but rather on factors such as timing, direction, and location of your push. If you get all those things right then a small amount of energy will send him reeling but if not then even a huge dose of energy will have little effect. The same is true of military strategy, where a general can employ a clever strategy to gain victory regardless of the size of his forces.

Today I played push hands with [name suppressed - Translator]. In that practice, I relied strictly on this method of sensitive use of very light energy, changes, and insubstantiality, with excellent results. So in the future, please pay attention to the results of today's match and never employ any kind of hard or clumsy force.

I would like to quickly transmit the above teaching to others. But it's really hard to find a suitable student. First, it would have to be somebody with adequate basic skills, second it would need to be a sufficiently intelligent student, and third, I'd have to find a way to imbue the teaching deeply, as this isn't a simple matter that a few words of text can convey.

26. Whether you are practicing the form or working on issuing energy, everything depends on total relaxation of your body. Otherwise you won't be able to move freely. Only with relaxation will the qi energy instantly follow your mind and intention, resulting in the partner or opponent being blasted out before he even realizes what's happening. You can imagine how light, quick and perfectly timed your action will be. This comes from total relaxation and softness, otherwise you won't get the skill.

To be able to issue energy, you must first have listening energy and skill. This depends entirely on sensitivity in your hands, the foundation of which is your daily practice of the form. Without this foundation, you will have insufficient listening energy. Listening energy is a function of perceptual sensitivity, and issuing energy relies on dan tian cultivation, and the spine. Issuing energy depends on using your dan tian energy to muster the energy of your entire body. When you are not issuing energy, your body is insubstantial, but when you do issue energy you must be rooted and stably grounded.

If, when issuing energy, your feet are clumsy and feel dead, your postures will lack vitality and then you won't be able to move freely into any desired configuration.

You must first drop the energy momentarily to your feet in order to issue it maximally.

Sometimes your movements must be agile and lively, while at other times you must be totally solid. This is what is meant by distinguishing between substantial and insubstantial. It's important not to get them mixed up and blurred together. A certain teacher has a kind of waist and leg energy that is flexible and soft. This is a useful kind of energy as it is deeply sunken.

But it can only be used effectively against beginners. When the attempt is made to deploy this energy against an experienced, sensitive practitioner, it fails immediately. That's because real martial arts is a function of lively agile movement. It is not sufficient to depend entirely on sinking and rooting energy.

In Taijiquan, when we want to move slowly it's absolutely slow, when we want to move rapidly it's absolutely fast. We move slowly when it's appropriate, and when it's time to move quickly we can strike and knock out the opponent within one hundredth of a second before he even realizes what's happening. That's called advancing and retreating imperceptibly which leaves the opponent with no chance to block, forestall, or even react. This speed is not dependent on the extension and retraction of muscles, tendons, and bones in the ordinary way, it is, rather, the application of a mental process that triggers mysterious lightning-fast action.

When you aren't actually issuing energy, be completely light and insubstantial. When it comes time to issue energy, it must discharge with sudden emphatic overwhelming effect, to shock and awe your opponent or partner - crisp, instantaneous, and coldly precise. Never hard or static. Only then are you playing Taijiquan. Your touch must be light as a goose feather, yet heavy as Mt. Tai, clearly distinguishing substantial and insubstantial, you must be unfathomable.

Never forget that we come on light and lively, never with hard or oppositional force. No matter what the physical configuration, we never neglect the use of light, active, soft and flexible sudden energy. The most important thing is to use emptiness as the basis for deploying our qi energy.

When you practice push hands, you must touch gently, feel lightly with your hands, and focus your perception tightly and accurately. Then, when issue energy, it is deployed from the waist upward and forward. Never try to physically struggle to secure a hold or lock as as setup for issuing energy. This is the teaching of a certain practitioner and it's absolutely the wrong approach.

Some teachers particularly emphasize setting up a lock, grab, or hold as the precondition for issuing energy. This kind of approach only works among their own students, against outsiders they wouldn't have a chance.

