

Sung (To Sink)

By Ron Perfetti



Considered by many, including the legendary Grandmaster Yang Cheng-Fu, to be the heart of T'ai Chi practice, this is the Chinese character that has most frequently been translated as meaning "to relax". But its literal translation is actually "to sink", and I feel that this is very revealing and important in discerning the true meaning of the teaching.

The intention of sinking is, as is the case for many T'ai Chi principles, a multifaceted expression. The major elements involved in this process of sinking include aspects of mind, energy, and weight.

The sinking of mind is related to the idea of attention in the lower Tan t'ien, or pelvic area. This denotes the relaxing of the attention usually held in the head, shoulders, and chest, allowing it to settle down to the Tan t'ien. The result of this is a shift out of being top-heavy (and thought oriented) into the experience of being centered (feeling/sensory oriented).

The sinking of the energy is directly related to that of sinking the mind, and in many ways is the result of being successful in being able to do so. The Classics § tell us that "where the mind goes, the Chi follows". The result of being able to sink the energy is that we truly enliven the pelvic area as the foundation of our energetic body. This is considered the lighting of the body's fire which warms and nurtures, thus providing the basis for health in the organs, spinal column, and sensory organs.

The sinking of the weight obviously has the same direction as the previous two elements of mind and energy, that of down, but instead of the Tan t'ien, its destination is the soles of the feet. One of the descriptions in the Classics of a master is "that person who has sunk 100% of their weight to the soles of the feet, leaving the rest of the body light as swan's down". In T'ai Chi we recognize that all tension in the body is expressed as holding weight up (opposition to the natural law of gravity), so therefore all relaxation must express itself as releasing weight down. In order to free the movement of the body and the energy, we must be successful in sinking the weight down through the musculo-skeletal structure to the ground, which is also a prime component in the experience of rooting.

It is important to make a certain distinction between relaxing and that of sinking. One could conceivably relax into a state of flaccidity or weakness. Yet in the process of sinking, in which we include the understanding of suspending the head top and muscular tone, one can only release the body, energy, and mind into a state of awareness, freedom of movement, and dynamic, non forceful strength.