

Zhan Zhuang - Standing Pole Meditation **by Marco Lueck**

Whether you practice internal martial arts or Qigong for health purposes, Zhan Zhuang is an essential part for developing health, strength and a great sense of body-awareness. The martial artist will slowly narrow the center line of the body and tap into full body connected power. Practitioner for health purposes will be able to identify the most subtle physical and energetic blockages or tensions and promote increased circulation through deep relaxation.

Zhan Zhuang, as simple as it may seem, is a very profound technique. In order for you to understand the "Standing Pole Meditation", I will tell you its uses and theory from the perspective of a martial artist and that of a practitioner of Qigong for health purposes.

I will start with a bit of history, then continue with the concept and theory and finish with all the instructions for a proper practice.

The origin of the Zhan Zhuang Qigong practice (also known as standing pole or hugging the tree exercise) can be traced back as far as the 3rd century BC, though it's debatable as to when exactly the system was developed, and by whom. In fact it's unsure what Zhan Zhuang was originally developed for. However, The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic (Huangdi Neijing, 黃帝內經), which is the most important ancient text in Chinese medicine as well as a major book of Daoist theory and lifestyle, suggests that the performed static standing exercises were practiced to cultivate inner peace, health and to balance the body. In the early Qing dynasty (17th century) this practice was widely spread and commonly practiced by the Shaolin monks. Even though it was not exactly the same version as the standing pole exercise as we know it today, at first glance, the concept seemed the same. The Shaolin warrior would maintain a single posture for a long period of time, essentially a "horse-stance" which was supposedly held until one doesn't feel any discomfort or fatigue anymore. Everyone who has spent a few minutes in a horse-stance knows that this practice is mainly strengthening the legs and lower back and maintaining relaxation is a



San Ti Shi Stance

more than difficult task. Through diligent practice you will be able to cultivate a very low centre of gravity and firm root which allows your body to stand very stable and well balanced. These days we know that a "relaxed tension" is one of the key features of Zhan Zhuang, however, looking at the execution of these exercises from back in the day, they seem to have had little to do with relaxation and internal self-cultivation or nurturing tranquility and health. Static standing exercises have been adapted by many martial arts styles. However, it wasn't until the development of the "San Ti Shi" (Heaven, Earth & Body-Stance), which belongs to the practice method of Xingyi Quan (Form and Will-Boxing) that the principles of relaxed nurturing of strength and physical conditioning were combined. It is believed that through this knowledge of the previous static Qigong exercises, in particular, San Ti Shi, Wang Xiangzhai then developed the standing pole practice as we know it today. Master Wang Xiangzhai (1885-1963) was a master of the martial art Xingyi Quan and the founder of Yiquan which was developed through his experiences of Zhan Zhuang Gong. In Yiquan the focus is on developing one's natural movement and fighting abilities by improving perception of one's body, its movement and of force.

The concept of Zhan Zhuang

There is a concept in martial arts that movement is inside stillness and stillness inside movement. If we assume a static position like San Ti Shi for example, there is also a potential to create movement. It is as if your body is standing in the starting position for a particular action, your muscles are energized and you

are experiencing a certain “readiness”. At the very least we have to realize that this person, standing still is having potential energy. At any time this person could, through releasing, create kinetic energy and fall to the ground. Of course this example is only to highlight that, unrelated to contracting muscles in the body, the body is also holding a potential of energy.

Some styles of martial arts are utilizing this very idea to create movement using this different “engine”, not muscles and tendons, but the potential energy stored in a posture. You can think of this engine as “gravity power” which can be used for example, as “falling” steps (often seen in Chen Taijiquan) or as different postural releases in which the martial artist is throwing the opponent. So gravity plays an important role in the creation of potential energy, but it can also be utilized in different ways. This gravity can be used to put tension on the major tendon lines of the body and on the tissues throughout. This trains the whole constitution of the body and the tissues and muscles fibre will get an elastic and strong quality and capable of holding higher volumes of potential energy.

Zhan Zhuang as a fundamental exercise for internal martial arts

First of all, Zhan Zhuang is very helpful to condition the body into the correct postural alignment. The process of “flattening the lumbar curve” is considered important in order to increase your power through a entirely connected body. Important instructions to stand in this posture correctly are the tilting of the pelvis and bringing down of the tailbone. However, these cues potentially lead the students to tense the psoas muscle. That’s why it is important to remember relaxing the buttocks at the same time and let it hang down like a weight on the coccyx.

