

Standing Like A Tree

If you ever observe a large group of people in China practising T'ai Chi in a park or public square, you'll probably find that, unlike in formal or display sessions, you will see a multiplicity of T'ai Chi and Qi Gong styles being carried out as individuals exercise on their own oblivious to others around them.

If you study them more closely, you may see that some are just standing stationary in a fixed posture for maybe 10 minutes or longer, eventually moving but only to another static posture. Looking longer at these people, you may also detect a very slight gentle swaying movement in their apparent rigidity.

These people are almost certainly practising a Qi Gong called Zhan Zhuang (*pronounced Jan Jong*) which has an accepted translation of 'Standing Like a Tree'. Imagine a tree - a tree with a solid trunk and strong, spreading branches, deep roots firmly embedded in the ground - a tree that appears immovable, yet when observed over a few years is growing from the inside.

One of the modern masters of Zhan Zhuang, Lam Kam Chuen, says:

*When you stand, you are like a tree. You are growing from within.
Your feet, like roots, draw power from the earth.
Your body, like the trunk, is perfectly aligned.
You are unmoving, strong.
Your head is open to the heavens like the crown of the tree.
You rest calmly, the universe within your mind.*

Zhan Zhuang is one of the few major Chinese exercise routines that involves no direct physical movement, yet combines all the elements of an ideal whole body exercise: the physical development of health, strength, muscle tone and posture control combined with internal calmness, philosophy and personality enhancement. In modern China research into its effects has endorsed its benefits, and as such it is used extensively in Chinese medical therapy in hospitals and clinics for the treatment of a wide range of conditions, and also by serious students of many internal martial arts (not only T'ai Chi), where it is used to develop full physical and mental body control. Originally a martial arts 'secret', it is now practised by increasing numbers of people throughout China and also forms part of the training of some of the country's top athletes to provide increased blood circulation, greater breath capacity and enhanced muscle tone.

Its creation is attributed to the health methods used by Daoists. In more recent centuries, martial artists adopted Zhan Zhuang to create a superior exercise, often devoting up to 50% of their practise time to it. The postures stimulate the flow of your body's internal energy *Qi*. Once you have overcome any physical fatigue, holding the positions helps you to mentally relax in meditation, while at the same time, building up your muscle power and resilience and improving posture. This regulates the flow of vital energy by helping your whole system to relax and at the same time strengthening the ability of your body and mind to withstand stress.

Despite the tremendous energy that it is capable of eventually generating, it can be practised by anyone, of any age, anywhere, without special equipment or clothing, and can be adapted for a seated position. Although long time periods are hard to maintain at first, with progressive practising and a little patience, once you begin to feel the benefits, you will find that Zhan Zhuang can be a treasure for life.

Before You Begin Zhan Zhuang

I have decided to include instruction for this Qi Gong in my book for beginners for potential use in the early development of posture and stance awareness. Adopting basic Zhan Zhuang will be invaluable for those intending to progress to higher levels of T'ai Chi. I have also found that many who are recovering from or managing spinal problems can often benefit from including this in their practise.

The postures shown here are a basic sequence of five. Some teachers may use just one posture (normally posture 2) or progress the sequence in a different order; others may introduce other static postures, normally drawn from animal stances or from your T'ai Chi form postures.

Please be aware that the simple postures shown here can be very demanding when carried out correctly, even if only for a few minutes, and it is recommended that before attempting any Zhan Zhuang, absolute

beginners wait until they are happy with some basic Qi Gong and form, and have started to appreciate basic posture and movement, preferably under the guidance of a teacher.

Important Practise Tips Before You Start

WARNING: In the early weeks of practise, holding a stance too long or incorrectly can cause muscle fatigue and/or shaking. Normally the recommendation when it is used as a health aid is 30 seconds to 2 minutes per posture, progressing gradually to 15 minutes, however serious traditional martial art students may eventually spend 2 hours per posture! **PLEASE DON'T OVERDO IT.**

- Ideally choose a calm place tranquil place to practise.
- Some beginners may initially experience severe muscle fatigue and trembling. With some this can happen within just a few minutes and can be very worrying. You perspire, your calm breathing become erratic and your mind says stop - so do so. This is why you need to progressively build up the duration of practise and not try to push yourself too hard in the early weeks.
- My recommendation for beginners to Zhan Zhuang is that the period for holding a posture is initially 30 seconds to 2 minutes, progressing gradually over many weeks to 5 to 15 minutes. It is far better to start learning with a single posture using a very short time period, progressively increasing the time over a few weeks, as this way you develop stamina and start to fully learn and experience the effects of this 'static exercise', rather than negating your effort by becoming fatigued and stressed. In these early weeks you work only on a single posture and once the allotted time period is expired, the exercise is not normally repeated in that session. Once you have started to develop the physical stamina required by only working on one posture at a time and are comfortable with for example 5 minutes of a posture, tick that one off and move to another next session.
- Eventually, after a few months, when you have accustomed your body to each position you will be ready for a five movement sequence. When you practice the sequence, initially time each posture stance to a fifth of the total time period.

