Distinguishing the Hip and Waist by Sam Masich

Part I - The Hip

There is perhaps, no greater stumbling block to the mastery of Taijiquan, than the murky confusion we are greeted with when we first begin a conscious study of the hips and waist. Virtually nothing in our western physical education prepares us for the study of this region. This is in part due to the competitive, “winner” based nature of western sports-based physical education which values achievement over exploration, and also the long history of taboos regarding the region fostered by puritanistic values which considered such considerations indecent. To make matters more difficult, examination of hip and waist is inherently handicapped by our ‘homunculus’ nature, the almost inversely proportionate sensory relationship between volume of tissue in the body and amount of nerve supply to a region. For example, the tiny eyes and lips are tremendously more sensitive than the comparatively huge thigh muscles. Similarly, we are engendered with only a minor innate awareness of the hip and waist sections of the body. The ignorance and even fear around experiencing this area is likely related to the natural difficulty in sensing the region directly. In psychology, dream and myth the hip and waist are often identified as the physical repository of the repressed or unconscious emotional content that can steer and sabotage our conscious lives.

Another problem for Taijiquan enthusiasts specifically is that the first and second generation of Taijiquan classics, when referring to the hip and waist, describe the Legs and waist[1] but never refer specifically mention the hips thus distracting generations of students from an obvious and important study. This is likely due in part to a similar traditional conservatism as in the west around the use of vulgar descriptions. These writings possess an extraordinarily dignified tone, which borders on the genteel. These documents also speak in a poetically didactic language that lends itself more to communicating principles rather than specifics. In them we find descriptions of the feet, the legs and the waist, but it is not until the post-classics generations, eighty to a hundred years later, that we begin to find direct instructions around the kua, the buttocks, the tailbone and the groin.

The hip and the waist are *entirely different* parts of the body. While this may seem almost too obvious to mention, it would appear that a clear understanding of this distinction is lacking in many Tai Chi players[1] training. Consequently for these practitioners, the intrinsic and dynamic relationship between hip and waist cannot be maximized for purposes of mobility, power or health.

Definition, Structure, Behaviour and Function of the Hip

For our purposes it is not necessary to get too anatomically technical here as an understanding of these elements in the body requires, not a medical, but an experiential knowledge. You may refer to almost any anatomical text on the subject. While it is certainly helpful to *see* the differences it is more important that we feel the natural design of the hip and waist structure and act clearly based on what we feel. On a basic level the hip can be distinguished from the waist by its structure and location. On a deeper and more relevant level, the hip and waist can be studied based on their differing functions.

The Hip

The hip is a joint representing the connection of the head of the upper femur to the pelvic region at the acetabulum (hip socket). Unlike the knee or ankle, the hip is a ball and socket joint, which makes it excellent for a great variety of complex rotations. The hip joint *allows the leg to move relative to the body*, for example in kicking or leg lifting actions while one leg is on the ground or for the *body to move relative to the leg*, as when the torso *folds* in toward the thigh during weight shifting in Tai Chi when two feet are on the ground.

In Chinese the most common word for hip is *tunbu* (literally Buttocks section) but, as in English, it commonly implies the outer hip surface rather than the inner working structure. In Taijiquan and in Chinese martial arts study in general, the term, *kua* (pronounced 'kwa'), is used to describe the relevant region. Homonyms for kua imply the notion of something that passively collapses, is slung across or straddles. While kua can be translated directly as hip it refers more to the *hip-crease (inguinal crease)*, the natural fold which stretches up diagonally, outward from the *perineum-huiyin*, to the juncture between the top of the hip bone and the base of the outer pelvis. It runs along the same path as the inguinal ligament. Obviously there is one kua for each leg but it can be helpful to note that both kua stem from the same place, the huiyin. Realizing this, it is much easier to be consistently aware of the natural movement of the hip-crease as it opens and closes. The tendency of practitioners, once aware of this region, is to focus excessively on the upper segment of the kua. This tends to raise energy in the hips. A much greater degree of Œrooting¹ can be accomplished instantly simply by settling the kua at its base near the perineum. When describing the hip region in later Chinese texts, we see the term kua or *kua gen* the hip-socket (literally hip *root* or *base*) used almost universally by authors. Common expressions include “loosen the waist and the kua”, “sink the qi and settle the kua.”

