



## Update

### Hello!

With the warming weather, I hope you are able to spend more time outdoors. Tai chi is particularly enjoyable and healthful when practiced in an open air environment. Outdoor environments offer a variety of terrain with which to practice our movements. While level floor or ground is best for beginners, more experienced practitioners find it helpful to challenge themselves by practicing the tai chi movements on uneven terrain, including gentle slopes and steps. Beaches are interesting because the sand shifts as weight is transferred from one foot to the other, requiring more attention to sensing the pressure distribution under each foot. And cruise boats provide gentle rocking motions that challenge one's balance, particularly during one foot movements, such as kicks.

### Insight Sharing - More About *Song*

In the most recent issue of the newsletter, I wrote about the tai chi principle of *song* (鬆), explaining that there are two components - the elimination of held tension, and the opening of joints. In this issue, I'd like to provide some additional guidance and examples.

In figure skating, one example is the use of *song* in spirals. Reaching out with the head and neck toward the front and with the free foot toward the rear reduces spinal compression and allows each vertebra to share in the gentle bending of the back. See illustration below. This movement impulse also balances the forces throughout the length of the body. Many beginners think only about lifting the leg and arching the back, creating local forces making the movement more strenuous than necessary.



In another figure skating example, the use of *song* throughout the body helps to dissipate impact forces upon landing. I had occasion to observe a skater at a national exhibition where the skater's head snapped forward at the conclusion of every jump landing. It seemed that she tried to brace her spine by contracting muscles using the suit of armor strategy, thereby shunting the impact forces up into the neck area, where the forces snapped her head forward. If she had instead lengthened her spine using *song*, the forces would have dissipated along the entire length of the spine.

In tai chi, there are several levels of *song*. These levels are mostly about the elimination of held tension. At the first level, one can be *song* when one's mind is thinking about it, but once the mind is not on it, the tension returns. At the second level, *song* has become second nature, meaning the body is *song* without the mind focused on it. However, when under pressure, the body tenses up again. At the third level, the body is still *song* when under pressure. And finally, at the fourth level, the mind is also in a state of *song*, the person being calm and collected. In the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, one of the main protagonists, Li Mu Bai, is a tai chi swordsman, and demonstrates the highest level of *song*. Not only is his body *song* during sword fights, he is also calm and collected at all times.

There are many ways to achieve the various levels of *song*. I find that the *wuji* stance (無極勢), a standing exercise, to be helpful for beginners, since there is no

distraction from movements, such as during form practice. In the *wuji* stance, one stands in a good posture and progressively relaxes each body part until all held tension is released. At this time, the body will start swaying due to it being an inverted pendulum, and automatic responses kick in to keep the body upright.

One should practice *song* throughout the tai chi form. After sufficient practice, one can check oneself at various times to see if there is held tension. Constant practice of *song* and constant checking throughout your daily activities will help one to reach the second level, where one is *song* without actively thinking about it.

To reach the third level, being *song* under pressure, a good approach is to practice push hands. This is a partnered exercise, where each partner takes turns pushing each other in a circular, continuous pattern using a variety of prescribed techniques, but the specific technique chosen by the pushing partner is not known by the receiving partner. This exercise develops neuromuscular response, in addition to ensuring correct tai chi techniques. Beginners tend to stiffen up under pressure. Frequent practice will gradually improve the level of *song*.

Practicing *song* in everyday tense situations will also be helpful to reach the third level. Drawing from my own experience, when I realized my body became tense during dental prophylaxis (a somewhat stressful situation), I actively relaxed my body, and am no longer tense during these procedures. When I began riding a motorcycle, my body became tense when riding at highway speeds. Awareness of the tension allowed me to relax the muscles.

Body and mind are synergistic. As the body achieves *song*, the mind also has reduced tension. Sometimes this is referred to as *jing* (靜). The fourth level of *song* is achieved when mind and spirit are calm and collected. Figure skaters should also aim to achieve a high level of *song*, which allows them to perform and compete at their best. Muscle tension caused by nervousness hampers one's performance in competitions.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with a quote from Dr. Joanne Elphinston's book, *The Power and the Grace*, regarding the myofascial web: "...if you release held tension in the contractile muscle component of the web, you establish more space within it, ... we can move into positions that foster elastic energy transfer, allowing our myofascial system to function beautifully to share, transmit, and disperse force." This succinctly explains why we practice *song* in tai chi.

With Warmest Regards,

**Vincent Chun, PhD**



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