I personally wouldn’t go as far as claiming that the standing pole meditation is “the ultimate way” to build a foundation for internal martial arts, but I believe it is an essential corner stone which can teach us a wide range of things about ourselves. At the very least, I believe that static postures are necessary to create the awareness of the body and its connection with the lower Dan Tian. With the knowledge about the constitution of our bodies, we will be able to train more effectively.

How to increase the potential energy and transform it into power.

Essentially you can picture the body as one unit and imagine a web of tissues, different elastic bands and sheets of fascia. From what we have learned this interconnected web is full of potential to create motion, and training it will cultivate stronger potential of power. San Ti Shi, Zhan Zhuang and the postures of the Yijin Jing all focus on stretching major tendon lines and tissues of the body. These lines are all leading back to the centre, the lower Dan Tian, which acts like a major connection point for all motion created. This centre can sink, tilt or rotate. When this action occurs and the body is held static, you are basically loading this web with potential energy. - This energy can be transformed into power if the practitioner chooses to release the tension.

Through awareness we develop a natural connection and engage the whole body.

Generally speaking, most people lose the awareness of their bodies. It will stop working as one unit, and movements will be segmented. It is common in today’s society that people become disconnected from their bodies. That’s why, the novice, first needs to reclaim their sense of awareness and develop it to a high degree. If we look at the “Cloud Hands Exercise” in a Taiji form for example, you might see a beginners hand hanging soft “like dead” or the foot hangs loosely during a step. In order to move our body in unity we need to create a good sense of awareness. Simply by placing our awareness on a specific area in the body we will be able to engage this part. The hand will become alive and the action of moving it in this state of “readiness” will be executed with the correct amount of effort. With the awareness on your foot during a step, the foot will be engaged and actively searching for gripping the ground. This awareness, though it is extremely hard to apply during motion, is an important part of practice. With diligent training it will eventually become a natural reaction, a habit which will always maintain the correct state of each part of your body during motion. When we stand still in Zhan Zhuang, we are able to practice this microscopic awareness. When we scan the whole body from the top of the head to the toes, we will make the whole body engaged and start seeing the requirements of each body part necessary to go through complex motions.

Motion in stillness and deep relaxation

Once we have cultivated a good sense of awareness we will be able to identify the most subtle physical and energetic blockages or tensions. We often think that we are relaxed, but often this relaxation is only superficial. Deep relaxation reaches all the way into the bones, as we learned in the Qigong relaxation theory. Once we stand in Zhan Zhuang, our sore muscles shaking, we will have to admit that we are not really as relaxed as we thought we were. Practicing will show us places of tension that are deep within our bodies and using our mind and the breath we will be able to release them.

