Standing Still Like a Tree

By Victoria Windholtz

In Chinese, Zhan means to stand still and Zhuang means foundation, or Pile. Gong can be translated as exercise with the intrinsic meaning of assiduous practice.

This is the reason why we poetically call this posture "to stand still like a tree."

During the winter, the trees endure the cold weather, the rain and the snow. They stay and wait, impassive, with no other goals than being what they are. Nothing can change their inner nature.

Even if they share the ground with other trees, they are deeply rooted into themselves. Outside, they remain still and silent, but inside, they never stop growing.

We have a lot to learn from trees, from their wisdom and patience. No event in life should be able to change what we are.

Like the trees, we should perfectly accommodate to the seasons. Our interactions with other human beings should not devastate our lives. We should, like trees, always remain rooted and centered.

By practicing “zhan zhuang,” we stay still, like the trees. We learn how to keep our body and mind balanced.

Only from the stillness, can we develop an inner view of ourselves, and understand deeply all the great and constant changes which are produced inside our bodies.

The study of zhan zhuang has no boundaries, no end. Like the trees, as life go on, we keep growing . . . from inside.

History

This practice is a part of an ancient Chinese health system of exercises.

One of the first references found about this type of exercise is in the Huang-Ti Nei Ching (Classics of Medicine by the Yellow Emperor, 2690-2590) which is, by the way, probably one of the oldest books in the medical field.

This posture, practiced and transmitted secretly in martial arts circles, has been openly shown to public since the last century.

Wang Xiang Zhai, a very famous martial arts master of that period in China, made of this technique the base of a new martial art that he called I Chuan (Mind Boxing). He used to say:

"The immobility is the mother of any movement/technique."

Today, this technique is more and more studied by practitioners of internal martial arts, including T’ai Chi.

As martial artists seeking to build up great amounts of qi (vital energy), or simply as individuals concerned with getting a better health condition, we all have many good reasons to include zhan zhuang in our daily practice.

Principles of Practice

"Zhan zhuang gong" is the foundation for all the postures in T’ai Chi. It is a deep preparation before further practice.

It is very important to practice this posture in a correct manner in order to better understand the T’ai Chi principles.

Even if from outside, this technique looks extremely easy to perform, but we should never take it for granted. A qualified teacher is a must to help you correct your posture regularly.

Failing to practice in a correct manner, some health problems might appear or degenerate and energy blocks can simply get worse.

Its study allows the practitioner to refine the feeling of all the parts of his/her body and to understand the energetic flow of qi and blockages through progressive and continuous practice.

The very secret of this art is to bring out and liberate the energy which is inside our bodies, sometimes in a latent state.

Two aspects are relevant while you practice this technique: first, relax the whole body, second fix your posture.

Relaxing should not be assimilated with a passive state. By focusing our attention in our bodies, we progressively learn how to remain alert and quiet at the same time.

It is not, like in many sports, about making a dynamic effort then rest.
Here effort and relaxation go together in an outside static but inside very dynamic exercise.

In this posture, body and mind work together as a whole. Therefore, when we practice we must consider not only body principles but also mind principles.

**Body Principles**

Feet are parallel. Keep your arms up as if you were holding a ball and place your hands somewhere between the thorax and the abdomen. If you are tired or if you are a beginner, keep the hands at the level of your “dantian.”

With time and practice, you will feel the need to raise them progressively. Let it happen but do not force your posture. Be natural.

Keep your head up. You should have the feeling as if the head was suspended from above.

Relax shoulders, elbows, wrists and hands.

Relax your chest and allow the breathing to settle down smoothly into the “dantian” (a point located two fingers below your navel).

It is very important for beginners not to deliberately try to push down the breathing. This can damage the organs. In fact, we can not force the abdominal breathing itself. It should come with consistent practice, as well as the feeling of peaceful rooting.

Relax the kua.

Bend your knees slightly and relax them. Do not put pressure on your knees. Avoid letting the body weight to rest on them. Do not practice a low posture if you are a beginner or if you are physically exhausted.

Relax the knees. Relax ankles. Relax feet.

Make sure that the weight is equally balanced on two feet. Relax and stretch your spine. Relax your back.

Align the “Baohu” (an acupuncture point located on the top of your head) and “huiyin” (located between anus and the genitals).

Side view of zhan zhuang.

Listening behind. During zhan zhuang, you should be aware of the eight subsidiary directions (front, back, left, right, front right, front left, back right, back left). Keeping exclusively your attention to the front part of your body will bring part of your energy up.

As a result you will find it difficult to keep quiet and focused. Therefore it is advisable to keep a “listening feeling” behind your body in order to remain quiet and to develop vital energy inside your dantian.

For beginners it is sometimes difficult to stay in this posture longer than two or three minutes. They can experience physical discomfort, shortness of breath or even mental confusion.

The principle is to practice naturally, following your needs and your physical condition. You should not force yourself to progress too quickly. There are not short-cuts in this practice. Patience and consistency are a must. The improvement and eventually the need to stay longer in this posture will come with time and regular practice.

The usual duration of a session for advanced practitioners is between 20 minutes and one hour. It is relevant to point out that the duration is not the most important aspect of this practice. This is not about competition.

Focusing on quality is much more rewarding in term of results. Therefore, it can be much more effective to have ten minutes of a focused “zhan zhuang” than one hour just waiting.

It is also important to respect your body condition. If you are physically exhausted, the best way to regenerate your energy is to rest. Start again when you feel more rested and alert, then you will be able to take out all the benefits of this marvelous practice.

**Mind Principles**

In zhan zhuang, we use the mind to train the body. It is a sort of meditation, but you should not seek to empty your mind. When the mind is wandering about too much, just bring it back to the center. Then use your attention to correct your posture and to develop inner awareness.