My own approach to push hands is to be extremely flexible, using expansive relaxed movement and while distinguishing substantial and insubstantial, ready to issue energy at any moment from my active waist and hips so that the action can change seamlessly to fighting for real at any moment. This is the most practical approach.

27. Whenever you make a move, you must distinguish substantial from insubstantial. But you are not to make this distinction by using your hands, arms, and shoulders, rather, you must be able to distinguish full and empty by means of your waist and your body and by using your spirit power. Even in real fighting or sparring competition, sensing the full/empty distinction is absolutely essential. However, in a free fighting situation, your movements must be

instantaneous, crisp, and decisive, applied with an unshakable conviction of absolute victory.

28. Issuing Energy

(1) When issuing energy, your feet must be firmly grounded to establish root.

A certain teacher has some ability with issuing energy, but his deficiency is similar to another particular teacher in that both of them seek to establish a lock or hold, or to somehow immobilize the opponent, requiring this kind of setup in order to issue energy. But they are good in that, when they do issue energy, it is substantially powerful. However, because they need that kind of static setup before then can apply their energy, once they meet up with somebody very slippery who they can't lock or submit their entire approach falls apart and they won't be able to do anything.

(2) When pushing hands, there are seven mandatory considerations: one, you must be absolutely insubstantial; two, your body and waist must be supple, free, and flexible; three, you must be able to issue powerfully rooted energy; four, your spirit energy must be maximal; five, your energy must be capable penetrating deeply into your opponent's body; six, your approach must be so subtle then when you apply your touch he can't feel anything coming but is suddenly jolted with an electric shock; seven, you must have the ability to really freak him out with your overwhelming power. If you are able to shock and awe the opponent in this way, you'll knock him down, injure him, or blast him far away with your power. [So PLEASE be EXTREMELY careful! - translator's note]

(3) There is a certain teacher who has basically adequate skill when it comes to issuing energy, because he has some ability to sink and root himself, but he has a big problem when it comes to moving with lively, responsive energy. Again, he relies on a static grip or hold as the basis for his issuing of energy. In a more realistic situation he just won't be able to get that kind of setup. Nobody is going to wait around while you try to get a good firm solid hold on them before you can blast them.

(4) When it came to issuing energy, the power employed by my teacher Master Yang (Chengfu) was relaxed, rooted, flexible, and possessed a penetrative quality. His power had the ability to completely crush an opponent's rib cage as it shot into him, totally overwhelming him both physically and psychologically. An experience of his energy was actually panic-inducing. In the fact of that kind of power, nobody, no matter how powerful, had any chance of resistance. That is what it takes to merit the title of true master of Taijiquan.

(5) When issuing energy, you must use the power of your entire body to both sink and press down, concentrate all your energy into your opponent's body. That will cause him to be blasted upward. You need to think about this teaching really carefully and thoroughly, or you'll never get it.

(6) When issuing energy in push hands, you need to carefully consider how to apply your waist

and spine, as well as your leg power. This is extremely important. You use your arms only for sensing his moves and energy, never put strength into your arms and shoulders for actual pushing. In that way he can't sense your power nor can he neutralize you. But if you do use the strength of your arms and shoulders, he can very easily sense what's coming and neutralize you.

(7) When you make any move, always begin with absolute softness and relaxation. That way you can sense his changes. If you feel he is the type of partner who is able to move effectively, then just go along with his movements until the right chance presents itself. When the moment comes, you apply your energy from an unexpected angle and you'll overcome him every single time. When the time comes to issue energy, you concentrate your mind for an instant, then blast him with relaxed energy. If you are sufficiently relaxed, this always works.

29. On Energy

(1) When you issue pushing energy, you must separate your partner or opponent's arms to force your power into his chest. Only when you can penetrate into his internal organs can your skill be called adequate.

(2) When you issue pressing energy, again you must use relaxed, rooted energy to penetrate deeply into his internal organs.

(3) When using wardoff energy, you must relax your shoulders and elbows to make him feel as though he's pushing on a car tire that affords him no solid spot to apply his own power.

(4) When using pulldown energy, you must not forcefully grab his arm and yank him down. Rather, you use a light and sensitive touch just on the surface of his shoulder, conform his shape as you bring him into your grasp.

