

On Relaxation

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Translated by Tu-Ky Lam

In my article entitled 'On spring-like force' I briefly mentioned relaxation. Now I would like to elaborate the same topic so that Chen style practitioners can see its importance. From my observation, Yang and Wu style practitioners pay much more attention to relaxation than Chen stylists, who place so much emphasis on the training of 'fa-jing' (power discharge) that they ignore the importance of relaxation. In fact, many Chen style practitioners do not realize relaxation is the foundation of spring-like force, which requires a mixture of soft and strong.

Meaning and contents of relaxation

Grand master Chen Zhao-kui put a lot of emphasis on relaxation. In summer 1973, when he was teaching me in his home, he said, "Throughout the practice of Taijiquan, the whole body has to relax and sink. You have to be one hundred percent relaxed. And all the joints in the body will have to be loosened right through to the tips of the fingers. It is only by relaxation (still with peng energy) that you can discharge your power thoroughly. Then your power discharge will be as powerful and as quick as lightning that your opponent cannot react in time." His comment pinpointed the relationship between fa-jing and relaxation.

Taijiquan is an exercise which exploits the hidden potentials of the human body by following natural rules. It regulates and strengthens the human body by a special way of training, bringing the mind and the body to a higher level of equilibrium and freedom. For this reason, throughout the practice of Taijiquan, the mind should be in total control, giving orders to muscles, tendons, bones and internal organs so that they can work together orderly and smoothly according to our will. And we can be quick and light in our movements. We can say Taiji training enables the mind/intent to give orders to the body to make good use of our hidden abilities. In other words, the signals from our brain and the movements of our body have reached the stage of automation or unity. When we face an opponent, our mind/intent will try to mobilize the force of the whole body to the point of contact. To achieve this, our whole body will have to be relaxed and loosened. It will be like a whip -- before we use it, it is so soft, but once it hit the object it will be very very powerful.

Real relaxation requires that we have to relax thoroughly. From my opinion, thorough relaxation should include the following.

1. Relaxed and calm.

This means that our mind must be relaxed first. This is the starting point of relaxation. Wu Yu-xiang, founder of Wu (Yu-xiang) style Taijiquan, said, "First from the heart (mind), and then the body." Chen Xin, the 16th generation master of the Chen family, also said, "Our mind has to be relaxed. If we can achieve this, the whole body will be relaxed." In Taijiquan, when one part of the body moves, all other parts will move as well, and when one is still (motionless), all others will also be still. The motion and the stillness are all under the control of the mind. That is why when we practice Taijiquan we have to be relaxed and calm and have total concentration. It is only when we have reached this stage of the mind that we can develop the high sensitivity of what the Taiji classics describe, "a feather cannot be placed and a fly cannot alight on any part of the body." Taiji practitioners place a lot of emphasis on using the mind/intent, of which the training should start from setting the mind in a peaceful and relaxed state before we can concentrate and use our mind/intent to achieve what we intend to achieve.

2. Relaxed and open.

If our brain is in a peaceful and relaxed state, our mind/intent should be able to make our internal organs, muscles, tendons, and the joints in the body relaxed, loosened and lengthened. The Taiji classics say, "Our skin has to be sensitive; and all our joints have to be loosened." And Chen Zhao-kui said, "We should lengthen our body from opposite points." "If one part of our body goes up, the other one must come down." or "If you discharge power to the right, you must loosen and sink the part of the body that is in the left." They all emphasize the same principle: loosening and lengthening all the joints in the body. For beginners, they should start from loosening and lengthening first. At a later stage, they can try to achieve in the opening there is the closing.

3. Relaxed and sinking.

This should include the sinking of qi, body weight, and the main joints in the body. When we practice Taijiquan, except for lifting our head-top up, all parts of our body have to be loosened and sink. For example, in our arms, we have to loosen our shoulders, sink our elbows and bend our wrists; in the legs, we have to loosen our hip joints, bend our knees, and have our toes cling to the ground; and in our torso, we have to relax our chest and sink our waist (lumbar spine). We do this in order that our joints can be loosened and lengthen and that our qi and body weight can sink, which can make our bottom part firm or well rooted, and as a result, the top part of our body can be nimble. The sinking of our qi and body (except the head-top which should always be lifted) can make us avoid to problem of top-heaviness.

