



## Fang sung

### *Fang Sung*

One day, so the story goes, one of Master Tung Yenchieh's<sup>1</sup> students asked him for some advanced Tai Chi instruction. The Master readily agreed and at the end of the class slipped a sealed red envelope into the student's hand with the express instruction that he should only open it at home when no-one else was around. The young man did exactly as he was directed and as soon as the house was empty he excitedly tore the letter open. Inside, he found a slip of paper with just a single character written on it. That character was:

松 (“Sung”).

### *The Meaning of “Sung”.*

Linguistically, “Sung” is usually translated as “relaxed” and “Fang sung” as “to relax”. However, the English term is less nuanced than the Chinese original which can also mean “to free, liberate, let out”, “to let go”, and “to loosen”. Etymologically, “sung” is based on a character for “longhair which hangs down”, and it is this which really gives us an insight into the significance of the concept for students of Tai Chi Chuan.

#### **The Qualities of Relaxation in Tai Chi Training**

The verb, “fang sung”, is comprised of two characters:

放 (“to release”) and 松 (“looseness”)

The character for “sung” includes the pictogram for a pine tree, growing straight and tall. When standing or moving we should also be straight and tall, as if suspended from above.

When the body is properly aligned and upright, we can relax.

“Fang” emphasises letting go. To relax properly, we must let go – of mental stress (anger, anxiety or an over-active mind) and of physical stiffness by releasing tension in the muscles. Imagine a lady with her hair done up in a bun. If she takes the pin out, her hair will naturally unfurl; it will drop, straightening and stretching before rebounding and then settling back to hang down loosely.

Now we can begin to understand some of the key qualities of relaxation needed for effective Tai Chi Chuan training. Being “sung” involves three things:

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<sup>1</sup> Master Tung Yenchieh was a student of the legendary Yang Chengfu.

1. **letting go** (mentally and physically), as a result...
2. **sinking** down naturally, and in so doing...
3. **stretching** (with the natural elasticity of the body)

*Fang sung* relaxation must not be confused with limpness. It is about attaining an optimal state (referred to as *tonus*<sup>2</sup> or *tonicity* in medical English) which allows us to maintain an upright posture with the absolute minimum of muscle contraction. This alignment (with its imagery of being “suspended” from the crown of the head, of being loose and hanging down, together with that of the upright pine, whose limbs do not droop down but are buoyant and lively) neatly describes the very essence of *fang sung*. Imagine snow settling on the branch of the pine tree. The snow is supported by the branch until it eventually becomes too heavy and slides off onto the ground, releasing the branch and allowing it to spring back to its original position. This is *peng* energy in the natural world. It is elastic and alive not floppy and dead. Without being *sung* we cannot hope to develop effective *peng* energy, and, as we all know, *peng* is the primary energy in Tai Chi Chuan.

## The Importance of Being “Sung”

### Developing Chi

Tai Chi Chuan is based on Taoist philosophy. The concept of balance between opposites, Yin and Yang, underpins everything we do. In training terms, we aim to develop external (Yang) capabilities in conjunction with internal (Yin) capabilities. Practically, external training is designed to strengthen the tendons, ligaments, and bones. Internal training should focus on strengthening our *chi*. There are three aspects to this: cultivation, storage and circulation of *chi*.

*Fang song* is critical to developing internal energy. For example, if you mobilise 100 units of energy per session but you use up 90 units, you only have 10 units of energy left. By following the *fang sung* principle, you align and relax your body and calm your mind more. Less *chi* is wasted and what *chi* there is can also circulate more freely through the body as there is less tension and better alignment. Now you expend, say, only 80 units of energy per session. You have accumulated double the amount of *chi* and it can move more easily. The more *chi* you have circulating smoothly around the body, the better your health.