(5) When doing pulldown, you must not grab or try to lock him as you pull. You extend your hands lightly, and your pulling action is deployed simultaneously with your grasp. In this way the two operations fuse together. Of course you shouldn't first pull and then grasp either.

(6) When using elbow strike, focus on a single point, in that way your energy easily penetrates.

(7) When using shoulder strike, relax your shoulders, and with your qi energy guided by your mental focus, strike with the point of your shoulder, quickly in one single move.

(8) There are 6 methods for employing your fists, and another six methods for use of the palm. These I will discuss later.

Every normal person has the ability to defend him or herself. But if you rely on official protection from police or military, they may be too late to help you. It's even possible that your own unfilial son may come to beat or bully you, not to mention other people - therefore from ancient times

the practice of martial arts has always been essential.

30. Issuing Energy in Push Hands

(1) When issuing energy you must mobilize your spirit power, and deploy it from your waist and spine. Never initiate with force from your two hands and arms, with the waist and spine force following after - that will never work.

(2) Don't use overly large stances or postures, otherwise you will find yourself unable to deploy the internal force of your body from your spine.

(3) Your hands, arms and shoulder must be completely relaxed to transfer the energy, you cannot apply pre-emptive static force.

(4) You must never try to force a chance to strike or issue energy, you don't go chasing any opportunity to apply it, and you don't try to get him in a lock or any kind of technical trap or submission. The chance to strike or issue energy occurs spontaneously, jumps to your hands, as you engage in the give and take of the practice. Only when the chance falls right into your hands do you issue energy. If you are trying to force any kind of technique, lock, or trap, that's nothing but a kind of willful subjectivity on your. It's not an objective way to practice, you are just projecting yourself rather than following facts. The Tai Chi classic writings say that you aren't to move unless and until he does, but that if he moves even slightly, you should have already moved first. This is the practice of no gaps and no resistance.

(5) You must gauge your application of energy accurately. Your energy must be issued from the waist and spine, using the qi energy reserves of the dan tian, and must be issued to a sufficient degree, with sudden precision, and in coordination with your entire body movement.

(6) It has been written that you must never use static force, but only lively intelligent power. The way of Tai Chi is non-opposition, That's what is meant by no resistance in the classic saying. But at the same time you must never lose touch, never allow any gap in contact. Your spirit has to stick to him absolutely without any opposition. By always following closely you can anticipate and neutralize anything he does.

(7) As you practice you sometimes appear happy and boisterous, sometimes grave and imposing, you may breathe ostentatiously, you may oscillate between apparent happiness and apparent anger - this is all part of the tactical alternation between full and empty.

Sometimes your energy must be issued very powerfully, suddenly, and with overwhelming effect. To mobilize your energy in that fashion you need to be completely relaxed and sunken, and have your power issue from your dantian with a jolt as it engages. If you don't feel that jolt your energy won't have much effect.

Sometimes on the other hand, your energy should be applied with a slower, softer start,

ramping up at the tail end to an blast like a shock of electricity into him. The choice of these styles of energy application depend on your assessment of the temperament and situation of your partner or opponent at any given moment, you can't rigidly set it up in advance.

(8) When you begin and take your position, you must project an air of lively responsiveness and infinite adaptability. At the same time, you must appear to be invulnerable and all-powerful. If you start out looking slow and stale like some kind of wooden dummy you aren't projecting anything - that's not the way to go.

(9) If the opponent uses physical force, his movement will of necessity be slow and clumsy. But if he's lively, light, and sensitive, I have to be really careful.

(10) If the opponent begins with a forceful, static move, respond with a quick and lively neutralization. if the opponent is light and alert, then issue sudden, crisply powerful force - the point is that you never stick to one pre-determined way. Go at it like a doctor who knows which medicine applies to which disease, he can't get away with using the wrong treatment.

(11) You have to practice a lot of push hands in order to be good at issuing energy. If you just think and theorize about it without taking action, you'll never get anywhere. Throw yourself in to the world of real training, you'll never get anything from abstract cogitation.