

## Master Li Yaxuan's Explanatory Notes on Push Hands

[Excerpts from Chinese book: 李雅轩杨氏太极拳推手论真; translation by Scott Meredith. Master Li Yaxuan was the most accomplished senior student of Grandmaster Yang Chengfu, and he was a senior classmate of Professor Zheng Manqing. These notes are selections from throughout Master LYX's book (mostly the continuous text from the first half of the book). Detailed descriptions of physical postures or motions are omitted, as is anything not written by Master LYX himself, as is anything I didn't feel like translating that day. This translation was done in "real time streaming mode", meaning that as I read it I directly typed in the English equivalent. Therefore it may not be absolutely optimal in every word choice and phrasing decision. But guess what, even if it were perfect there'd still be plenty of armchair quarterbacks more than happy to pile on and rip it all to shreds so it isn't worth bothering to try pleasing everybody. There should be enough here from this great historical Tai Chi master to at least get everyone thinking. In my translation below, I have tried to preserve some of the flavor of his direct, unpretentious, and refreshingly unpoetic style for your reading enjoyment).  
- Scott Meredith / Sept 2010 / [www.zmq37.com](http://www.zmq37.com)]

### Push hands and issuing energy

Before you actually make physical contact, assume an attitude of emptiness. With that established you can very lightly touch your partner's hand. Once you have touched him, you must not move of your own volition. Think of this phase strictly as a means of training your sensitivity and awareness. Then you use your superior emptiness, awareness, perception, and sensitivity to engage your spirit in order to neutralize even his slightest intent towards movement against you, following and adhering without gaps or resistance. Under these conditions, his faults will unfailingly be immediately apparent to you and the opportunity to deal with his movement will spring naturally to your hands. At your merest whim, you will have him trying to seize the wind and grasping at shadows. You'll have him toppling and swaying right and left, and he'll have no chance to try anything against you at all. Your body is completely soft and pliable, appearing to be boneless. No matter how your partner comes at you, you seem to be able to absorb or redirect everything, extending and retracting at will, using invisible changes to neutralize him. And when you counter, he will feel that your entire body has hands, all coming over him, leaving him unable to escape you. But the level of attainment I've described is strictly dependent on correct and diligent daily training, as well as meticulous development of the Tai Chi basic skills.

From the moment of contact with my partner's hands, I am using the lively emptiness and lightness of my own hands to follow his every move. As I follow, before he knows it my presence has infiltrated his body. From this point onward, the slightest movement of my spirit energy and activation of my dan-tian's qi store will immediately send him reeling as though he's touched a live electric wire. What we call emptiness contains everything, and what we call liveliness feels all, so that whenever the right opportunity comes to your hands your internal energy's automatic reaction instantly sends him sprawling out. Therefore, in pushing hands you need not seek out a particular time or chance to push him, no need to force anything. When the chance has perfectly

developed on its own, you'll feel that jump straight into your hands. Very rarely you will not feel that chance come to you right away, and this just means that no fault is yet apparent in your partner's energy. In this case, there's no need for you to try to force an opening or forcefully oppose him, you should simply maintain your alert hands. If after a long period you cannot detect any flaw in him, it may be that his level is higher than yours. Then you should humbly seek instruction from him, to further your own knowledge. Struggling to force a victory won't do anything to develop your skill.

When applying the skill against a real enemy, you have to constantly consider how to avoid his strong points and attack his weakness, in order to achieve distance and crispness in your strikes. You need to understand how to insert your energy deeply and internally, to pierce through him as though he were made of paper. You need to know how to control him with your energy such that he won't be able to shake you off or even move at all. You must be able to shock him with your energy so that he is blasted up and out with astonishment. His spirit must be shaken, he must be frightened and feel that he has nowhere to plant his foot. Your advance must be invisible, and your retreat undetectable. He must feel your strike comes absolutely out of nowhere. But keep in mind that what I'm saying right here applies to serious assailants only. When you are just practicing with friends and colleagues, you can't use this kind of intensity - that would be a breach of common decency.

