



*The Concept of “Sung”  
in Tai Chi Chuan*

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## **The Concept of "Sung" in Tai Chi.**

*Elsewhere, we look at the concept of "following" in Pushing Hands. Even more important – for Tai Chi in general, not just Pushing Hands - is the notion of "sung" which we translate as "relaxed". If we are not "sung", we cannot follow nor can we support our centre and maintain our root. So, being "sung" is a prerequisite for being able to develop skill in Pushing hands and, later, free sparring and self-defence. In the following article, I look at the various aspects of being "sung", the obstacles to achieving this state, the benefits it brings once we have mastered it, and some suggestions for being able to achieve it more effectively.*

When we observe a true expert in any field, their skill is such that to an onlooker whatever they are doing seems effortless. There is a rhythmical, relaxed quality and economy of effort which can only come from years of intensive and dedicated practice. This applies as much to concert pianists giving a recital, cabinet makers crafting a dovetail, or Roger Federer hitting a passing shot on Centre Court as it does to the Tai Chi practitioner. What seems easy to the onlooker, of course, is in reality anything but.

Anyone who has tried Tai Chi already knows how difficult it is, and most difficult of all is the one thing which underpins everything else in the art and is the mark of authentic Tai Chi; the ability to relax. If we are not relaxed, our movements cannot be considered true Tai Chi. We are simply, quite literally, going through the motions.

True relaxation calls for the emotions to be balanced and stable, the mind to be calm and free from distractions, and the body to be aligned and without muscular tension. Implicit in all this is the notion of "letting go", not holding on to intrusive feelings and thoughts, and not holding muscular tension in the body. When the mind is calm and the body balanced, the muscles can relax, the joints can open (increasing mobility) and the hips can seat properly, so that the centre is supported. As we relax and "let go" more, our *Dantien* drops, lowering the centre of gravity and increasing stability. Without letting go, there is no root. Without letting go, there is no softness. Without softness, there is no sensitivity only rigidity; we can easily be manipulated. Our movements are not smooth, our reactions are slower, and there is insufficient extension when striking. Without a firm root and a relaxed spine, there can be no unifying ground path, no storage of energy in the lower back, and without opening the joints and sinking into the hip, there can be no "*fajin*" or explosive power release with that elastic

quality so distinctive of Tai Chi. We lack power. In short, without "sung" there is no Tai Chi; there is only movement.

In the civil sphere, the health benefits of emotional, mental and physical relaxation are also considerable, if largely self-evident. Lower blood pressure, enhanced mood, reduction of strains, improved respiration and increased mental acuity are all widely attributed to it. The Chinese would also emphasise the increased *chi* flow, which is instrumental in improving well-being and maintaining good health. Since *chi* flows through bone marrow as well as the familiar meridians, opening the joints and improving the structural alignment of the skeleton facilitates smooth *chi* flow around the body, whilst slow continuous movement in this relaxed state further mobilises the energy, moving it around the body more effectively and so preventing stagnation.

All these aspects of being "sung" are easy to explain but it is very hard to achieve. However, with conscientious and continuous application, anyone can improve. To understand how we can do this, we have first to appreciate what is preventing us from letting go.

Emotions affect thoughts and the two are inextricably linked. The emotional distractions are the hardest to deal with as they bypass rationality. Even when we "know" intellectually that we should not let certain things bother us, they still do. Other thoughts of all kinds also intrude: things we should have done, awkward problems we are struggling to find a solution for, outstanding business we will soon have to attend to; the list is seemingly endless and it is easy to hop rapidly from one to another. The Chinese refer to this mental chatter as "monkey mind" and it is a sign of excessive, chaotic Yang energy. Until we have stilled the mind, we cannot relax the body.

Physical impediments to being "sung" include bad posture and inactivity which stiffens both the joints and the supporting ligaments and tendons, thereby inhibiting freedom and range of movement. Technology and the modern lifestyle are against us, whether we are sitting at computer screens for extended periods of time, cradling a mobile phone under our chin as we "multi-task", or driving long distances when once we would have walked everywhere. Allied to this last point is the problem of weak legs. If we have limited strength in our legs, we cannot maintain postures and exercises long enough to relax properly into the joints before our muscles give out.

For Tai Chi students, other factors also come into play. Lack of proficiency in applying Tai Chi principles means that our comfort zone is relatively small

and as we get to the outer limits, we become anxious mentally and this anxiety results in physical tension. In addition, because we cannot apply them properly, we sometimes lose faith in the efficacy of the principles and this results in what we might call defensive tension, where we fear that to let go will actually make us more vulnerable not less. Finally, a combative mind-set will increase tension as the intent to move becomes linked with the notion of "winning" or "losing".

