



SUNG BEFORE PENG
Dr. John P. Painter

Everyone wants Peng-Jin but few realize that before Peng comes Sung!

The Character for Peng or Beng gives the impression of something rebounding or bouncing. This concept is one that is much discussed in the internal arts. It is part of the whole body concept for generating force in most internal arts. There are many interpretations of what Peng-Jin is and how to create it. Essentially in an attack it boils down to being able to transmit a type of flexible as opposed to rigid force by entrainment from the ground to the body weapon (fist - elbow - shoulder etc.) being used. So before we discuss Peng-Jin we need to understand how to make the body more responsive and sensitive so we can learn how to feel the correct pathway or alignments needed to develop the skill of Peng-Jin. This is why I say before Peng comes Sung!

*"The ancient pine stands tall,
branches laden with falling snow in winter's moonlight.
One more flake falls.
A limb bows low, releasing its icy burden to the waiting earth,
then springs back, ready to catch more."*

Li, Long-dao, 1948

The principles of Baguazhang are not things or specific actions; they are internal feelings and awareness resulting from a very personal process of experiential learning. One of the more difficult but essential principles to grasp in Baguazhang practice, especially for Westerners, is that of the release of tension (Sung); often referred to as relaxation and sinking of the body. Ask most Baguazhang players what the word means and they will say that it means to relax, sink, or get loose when you do the form.

A few misguided individuals believe that in some mysterious way their internal breath (Qi) will begin to move their body independently of muscular or mental action. A well-known Chinese Baguazhang instructor once said to me, "I have achieved a state in my Baguazhang that, when I practice, my muscles no longer move my body. I am so loose and relaxed that my Qi moves me instead!"

Let us understand reality from the beginning, movement of your physical body without mentally and /or neurological activation accompanied by muscular contractions is a physiological impossibility. You simply cannot move without flexing a muscle and every time you flex a muscle to walk, stand, sit, punch, kick, chew food, talk, or raise your arms, then your mind / brain and nervous system are involved.

九龍八卦掌

Understanding the proper role played by balancing muscular contraction (tension) with muscular release (relaxation) in Baguazhang practice is a sadly neglected subject for many devotees of Baguazhang. I am not sure exactly where these ideas of becoming limp as a dishrag or Qi moving the body without the help of the external skeletal muscles began. They certainly do not seem to be in harmony with the Baguazhang classics. The masters who wrote the definitive literature on Baguazhang all say that it is the mind and not the Qi that moves the body.

"For all intents and purposes everything in Baguazhang depends solely on the mind's power and not on external appearances."

Li, Long-dao

What is Sung?

Let's examine the concept of Sung from a practical perspective. The word Sung in the Chinese dictionary has numerous definitions the first of which is surprisingly enough: A pine tree. The second definition refers to a state in which a thing becomes relaxed, without excess tension. It is important to remember, at this point, that the Chinese written language is comprised of symbols that do not always indicate precise concrete things as in English. Chinese characters often have layers of meaning that represent feelings and ideas.

At first glance it is not so easy to see what a pine tree has to do with being relaxed, yet this is exactly the image that conveys the concept of what true Sung is all about. The doggerel about the ancient pine and the snow by my teacher, Li, Long-dao, at the opening of this article was the way he explained Sung to me as a young boy.

The pine is an ancient Daoist symbol of longevity and eternal youth, as the tree remains green and flexible no matter what the season. Its roots are deep and strong and the limbs are long and can support great weight. As in the poem, when there is an outside force applied to the limbs, they do not resist or become rigid. The limb bows slightly under the weight of the snow, allowing the weighty mass to slide off. The pine tree is not limp or flaccid. It has just the right balance of firm, flexible resistance without rigidity to sustain itself through all types of weather. It is in this same way that I believe we should view the concept of Sung in Baguazhang.

"Before there is Yang-jin the Yin-jin must manifest itself"

Baguazhang Classics

Yin-jin is that quality of energy that is relaxed before it can become Yang-jin or firm in nature. So before there is hard power there must first be relaxed or soft power. What this really means is that if we want to deliver great power in striking we must first learn to relax the muscles of the torso and limbs.

"Beginning any strike with tensed muscles will only inhibit the action because the antagonistic muscles will be flexed thereby reducing the speed and power generated by the agonistic (flexors) during the strike."

On The Long Road To Nowhere

The late Jou, Tsung Hwa, a highly regarded author and teacher of the Yijing and Taijiquan, told me, "Many people practice their Taijiquan and Baguazhang forms for years and years and never achieve true success. If you continue to depend only on your teacher, or merely try to reproduce, copy, and preserve a particular teacher's approach, you will not reach your highest potential."

The belief that constant form repetition will produce Sung skill or Qi is a path many follow. Mindlessly repeating a form over and over again is really a long road to nowhere. Some years ago at a martial arts tournament, a top competitor, who has won a number of medals, pulled me aside and said, "Dr. Painter, can you tell me how to feel the Qi in the forms? I copied my teacher, but I don't feel anything. How do I feel internal energy?"

Like so many others he had been doing internal arts externally. I told him what my teacher had shared with me, "The form or style is not important. What is important is what the mind does during the movement and that the body alignments are correct for the specific movements intended purpose."

