

The Two Turns of Tai Chi

By Hal Mosher

The three internal arts from China are Hsing-I Ba Gua and Tai Chi. The internal arts are delineated from the external styles like Karate in many ways, but one of the most important ways is the way in which the waist is used. In Tai Chi the waist movement is of crucial importance because it is aligned with the weight shifting. The weight shifting and the waist turning are inseparable. My teacher Mr. Liu Hsi Heng always said, "The turn is not a turn and the shift is not a shift". What he meant was, if you think about the shifting then you stop turning, and if you think about turning you stop shifting.

The shifting and turning like everything in Tai Chi must be balanced and even, like a perfect yin and yang symbol. In practice you want to turn at the end of your shift which insures that your turn isn't double weighted. It was this balance of shifting and turning that became my teachers focus for many years and out of that focus he labeled two distinct turns. The first turn is called the down-up turn which moves along a vertical axis as you shift into the full leg. The down up turns' primary emphasis is the shifting. The other turn is called the left-right turn which moves on a horizontal axis as you shift into one leg. The left right turns' primary emphasis is the turning. My teacher isolated these turns to make it easier for beginners to see, understand, and practice. The two turns are combined together later to create a gyroscope-like movement of the waist. It is this movement of the waist that dictates everything in Tai Chi from form to function.

The down-up turn is hard to explain on paper, and I always advise my students to see it in person before trying it on their own. The best way to explain these turns is through analogy and metaphor. The turns themselves actually function to keep you moving continuously and at the same time rooted. I will first talk about the rooting aspect of the down-up turn. The down part of the down-up turn is the rooting aspect; the up part keeps you moving. The down-up turn represents central equilibrium because its emphasis is rooting.

In practice, as you shift into one leg imagine the weight is dropping into the foot like the spade of a shovel dropping into the ground. As the weight drops into the foot you should come a little forward in order to bring back to the other foot, like the spade picking up dirt. This is the up part of the down-up turn, and also the movement aspect of the down-up turn. The root must be made before the movement aspect can continue, which makes the turn single weighted. It should feel like your shifting is like a pendulum with a strong sinking element attached to it. The hips are also aiding in this procedure; the full hip is coming back towards your tailbone as you shift, the hip emptying out will come forward towards the front knee. This scissor like movement creates your shift and you're sinking into the root at the same time. The thighs are also rotating with this scissor like movement; the thighs rotate in the direction you're shifting. When the hips are moving in exact proportion to each other this is the down-up turn.

An important aspect of this turn is making sure your alignments are true. Your shoulders should be in line with your hips, and your occipital bone should line up with a vertical tailbone. You can practice these turns in a feet parallel position or a 70/30 bow stance position without moving your feet. It is better in the beginning to shift slowly and try to get a feeling of the tailbone doing the turn, not the shoulders. In the beginning, there is a tendency to twist the shoulders away from

the hips, for this reason, it is best to relax the shoulders to free up movement in the hips. The down up turn has a kind of rolling under feeling of the tailbone and hips which then generate the left right turn as you are able to sink and relax deeper into the full leg.

The left right turn is about movement, in particular, movement horizontal and continuous. This turn is what most people think of when they try to turn the waist; the part that is missing is the down-up turn in the left right turn. This why I explained the down-up turn first, it is more difficult to grasp because it is not common knowledge. The metaphor for the left right turn is the door hinge. The pendulum metaphor applies in this turn as well up to the point where your shift is then completed. When all of your weight is on one leg and your down-up turn is complete then you relax your empty leg a bit more and this creates a little horizontal turn to the left or right depending on the leg you're on. Again try not to use your shoulders, instead try to sink and relax in order to create this turn. You should try to feel like your hip joint and tailbone are like the holder and pin of a door hinge, as these two elements line up they allow the door to turn on its axis. You can practice this turn in the same way as stated above, without moving the feet with the feet parallel or in the 70/30 position. You can do five down up turns, and then five left right turns on each leg and in both leg positions. If you want, you can do different hand positions from the postures in the form, like push, brush knee, bend bow shoot tiger. In general, the down-up turn is push, and left right turn is rollback. When you can find these two turns in every posture of the form then you can start combining the turns. My teacher called these two turns the conscientious practice of Tai Chi so it is important to understand them and practice them diligently.

These two turns are really about teaching one how to yield and push in push hands practice. The down up turn is the yield which then creates a push. The left-right turn then allows one to yield and push in any direction you please. Push hands teaches one that you have to be able to deal with your opponents force in whichever way he pushes you. The two turns are tools for listening and responding to attacks by using the waist. Eventually the whole body will be able to respond with these two turns, and your opponent will feel like he/she is trying to push a ball on the surface of the water; no matter where he/she pushes on the ball the other side comes back around to meet him/her. Tai Chi and push hands can be very difficult to practice correctly, but with these two turns you will have a strong foundation from which to grow into your practice.