When you adopt lightness, it must be absolute, perfect. He shouldn't be able to feel your advance in the slightest. Your hand must extend with matchless speed, so that he has not the slightest chance to slip away - you can imagine the psychological shock that this kind of action produces in him.

When a fight flares up and you need to apply your skill, your facial expression must suddenly change. Your hairs must bristle, as you present an overwhelmingly threatening appearance, like a wild horse. Your energy radiates so strongly that an assailant cannot resist you as he gapes in fearful wonder, and feels himself at a complete loss. Only this condition represents the mobilization of spirit energy from the dantian. If you are only responding with muscular energy and superficial physical motion, that's not the real thing at all. With a useless and inflexible physical response, the energy is never issued and never penetrates your assailant. That's the hallmark of a dead and static approach. You must be completely relaxed, only then can you respond mysteriously to every condition. You must be as relaxed as a bag of bones, only this can properly be called relaxation. Never forget that you'll never be able to issue energy as long as you cling to any residual tension whatsoever.

Below are the eight principles of issuing energy:

1. You must correctly judge the timing.
2. You must locate the correct position of application.
3. You must establish the correct direction.
4. You need to sink and relax.
5. Your mind must be coherently focused.

6. You must draw the internal energy from the dantian.
7. You must issue the energy from the waist and spine.
8. You must suddenly blast it out straight.

If you can do the above eight things completely and correctly, all together in one go, then your energy will emerge explosively like gunpowder and will issue like a bullet. It will land with a bang like a slap on the opponent's body. He won't have any chance to escape it at all, and the effect will be as though he got a heavy electric shock. If you don't follow these guidelines, you'll have trouble getting a long-range, powerful effect in issuing energy.

When you first touch hands in ordinary practice, you need to use a very light touch to feel him out, to follow along with him, responding and adapting to all his changes. You mustn't pose even the slightest resistance. If you use strength to resist or put up any kind of block you won't get any opportunity to issue energy. That will result in your strength and his strength canceling each other out, and you'll never achieve anything that way.

The actions and directions of issuing energy include upward, downward, forward and back, and include pulldowns, as well as the use of both long and short energy and so on. You have to visualize and practice all the above types diligently. Advancing must be fast, and the energy must be issued crisply, firmly, fully, and suddenly - only then will your opponent feel that he's been electrically shocked as he's blasted up and out. Anything else is useless.

You concentrate your energy on an inhalation and issue it on an exhalation. Coordinate your movements with your breath. In doing this your body must be completely relaxed, otherwise you won't be able to align your movement with your breath and then issuing energy is completely hopeless. That's why we train for relaxation first and foremost in all taijiquan postures.

Once, somebody asked Grandmaster Yang Chengfu the following: "We never see you putting on any big show of power, so how is it that you can blast people such a distance with such sharp focus?" Grandmaster Yang replied: "It's because I am issuing relaxed energy." Somebody else asked Grandmaster Yang Shaohou the following: "You seem so relaxed when you issue energy, how can that possibly be so powerful?" Grandmaster Yang replied: "It's precisely because I'm relaxed that my energy is so effective." The replies of these two teachers establish very clearly that relaxation is the unalterable foundation of Taijiquan both for push hands and combative applications.

Whenever I practiced push hands with Grandmaster Yang Chengfu, I had a most peculiar feeling, which I've always remembered. Every time when I began by merely touching his hand, I felt drained of all resistance, every part of my body became utterly weak. When Grandmaster Yang simply touched my arm, I can't explain it but I felt that every part got absorbed into him somehow. It was as though somebody had thrown a giant net over me. No matter how I moved I couldn't get away and my every movement just put me at a further disadvantage. Even though I knew Grandmaster Yang's hand was just placed on me lightly, still it felt incredibly heavy. I couldn't really move, but I couldn't not move either. Trying to power my way out of it was

