

## **Practical Wisdom: The Art of Pushing Back**

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**NOTE:** This paper is a supplement to the presentation, “The Art of Pushing Back: Getting Buy-in” on June 8, 2005 at the FEMA Higher Education Conference, Emmitsberg, MD. This writing provides a foundation for the presentation topic. Specific points for applications in an educational and emergency management context will be included in the actual presentation.

### **Abstract:**

There is no area of our lives that can escape some form of influence. When we become aware of something, we also become aware of how we will be influenced. We either accept or reject influence. If you are a teacher your attempts to influence the students will either be accepted or rejected. If you are a department head looking for support for a new program, it will be your abilities to influence others that will get the buy-in or not. During a crisis; a leader’s greatest strength will be his or her skills to influence people to effectively respond to the situation.

There is a science and art aspect of influence. It is this basic concept that is the essence of learning to effectively deal with perceived resistance, opposition, and conflict. The ‘science’ part of influence makes visible the underlying patterns, structures and designs. The ‘art’ aspect provides insights for creatively working the science to generate more advantageous alternatives.

This paper presents the philosophy and principles of the Chinese martial art Tai Chi, as both a metaphor and illustration for understanding how to masterfully deal with resistance, opposition and conflict situation.

Tai Chi is a perfect example of what I mean by science and art. It provides an awareness and understanding of the science of conflict found in all of nature - polarities. Tai Chi also teaches how to artfully utilize those patterns to influence the outcome of the real or perceived resistance, or conflict. In fact, the symbol of Tai Chi is what is commonly referred to as, ‘Yin and Yang.’ The symbol represents the dynamic interplay of interdependent opposites. By learning the ways and means of this ancient conflict resolution model, we increase our efficacy to effectively influence ourselves and others.

### **Introduction:**

I was first introduced to Tai Chi as a martial art in 1978. I was a member of a Kung Fu team that was invited to participate in the Chinese New Year celebration in San Francisco. During the trip my Kung Fu teacher took our team to meet one of his teachers, Master Ben Lo. Although I was aware of Tai Chi as an exercise, I was not very familiar with it as a martial art. As we entered Master Lo’s martial arts school, I was expecting to see punching, kicking, force and power. Instead, the students were working in pairs, moving very slowly yet gracefully.

Master Lo ended his class and released his students. He came over to greet us and asked what we thought about Tai Chi. I told him that I wondered how this could be an effective martial art. Master Lo told us that when there is resistance and force meets force, the stronger force will always win. To demonstrate, he invited Mark, the biggest person on our Kung Fu team to the center of the room. He instructed Mark to push him over.

Master Lo stiffened his arm and body, offering Mark as much resistance as he could. Mark easily pushed him back. Master Lo smiled and said, “That is Kung Fu – two opposing forces, each competing for the same force and power. Now, I will show you Tai Chi!” He motioned to Mark to attack him again. Mark was one of our team’s best fighters, very big, very strong and

extremely competitive. I truly believed that the small Master would be injured if Mark chose to go all out. Mark was very confident that he would win again. He pushed at the Master and was immediately flung away. Mark attempted another more aggressive attack, and then another. Each time Mark pushed, he was quickly and easily tossed away. After several failed attacks, Mark's ego and anger got the best of him and he pursued Master Lo with utmost intensity and aggression.

I was truly mesmerized as I watched a seventy-year-old Chinese man, who looked like he was forty, throwing a 6'6" - 265 lb. black belt around like he was a rag doll. I watched in awe as this 5'4", 125 lb. old man demonstrated the most powerful martial art I have ever seen, and did it with the grace, elegance and power of a waterfall. Master Lo then selected four more of us to attack him simultaneously. There were now five of us attacking the great Master and the result was the same; we were all flung and discarded away. Master Lo continued to smile and never broke a sweat. I was indeed influenced by what I had experienced. There was a major shift in my belief regarding the need for force and power.

**The Wisdom:**

Tai Chi is the national exercise of China. People of all ages gather in the mornings to perform the very slow and deliberate movements of the various forms. Tai Chi as an exercise is like swimming on dry land. Each movement is performed as if there is resistance, much like moving your hand through water or holding your arm outside the window of a moving car. These slow movements teach the body to yield and relax to the resistance of the water or the wind.