I feel in the case of Sung, feeling Qi arises as the by-product of correct mental and physical activity. To feel the Qi in your Baguazhang, what you must do is carefully examine in slow motion each action you make; feeling the muscles flexing, stretching, and relaxing harmoniously. When you consciously work to slowly and deliberately control the actions of your body in sequence, you learn to relax the muscles not needed in a specific action. As this happens, your autonomic nervous system will dilate blood vessels activated through your mental desire to "feel". The nerves will become more sensitive and you will experience these sensations as Qi flows. This feeling of Qi is the end result of a proper release of musculoskeletal tension. The goal is to learn to feel all of this happening and to gain control over your body in action.

That Certain Feeling

Sung training has two major parts. Mind/body coordination and rooting skills. In the beginning, to train Sung, we embark upon a process of consciously finding and relieving unintentional tension in the body in order to facilitate more freedom of movement and articulation of the joint structures. In short, becoming aware of the unnecessary and excessive tonus in our flexors and extensors and letting go of any tension that is unnecessary. Once we can do this we can let the body "settle" in with gravity and develop a dynamic stability called rooting energy.

We must not collapse to learn Sung. We strive for a harmonic but dynamic balance of flexion in the protagonist muscles, coupled with an equal release and extension in the opposing antagonistic muscle structures. When correct kinetic equilibrium is achieved, the antagonistic muscles will be releasing tension in a balanced, dynamic action with the flexors of the protagonist muscles. There will be achieved a true Baguazhang flow state in the action. The relaxing muscles will act like yin flowing smoothly in harmony with the flexing muscles, yang; just as in the Chinese philosophical principle of the taiji symbolism.

The first part of Sung is mental and physical. You learn to feel these changes at all levels of muscular activity during your movements. This is no small feat, because Baguazhang is a dynamic and moving exercise and the muscles are constantly changing, relaxing, stretching, and flexing. This is one of the reasons for doing the form slowly. You have the time to use your mind to scan the body for areas where you are holding muscles (not used in the present action) that contain non-essential tension and to release it.

To attain Sung the mind must be disciplined. It is necessary to be fully present in the now moment. To be aware of each and every action you are making as you do the form. There must be, especially for the beginner, no distracting thoughts that bring on anxiety or tension.

Rooting and Sung

Yang, Cheng-Fu, in his twelve important points says, "To sink (zhen) is really the second step of Sung. Originally, the two were merged in one concept. To sink means to become stable by emptying strength from the upper torso into your legs. If you remain stiff in the upper body, your body will float and you can be easily toppled." This statement again bears out the Chinese calligraphic concept of Sung being a pine. The pine is tall and straight. Most of its weight is in the lower trunk and the enormous root sunk deeply into the earth.

Sinking or rooting does not mean that you press the body downward into the earth. Sinking is more a psychophysical concept. It is correct posture. Standing straight like the pine tree and a letting go of tension in the upper body so that the weight is carried directly over the center of gravity line located in the pelvis. When you do this the body naturally sinks.

It is important not to equate sinking with compressing. Your spine should be lifting upward when sinking, with the vertebrae and other joints opening, not pressing together. If you compress the spine, then you can damage the shock absorbing disks between each vertebra. If you stretch the spine as you "sink", you will increase their elasticity and strength, resulting in a suppler waist and flexible back.

The result of true Sung skill training is not limp or slack. Real Sung skill imparts the flexibility found in a good piece of spring steel or the sinuous body of a large serpent. It is not the wimpy image of a loose, flaccid silken rope that so many practitioners seem to try to emulate.

My Five Enemies of Sung

1. Tension in the antagonistic muscles.

Muscles not directly used in the action must be as relaxed as possible, so as not to pull against those muscles creating the motion. For example, the biceps (protagonist) must flex when lifting the palm, while the triceps (antagonist) must relax and stretch. All skeletal muscles are paired in this way and they must act in this manner to function smoothly.

2. Tension in the protagonist muscles.

Muscles used in the actions must not be unduly tensed until the moment of use. To have full energy, a muscle must relax and stretch slightly and then contract. Excess tension in the protagonist muscle will inhibit sensory awareness.

3. Out of sequence entrainment.

To have any part move out of sequence interrupts the flow or proper sequence of concentration. This will reduce or negate the mental sensitivity in proportion to the power of the out-of-phase action.

4. Lack of proper stability.

If there is no solid foundation (stance) from which to launch the motion, the sensitivity will be unstable. Instability distracts the mind from its goal of feeling the actions.

5. Emotional tension, competing, or thinking of an opponent.

Mental anxiety, the desire to win or succeed, can lead to excessive muscular tension in the beginning stages. For the beginner, a student who has learned the form and is now trying to do the internal sensing work of releasing excessive tension, thinking of an opponent or practicing applications of push hands will only retard his progress and lead to the use of excessive muscular force. This is because thinking of anything exciting or dangerous naturally produces a state of excitation in the nervous system, which is reflected in the musculature.

Bottom Line

To develop Sung is to use your mind to learn to feel and adjust the way you use your body machinery. This awareness teaches us to clearly differentiate between the necessary and unnecessary use of your muscles as you move. In this way you eliminate the excessive tension of antagonistic muscle groups in any particular action. You learn to balance the body with the force of gravity. You learn conservation of motion and develop a high level of stability. The release of conflicting muscle traction between protagonist and antagonistic muscle groups will result in greater blood circulation, joint flexibility, and fluidity of motion. You will also improve your kinetic alignments and potential for generating speed and power in martial applications. But, no matter how masterful you may externally appear to be in performing the forms, you will only get lost in the form if you believe that some day your Qi will begin to move your body!

