

The Meaning of Relaxation

I am often puzzled by the fact that even some of my long-time students are confused about the meaning of relaxation. In general, to be relaxed in I-chuan training does not mean to be inactive. The notion of inaction implies not doing anything either mentally or physically. By contrast, the very heart of I-chuan training is the mental and physical activity of hard work. Consequently, any interpretation of the notion of relaxation that confuses it with inactivity is fundamentally misguided. The difficulty, however, is that, by its very nature, work creates tension, and tension always hinders one's training. Paradoxically, then, the student must learn to work hard and simultaneously to let go of the tension created by that work. Some prefer, however, to throw away their relaxation and keep the tension associated with work.

Like most paradoxes, that of relaxing while at work is only apparent. Consider, as a simple example, the activity of swimming. If you're tight, you sink. If you're inactive, you sink. The only way to stay afloat is to let go of your tension as you do the work of swimming. That is to say, swimming is possible only if all the swimmer's muscles are continuously interchanging between being at work and at rest. You sink if you keep the tension or if you throw away the relaxation. Anyone who has any experience swimming knows just what it means to work and let go of tension.

How long does it take to learn to "swim like a fish?" It depends. Some people will never get there. Personally, I cannot swim well, because I cannot control my muscles in such a way that I relax and at the same time go to work. When I first took swimming lessons, I used to complain to my instructor that I wasn't learning fast or well

enough. He told me to relax. So I relaxed (in the sense of letting my muscles become inactive), and I sank like a stone. Then he told me I wasn't working. So I went to work and created a lot of tension, and again I sank. I worked long and hard at it, but I could never "swim like a fish." So I concluded that my instructor was no good. How could someone work and relax at the same time? There must be some secret here I was missing.

Like "secret," however, the word "relaxation" is among the most misunderstood in the martial arts. Indeed, my youthful confusion about swimming is more than common in the context of training. Thus, when they practice their kung fu or t'ai chi forms, most students are either inactive or too tight. Because they mistake inaction for relaxation, there is neither mental nor physical activity at the heart of their training. Perceiving that to be inactive is basically to be dead, some students overcompensate and become very, very tight. Either way, though, they receive no health or martial arts benefit from their training.

In a sense, there is nothing special about the martial arts in this respect. Like the martial arts, swimming, skiing, running all demand this same sort of relaxation while at work. In I-chuan, this is call "sung" and "gunn" together." In other words, do not first try to be "sung" and then later try to be "gunn." "Sung" means "let go of tension." "Gunn" means "go to work." Sung is not soft. Gunn is not tight. They are two sides of the single coin of work in I-chuan training. The lesson of this paper is, therefore, essentially the same as that of the discussion of up/down in my earlier paper on that topic: the student must learn to let these things happen together rather than making them happen one after the other. And just as before (where the up/down happening together cannot be

planned but must happen naturally), so here too: sung and gunn (letting go of tension and going to work) must happen naturally. Any attempt to pre-arrange their occurrence will lead only to the development of yet another martial arts form. The good news is that, like up and down, sung and gunn do happen together naturally, without our having consciously to think about it. The bad news is that it takes a lot of common sense and hard training with the right instruction to get oneself out of the way of these natural responses so as to be able to use them intentionally.

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