Lifting The Spirit

by Nick Cheang

By the 1930s Yang Cheng Fu had built the first large Tai Chi organisation and published quite a lot of valuable, deep information about the development and use of internal energy. One of the most accessible parts of this knowledge is his list of ten principles of Tai Chi Chuan. Lifting the Spirit (Xu Ling Ding Jin) is his first point and it reads something like this:

'Emptying the thoughts and raising the head as if the crown of the head is pressed up against the heavens'

Grandmaster Ip's book 'Tai Chi Chuan Revelations' elucidates with the following commentary: 'The neck must be straightened to allow the head to be raised and vertical. This allows the spirit and Chi to arrive at the crown of the head. No physical strength should be used, as physical strength will cause stiffness and also hinder the Blood and Chi circulation. One must have natural intention of emptiness in the mind'.

Although Lifting the Spirit is the first point Yang Cheng Fu mentions, it is seldom the first thing people learn about Tai Chi. Of course the first things to learn are some movements. Yet movement in itself is an external thing. Knowledge of energy is the real prize we are after. As I wrote in an article in 'Tai Chi and Alternative Health' magazine, the gateway to gaining this knowledge and understanding is mindfulness. Through mindfulness we can begin to relax the mind and body and begin to feel that there are stronger ways of being that are integrated and holistic rather than divided and tense. Put another way, movement separate from our centres tends to lack mindfulness. However when we relax, centre, empty our thoughts and our bodies, we engage in movement with a clear spirit, a sense of fulfilment and intense mindfulness.

However the issue of using relaxation to achieve unity is of course that everything can sag. We can become too Yin. Relaxing in Tai Chi is about letting go, but instead of finding the right 'tone' that really means letting go, we often make the mistake of 'deflating'. But all is not lost – something comes from sagging. Like a sagging balloon we can keep working on relaxing the already relaxed parts of ourselves until we totally expose the foolish nature of the other 'locked', 'tense', 'held' areas that hide within our body (and mind). In other words the areas that respond to the command to be more Yin can bring the 'stuck', Yang areas more solidly into our awareness. The super powers we see in the Tai Chi Masters come from having faithfully joined mind and body in relaxed harmony, capable of being still or in motion whilst maintaining the same tone...just different intensities. Once we have sufficiently eroded our 'stuckness' these powers are possible.

It is with this challenging paradox that Lifting the Spirit can really help. In general we are so totally egocentric that we often forget to perceive our head as part of our body system - after all we can't see our own head other than in reflection. Small wonder then, that when trying to become mindful of our entire body system (relax all the muscles, sink the energy, maintain focus on a position the body is holding, keep intent and energy projection clear etc.), we struggle to apply the ideas to our head and neck. Often our head is used simply as an 'observation deck' or 'thought platform' rather than as an integrated part of the system. It's almost like a separate creature that darts and moves around on our mobile necks whilst the body gets on with its commanded duties.

This is a reasonable position to hold when first beginning Tai Chi, as we are generally quite disorganised about how we use our energy and will tend to use the head in the way we have learnt -
in order to support the mind in coming to grips with what is involved in Tai Chi study. But at some point our departure from past ways must extend to the unruly ruler of our systems and so we should then ‘empty the thoughts and raise the head as if the crown of the head is pressed up against the heavens’.

Simple. In actual fact, because of the complexity of muscles through the head, neck and shoulders, getting the correct ‘tone’ of Lifting the Spirit is very hard. As most of us are programmed to display complex information about our feelings through the attitude of our heads and necks, it is in addition very hard to give the command for the head to remain ‘pressed to the heavens’ and not have it quickly forgotten.

This is one of those times when our standing (in Wuji) post-Qigong, is invaluable. We all know, through modern exercise science and therapy, that it takes time to properly warm up the body and so it is with your Tai Chi exercise. If you take the time with Qigong it will bring its rewards, because it is through the stillness of the Qigong that you can concentrate totally on one thing long enough for your system to warm up, loosen and coalesce in line with your intent. All healthy young children naturally Lift the Spirit. Once they have mastered sitting up their spine will automatically stretch within itself, expanding each joint and allowing the crown of the head to ‘press against the heavens’. This is also true of quadrupedal animals. For example, if you press a horse, dog, or cat on the forehead between the eyes - and they wish to stay - you will feel a solid, expanding response from their system. In this instance the Lifting Spirit is still up the spine, as it is with us, except they project it forwards through their foreheads, as it is the forehead rather than the crown which is in line with the spine in the horizontal plane.

So really Lifting the Spirit is about recognising that, energetically speaking, the head is best treated as part of your spine. If you are willing to stand in Qigong long enough you will find the alignments in the thoracic and lumbar vertebrae, sacrum and coccyx become stronger and stronger and you will be able to feel how energy travels expansively up and down it. Once you can do this you can then add the cervical vertebrae and your head to that list and hey presto! You will be able to Lift the Spirit consistently without using force. Prior to the solidity of the spine providing the energy flow to Lift the Spirit, there will be a tendency to use local force to create lifting of the neck and head.

Once the energy is coming up to and beyond the crown of the head, the effects are phenomenal. It means that your whole body is expanding from top to bottom: from the tip of the spine to the end of your tailbone; from the tip of the spine to the crown of the head; from the pelvic bones to the soles of the feet; from the shoulder blades and collarbones to the tips of the fingers. So having studied the rest of your system, accurately adding Lifting of the Spirit creates one entire flow of energy from mind, body and spirit - you could say it is the icing on the cake. Then the power of your internal energy is multiplied manyfold.

In addition to the extra power it gives for martial application, trying to keep the Spirit Lifted is fertile ground with respect to self-development. It is amazing how many ways we use the direction and volume of energy in the head, neck and eyes to communicate consciously and subconsciously with other people. As an experiment, Lift the Spirit and then go out in public. Remain mindful of Lifting the Spirit all the time - then notice on your trip the times when you feel the compulsion to stop doing it, or to duck your head, or to turn away or avert your eyes as you engage with someone. It is only when you do an exercise like this that you consciously find out where you have placed yourself in society: to whom do you defer and who do you dominate? Such an exercise will raise many questions for you. By answering them, you can become stronger and more sure of yourself and of others. You can be more able to decide where you want to be, rather than allowing the strength of
others, or your own assumptions and habits, to dictate that for you.

In conclusion I would say - do practice Lifting the Spirit as much as possible. Perhaps the best place to really concentrate on it is during your extended Qigong practice. So really you could say that the whole of this article has been a very long way of saying 'more Qigong!', one of my Tai Chi teacher's favourite catch phrases.