The martial training of Tai Chi Chuan concerns itself with the ability to maintain a harmonious balance-in-change in the midst of violent conflict. The Tai Chi forms, pushing hands and sparring exercises gradually "re-program" the nervous system to move in such a way that the Tai Chi fighter can follow his opponent's attacks rather than resisting them. If my opponent launches a powerful punch against me, I am providing resistance if his punch connects with my face. I am also providing resistance if I successfully block his punch and it connects with my forearm. True enough, I will not be harmed as much by a blow to the forearm as I will by one to the face, but in either case I am absorbing the impact of his blow, exactly as he had anticipated, and it will cost me time and energy to recover from the impact and fully regain my balance. In the meantime, I am extremely vulnerable.

A much more powerful way of dealing with his punch would be to empty my body and move with the punch so perfectly that it finds no firm target to connect with. This leaves my opponent in an extremely weak and unbalanced position, and makes it possible for me to gently re-direct the force of his punch back to him, thus returning his lost balance.

Of course when we say gently re-direct the force of his punch back to him" we have said quite a mouthful and it does take a lot of training to do this fluidly. But oddly, the training involves more unlearning than it does learning because any imbalance will always and automatically return to its source unless it is interfered with. The "trick" to the incredible power of Tai Chi. as a fighting style is to learn to follow your opponent's hostile energy without opposing or interfering with it, remaining calmly centered while your assailant goes about the business of defeating himself.

**Practical Wisdom:**

Tai Chi can be used as an optimal situational awareness model. The principles can be used to obtain and retain a focused mindset in any crisis or emergency situation.

Think of the above paragraphs in the context of getting buy-in, dealing with resistance, or everyday conflicts. You can begin to see that the same skills to accept and redirect apply in all learning, communication, motivation and negotiation situations. If you can harmonize with a physical punch so that it leaves you unharmed, you can behave the same way with emotional disappointments, intellectual arguments, or any resistance-based situations.

It has been nearly thirty years since my first experience with Tai Chi. As I continue to practice the basic principles, I continue to deepen my respect and appreciation that real wisdom and power comes not from force or power, but from calm, adaptation, awareness, and purposeful intention. Tai Chi continues to contribute to reconditioning how I perceive and interact with the world. I have evolved my knowledge of the science of Tai Chi into an art form for effectively mediating, managing and resolving all types of conflict situations.

Often the differences in teaching styles and learning styles can cause resistance and conflict. Tai Chi teaches ‘be a ball not a wall.’ Practicing to accept and redirect any opposition I receive, has taught me to be a more effective teacher, parent, coach and leader.

The essence of both The Art of Pushing Back model and Tai Chi is, “Clarity is Power.” Clarity comes from making finer and finer distinctions. Making finer and finer distinctions requires the ability to ‘invest in loss’ – give up what you think you know to discover something else. This is called inquiry. Inquiry is not about looking or listening FOR something; there is not some specific ‘it’ to find or place to get to. A true inquiry is simply an exploration to discover what you don’t know you don’t know. It is a conscious act of discovering subtleties, nuances, processes and patterns.

### **Conclusion:**

In any situation you will default to what you know best. If all you know about dealing with resistance and conflict is, ‘stronger is better;’ that is how you will behave. Certainly, ‘stronger’ will have some influence. However, when dealing with people, if you learn to ‘be a ball not a wall,’ you will be able to calmly redirect any resistance or opposition. It is possible to successfully deal with any resistance or conflict situation without getting drawn into anger and aggression. It takes training and practice to unlearn the reflex attitudes of snap-judgments, inferences, projections, and perceptions of ‘wrong,’ unfair, and ‘must win.’

Tai Chi ranks at the top of major influences in my life. Tai Chi is the science patience. It is an art form to express mental, physical and spiritual balance during motion. It is a practical wisdom for transcending the difficulties of daily life, remaining calm, unruffled and confident no matter what the circumstances. As a martial art Tai Chi is perfect for dealing with physical threats. Mastering Tai Chi as a martial art takes a great deal of commitment, patience, time and practice. It is well worth the effort.

The Art of Pushing Back model was created to speed up the process for non-physical applications. It is the Tai Chi principles in action for effectively dealing with resistance and conflicts inherent in learning, communication, motivation, and negotiation types of situations. To become effective in this context does not take very long.

The greatest influence is clarity... and clarity is power.