There is no single word for kua in English but I find Œhip-crease¹ to be a very satisfactory descriptive when instructing students. It is easily demonstrable via the folds in the fabric of pants or untucked shirts and an easy term for students to remember. ³Settle into the hip-crease² or ³relax deep into the hip-crease² usually do the trick. Most Tai Chi students eventually become accustomed to the term kua and it is used commonly by non-Chinese speaking instructors in many languages.

How the hip moves: Important!

Here is another possible reason that the legs are mentioned in the classics and not the hips. The hips should always move *as a natural consequence* of actions initiated in the legs. Since they have no mechanism by which to move in and of themselves, it is an error to think that we move from our hips. Like a tree being swayed by the wind, the hips are *caused* to move. An ignorance of this critical concept has left some practitioners struggling for decades, trying to find root, fluidity and true sticking ability. The hips must *allow* movement. They must acquiesce to pressure, letting force, movement and energy transfer up, down, forward, backward and side to side. While the pressure may come from the opposite leg¹s driving force or from a partner¹s pushing, the hips themselves must remain receptive, passive and clear. We do not try to move the hips in relation to force but, like the axle of a wheel, allow them to rotate as a matter of course. Usually it is the passive rotation *into* one hip

which causes the passive rotation out of the other hip. This is often described as folding the hip or kua.

Tightening up

A tendency to unconsciously tighten up in the hip and waist region frequently occurs in maintaining balance or moving the body throughout stances. Tension is commonly found in the upper thigh, buttocks, groin, psoas, lower abdominal and lower back regions as the body attempts to shift according to the various demands of practice. These areas in the body are highly responsive to one another and when one region becomes tense the others will also tend to tighten with an almost empathetic solidarity. This clenching, even if subtle, prevents clean, clear hip and waist rotation as the joints are restricted by the bound condition. It also tends to drive energy upward causing the upper body to become tense, the breath to become shallow and movement to become superficial. This is extremely counter-productive to freedom of movement, delivery of power and movement of energy. Thus the whole family of muscular responses associated with the hip and waist region requires patient examination and vigilant monitoring during training.

Why we tighten up

To Maintain Balance
In order to maintain ideal equilibrium it is essential that the body¹s Centre of Gravity reside near the centre its Base of Support. As the CoG is displaced, by either the weight shifting during practice of forms or the by the jostling of push hands and sparring, the muscles tend to tighten up in an attempt to facilitate stability. We must learn to be calm under pressure and trust that the natural design of the relaxed body will serve us better in maintaining stability than our first instinctive responses toward tension.

Fear and Panic
Another reason we might tense up in the hip and waist region is due a quality of protectiveness which automatically arises when we fear that we will come to some kind of harm. We fear loss of balance, loss of composure, getting hit, pushed or injured and we fear losing against an adversary. It is for this reason we must learn to Invest in loss¹, for as long as our instinct to flinch and clench in response to pressure continues, we will be thwarted in our Tai Chi development.

Habit and Conditioning
Thirdly, we tense up due to habit and conditioning. One person might hold tension chronically in one hip, unconsciously protecting an old sports injury. Another might experience a gnawing anxiety in the pit of the stomach caused by a buried emotional trauma, while still another might hold constantly in the buttocks due to burdensome work and home responsibilities. While the sources and causes for tension in this region are endless, the solution is always the same, relax. In Chinese the word *song*, which means to relax, implies loosening by letting something fall slack for example long hair falling once released from its clasp.

In order to overcome the instinctive tendency to tighten up we most begin an inner journey of self-evaluation and self-discovery to identify what and where we are holding. In Tai Chi this means using movement to delve experientially into the hip and waist regions at the centre of the body in to learn more about their nature,

relationships and inclination. Ultimately we find here a great deal to learn about ourselves.

What correct hip movement does

Ideally, it is through a well-positioned hip that the weight of the upper body passes, down, transferring directly into the thighs. This is what creates conditions for true alignment in both the legs and torso. Without correct, natural hip placement the body distributes its weight, instead of into the thigh, throughout various other muscles, creating unnecessarily regions of lateral tension. This produces a certain type of subtle yet constant physical anxiety which results in a conflicted stiffness and an inability to move freely and intentionally. As well, it puts undue stress on the knees, further restricting movement and sometimes causing pain and even injury. The role of guiding weight into the thighs, leaving the rest of the body free for action, is one of the most important functions for the hip.