Zhan Zhuang and the breath

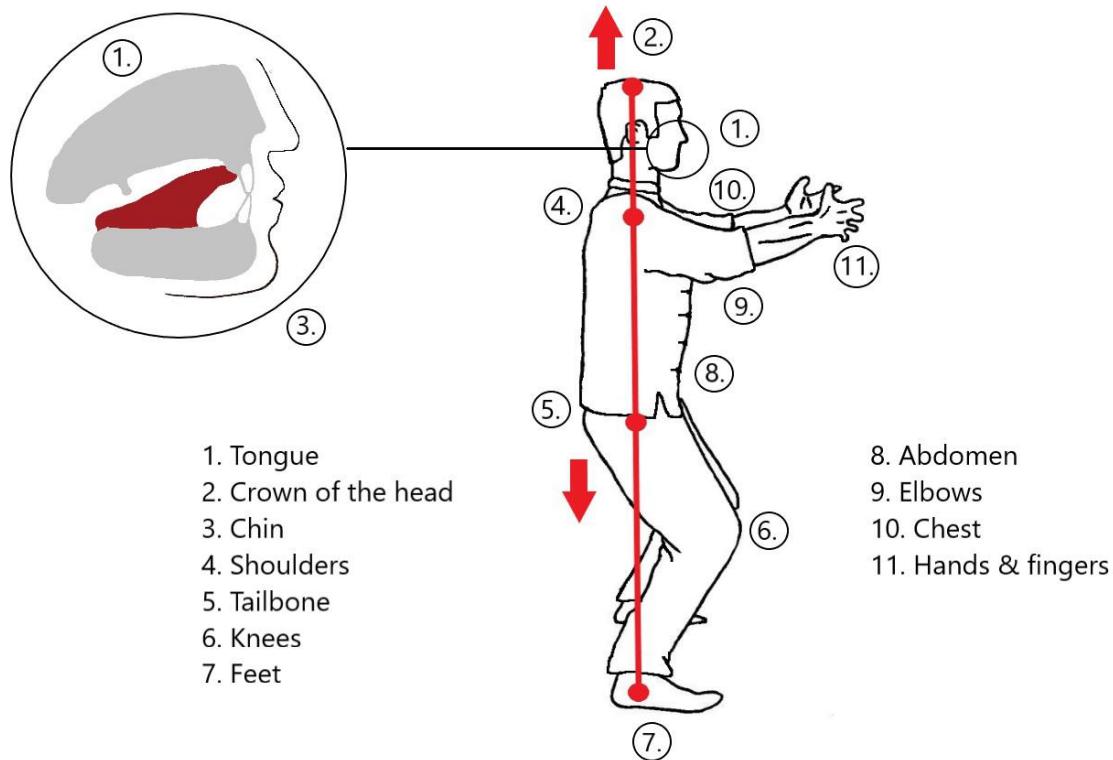
There are different techniques for breathing during your Standing Pole Meditation. These techniques are often paired up with different visualizations in order to practice safely and learn how to focus on the lower Dan Tian. One of these visualizations, for example, is breathing into your feet. This is done to lead the Qi down and prevent it from “getting stuck” in your upper torso. Generally speaking, we should breathe naturally. Most likely, this doesn’t mean the kind of breath that comes naturally to us because it often is not the most effective way. We might have a deficient way of breathing due to previous injury, an unhealthy lifestyle or certain habitual behaviors. Natural, in this case, most likely means embryonic breathing, also known as “back to childhood breathing”. While a baby is developing in the womb and when it is born, the baby breathes through its navel without using its lungs. This is breathing from our centre point and is called the “original breath”. Our goal in Qigong is to go back to this kind of breath because it nourishes the body, stimulates the internal organs and is the key to a smooth circulation of energy within the body.

Zhan Zhuang Qigong for increasing and maintaining health

From TCM (Chinese traditional medicine) we know that Xin (our emotional mind) governs most of our body. All our thinking processes and organs are controlled and regulated by it and therefore it is under constant “work load”. If it is too excited and exhausted, due to physical, emotional or mental strain, our vital organs function inefficiently and sickness or diseases can manifest. When practicing Zhan Zhuang, naturally we first need to cultivate a peaceful and concentrated mind, calming down the fire of our Xin. This will promote the Xin (which encompasses the entire cerebral cortex and central nervous system) to reach a state of rest and recuperation. With Xin in “resting mode” our bodies can relax while maintaining an appropriate degree of stimulus (engagement) and reach a nourishing state in which the blood flows freely. This unobstructed blood flow is one of the most important elements of the Standing Pole Exercise for development and maintenance of health. With the body assuming the correct posture and a relaxed Xin, your blood circulation is improved greatly and Qi can reach every part of your body and nourish it. From the outside the body appears to be still, but on the inside, all the vital organs can settle and metabolic function increases. This is why it’s called movement within non-movement. - Zhan Zhuang promotes unhindered internal activity which leads to a natural adjustment of your Qi in the organs while maintaining external stillness.

Let's get started.

I will start with the instructions for the posture. There are 11 major parts of the body that we need to focus on in order to achieve the ideal postural alignment. Yes I know, we have talked about most of these in the previous lesson already, but let's go for another ride. This time in different words and with some extra details.



1. First of all, we place the tip of our tongue to the roof of the mouth. This connects the Yin vessel (Conception Vessel) with the Yang vessel (Governing Vessel). The tongue functions like a bridge for the energy to circulate freely between the front and the back of the torso.

2. Second, we raise the crown of the head up. The feeling should not be tense. It is as if you had a string attached to your crown which gently pulls up the head.

3. As you bring the crown up, almost simultaneously and as a result of that motion, your chin will be tucked in slightly. If your chin is facing up or forward, the crown of your head is also in the wrong position. So please check if the chin is tucked in slightly, without constricting your throat.

