



San Soo From The Ground Up: Part 1

In this three part series I will give some of my ideas on Kung Fu San Soo as a complete martial system. This will include structural, energetic, emotional, psychological and physical dynamics. The art of Tsoi Li Ho Fut Hung as a means of self defense is obviously very effective. What seems to be getting closer to disappearing is the “art” of San Soo. The Grandmaster, Jimmy H. Woo was the epitome of the dynamics noted above. When I began training with Jimmy he would tell me to be sure to be at the Saturday class. Because that was the day we got the form instruction. I believe it also was the day there were many more top belt instructors in class and Jimmy wanted me to be exposed to all that experience. Anyone who had the pleasure of standing next to Jimmy while he taught the form, or had Jimmy move on them will know what I’m talking about. The balance, structure and rooted posture combined with perfect timing created a truly powerful experience. This will be the topic of our first article.

Root and structure can be explained in many ways but there are some basic rules that apply that transcend martial system. All power should start at the feet and generate upward and outward to your opponent (or weapon). This also applies to the opposite direction. For instance, when blocking and contact is made the connection should reach the ground. This is receiving and grounding the incoming force. Please be aware we are speaking of balance, structure and root at this time. So we can keep focused on the topic, we are not discussing rotation, intent, direction and the many other elements that apply. When striking outward, the use of the large muscles of the legs and torso combining is where true power is generated. This leads us into the proper use of the stances.



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There are eight basic stances that are taught. Each stance has function in its static and dynamic usage. I'm fairly certain that most everyone in the San Soo art has heard the stories of Jimmy holding the stances with arms extended and buckets of sand in his hands. He told me the stories himself so I'm sure there is no overstating the importance of static training. Unfortunately this type of training falls to the wayside due to the rigorous nature of it. Yet this is the kind of training that creates the root in the mind and the body and is considered basic. Your stance training should be focused on, not just tolerated. As with the basic 45, it too is only as basic as your mind allows. There are eight basic stances, but there are other stances too. Jimmy had shown me one legged stances and deep side stances that are not often seen. You can readily see these stances when they are in use during your work outs.

When practicing the stances in a moving pattern, (dynamic) focus on the feel of each stance and the transition to the next stance. Do this slowly so you can feel the root and drive from the foot to the leg to the waist. Make sure your body moves from side to side, front to back while being pushed from the rear foot and the front foot. Your foot bottom should grind from the flat of the foot and should not pivot and release. This will surely uproot and disconnect you from the ground. Keep your body in a squatted position and try not to bob up and down. You must keep your spine straight. This is very important. When practicing your static stances there are three levels you can train at, high, middle and low. It is recommended that most of your training be at the middle level.



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Training at the low level is for training the strength in the legs and also to train the mind to relax and sink, increasing the ability to root beyond the superficial. When discussing structure, I always recommend students practice the stances at a level where they can hold the stance correctly. This is far more important than holding the stance lower but with your feet stuck out in the wrong direction or your knees not in line. At this time we should cover the correct positioning for the eight basic stances. Keep your hands in a fixed position at this time. We are covering root and rooted structure at this point.

When Jimmy taught the stances to me, he emphasized the positioning of the feet, saying the feet should line up straight while in horse stance and at a 45 degree angle in $\frac{1}{2}$ horse stance. Jimmy told me to take tape and put a plus sign on the floor and focus on keeping the stances in line.

When changing from stance to stance your body should noticeably rotate and move and not just pivot in place.

From set position (cobra stance) you circle your leg up and out into horse stance. Then repeat with the other side. Move down and in. Do not stand up and down. Your rear leg then pushes you from horse stance (su ping ma) into $\frac{1}{2}$ horse (an do ma) until the rear leg is fully extended and the feet grind to 45 degrees. Your body should face forward. Drawing back into kick stance (el ma) you should not pull back. You should push back from the front foot driving down and in, not up and out. Your hips should square to the front and drop and your front ball of your foot should lightly touch the ground. The rear foot should be at 45 degrees and your front heel should be in line with the outside of your rear heel.



