

Zhan Zhuang - foundation of Internal Martial Arts

by Karel Koskuba

Most Internal Martial Arts use some form of standing practice as foundation training (and Taijiquan is no exception in this regard). These standing exercises are usually called **Zhan Zhuang** (pole standing); sometimes they are called 'standing Qigong'. I think it's fair to say that most students are baffled by them. They are supposed to be good for you but most students find them difficult to understand, boring and painful. Yet they are supposed to relax you and help you to 'accumulate *Qi*'.

In this article I shall try to outline my theory that should explain, from western perspective, why these exercises are so important both for Internal Martial Arts and Qigong, how this western view correlates with the traditional *Qi* view and give training advice on how to practice them. In writing this article I have drawn upon my experience from Taijiquan, Yiquan and information from medical postural rehabilitation research and sports science.

Before I start, I would like to establish some facts about how we use our body that I will use in my explanation.

Posture, Movement and Balance

We generally think of posture and movement as being separate - we are either still or we move. Movement and posture place different demands on our muscles and so it is not surprising that our muscles reflect this. For example, those muscles used mainly for posture have a high content of slow-twitch fibres whereas the muscles used mainly for movement have a high content of fast twitch fibres. But not only are muscles different from each other, one muscle can be quite different in different functions. For example a muscle when used in a **postural** (**stabilising** or **tonic**) function will act differently from the same muscle when used for movement (**mobilising** or **phasic** function). So for ease of explanation, let me pretend that each muscle is really two muscles - a postural one and a phasic one (sometimes called stabilisers and mobilisers). As a further simplification, when I say a muscle, what I will mean is the muscle with all the various sensors associated with it plus its controlling mechanism within the Central Nervous System. So please keep it in mind when I talk about muscles 'feeling this' or 'doing that'.

What is important about postural muscles from our perspective is the fact that they react against the force of gravity and that they act outside of our volition - we cannot normally control postural muscles directly, only indirectly - through intent. For example when we ride a bicycle, we keep our balance by the use of postural muscles. Our intent is not to fall down but we do not consciously control their operation in the way we can control voluntary movement. Conscious control would be too slow - before we could react, we would fall down. This is in fact what happens when we start learning to ride a bicycle - we start by using phasic muscles and through trial and error the postural muscles take over and we 'find our balance'.

Our postural muscles are not only used in holding a posture or in balancing as was mentioned above, but during movement, too. If we think of movement as a transition between postures, we can see that postural muscles are active all the time. But what is the relevance of postural muscles to Taijiquan?

Effortless and Natural

If someone pushes against you and you do not want to be pushed off balance, the chances are that you will resist using strength. If this happens, you are using phasic muscles. But it will be different if someone pushes down on your shoulders. In this situation you do not push back up - you just absorb the push effortlessly into your posture. So in the first example if, instead of phasic muscles, you were to use postural muscles to absorb the push into

your posture, you would use far less effort. You could then also use the 'balancing' ability of postural muscles to effortlessly counteract any sudden change of direction. In other words, as the Taiji Classics say: "**when he doesn't move, you don't move; when he moves, you've already moved**". So using postural muscles in this way would make Pushing Hands a far more enjoyable experience!

Where the Mind Goes, the *Qi* Follows

The parallels between *Qi* and the use of postural muscles should be becoming a bit clearer now. When I use intent (*Yi*) to guide my postural muscles to lift my arms, I do not feel any effort - it is as if my arms are being lifted by invisible threads. When I use postural muscles to absorb or neutralise a push, I don't feel any effort and my body reacts automatically to produce a balanced outcome for me. And when you start using postural muscles, you develop a feedback through subtle sensations such as heat, ache, flow and others. All these are properties of *Qi*. If we describe (human) *Qi* as 'those processes of the body/mind that are outside conscious control' than we would cover most aspects.