Let's say that you have practised each posture using single 10 minute sessions. Now practise a sequence of five postures for 2 minutes per posture stance. This way you are still only standing for the same overall time of 10 minutes that you had achieved with each single posture.

In future sessions progressively extend the time for each posture in the sequence, thus extending your overall practise time.

- *How can you measure how long you are standing in a posture?*

You can always watch a clock or use a kitchen timer, but one of the best ways and more befitting the meditative nature of Zhan Zhuang, is to count your breath cycles - typically fifteen slow, deep in and out breaths will take around a minute. This is only a guide as not everyone breathes at the same rate, and as you progress with T'ai Chi and Qi Gong, your breathing will get deeper and slower.

- Feet should be about shoulder width apart, knees soft, spine & coccyx hanging down, neck and head relaxed, body as if it is suspended by a piece of string. Your mouth slightly open, ideally breathing through nose if you can. Imagine that you are sitting on the edge of a large soft balloon. There should be a small balloon under each armpit and a larger one between the knees. The fingers should also be held loosely apart by a mini balloon (but not splayed out or rigid). Depending upon the posture additional 'balloons' may support your elbows or hands.

- When you are standing, be as quiet as possible. Just be where you are and be very still. Feel calm and happy. You will hopefully experience a feeling of deep meditation. Eventually you will feel as if your body is expanding naturally, both physically and mentally.

- After a period of settling down into a posture, start observing how your body keeps balance. Gradually you will become aware of small movements of your body. At the beginning, there is tendency to correct for this by a physical movement such as leaning backward or forward. DO NOT try not to control these movements this way as it defies the basic requirement of a straight back and impairs circulation.

Instead, imagine standing in a warm stream and feel your body swaying as if moved by slow waves. Let your whole body sway as one unit and eventually you will develop the ability to gently counter and control these movements by applying subtle internal resistance to 'give and take' the movement.

You do this by modifying the tension in different muscles in the legs, arm and back to compensate and control. At first, this may feel uncomfortable as it increases the load on your entire body; nevertheless it is correct, and is one of the key factors in understanding the essence of deeper application of T'ai Chi energy sensing and movement.

The Postures Of Zhan Zhuang

Although shown standing, the postures can be modified for sitting.

Commencing

Carry out a simple warm up and then adopt the basic standing T'ai Chi posture:

1. Feet slightly apart - about shoulder width; head up - as if pulled up by an invisible string; chin slightly pulled in; fingers slightly apart and slightly curved; tail-bone dropped down - as if sitting against a balloon; knees have no tension - soft and slightly forward. DO NOT lean forward or backward.
2. Breath deeply (ideally through the nose), cleanse the mind, and think and focus on the posture(s) about to be carried out.
3. Ideally use a slow deep breath counting:
'In': one, two, three, four.
'Out': one, two, three, four.



First Posture - Wu ji (the primary energy posture)

This basic posture has already been used as a simple Qi Gong. Now we intend to hold this posture for a much longer period.

1. Hold the hands by the side of the hips palms facing inward. Imagine that you are sitting on the edge of an imaginary balloon and that there are small balloons under your armpits and even smaller ones between your fingers.
2. Focus on sinking Qi to the Dan Tien whilst breathing slowly and deeply. Seek out any tensions in your body and relax them by readjusting muscle use.
3. Imagine that you are standing waist deep in a gentle current of water that is moving past your hands. Use the flow of this current to gently stabilise your body.



Second Posture - Embracing the Tree

Here imagine that you are hugging a tree. This posture is often used by those who practise Zhan Zhuang using only one position.

1. Lift the hands to a position with the palms facing the chest at a height that puts the little fingertips level with the heart and the thumb tips with the top of the shoulder (in alignment with the middle Dan Tien). Elbows and hands are away from the body as if you are holding a balloon gently against your chest.
2. Try not to drop your elbows - imagine that the water you are standing in is midway up your chest and that your elbows are supported by an inflated balloon or cushion on the surface. If you press the elbows down the balloons will resist - if you lift your elbows up, the balloons will float away - learn to control them.
3. Focus on your breathing, and again readjust muscles to compensate for tension.