4. Focus on your shoulder area and consciously relax them, drop the shoulder and elbow joints. This is particularly important because it is the connection point between your arms and main part of the torso. If you hold tension here it is impossible to feel the entire connected body and it will effect the entire posture. Tension in the shoulders will obstruct the flow of Qi and blood and trap Qi in the chest area. Always return to this position and check if your shoulders are relaxed. Do this until you have created a lasting habit of maintaining relaxation in this area.

5. One of the most important actions is bringing down the tailbone. The lifting of the crown and dropping of the tailbone create a nice and straight spine. This is particularly important for full body connected power, as it flattens the lumbar curve through which we loose a significant amount of energy. Your whole should gently sink and root into the ground. These two combined actions, are the main reason for correct postural development. When practiced over a long period of time you will be able to relax deeper into your body because your bones are "stacked" on top of each other,

creating a self-supporting structure. The correct posture will allow deep relaxation which is the key to all internal cultivation practices. Your circulation will be improved and Qi can flow freely. Your vital organs can settle, move into a rejuvenating state and your natural balance of Qi will be initiated. In order to bring the tailbone down, it helps to tuck the pelvis under a bit, then instead of moving it forward, try to pull it down to the ground. Remember to release tension in this area and try to avoid maintaining this position in a forceful manner. Imagine you let the tailbone hang freely, relax the abdominal muscles slightly (not completely) and try to find space in your hips.

6. The knee position is important to maintain the correct lower body position, keeping the psoas muscle relaxed, and allowing Qi to flow down to the ground. At any point, if you lock out your joints, you will obstruct the Qi flow. The knees, as well as the elbows, wrists and fingers, should be slightly bent. Make sure that the knees never move past the toes. They should slightly push outward (this will externally rotate your hip joints) and maintain a relaxed but softly engaged structure.

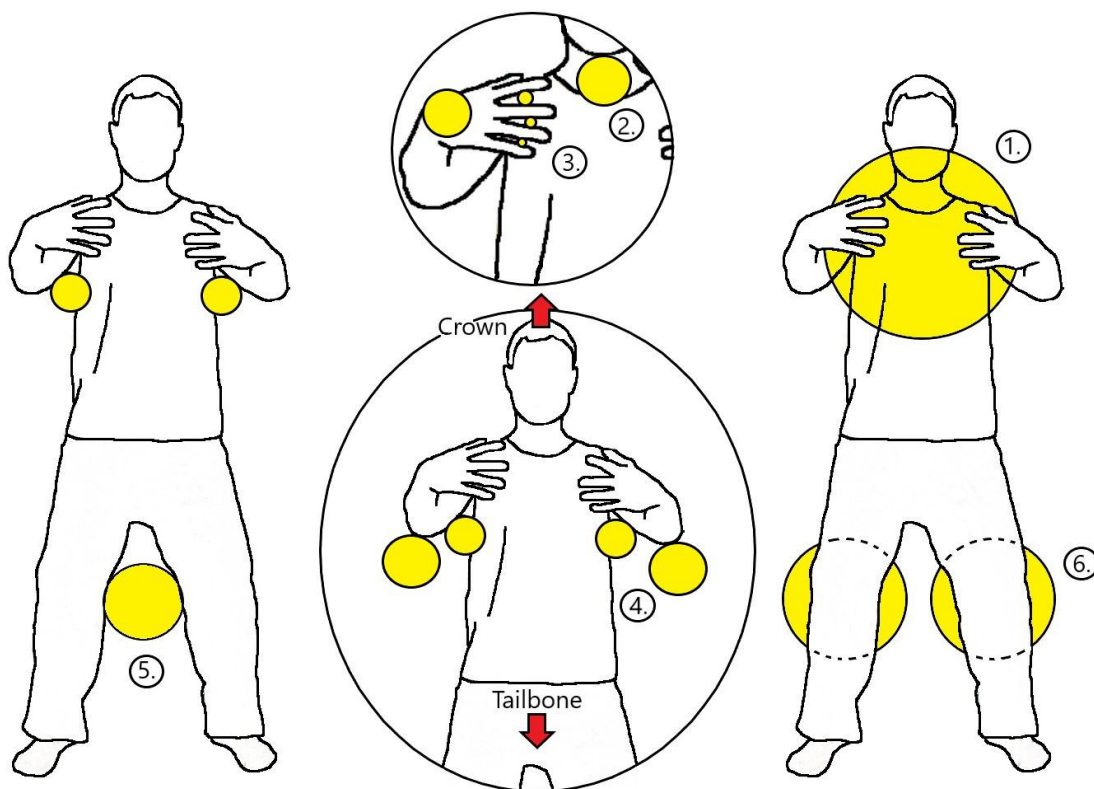
7. The feet should be flat on the ground. Try to feel the whole triangle of the foot and balance your weight evenly. Relax the ankles.