As importantly, the hip serves to translate intact, the position of the upper body as we shift from one leg to another. It does this by passively rotating as it receives the force from the *driving leg*. The upper body is carried comfortably as the base shifts securely to and fro. Without this smooth translation of forces a muddled, confused energy possesses the legs which now require constant assistance via undesired compensation from the arms and torso. This results in involuntary forward and backward leaning as well as a tendency toward uncontrolled changes in postural height and movement speed. Thus, the ability of the hips to translate the position of the upper body, further aids in the independence of the torso which needs it¹s freedom for responsiveness and the ability to direct various types of energy.

In a related way, the hips, when loose and in their natural track, provide the means through which power from the legs may be mediated upward, into the torso to be directed by the waist. The hips must allow the force of the legs to pass through unhindered. If the hips are tense, power will be bound and prevented from continuing onward and upward. This is part of what is meant by:

The root is in the feet,
It issues up through the legs,
is directed by the waist,
and expressed through the fingers.

Without a clear understanding of the kua/hip-crease the classic is almost meaningless as a tool for developing control and power in Taijiquan training.

As we can see the hip cares for both the shifting of weight in the legs and the delivery of power, all the while receiving and guiding the upper body weight into the thighs. Thus the hips are responsible for stability, mobility and power simultaneously. Study of the hip is one of the most critical parts of a Tai Chi player¹s training.

The Hip-Track

The hip-track is the simple path that relaxed hips naturally travel through when weight is shifted from one leg to another in Tai Chi practice. In order to clearly understand the hip-track the action of shifting should be accomplished by a simple driving or pushing down of one leg into the ground causing the body to move away

from the driving leg into the passive receiving leg. If the hips are relaxed during this process the hip-track should quite naturally appear. Moving through the hip-track ensures rootedness as it ensures alignment between the thighs and the base in the feet and effortlessly prevents the torquing and twisting in the knees and ankles which many Tai Chi players mistakenly confuse with hip or waist movement. This kind of rootedness created by hip-tracking is not static, heavy or frozen but mobile, vigorous and substantial. Movement through the hip-track will *carry* the waist and the upper body passively leaving them free to undertake other actions with the security of a solid base. The range of movement is quite conservative and is accurate only when the joints are possessed of real relaxation.

Vaulting, Holding, Augmenting and Assisting

When we tighten muscles around one or both hips during weight shifting the hip-track is impeded in its natural course and the hips either vault over the resistant region or hold themselves in a fixed shape preventing proper rotation into the hip joint of the weighted leg. These errors result in loss of fluidity, root and stability. They cause the upper body to compensate by holding tensions that restrict freedom of movement. Tightening up, as we have seen, is largely instinctive and unintended. It is therefore very difficult to identify and correct and requires a great deal of attentiveness. It is important that a Tai Chi player commit to this vigilance as proper hip-tracking is the basis and foundation of all other Taijiquan movement and must become habit for maximum progress to occur in other areas of the art.

While the hip-track¹s movement is very simple it is not easy to master due to the mind habitually trying to guide events. A tendency exists in most Tai Chi players to *augment* movement, helping the hips to find their right place. Of course this is an erroneous approach as any activity in the hips at all will take them off the hip-track which can only be found by settling. As the femur ball and hip socket are naturally restricted in their movement by structural limitations so to the range of the hip track in the fixed stance is also limited. In order to compensate for this Tai Chi players tend to assist the action of the hip-track in order to acquire greater range. While this might serve in an emergency it is a bad habit where the basic foundation of movement is concerned and will lead to dramatic and flustered styles of form and push hands.

Conclusion

Understanding Taijiquan is a matter of in many ways a journey from the outer to the inner, from the flower of form to the root of innate structure. At some point in every serious Tai Chi player¹s progress it is critical to master the hips and waist. This is like learning letters in writing, rhythm in music or primary colours in painting. Mastering the clear hip is difficult but very worthwhile foundation that will serve all Taijiquan, Qigong and martial arts studies. Next time we will look at the waist and associate members of the hip and waist family.