My teacher, Chen Xiao Wang, usually says that 50% of the intention should be focused on the posture and the other 50% should be free. This means that you should allow yourself to accept losing some control. This is part of the training.

You should exercise to feel from inside the three external coordinations: Shoulders and Hips Elbows and Knees Wrists and Ankles As well as the three internal coordinations: Heart Mind Qi (energy)

It can be an useful tool to work on each pair of joints separately, as follows:

Two shoulders flowing. Two elbows flowing. Two wrists flowing.
Two hands flowing. Two hips flowing. Two knees flowing. Two ankles flowing. Two feet flowing.

And then:

Right shoulder and left hip flowing. Left shoulder and right hip flowing. Right elbow and left knee flowing. Left elbow and right knee flowing. Right wrist and left ankle flowing. Left wrist and right ankle flowing. Right hand and left foot flowing. Left hand and right foot flowing.

To work on the external and internal coordinations will help you to progressively feel your body as a whole. Mind and body are not separated entities any more.

In order to finish a session of zhan zhuang, you slowly let both arms go down, hanging up on both sides of your body. You will usually place both hands, one on top of the other, covering your dantian.

As you start moving, take your time to relax shoulders, elbows and hands again. Make sure that your “dantian” is fully relaxed. Do not rush.

For women, right hand is placed first. For men, left hand is placed first. “Laogong,” the acupuncture point placed in the middle of the palms should form a straight line with the dantian.

Align the Laogong and dantian. Some rotation of the dantian should follow, as a closing technique.

Usually, when you stay in zhan zhuang for around twenty minutes or more, you can rotate the dantian 36 times in both directions. Counting the rotations is an useful tool to stay focused.

When the rotations are over, you can keep both hands covering your dantian for a few seconds. The whole body feels relaxed, quiet and stronger after practice.

Then allow yourself a few seconds before you go back to your occupations.

**Zhan Zhuang and Emotions**

We often frustrate our emotions in our daily lives.

Through the practice of zhan zhuang, as in life itself, emotions may come up. This happens because emotions are a part of our inner being. And somehow the internal practice leads us to deal with the deepest aspects of ourselves.

Zhan zhuang gong will progressively allow us to recognize these emotions and to bring them out and when they are negative ones, to get rid of them, in a healthy and natural way.

Therefore, when emotions turn up during your daily practice, do not fight against them any more. Let them come.

If a sudden need to cry appears while you are practicing zhan zhuang, do not repress it. Cry. If you feel oppressed and anguished by unexpected and somehow violent or painful emotions, do not restrain them.

Allow them to come up, to exist inside your body and finally to be released. Observe their transformation from inside.

With consistent practice, you might get some distance from what is going on, physically and emotionally speaking.

You might better accept your own emotions as simple ways of self-knowledge and self-evolution. You will become actor of your own emotions, instead of being constantly submerged by their unpredictable flow.

Isn’t accepting what we truly are one of the keys of developing our own freedom?

At this point we get in touch with a deep subject: zhan zhuang, as a tool for self-development. By deepening your knowledge of your inner feelings, you will be able to identify your emotions and to get better control of them in your everyday life. As a result, you may feel the extraordinary benefits of this practice in your social and personal life.

Releasing bad energy becomes particularly important when we understand the impact that bad emotions or permanent stress can have on our bodies.
This exercise becomes not only an extraordinary way of inner exploration but also a very powerful healing technique.

**Zhan Zhuang as Healing Technique**

Zhan zhuang is an invaluable asset to correct the bad postures related to the sedentary habits and the bad habits of our life.

By practicing zhan zhuang, we can successfully relax our nervous and neuromuscular systems altogether, allowing our bodies to regenerate and to build up considerable amounts of energy.

Blood circulation inside our bodies is enhanced. All the internal organs get tonified, massaged and stimulated in depth by this practice. The small blood capillaries in the muscles expand. This is reflected by a numbing feeling in the hands and feet. The whole body may become warm or sweating.

The continuous practice gradually induces abdominal breathing. The pulse and breathing rates become low. As a result, the lung capacity increases and the heart receives more oxygen and blood, getting stronger.

Practicing zhan zhuang allows us to relax the cerebral cortex to a inhibitive state, which protects the body from nervous exhaustion and reduces the development of chronic illnesses.

A study undertaken in a mental health institution in Canada (June 1998) shows how this exercise has been successfully used as a complement of treatment for some depressive and anxious state.

Recent medical studies stress the incidence of long-term stress in the development of some chronic conditions and even certain cancers.

Long-term stress largely weaken the immune system and might increase, as a result, the risk of developing sicknesses. Zhan zhuang helps to relieve stress from our everyday lives. Through standing, we learn how to relax deeply. After practice, one usually feels refreshed, comfortable and full of vitality.

**Casual Zhan Zhuang**

With time and dedication, we realize that we can use all these principles in every situation of our lives. Waiting for the bus, washing dishes, sitting and lying down, cooking, driving. Any situation is good to deepen our daily practice.

Practice will become for you as essential as playing is for children. Nobody knows how many hours a day they play, but basically we can say that they play the whole day.

**Spirituality**

This beautiful practice is not only an unexpected moment of intimacy but also a source of spiritual inspiration.

Stripping our practice to the bare essentials, we can find ourselves as human beings.

We are part of the Universe. We share the energy of our near environment. Our pulse is a part of the cosmic pulse itself.

As our sensitiveness develops, we begin to feel in our body the subtleties of the interaction between yin and yang energy.

Standing between the earth and the sky, our body and soul become one.

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