Qi* originates in the *Dantian

When you make any movement, before the movement begins there is a short delay during which the body prepares by stabilising your lumbar spine using deep abdominal postural muscles. Normally you will not feel this 'preparation', but it is there and as your awareness increases you can feel it. As we said in the above paragraph, usage of postural muscles equates to usage of *Qi*. Thus any movement is preceded by activation of your *Qi* in your *Dantian* (think of it loosely as the lower abdomen).

Your body will not move till it is properly stabilised. This is important for fast moves, especially explosive *fa-jin*. The delay produced by stabilisation of your lumbar spine makes you slower. This does not matter very much for slow movements. But when you want to move fast, you do want to move fast! There is a way to eliminate or at least minimise this delay by holding your body in a posture where your postural muscles are already engaged.

Song

The posture just described is what is called *Song* (loose, relaxed) in Taiji Classics. What is important in this posture is that everything that can be supported by postural muscles, is indeed so supported. Your body feels light (you can't feel postural muscles) and poised for action, perfectly balanced. You could even say that (quoting Taiji Classics again) "a feather cannot be added to the body nor a fly alight without setting you in motion".

Whole Body Movement

If you stand on one leg and observe for a time what you do to keep upright, you may notice that the adjustment to your posture can happen anywhere from your ankles all the way to your head. That's because postural muscles co-ordinate across the whole body. When you use postural muscles, rather than phasic muscles, you will naturally produce whole body movement.

Postural Dysfunctions

From what you've read so far, you can see that training postural muscles is quite important. But there are still other reasons to be concerned about them. Due to our fairly recent transition (in evolutionary timescale) into upright posture, the postural function related to this upright posture is not yet securely embedded into our neuro-muscular system and can be easily disrupted. It seems the 'new' postural muscles need the input that they get from functioning as postural muscles (i.e. balancing against gravity) to remind them that they are postural muscles. For example if they are held in a fixed position for a long time, they may start to forget their proper role. Our lifestyle unfortunately encourages this (school, office, computers,...). And there are still other ways for things to go wrong. Sometimes phasic muscles can take over the postural role because we did not 'let go' of them at the

end of a move and so they may start holding part of our posture. As the posture muscles weaken through inactivity, the phasic muscles' postural role will be strengthened. Or we may strengthen a phasic muscle too much during training and it may start taking over the postural function within its domain.

All this has implications for our strength. When pushing something whilst standing on a slippery surface, we cannot generate much strength. In order to use force effectively, we need a stable base. This applies within our body, too. If our postural muscles are weak or not working properly, our phasic muscles will not develop their maximum strength. This means that often we can use only a fraction of our potential strength.

It affects our speed, too. If we can't produce enough strength due to weak postural muscles, our speed will suffer. If we use phasic muscles to act as postural muscles, they will not be very effective when we try to use them for movement.

As a result of all this, the majority of us do not use our core postural muscles properly. More than 95% of all musculo-skeletal problems can be attributed to the imbalance between postural and phasic muscles. And it's not only musculo-skeletal problems. As the research in this area is still fairly new, I'm sure the importance of postural re-education will grow steadily.

Having, I hope, established the case for postural training, let's have a look at it in detail. I will present Yiquan's approach to Zhan Zhuang training. Yiquan (pronounced yee-chuan) is an internal martial art with main principles and stages of training quite similar to those of Taijiquan and, with the exception of Zhan Zhuang, quite a lot simpler. Zhan Zhuang in Yiquan, on the other hand, is more detailed and it is the main training tool all the way from beginner to the most advanced level. I will describe several health postures and one combat posture but there are sitting postures, lying down postures (very popular with students!), one-legged postures, slanted postures, etc. However, the ones I describe here are sufficient for the purpose of illustrating the method of practice.

