

Date: Mon, 25 Mar 1996
From: Chip Ellis
Subject: Push Hands Energy

Since many people who play taiji quan like to push hands, perhaps you will find the following discussion interesting.

Tonight Dong Zeng Chen and I were practicing push hands. After we played for about an hour, we got to discussing some of the basic principles of that aspect of the art. We spent quite a bit of time talking about four terms: zhan, nian, lian, and sui.

Zhan [first tone] roughly translates as "sticky". I will comment more on this shortly.

Nian [second tone] means something like "constantly moving together". The concept is that you and your partner are moving everywhere together. Where one goes, so goes the other.

Lian [second tone] means to move without stopping.

Sui [second tone] is a concept something like "always agreeable" or "going alone". This means that if your partner comes in toward you, then you move back with the flow. Dong said that often times this concept is confused by push hands artists because they only bring the energy in. Actually, as your partner goes back (like when you push him) you then are supposed to follow along, thus move forward. So it's not just yielding defense, but also pressing offense.

Let's examine zhan a little bit. "Sticky" is more than just skin deep. Remember, this is an internal art which uses internal energy. Certainly when you roll back using lu you are using this zhan energy. But the feeling extends past the surface of the skin at the contact point. It extends into your partner's body. So the feeling of connectedness with your partner is almost like your body has merged with theirs.

A visual representation might look like this: Your hand (or arm or whatever) is represented by a large circle. This large circle is surrounded by a slightly larger circle which represents the energy field that surrounds your hand. (The picture would look like a large circle surrounded by a narrow band.) Your partner's hand (or arm or whatever) is also represented by a large circle. And his energy is also represented by a slightly larger outer circle.

So when your two arms touch the two inner large circles touch. The outer bands (your energy fields) then penetrate a ways into each other's arm.

While this may seem fantastic or delusionary to some, it nevertheless is real. It is also a classic representation of one aspect of internal martial arts energy. At times, when my push hands has been particularly good, I have felt my zhan energy inside my partner's body. Unfortunately I am not so skilled that I can do this on a regular predictable basis.

Dong maintains that very highly skilled practitioners can even feel zhan when they are not in physical contact with their partner. They must be close, however. Many of you may have felt this energy when you hold one palm a foot or two away from the other after you have practiced. (Playing with a ball of chi.) If you are sensitive, you will feel something like a magnetic field. Something akin to having the north poles of two magnets pointed at each other, thus generating a repelling force.

Dong is a pragmatist however. He does not believe the qi gong claims that a master can cause a student to move from a long distance. He also does not believe that you can feel zhan with your eyes closed. He thinks that the sense of sight, the eyes, play an important part in the process. With your eyes open, and your attention tuned in, you can feel zhan away from your body. With your eyes closed, you cannot.

While this discussion of an energy field surrounding the body may seem mysterious, your ability to see it does not invalidate its reality. I cannot see oxygen, but it still exists. I do not know if the photographs of people's auras are actually photographs of this energy field. They may be. Perhaps someone out there can address this question.

Even if you don't believe that such an energy field exists, you can still benefit from the concept. Using sticky energy requires a lot of sensitivity and skill. If you behave as if you are "listening" with your energy, you will find that you are more sensitive to your partner's moves. Indeed, you may even be able to correctly anticipate their moves before they actually move. "When he moves, I move first." This is a very high level of skill, but it is also a basic component of the neijia arts.

Aloha,

Chip Ellis