



Update

Hello!

Spring is in the air! Classes at the Milano Center are going well. It is a mixed level class in the Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention form. Newcomers are learning the form for the first time, while more experienced participants are learning finer points on balance and tai chi principles.

The online class in the 24 Forms is finishing its first cycle of instruction and will begin a second cycle as a mixed-level class, starting on May 4. Please contact me if you are interested in learning the 24 Forms. It is the most popular form of tai chi and is practiced worldwide.

In my skating activities, I just finished performing in two group numbers at the Skating Club of Boston's annual ice show: Ice Chips Full Throttle, featuring Nathan Chen. In one of the numbers I performed what is becoming my signature move, a very low hydroblade, garnering a round of applause from the audience. The event was exhilarating and I am more motivated than ever to work on my other elements for competition and performances.

Insight Sharing - Song

In this issue of the newsletter, I'd like to talk about one of the most misunderstood techniques in tai chi. The principle of *song* (鬆) is central to tai chi and is one of the distinguishing features of this martial arts style, considered the softest among all Chinese martial arts. Yet this principle is often misunderstood, even by many tai chi practitioners. So what really is *song*? The word literally means loose, and is sometimes translated as relaxed, but neither are adequate for describing this tai chi term.

The principle of *song* encompasses two components. The first component is the elimination of held tension, which is muscle activation that achieves no useful purpose. The second component is the opening of all the joints of the body. Some practitioners use the term *kai* (開), literally meaning "to open," to describe this second component, but more often than not its meaning is subsumed in the word *song*.

On the first component, that of eliminating held tension, it is necessary in order to sense the state of muscle activation and thereby be able to manage the coordinated activation of muscles in as powerful and efficient a manner as possible. I discussed this in my earlier article on interoception. Think of fine motor control, like in writing with pen or pencil. Holding the instrument with a clenched hand results in poor writing style. The opposite, where the hand is so relaxed that there isn't good control of the pen over the paper, is also undesirable. Another, more apt analogy is skiing downhill moguls. The skier's legs cannot be tense or else the skier will be tossed out of balance by the moguls. And obviously, the skier's legs cannot be relaxed either - they need to be strong and agile to withstand the high forces needed to successfully ski the moguls. Beginning tai chi learners often mistake *song* for being relaxed, and often play their form and even practice push hands with a minimum of muscle activation. This manifests in the lack of intent and the lack of gentle resistance.

Let's consider the second component, that of opening of the joints. Dr. Robert Chuckrow, author of *Tai Chi Dynamics*, suggests that *song* is muscle extension, although most scientific articles state that muscles can only contract. Dr. Paul Lam talks about expanding the joints from within. *Song* is most similar to pandiculation, the stretching and yawning that many mammals undertake upon awakening. *Song* and pandiculation are both relaxing ways for muscle activation, involving all of the muscles in the target area of the body and resulting in the opening of the joints. One can think of *song* as the opposite of the "suit of armor" strategy where all the muscles are activated strongly in co-contraction to withstand impending impact forces. While *song* also activates all of the muscles, it does so in a way that is stress free and sustainable, when compared with co-contraction.

When one practices *song* in tai chi, the head is pulled upward, the pelvis pulls downward, the arms are expanding outwards and lengthened. The legs have an outward expansion at the hip joints and knee joints (see photo above). This is a structurally strong posture. A similar posture is held in figure skating (see the

second photo) where the head is pulled upward, the pelvis is pressed downward toward the skating foot, and the arms and free leg are expanded outwards as if radiating energy.



In tai chi, *song* is associated with quick neuromuscular response, efficient use of energy, and force absorption and transmission. In figure skating, *song* contributes to a strong, balanced, yet supple and agile structure. It can contribute to feather-light jump landings, superior spirals and more.

To summarize, *song* is an efficient kind of muscle activation similar to pandiculation that expands the joints from within. The technique can be applied to figure skating and other movement arts.

With Warmest Regards,

Vincent Chun, PhD



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