Standing - Zhan Zhuang

General Points

Any worry or anxiety impedes our learning progress. So the first task is to create a calm and happy mental state and it is important to keep it throughout all training. This is a skill, like any other and will improve with training. So create some image that will make your mind tranquil and happy. In doing so, engage as many senses as possible. For example, imagine yourself in a beautiful garden. You can see pretty flowers and trees all around you. You can smell the flowers' scent on a soft breeze. You can feel the soft breeze on your skin. You can hear birds singing in the trees. There are few white clouds in the blue sky. Or you may prefer to picture a scene by the sea, with the white surf breaking on the beach. Any image that will make you as peaceful and happy as possible. Try to express the tranquil feeling in your face and body.

The next step is to relax the whole body. We shall use mental images again, this time directed towards relaxing specific areas of the body. Try to create kinaesthetic images (sensations in the body) rather than visual images.

Health Postures

Stand with your feet about the width of your shoulders apart, feet parallel or toes pointing slightly out, whichever is more comfortable. Bend your knees slightly so that you can relax the lower back. Feel the whole body soft and balanced. Feel that your head is held as if suspended from above by a string attached to the crown of the head. The neck will then be relaxed and free from any tension. The spine, and especially the coccyx, should hang

down - an image of reaching down with your bottom, as if about to sit on a high stool, can help with this. Eyes can be either open or closed, mouth nearly open (but not quite), breathing softly and quietly, preferably through the nose. Feeling calm and happy.

After a period of settling down, start observing how your body keeps the balance. Gradually you will become aware of small movements of your body. At the beginning, you are likely to feel the whole body sway a little and get automatically corrected into a balanced position. Try not to control these movements but imagine standing in (warm) water and feel your body swaying as if moved by slow waves. Feel the whole body swaying as one unit - do not move your arms independently of the body. Some people, because they think their body should be still in standing postures, try to keep the body motionless. That is a mistake - the body should be as soft and relaxed as possible.

The emphasis should be on relaxing all (phasic) muscles and feeling how the body balances against gravity. Slow, very subtle movements can be felt and these are used and controlled, first in a passive manner, later actively, using kinaesthetic visualisation.

The role of the Health Postures is to relax the body and develop whole-body connection. This means that a movement in any part of the body can be felt to propagate through the whole body in a natural fashion. The process is characterised by gradually becoming aware of the internal structure of the body and then gaining some measure of control over it.

Empty Posture (Wu Ji Zhuang)



Master Chen Xiaowang correcting Wuji posture of Kathy Webb

Observe the **General Points** and then the description in **Health Postures** above. Let your arms hang by the sides.

Embracing Posture (Ping Bu Cheng Bao Zhuang)

Start in the **Empty Posture** as described above. When

you have settled down and feel calm, lift your arms slowly in front of you in a shape of embracing a big balloon in front of your chest. The hands should be in front of your shoulders, with the palms facing you and the fingers of both hands pointing at each other. Keep your fingers open and imagine small cotton pads placed between fingers, supporting them in their open position. Your hands are soft and slightly curved. Feel your elbows resting on soft pillows.



Karel Koskuba in Cheng Bao Zhuang

With practice, you will be able to achieve a very relaxed feeling. When that happens, you can move on to the next step, creating kinaesthetic images.

Up to now, your elbows were as if resting on soft pillows, keeping your shoulders relaxed. Now imagine that your elbows are touching balloons floating on water. Your task is to keep the balloons under your elbows. If you lift your elbows, the balloons will be free to float away. If you press a little more, they will be pressed into the water and pop out to float away again. Imagine that the big balloon you are embracing is very fragile and filled with helium - if you press a little more, it will burst, if you press a little less, it will float away. The feeling created is that of sticking very lightly to the balloon but making sure not to let it slip from your embrace. The purpose of these types of images is not to become skilful in creating them but in exploring how the body feeling changes and gradually becoming aware of the inside body structure and body's unity. You can start slowly swaying forward and back. Keep your body balanced and experience the movement as a passive movement; for example as if standing in a slowly flowing river that keeps changing its direction. As you get better in experiencing the 'inner flow' within your body, you can discard the images.

