

Adding Nothing

By John Haggerty

John Haggerty has been studying and teaching East Asian martial and energetic disciplines for thirty years. John is devoted to sharing the strength and wellness of body, mind, and spirit that traditional internal practices can bring to the sincere student.

One of my teachers held the belief that any profound teaching should be expressible as a seed or kernel and should therefore be representable in condensed form as a single sentence. The instructional sentence he formulated for the related arts of qigong and taijiquan is this: “Stand up straight, breathe, relax.” In his view, all the elaborations of the various forms and sets we study are intended to allow us to stand straighter, breathe more naturally, and relax more completely, all in the pursuit of becoming more and more fully human. Of course, the seed is not the plant, and we are obliged to study also the branchings and roots of practice that our seed can generate. Let us journey out in order to return with a new understanding of our home.

Yang Chengfu, the great teacher and popularizer of his family’s style of taijiquan in the early Twentieth Century, is supposed to have told his students many times every day to relax. One story goes that he repeated this injunction to them one thousand times each day, all the while driving them on to more and more strenuous effort. Relaxation in this sense is clearly not collapse or limpness. Instead, it encompasses effortless action and awareness developed over many hours and years of rigorous work. In qigong and taijiquan we relax into the structure that our discipline has built and into our knowledge, learned through devoted study, that the earth will bear us up without assistance if only we allow it to do so. Relaxation is the art of adding nothing.

The word that we translate as “relax” is “sung.” Like a great many words shared between practices and lineages, this one has taken on many different flavors over the centuries. “Relax” is perhaps the most common translation in my experience but “sink,” “release,” “let go,” “surrender,” and even “relinquish” also make their appearances. The various translations may relate to different stages of practice or perhaps just to particular teachers’ preferred emphases-- a more martial teacher might focus on the practice of sinking and rooting, for instance, where a more philosophical instructor might turn her attention to relinquishment. Ultimately, though, the common thread is one of giving up unnecessary tensions so that one’s intrinsic structure might effortlessly support one’s practice and life.

Perhaps here we can see that “*sung*” is itself a seed concept for practice, one that grows through different practices, cultures, and traditions. In philosophical Taoism we might say that sung is the underlying principle in *wei wu wei*, acting without action. It is at least similar to the meditative traditions of yoga and Buddhism, wherein students release attachment to ego and outcome in order to become mindful. Indeed, realized relaxation is the same thing as smriti, consciousness without discrimination, equanimity, mindfulness.

To relax fully is to be at the centerless pivot, to adapt effortlessly. In taijiquan, we show it by adapting to the force of another, by following their intention exactly. One of the Taiji Classics says: "A feather cannot be added; nor can a fly alight." Profound relaxation, *sung*, leads to this kind of sensitivity. Even the addition of a feather's weight or the approach of a fly is significant and effortlessly encompassed. This sensitivity is a hallmark of any advanced practice, in taiji, in yoga, in any spiritual discipline; as we find our relaxed selves, we develop the capacity to become truly aware of others and open to a complete, unconditioned experience of the world.

Cheng Man-ch'ing, a student of Yang Chengfu and a great teacher and artist in his own right, once told his students that he had no interest in enlightenment but only wanted to become fully human. Perhaps realizing the potential of deep relaxation is the root of returning to our full being, no matter which path we follow, or what name we call it by.

John Haggerty has been studying and teaching East Asian martial and energetic disciplines for thirty years. He undertook an intensive study of qigong and Yang style Taijiquan in the tradition of Yang Cheng-fu twenty years ago, and has been teaching the Yang long form, pushing hands, and weapon sets, as well as several qigong sets, for about fifteen years. He also teaches Isshin ryu karate and Chinese hard style martial arts and has studied widely among other traditional East Asian disciplines and philosophies. John is devoted to sharing the strength and wellness of body, mind, and spirit that traditional internal practices can bring to the sincere student.