hopeless, but trying to get out gently didn't work either. Whether I tried to move quickly or slowly it was all equally useless. It's the same when you play a chess genius, no matter what happens you have no effective response. Although Grandmaster Yang had a very quiet and composed style, yet somehow in practicing with him I always felt very unsettled, alarmed and almost frightened, as though I were walking along a high cliff edge and about to lose my footing. Or I felt like a clumsy guy who flails anxiously after he trips into the water. Or I would feel as though buried under a heap of straw. I felt he could blast right through me at any time, and that my life might even be in danger. But Grandmaster Yang wasn't worked up in the slightest, he would just keep on rising and falling, following my movements, alternately fullness and emptiness and that's all. I would be left trying to catch the wind, and groping at shadows, toppling and swaying left and right, as though I were standing in deep water. My movements were entirely under his control, I had no autonomous movement left to me at all. Now, how can something like I've described here be possible? Even today I just don't understand it at all. I have never in my life found anybody else with this level of skill. Even though I learned from Grandmaster Yang for over a decade, I only achieved maybe 20% or 30% of his skill. We are going to have to really work hard to understand Grandmaster Yang's teachings in order to avoid the total loss of this art altogether in the future.

Wardoff, rollback, press, push; plucking, splitting, elbowing, shouldering; advancing, retreating, looking right, looking left; and centering - these are the 13 basic motions of Taijiquan, and they must be conscientiously applied. As for adhering, following, and the principles of no gaps and no resistance - these are even more important to research thoroughly. You must relentlessly pursue these ideas or you'll never understand real martial arts and you'll just end up wasting your time. Cultivate the qi and mind within, and every part of your body as well. Inner and outer, up and down must all be completely coordinated.

The idea of adhering doesn't only refer to the physical touching of hands. Even before your hands make contact, cover the opponent or partner entirely with your spirit and modulate your breath in accordance with his motions of extending and withdrawing - this is the deeper meaning of adherence. As you follow and track his motions, your hands have subtly and quietly come to the point of controlling his body. Then you'll be able to manipulate his every move to your own advantage.

The three principles of adherence:

1. As soon as the slightest physical contact is made, you must listen to his expansions and contractions and follow them - this is called tactile adherence.
2. Before physical contact is made, you must observe and judge the distance between you and position yourself accordingly - this is called visual adherence.
3. You must learn to listen for the features of his voice that help you to judge distance and to position yourself accordingly - this is called aural adherence.

All of the above are dependent on the cultivation of a sensitive and lively spirit, which is the most fundamental concern of Taijiquan training.

All of Taijiquan push hands is based on wardoff, rollback, press, and push, which embody the ideas of no gaps and no resistance, so that every time you touch with light sensitivity and the softness of cotton. If you don't properly distinguish wardoff, rollback, press, and push or if your touch is strong and hard, then that's external boxing.

When pushing hands, if you can focus your mind, intention, spirit, and energy into one quick blast, while avoiding hard strength, nobody will be able to withstand you.

Three principles of issuing energy:

1. When you use a light and lively motion to advance into his space and focus your relaxed energy onto one particular place on his body, he'll be blasted away as though he's been shot from a gun. When you pop him out a long distance, it's by use of this so-called "long energy".
2. When you keep your arms as soft and pliable as rope, and issue concentrated energy from the dantian to suddenly spring him off you it is called "breaking energy", which is painful to him on impact.
3. When you use all the qi energy of the dan tian and the energy of the entire body integrated into one quick blast, he'll be startled as though he's been electrically shocked and won't have any idea where it came from. He'll feel as though he's been struck by a bullet, which has penetrated him before he knows what's going on, and this is called "short energy" or "instantaneous energy". When this penetrates his body, his nose may drip and tears may come from his eyes. If you blast him with full intensity, you may seriously damage his internal organs, the signs of which include oral and nasal bleeding. The instantaneous energy can be lethal.

You should approach push hands with a light and alert spirit. Though you may have some combative skills don't use them against him. Though you may have some techniques, don't use those either. You must use your spirit to neutralize and counter. to make him feel he's chasing the wind and grasping at shadows, as though he has nowhere solid to stand, as though there's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, let him defeat himself with his own actions, then he'll be easily overcome. If you try to use techniques to block or counter his motions and attacks, he'll be able to forestall your application of whole-body energy and all your efforts will be clumsy and futile. Pay attention to this.