Covering Posture (Ping Bu Fu An Zhuang)

From the *Embracing Posture*, keeping your elbows still, slowly lower your forearms and turn your hands palms down. The arms should be horizontal, with fingers of each hand pointing inwards at around 45 degrees angle. Feel as if your arms and hands are resting on a plank of wood that is floating on water. Feel the plank floating on water away from you and follow that motion with your body. There should not be any change of your arms in relation to your body. Then feel the plank floating towards you and again follow the motion. All other points remain the same.

Combat Postures

Practice of Combat Postures is the first step in acquiring Internal Power. Their role is to make the Combat Stance (see immediately below) seem as natural as possible, strengthen legs and create a connection between them, and start using the whole-body connection to 'sense strength' in the body (see 'Almost-Movement' below).

Combat Stance

Stand with your heels about fist-width apart, toes pointing slightly out. Transfer your weight onto your right leg and shift the left foot forward, in the direction the foot is pointing and lift the front heel off the ground. Put about a quarter to a third of your weight onto the front foot. Keep a slight push from the front foot into the back one and vice versa. Each of your knees should point in the same direction as the respective foot. Feel as if there is an elastic band between the front toes and your forehead and between the front knee and the opposite hip. At all times feel that you are holding these elastic bands slightly stretched. The body should be held as described for the Health Postures. Eyes should be open, looking into distance.

Almost-Movement

Observe closely what happens in your body just before you move. Say you get ready to move but you 'abort' the move just before it actually happens. If you try it few times, you are quite likely to notice a certain type of feeling in the part of the body that you were going to move. At the beginning, it is probably easier to feel it in your hands or arms, so if you have difficulty with it, choose a hand movement. Eventually you will be able to feel a sort of 'inner' activity in your body. What happens is that as you form an intention to move and as you get ready to move, there will be some muscular activity associated with stabilising your body in such a way so as to enable the movement to take place. Normally this muscular activity is not noticed as it gets subsumed in the sensations of the actual move that normally takes place. We can't call it a movement, as there is nothing actually moving yet it is more than 'not moving' - that's why I call it almost-movement. This is the basis of 'sensing strength'. In the following Zhan Zhuang exercise we practise moving or sensing (*Moli* - sensing strength) in forward-back direction.

'Primordial Void' Posture (Hun Yuan Zhuang)



Master Yao Chengguang in Hun Yuan
Zhuang

Stand in a Combat Stance and as in the **Health Postures** above, create some image in your mind that will make you calm and happy; keep it in your mind and your body throughout the training.

Slowly lift your arms in front of you as in the **Embracing Posture** described above but this time the left hand (assuming the left foot is in front) is slightly more forward and up than the right hand.

Apart from the position of your arms and legs, the rest should be the same as in the **Embracing Posture** (including creation of a calm and peaceful feeling).

Sensing Strength in a Forward-Back Direction (Qian-Hou Moli)

Keep a very soft and relaxed body structure and create a kinaesthetic image of exerting a great deal of strength. For example, imagine that you are embracing a tree and try to uproot it by pushing with your body forwards. At the same time, imagine that you are inside another, hollow, tree with your arms and the back in contact with the tree and you try to uproot that one by pushing with the back of your arms. Alternate this effort with 'moving' in the opposite direction - pulling the inside tree with your arms and pushing the outside tree with the back of your body. Always use the whole body. Do not imagine that you are actually succeeding in any of these tasks - the trees are too big and just won't budge. During your practice, you stay relaxed and nearly still with perhaps just very small movement. Little by little you will get a feeling of almost-movement.

After a period of practice (say several weeks), slowly work the following six points into your posture:

- lift your foot arches and feel as if your feet are grasping the ground
- feel your pelvis horizontal and from there a slight lifting of your perineum
- feel your diaphragm horizontal by relaxing down the front bottom edge of your ribcage which should fill-out your lower back ("**relax your chest and raise the back**")
- feel the top of the chest/bottom of your neck horizontal
- feel the bottom of your mouth relaxed and horizontal
- feel the top of your head horizontal

These are all important points for re-inforcing the work of your main postural muscles throughout your body.