4. Relaxed and lively.

This will occur in firstly the joints in the body and then the spiral and flexible movements of our limbs conducted from our waist and dan-tian -- chan si jing. The key to achieve this is that through practicing the Taiji form, especially chan si jing training, we loosen our joints, and tendons, and increase the flexibility of our muscles. The Taiji classics say, "Each time we move, our whole body has to be very nimble." We have to train in such a way so that all our joints are loosened and can move freely and quickly at our will and we can quickly mobilize the force of the whole body to the point of contact with our opponent.

Major joints that need to be loosened

It was said that in Chenjiagou village the famous Taiji master Chen Bo-xian asked Chen Zhao-Xu (Chen Xiao-wang's father) how he could improve his Taiji form. The answer he got was really simple: 'Loosen four pieces', which clearly indicates the main joints in the body that need to be loosened. The 'four pieces' are the shoulder joints and the hip joints.

My teacher, Chen Zhao-kui, when talking about the major joints that have to be loosened, had more detailed and vivid description. He said, "We have to pay attention to the relaxation of our chest. It is only when our chest is relaxed that we can execute all our movements from our chest... If our chest is stiff, it will be filled up with our qi. Once our chest is full of qi, it cannot co-ordinate the movements of the whole body, then we will certainly be beaten in any contest." He also said, "The most important thing is to conduct all your movements from the waist and the chest. Your chest cannot be full of qi or jing at any time of your practice. Whether it is open or close, your chest has to be relaxed. The key to make your chest relaxed is in loosening your shoulders. That is why the Taiji classics say that the turning (free movement) of your arms rests on your shoulder joints, and the neutralization (of incoming force) is in your chest and waist. The key to make your waist nimble is in loosening your hip joints. If your hip joints are not loosened, your waist will be stiff."

He then added, “When you do pushhands, the first thing we should do is to control the opponent’s shoulders. When he finds it hard to turn, he will resist and so will be under your control. When your opponent wants to control you they will do the same thing as well. But if you can loosen your shoulder joints and can make them turn in all directions (when you do the form), then when your opponent grab your arms and try to lock your shoulder joints, you can follow their force, and turn your shoulders to get out of their control and then retaliate straight away. Your shoulder joints do not turn by themselves. Their turning should be executed from your chest and your waist. The three should turn together as one whole unit. To be truly relaxed means all these parts of your body -- Shoulders, chest and waist have to be relaxed and loosened.”

When he taught push-hands, he said, “The worst you can do is: when your opponent pushed, you lifted your shoulders up, and your chest and waist become a piece of timber, then you are finished. The old saying, ‘Taijiquan should be practice from the body.’ The body in here means the the shoulders, the chest and the waist, which you should work very hard on.”

From what the two masters have said, we should know by now what parts our body should be loosed first. So when we talk of relaxation , we mean loosening the shoulder and hip joints and the relaxation of our chest and waist as the relaxation and the turning of our chest depend on the loosening of our shoulder joints; and the turning of our waist depends on the loosening of our hipjoints. If you can solve this problem, you can solve everything about relaxation.

How to train to be relaxed

Students at the beginners’ level cannot avoid being stiff. This is quite normal as when you begin to learn Taijiquan you are not familiar with Taiji movements and you are certainly tense, trying to tackle this problem. Therefore, it is impossible to demand you meet such requirements as ‘Once you move, every part in your body moves’, or do all movements smoothly and gently. Beginners should be given some time to tackle the task of relaxation. At this stage, they need only to remember the movements: their directions/positions and how to do them, where the main energy point is, where the body weight is, shun-chan and ni-chan (the twining of arms, legs and the whole body), etc.

Once students have learned the whole routine, instructors should raise one of Taijiquan’s training principles -- relaxation, emphasize its importance and demand that they achieve it through the following methods:

1. Relaxation through straightness.

Relaxation should be based on an upright body otherwise our Taiji form will be collapsed due to swaying shoulders, sticking out buttocks, or over-extending knees.

2. Relaxation through slowness.

Chen style Taijiquan has a tempo of slow and fast intermixed. But for beginners, before they are truly relaxed, they have to practice the form slowly. Through slowness, they can check for themselves the part of the body that is not relaxed and can have better understanding of relaxation.

3. Relaxation through spiral movements.

All Taiji movements are spiral and circular. We should pay attention to the shun-chan and ni-chan of our arms and legs and be relaxed when doing the spiral movements. It is harder to relax if we move in straight lines.

4. Relaxation through the main joints in the body.

We start from loosening the major joints first. Then we can combine the loosening of shoulder joints with loosening the joints in the elbows and the wrists and be able to feeling how the joints are moving one after another just like the movement of a caterpillar or a worm which moves its body section by section.