Whether you are fighting with fist, sword, saber, or spear, you always lead with focused intent rather than physical implement. Any single motion of yours is always just the leading edge of a comprehensive ensemble of multiple pre-emptive attacks that entirely anticipate his every reaction well in advance. In this way you will easily prevail.

Use mind to strike at mind, use qi energy against qi energy, use spirit to overcome spirit, impose your presence on your opponent. In fighting, keep yourself completely relaxed but still integrated by your spirit. Employ elbowing and shouldering, use your hips and knees as well. What we call sinking is just the natural outcome of relaxation, it doesn't mean that you should force or

press anything down. If you aren't relaxed, the pure internal energy will not emerge. If you aren't committed to relaxation and softness, you might as well forget about Tai Chi and just pursue external conditioning methods.

The Song of Tai Chi Issuing Energy:

Mind intent with body relaxed,  
Focused qi energy shoots forward,  
Moving from instantaneous spirit trigger alone,  
Shocking force erupts from nowhere,  
And penetrates his chest like an arrow.  
Only the power that shakes his viscera  
Is the true power of Taijiquan.

If your strikes do not penetrate deeply within him, you have not yet cultivated sufficient inner force. In this case you still haven't utterly relaxed and you are still constrained by your reliance on physical force. If he can anticipate or forestall your actions, then again you aren't yet sufficiently relaxed and soft. If you find yourself getting tired when engaging him, if you start to pant and lose your breath, this is a sign that you haven't practiced enough and your combative applications will be ineffective and clumsy, lacking the requisite lively sensitivity and adaptability.

You inhale as though drinking in a river, and exhale as though blowing out a vast rainbow. Your energy issuance must be completely relaxed and sunken, and shoot out as though you were skewering a paper doll, with your internal energy and your mental focus absolutely unified. Your blast of energy will disrupt his breath and penetrate his chest, and trigger nasal and ocular discharges, including bleeding. So you can imagine how powerful the instantaneous energy [super-compacted form of 'short energy'] can be. This level of intensity can only be used against a very serious threat to your life and is not to be employed lightly.

When you cross wrists with your partner or opponent, with a sudden light pull you can topple him forward, and done properly this will numb his arms completely. That's called pulldown energy. It can be applied at any moment from the very first touching of skin to skin, you don't need to force any fancy gripping and locking techniques. Grandmaster Yang Chengfu was fantastically skilled with this type of energy. You can also use a two-handed or one-handed pulldown on his arms to suddenly trap him in a kind of bearhug. Applying the energy in this way results in him feeling a strange numbing pain from the neck downwards, as though suddenly suffering an electric shock. That's called the soft pulldown.

You mustn't contaminate your practice by continuing at the same time with external or physical methods of training and attempt to apply those to your push hands practice. This is absolutely pointless and without benefit of any kind. If your partner tries to engage you forcefully, seeking to show off his combative power, then I'll just use light and easy hand work to play around with him. Don't bother taking him seriously. If he cheats or acts disrespectfully, grabbing me wildly or jamming into me pointlessly then I'll change it over to free sparring. Ratcheting up in this way

is a legitimate response when necessary. When you switch over to sparring, your body needs to move sinuously like a playful dragon, your spirit like a wild horse, so that the slightest motion of your internal energy shoots straight into his body. If you try to rely on flaccid half-hearted actions you'll never defeat a really skilled fighter. You must be able to change suddenly, hit instantaneously, and generally act with extreme speed and precision. Your spirit must combust inside and emerge with shocking power like thunder that overwhelms him with shock and awe. This is the only correct way.

There are only five basic tastes [in traditional Chinese medicine], but in practice flavors are infinite. There are only five basic tones in the [traditional pentatonic] scale, but variations and combinations of these are infinite. The Art of War [Sunzi] has only 13 chapters yet its applications in real situations are beyond count. Similarly, Taijiquan has only thirteen basic movements [postures] yet the art is absolutely inexhaustible.

Against a skilled attacker, you won't know how or where to defend, he'll take advantage of your inattention to attack unprotected areas, you won't know when a strike is coming or what he's doing.