### Tai Chi Chuan Form Training

In *Tai Chi Chuan* training we aim to develop a solid base to support the *Dantien*. This involves working with gravity to “root” down through the feet into the floor. This can only be achieved by relaxing the body to allow gravity to take all the body’s weight straight down the leg and ankle into the foot. This will not happen unless the body is properly aligned vertically and the

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<sup>2</sup> the normal tension of a muscle at rest; tone

Collins English Dictionary

hip *kua* is relaxed so that the joint seats properly, allowing the pelvis to tilt slightly thereby lowering the centre of gravity and gently stretching the lower back to further reduce tension.

A strong and stable foundation has several advantages. It improves our balance, making it harder for an opponent to uproot us. It gives us the ability to use rebounding energy to issue power from the ground up, using the whole body as one unit. By providing a more stable support for the *Dantien* and loosening the hip *kua* more, its smoothness and range of movement is enhanced. Spirals will naturally appear. As a result, our stepping and turning becomes smoother and easier, and balance, stability, fluidity of movement, softness, control and power are further improved. Less effort is expended and the results are better. As the Chinese saying goes: *Double the results with half the effort.*

### ***Fa jing***

Explosive power release (*fa jing*) needs the whole body to be grounded, connected and relaxed. If we are not *sung* (aligned and loose), we will not be capable of deploying *fa jing*. Tension will slow us down, prevent us from rooting properly, and make us “pull” kicks and punches. Not only will we be unable to issue power quickly, smoothly and forcefully, we also run the risk of injuring ourselves and depleting our *chi*. Too much energy pushed through a rigid, mis-aligned structure will not only waste energy by failing to channel it efficiently, it will be expelled through the weak points of the structure (typically the *Dazhui* and *Lintai* points on the spine<sup>3</sup>) causing at the very least muscle spasms or tears, and quite possibly dislocation of the vertebrae at these two points on the spine. *Fa jing* is the showy aspect of Tai Chi Chuan to which many newcomers aspire, but unless we have first cultivated *fang sung*, it is best avoided.

### **Pushing Hands Training**

Pushing Hands training (*Tuishou*) forms a bridge between the form and applications. Its main purpose is to develop sensitivity, or “listening energy”. This sensitivity helps us to feel and explore the continuous interplay of the eight self-defence energies. Over time, if we train in accordance with Tai Chi principles, we become more sensitive to both our own energy and that of our partner, learning how to read his or her intent from the movement whilst concealing ours. We learn to stick, follow, neutralise energy, and issue power in safety without meeting force with force. We practise maintaining our root and freedom of movement under pressure from outside.

If we are not “*sung*” we will not be grounded. We will have no sticking-hand ability, we will be unable to issue energy quickly, and we will not be able to listen to our opponent’s intention through touch. To strike fast with our hands, we must have loose shoulder joints. To stick to our opponent’s arms, our own arms must be soft. In order to listen, we must first be quiet. To listen to our opponent’s force, we must not use force. Rigidity impedes our ability to sense

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<sup>3</sup> To locate these points, please see Body Basics (Study Aid)

through touch and undermines our root. If three people are pushing on your body, and you try to stand your ground by pushing against them rather than letting go of tension and sinking into the floor, you will be pushed back easily. When you tense in order to use force you become rigid, and if we use force against force, the stronger force will win.

In short, without being “*sung*” we will not be able to Push Hands competently.

### *How to Become More “Sung”*

The training method for *fang sung* is simple. There is no magic to this. First we learn about correct body structure and the principles of moving correctly. Then we just let go each time we practise. Every time we loosen up a little bit more, we improve our *fang sung* ability. There is no end to this training.

Chan Buddhist Master Seung Sahn said, “*Students always want to learn some fancy method.*” We become bored with simple methods and treat them with disdain. That’s why we fail.

*Every day in the pursuit of learning, something is added.  
Every day in the pursuit of Tao, something is lost.*

#### **What to Practise**

- Standing
- Lifting Water
- Silk Reeling
- Master Huang Shengshyan’s 5 Loosening Exercises<sup>4</sup>
- Form
- Pushing Hands

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<sup>4</sup> See Study Aid (Basics).