Tips for Zhan Zhuang practice

Establish a regular routine

The best way to achieve that is to start with *very little* but *every day*. What is 'very little'? Say 10 seconds - and I do not mean it as a joke! If you start with 10 seconds, you'll eventually be able to go to hours with no problem (if you wish).

In Zhan Zhuang you are training your Mind

The best way to train your mind is to *practice only when you concentrate*. That's why 10 seconds is probably a good starting point. As you keep practising, you naturally start to concentrate for longer and so you practise longer. Even when you can stand for a long time, if one day you can't concentrate, stop practising. If you force yourself to stand for a set period, you learn not to concentrate, the practice becomes boring and soon you would give up. When you concentrate, it's enjoyable and you progress faster.

Pain is not necessary

Pain is distracting. Remember, you are training your mind - if the pain in your legs or arms distracts you, you can't concentrate, so stop practising or change to another posture. If you have pain in any of your joints, stop practising - you should never feel pain in your joints. Muscle pain could be OK, but best to check with someone who would know (for example your teacher).

Get someone to correct your posture

It's a good idea not to worry about your posture at the very beginning. First you need to relax and settle into the practice. But fairly soon you should get someone to check your posture, preferably several times and then from time to time till you can feel yourself whether it's correct or not. It can save you a lot of time!

Further Training

Zhan Zhuang is the first step in Yiquan training. For completeness, I show the whole syllabus with both 'modern' and 'traditional' explanations.

Yiquan Training - modern (and traditional) explanation

- Zhan Zhuang** (Pole Standing) - the Health Stances are primarily for relaxing and retraining the body to use postural muscles (accumulating *Qi*). The Combat Stances are for learning how to control the postural muscles using intent (how to use *Yi* to lead *Qi*).
- Shi Li** (Testing of Strength) - learning how to move upper body using postural muscles (how to use *Qi* to lead body or strength) and patterning the body for subsequent Fa Li training.
- Mo Ca Bu** (Friction Step) - same as Shi Li but for legs.
- Fa Li** (Release of Power) - learning how to 'release' power by using phasic muscles supported by postural muscles (learning how to produce Jin by combining *Qi* with physical strength) along the lines practised at the Shi Li stage and later based on advanced Zhan Zhuang training.
- Tui Shou** (Pushing Hands) - this stage is similar to Taijiquan's Pushing Hands. Sometimes called Shi Li with a partner though later fa-jin is also used.
- Shi Sheng** (Testing of Voice) - learning to augment power and integrate the centre of the body in a more natural way using breathing musculature.
- Ji Ji Fa** (Combat Practice) - fixed and free sparring drills and sparring.

If you miss out the Combat Stances, instead of the 'Shi Li' and 'Mo Ca Bu' stages substitute practice of the Taijiquan Forms(s) and add weapons training after the 'Tui Shou' stage, you get a Taijiquan syllabus.

Yiquan for health

Zhan Zhuang training of Yiquan is ideally suited for correcting all kinds of problems stemming from the imbalance between phasic muscles and postural muscles, some of which were mentioned under the 'Postural Dysfunctions' heading above but there are other benefits that result from Yiquan training. The emphasis on tranquillity is very beneficial in any stress-related problems; the training method of slow and careful movements improves dramatically co-ordination and balance. It is an excellent method of regulating one's metabolism and sleep pattern. The list could go on but the space is limited!

Conclusion and Summary

Zhan Zhuang is the first step in acquiring Internal Power. The emphasis should be on *relaxing* all muscles and *feeling* how the body balances against gravity. Gradually the use of phasic muscles is eliminated from the postural function of the body. Slow, very subtle movements can be felt under the guide of *kinaesthetic visualisation (movement in stillness)*. Later on, when learning to move using 'intent', the body's structure should always be supported by postural muscles only, producing the feeling of standing at any point in the movement (*stillness in movement*).

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