Whilst we all find letting go difficult, there are things we can do to become better at it and so improve the quality of our Tai Chi and our general health.

### **Pick your training area.**

- Select a location where you instinctively feel at ease.
- Ideally, train outside in nature. There is an increasing amount of evidence that not only are we suffering from sedentary lifestyles but also that many of us are deprived of natural light; vitamin D deficiency being an obvious consequence. Mental health is also helped by spending time in the countryside or a garden setting. The Chinese would tell us that, if we have the choice, we should train near trees where the chi is particularly beneficial, especially around fir trees. The sound of gentle trickling from a garden water feature or the rhythmic swishing of waves at the seaside is also considered restful.
- Find a quiet spot. Keep external distractions to a minimum. Switch the phone over to the answering machine and mute the handset. If your choice of location is limited, you may still be able to decide when to practise so pick quieter times of the day, such as the early morning or late evening.

### **Cut down the amount of time you sit without a break.**

### **Do regular standing practice.**

- Start every training session with *Wuji* or *Zhang Zhuang*.
- Aim for 5 minutes at a time to begin with, increasing in 5-minute increments to 20 minutes.

### **Concentrate on your breath with your eyes closed.**

- Firstly, breathe naturally through the nose becoming increasingly aware of the sensation as the air moves in and out through the nostrils.
- Move your awareness to the *Dantien* and concentrate on the sensation as you imagine breathing right down into it until it is full, warm and strong.
- Finally practise whole body breathing, especially before starting the Form. To do this, feel how the whole body expands and contracts as you breathe; just like a pair of bellows. Pump up the body.

### **Allow enough time for each relaxation exercise.**

Slow, repetitive exercises, such as arm swinging, circling, or *Chan Si*, take on a meditative quality which helps to calm the mind and will enable us to relax the joints and the muscles, but we need to recognise that the more tension there is in the body, the longer it will take us to let go. For that reason, we need to allow plenty of time for each one. A minimum of five minutes per movement (or per stepping exercise) is not unreasonable (but avoid exceeding 20 minutes when circling as it can be counterproductive to do so in this particular case).

### **Practise Pushing Hands and partner drills more.**

This will help to develop your skills, enlarging your comfort zone and, with it, your confidence. Put yourself on the edge in order to push your boundaries further. Every time you find a weakness, you have found an opportunity to improve.

## **Lose the attitude.**

Recognise that the only person you are in competition with is yourself. Approach paired training – even sparring – as a co-operative exercise. You are working together to help each other get better. Everyone gets pushed over at some time: it doesn't make you a bad person. Provided you are willing to learn, the more you get pushed, the better you will eventually become.

Relaxing and letting go mentally and physically is incredibly difficult...but perseverance will reap enormous benefits, both in terms of your Tai Chi and your overall health.

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## **The Author**

### **Philip Larsson**



Philip has been practising Tai Chi Chuan since 1988 and teaching since 1995. In 1996, together with his friend and training partner, Trevor Priest, he set up Berkshire Tai Chi to spread traditional Yang and Chen style Tai Chi Chuan throughout the Royal County.

Since 1999, he has been studying under Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and, in 2002, he also began training with Grandmaster Chen's middle son, Chen Yingjun whom he co-hosts on Master Chen's regular visits to Berkshire.

In 2005 Philip went to study for a period in Chenjiagou, the birthplace of Tai Chi Chuan, becoming a full-time professional instructor three years later.

He is a regular instructor at various venues throughout Berkshire. In keeping with traditional Taoist principles, he is keen to ensure that Tai Chi Chuan is taught in a balanced way, with equal emphasis being placed on the martial and the health aspects of the art. He has designed and run in-house health and relaxation programmes for commercial organisations such as Nortel Networks and Henley Management College, as well as therapeutic classes for students with physical and mental health problems. In particular, he has experience of working with Parkinson's sufferers, arthritics and recovering stroke victims.

Private lessons can be arranged on request.

Besides his regular training with Grandmaster Chen and Chen Yingjun, since 1988 Philip has met, and attended courses run by, other leading Tai Chi teachers including Yang Jwingming, Chen Bing, Du Xianming, Ji Jiancheng, Chen Lei, and Mike Sigman.

In 2014 Philip received his certificate of proficiency from Grandmaster Chen.



# *Berkshire Tai Chi*

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