[A couple of repetitious paragraphs restating previous points are omitted here - SM]

When students begin learning push hands, they are usually afraid to relax completely, for fear that their partner or opponents will take advantage of their softness to suddenly launch a strong attack. What these beginners haven't yet understood is that if you can give yourself up entirely to relaxation, an amazing power of 'sensitive emptiness' naturally emerges that allows you to easily handle anything that comes up. This continues to evolve until it reaches an extreme degree light relaxed power so that your offense becomes unstoppable and your defense is also an attack. Any position you assume is superior to the opponent and you come to totally dominate whoever you work with without any problem at all.

compared to the way a fish hawk grabs a fish from the water. These birds use alternation of hard and soft applied by both extension and retraction. And they apply a kind of spiraling energy that wraps the prey without letup. They also have an unwavering focus on absolute domination of their prey. This kind of spirit is worth pondering deeply. We could also consider the image of a falcon catching a rabbit. They don't rely on the dead force of their rigid claws to get it, rather, they position themselves perfectly with crisp and powerful wing movements. This is an unstoppable attack motion without any hesitation or possibility of failure or retreat. In his absolute absorption on seizing his prey, the bird utterly forgets himself. His power is thus magnified tremendously, and even a hard clod of dirt could be smashed on impact with it. This attitude of total attack without regard for cautions and niceties is worth pondering.

I have an opinion about the current generation of Taijiquan teacher that can be summarized as follows: many of them have a understanding of the soft skill and relaxed power. However, their embodiment of the power of lively emptiness is still insufficient, not adequately refined.

Therefore, though a given teacher's skill may be great, but since his understanding of lively emptiness falls short, his internal energy therefore remains sub-par.

Zheng Manqing was extremely skilled at issuing energy, and he possessed considerable intelligence as well as natural talent, so that when he pushed hands with a certain other adept, with one quick slap that man was instantly thrown up against the wall by Zheng (this happened at the Nanjing Military Academy and is attested by witness Mr. Zhang Yingzhen who was present on the scene.)

At the 1956 Beijing National Martial Arts Athletic Meet, there was a participant from Hunan representing the Wu style, and his push hands skill was not bad. He had some softness and was very skillful at following and neutralizing. Even some famous Taiji masters such as Wu Tunan were unable to push him out. As for me, although I was able to push him out several times, I felt his skill level was above that of many teachers practicing Taijiquan haphazardly and incorrectly.

Lately I've come to understand a new level of transformation of energy. This transformation is beyond what I had formerly considered to be really superb energy, so I'm going to talk about it here. It derives from your form, you must that every single part of your body, including your shoulders, elbows, chest, waist, abdomen, groin, legs, and knees, is absolutely and entirely relaxed, and your mind must be completely calm and quiet. You must fuse together mind and body, inner and outer aspects. Don't leave anything incomplete or unaccounted for. If you can maintain this state of sensitivity in push hands practice, then before your partner's motion can reach you, you'll have completely anticipated and countered it before he can even complete it. Then my response conforms perfectly to his actions, and I can invisibly counter any force he attempts to apply. But if I take any kind of rigid static position, when that involves focus on a particular part of my body, be it my hands or any kind of pre-determined posture, then I cannot naturally respond to incoming force and I will lose to him. In my focus on one detail I lose all the rest. This is an amazing aspect of Taijiquan. When you understand this your skill will greatly advance.

The points made above are addressed to very high level experienced, practitioners. If you are just playing with any ordinary practitioner, you don't need to make such a big deal out of it. In that case you can simply follow the teachings of Yang Banhou when he advised that you just issue your power and that's an end to it. You won't often have exposure to real understanding of energetic transformation and listening energy and softness. What I wrote above is the distillation of my years of unceasing diligent practice and personal research, not to mention my constant reflection on the teachings and experiences given to me by my own teacher. This realization came to me gradually little by little. But my understanding is still inadequate, so I need to keep working on it.