5. Relaxation through tightness.

Taijiquan requires that all parts in our body sink. This requirement brings a heavy burden to our legs, which have to be firm and strong in order to give good support to the upper body. When we practice in a low stance, the burden to the legs is even heavier. From our experience, the low stance can help develop strong legs. It is only when you have strong legs that you can better relax the your upper body, and you can shift weight more easily. You can say the relaxation on the top of the body builds on the tightness at the bottom. Therefore in your daily practice, try to use a low stance to give good training to your legs and so make good preparation for the relaxation of the whole body.

6. Relaxation through losing in push-hands.

From doing push-hands, we can learn the skill of borrowing our opponent's force. In order to borrow his force, we cannot resist and have to follow. People who do not want to lose are always tense and stiff, therefore resistance and running can often happen. If we are not afraid of losing, we can be more relaxed. Therefore, when you do push-hands, you must be prepared to lose and must not try to avoid losing. If you are not afraid of losing the benefit will be enormous. You will not be afraid of letting your opponent come in when they push. You can let them push in as deep as they like, and just relax and slowly develop the ability to contain and swallow the incoming force.

Relaxation and strength training

The relationship between loose and tight, soft and strong, and relaxation and strength training has always topics which can easily cause heated debates. We must understand that Taijiquan is a martial art of which the philosophy is based on the Yin Yang theory from Yi-ching, and people often refer to this aspect of Taijiquan as 'soft and strong intermix'. Any martial art which only emphasizes on soft and relaxation is not Taijiquan. That is why I have earlier said relaxation is only part of Taijiquan's basic training, not all of it. Relaxation is only a means in Taiji training, not an end. Our main purpose is that we can develop a spring-like force which is both soft and strong, and light and heavy through relaxation and other training methods. This is Taiji force and is the force of the whole body, which cannot be achieved only by relaxation. Taiji force is achieved through the diligent practice of the Taiji form, push-hands, training equipments, single Taiji movements, and other power training programs. All these training methods are not contradictory to relaxation but are complementary to it. Some people dare not take part in power training programs for fear that they may make them unable to relax. Their worry is unfounded.

We all know that Yang style practitioners place a lot of emphasis on relaxation. Dong Ying-jie, one of Yang Cheng-fu's best students, has made comments on the relationship between relaxation and power training as follows.

“Some people said Taiji practitioners should not do weight lifting and should not use force. This is not true. Before we learn Taijiquan, our whole bodies are stiff and our force is not flexible. Once we have learned Taijiquan, we are very relaxed, our qi circulates and we can get rid of the stiffness but keep our force. Our rigid force has become resilient force. The rigid force usually comes from the shoulders and is not controlled by the waist and manifested through the fingers. In business term, our rigid force is our capital, and relaxation is the method we use (know-how) to run a business. If

we know how to run a business, with a small capital we can still do big business. If we do not know how, then even with a big capital, we cannot run any business. Therefore, after you have learned to do Taijiquan properly, there is nothing you cannot do, be it weight-lifting, wrestling, or running. Do not let the misconception to worry you.” (Dong Ying-jie: Taijiquan Shi Yi.)

So Mr. Dong Ying-Jie has compared power training to the capital needed in a business and relaxation to its know-how in order to succeed. Here I would like to give an example to illustrate the relationship between power and relaxation. Some children like jumping up and down on a trampoline. Whether they can bounce high up or not depends on the resilience of the trampoline. If it is soft and without resilient force, no matter how hard a child jumps on it, he will not bounce back up. It will be the same if the trampoline is hard. Taiji force is like the force of a trampoline. It is a mixture of soft and strong. The Taiji classics say, “Let your opponent come in and hit back as soon as he loses his balance.” If you want to let your opponent come in, you will need to be relaxed first. In order to hit back you will need a strong resilient force which is based on relaxation and great strength. You cannot achieve what the Taiji classics say without either of them. That is the reason why I insist that you train hard to develop strong internal power and at the same time achieve relaxation. Combining the two, you can have a strong resilient force, which is real Taiji kung-fu. Therefore, Chen style’s special Taiji training programs on power training such as doing fa-jing on the long pole, twisting the Taiji short stick, turning Taiji ball, and even striking at punch bag with spiral movements are advisable. I can firmly say that relaxation and power training are not incompatible but in fact they are complementary to each other. The key is in that you have to be relaxed first and then from this foundation you develop your power. The misconception that power training can affect relaxation is unfounded. As for Chen style’s power training, see my other article entitled ‘Push-hands and power training’ which is also on video tape.

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