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If you draw your front foot back you can go straight into set position (cobra stance). Push off and go into ½ horse as you drag your rear driving foot up into position. Remember to stay down and in. Do not lunge up and out. This is what is commonly seen in most the stance practice. Also remember, how you practice is going to be how you respond when the time comes to use it! These ideas will be covered more in part three of the series.

When going into cross stance (new do ma) you should be pushing from the rear foot, feeling the drive coming from the heel to the ball as you push off. The new front foot needs to be straight like in the horse stance and the rear heel rises up so you are on the ball of the rear foot. The rear foot should face the middle of your front foot. Your body faces to the front and not inline with your lead leg. Be sure to step out wide enough so that when you turn out of cross stance your horse stance will be correct. The turning move is called jona ma. You will uncoil into full horse stance. Begin turning at your waist first and begin to shift the weight to center. Keep down and rooted so your front foot will grind and turn to match up with your rear foot facing the same direction in horse stance.

The next transition is into kneeling stance (bing guy ma). You can rotate through the horse stance straight into kneeling stance or separate it with a pause. My personal preference is to make each stance stand out. This stance is done by dropping the knee of the previously twisted (and now uncoiled) leg and coming up onto the ball of the foot. Try not to turn the front support legs foot out but keep it facing the same direction.



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The dropped knee points off in a 45 degree angle. Not straight toward your supporting leg. Your body also points in that same direction. This keeps you off that tight rope that you see most people end up on. Most of your body's weight is supported by the front leg. Again remember to keep your back straight. Even when using this position to drop your knee on someone you will be able to deliver much more body weight with your spine straight. Do not lean.

Step out with the bent leg straight into $\frac{1}{2}$ horse again pushing from the supporting leg. You can use a variation of an do ma, called shum gak ma. The difference is the rear driving foot is turned straight at a 90 degree angle and not turned to match the front foot. We usually teach students to just step to $\frac{1}{2}$ horse since this position is not as dangerous to the rear leg knee, structurally. Finish up by pushing from the front leg to turn 180 degrees into $\frac{1}{2}$ horse stance facing front. I will sometimes teach students that are having trouble staying in line while turning to break it up by turning to full horse, then moving through to $\frac{1}{2}$ horse. Open the front foot by grinding on the heel and push off the rear foot to step up to set position (cobra stance). You will be slightly to one side until you complete the same set of movements to the opposite side. At that point you will be in the same place that you started your training.

Take the time to feel what it is you are doing, don't just blow through this set of movements. You will only defeat yourself. There is a saying in the NeiJia schools of kung fu, "Your worst opponent is yourself."

Books and articles are good means of reference and to stimulate the mind to ask necessary questions of yourself and your teachers.



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Nothing takes the place of hands on instruction from a qualified instructor. The ideas presented in this article come from the experience I had with my teachers, especially Grandmaster Jimmy H. Woo. As with all knowledge that delves deeper than the exoteric, some ideas are difficult to imagine in the written form and are better experienced and visualized. These ideas only touch on, and do not come close to, explaining the internal dynamics that also apply. Fine points of weight shifting and rotation can not and should not be learned from an article.

The “art” of Tsoi Li Ho Fut Hung Ga was developed long ago in times that were still feudal and martial weapons practice was not just for the arts sake but for defending yourself against another who may be armed with any number of (what we now call) classical weaponry. The proper use of, for instance, a one legged stance to avoid a spear thrust or cut from a long handled broadsword only makes good sense. It’s called getting out of the way. Jimmy would often speak about being able to delay your step after kicking, or as he said, “you slow it down and hold your balance, this adds timing and cadence to your form.” It’s my belief that this is just as important, if not more so, when you speak of application. You should be able to remain rooted when kicking and even when performing the hopping and turning steps that are prevalent in the San Soo form and fighting. These are ideas that will be covered in the next section of this three part series. Remember that you can limit yourself, but please do not limit the “art” of San Soo.