Skill in Tai Chi derives from a quiet, calm and gentle persistence. Skill in push hands however requires a kind of concentrated precise energy which is issued abruptly, taking him unawares. In practicing the form, your skill emerges from absolute awareness of every energy pathway in

your body. The form is a practice of learning to know yourself. When we do push hands, we learn to observe everything about our partner's motion - whether he applies a greater or lesser energy onto us, whether he moves quickly or slowly, softly or rigidly, the direction of his motion - all that is why push hands is the practice of learning to know another. Only when you know both yourself and the opponent in this way can you be assured of victory in push hands. It's not as though you can just quickly pick up a bit of crude and superficial fighting power and then you're good to go - not at all.

We can analyze the listening energy skill as follows:

1. Use your eyes to observe and learn everything about your opponent's appearance and posture - this is visual perception.
2. Use your ears to listen and learn everything you can from his voice - this is aural perception.
3. Use your skin in contact with the opponents body and learn from your sensations - this is tactile perception.
4. Use your mind and psychological/emotional intuition to perceive everything about him - this is full understanding.

When you have acquired the above four types of perception and can use them to judge the quality and nature of an opponent and decide how best to handle him, you will be nearly unbeatable. But these four attributes of your listening energy derive from slow, concentrated, gentle and careful daily cultivation over time.

Whenever you practice you must focus on relaxation and sinking. You must stay quiet in mind and body. Those attributes of perception arise from a clear mind and begin with clarity of sense perception in daily life. The reason for the emphasis on relaxation in Tai Chi is to strengthen the mind.

When my teacher Yang Chengfu issued energy he used the power of his waist and spine, and the qi energy of his dantian, and applied the energy of his entire body into a single abrupt downward blast which seemed to simultaneously bounce forward as well, like a forward-directed sudden pulse of power. So the opponent would feel something like electric shock and completely crumple in the face of this. It's not that he used the physical power of his hands and arms to just ram forward crudely. If he'd done that his energy, though strong, could not have issued crisply and cleanly.

[Song of Issuing Energy - omitted here]

[Song of Movement - omitted here]

[Song of Fluid Turning in Push Hands - omitted here]

The main application of Taijiquan is to neutralize the incoming force of an attack. Once incoming force has been neutralized, it comes to nothing, and your opponent will be at a disadvantage with his weaknesses fully exposed. That's your chance to counter with natural spontaneity. All

you need to do is concentrate your spirit force for a moment and you'll blast him right out. So you never need to go looking for an opening or try to force an opportunity. If you do that your counters will not be as crisply effective as they should be. But this countering ability is entirely dependent on your perceptual sensitivity. Therefore you must place the main emphasis on your daily practice of lively sensitivity. Anybody who thinks that because Taiji is practiced with slow soft movement that therefore it can't be put to effective real-world use is entirely mistaken.

The slowness and softness of Taiji practice are intended to cultivate perceptual sensitivity, to temper and maximize the spirit energy, and to clarify the mind. Your responses must be so deftly sensitive and your issuing of energy tightly focused into any opening that you can sense. The energy emerges suddenly and abruptly penetrates anywhere that he can't defend - that's how four ounces defeats a thousand pounds. This is the most sophisticated form of offensive fighting. If your spirit energy is insufficient, or your perceptual abilities are inadequate, then your opponent will feel your energy before it can be issued, and though it may be strong you won't be able to apply it. Your full power can only manifest if you're sensitive enough to perceive everything about him while keeping your own power hidden, your issuance of energy will be fast and fully effective.

Hand to hand combat applications for the most part come under one of the following two headings: either you anticipate his move entirely and jam it or forestall it preemptively before its even launched; or else you react to a move that's already begun and evade or deflect so that he can't land it, while simultaneously zeroing in his weak or exposed points and counterattacking them, which works every single time. But these two operations both depend entirely on having superior movement and perception, otherwise they are useless.

In fighting, reliance on only physical skills and perceptual sensitivity are still insufficient. The really key element is fighting spirit, a kind of absolutely resolute decisiveness, and absolutely unyielding conviction of certain victory in your heart. Then you will prevail no matter how skilled he may be. Secondly you must have thorough control of insubstantiality, and be a master of unpredictable change from light as a feather to heavy as Mt. Tai. You have to project a vehement metallically strong radiance and apply your art with coldly detached precision.