In the first posture described earlier, the stance is balanced and central with arms down at the sides of the body. The transition into the second posture consists of raising the arms up and holding them in front of you. This action shifts your centre of gravity slightly forwards, and unless you compensate for this shift you will feel be unbalanced as if about to topple over. Learn to compensate by altering muscle tension rather than by leaning back.



Third Posture - Holding the Belly

As you slowly lower your hands into this posture, again appreciate the subtle difference in the core muscle tension in your back as you compensate for the change in arm position.

1. Lower your hands, palm still facing inwards until your fingers point at the Dan Tien and towards opposite knees. Imagine that you are holding a large balloon gently against your stomach, but not so hard as to distort its shape or burst it.
2. Again try not to drop your elbows - imagine that the water you are standing in is up to your hips and that the balloon that you are holding and your elbows are floating on the surface.
3. Focus on your breathing and ensure relaxation (song).



Fourth Posture - Standing in the Current

This time the hands are moved out to the side of the body. As before note how the simple change in posture subtly changes the muscle use.

1. Soften your knees a little further and move your hands out to the side about 9" (20-25cms) from hips, palms facing downward.
2. Imagine that the water you are standing in is up to your hips and that there are small balloon or planks of wood under your hands. The current will try to move the balloons or planks, but by gently pressing down you keep them in position.
3. Focus on your breathing and releasing tension.



Fifth Posture - Holding a Ball in Front of the Face

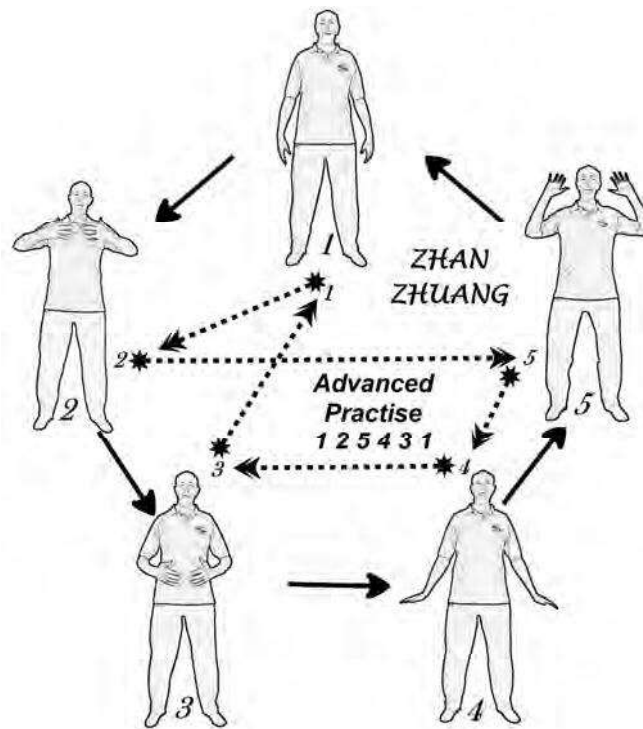
1. With the knees softened as in Posture 4 (and a little lower still if you can manage softer knees), lift your arms so that the hands are shoulder width apart and held at face height, palms facing forwards (as if about to score with an oversized basket ball). Your thumbs should be approximately level with your ears and fingertips with the top of your head.
2. Again try not to drop your elbows. This time you should imagine you are supporting a large balloon in front of your face and that you are about to push it over a wall or are about to score with an oversized basket ball. Your elbows are again supported by balloons or cushions floating on the surface of water which is now back up to your chest.
3. Focus on your breathing and releasing tension.



Finishing the Session

1. Gather Qi in the palms of your hands, lift slightly then invert the palms and push Qi down the legs, lowering the hands down to your sides.
2. Slowly straighten the knees and stand up.
3. Step the legs in together and 'bounce' and flex the legs and feet.
4. Walk around.

Posture Sequence



Simple Zhan Zhuang Learning and Advanced Sequences

The order that the basic postures are practised in can vary. The picture above illustrates the usual sequence to use when you start learning Zhan Zhuang and compares it to one of the sequences that is often chosen in traditional teaching.

The initial learning sequence follows the posture order illustrated previously in the instructional text, **1-2-3-4-5-1**, which alternates lowered and raised arm postures.

The traditional sequence shown as an alternative in the diagram swaps over posture 3 and 5, changing the practise order to **1-2-5-4-3-1**.

This sequence is much more demanding for the beginner as it puts the most wearying raised arm posture (5) immediately after the raised arm stance (2), and does not give you the opportunity to lower your arms and 'rest' them using the lowered arm postures (3 & 4).