8. The abdominal muscles should be relaxed yet engaged. Relaxing them more will help taking some tension away from the hip flexors. It is a bit difficult to give exact cues for the abdominal area because it depends on the breathing. If you use “embryonic breathing” the breath and posture will determine the amount of engagement in your abdomen. Generally speaking, (especially for the novice) it is best to breathe naturally with a slight engagement of the abdomen.

9. The elbows are bent and positioned below your shoulders and wrists. You are creating a circular shape with your chest, arms and fingers as if holding and inflated beach ball. It helps to imagine the elbows as the heaviest part of the entire arm. This will aid in keeping the shoulders down and relaxed.

10. The chest is part of the circle that you are forming with your arms and hands. This means it is caved in slightly and fully relaxed. Focus on your collarbones and consciously relax them.

11. The wrists are slightly engaged, the fingers are pointing to one another with a decent space between each finger. You don't want to let your hand and fingers hang “like dead” but you want to maintain a slight engagement within a relaxed state. The drawing below will explain the concept of tension within relaxation more in detail.



The instructions for the Standing Pole Exercise might seem somewhat contradictory at times. They ask for a certain amount of engagement or tension, even though we know that relaxation is without doubt the key element for any form of Qigong or internal martial arts training. Only when the body is relaxed will the Qi channels be open, the blood circulate smoothly, the internal organs settle and the natural process of balancing Qi within your body will be supported. So let me clarify the concept of being “engaged but not tense, relaxed but not slack”.

We try to achieve a balance between stress and collapse. Of course the term relaxation is a relative one, especially regarding our postural alignment. When we are standing, if we want it or not, some muscles will always be concerned with keeping us upright. If we are relaxed in the sense of not using any tissues at all, we’d simply drop to the ground. The key is to be relaxed, but not slack, to use the right amount of engagement that is necessary to maintain the form. We should be slightly tense, but not stiff. As relaxed as we can possibly be without breaking the posture. Eventually your skeletal structure will be perfectly aligned that you remain in this position without any effort at all.

To teach you how to make these tiny adjustments yourself and to help you develop a feeling for the correct amount of engagement, I use these “yellow circles” (drawing above). When assuming the Zhan Zhuang position, go through each cue one at a time. It is okay to make minor adjustments to suit the physical state of each individual, but it is vital to aim for the correct posture to create maximum physical equilibrium.

1. “The beach ball”. First of all, due to the power of gravity, you will need to engage your muscles to bring the arms up. This is the easiest indicator for the amount of engagement to maintain the structure of the up-down direction. The beach ball itself is not only important for you to maintain the circular position, but also an indicator for the engagement. You want to make sure that you don’t drop the ball and apply a slight amount of tension to hold it up. Keep your elbows from turning to the side, keep them facing down.
2. The next “ball” is under your chin. Your chin is tucked in and the crown of your head is raised. Imagine you are pressing a very delicate balloon between the bottom of your chin and the collar bone. Make sure you don’t constrict your throat or your breathing. This is a good indicator for describing the amount of tension used to maintain the chin position and simultaneously reminds you to keep the crown of the head up.
3. To apply the right amount of tension between the fingers it is helpful to imagine marbles between them. The engagement should be about as much as it is necessary to keep the marbles from falling out. In addition to this engagement, the top of your wrists have slight “forward power”. Imagine you are gently pushing a light object away from you.
4. A common way to explain the engagement of your arms is by imagining to hold raw eggs in your arm pits. Obviously you don’t want them to fall on the ground, or crush them in your arm pits. Your elbows, in addition to being part of holding “the inflated beach ball” have also a slight amount of “down power”.
5. Surprise, there is also a ball between your legs. When we stand in Zhan Zhuang, our knees have slight “inside power” as if holding a larger gymnastic ball up between them. This action externally rotates our hip joints and creates space in them.
6. When you assume a particularly low position, it is more difficult to maintain a straight back and to push the tailbone down. You need to be aware of how the posture changes and maintain all principles. To prevent any strain and injuries on your knees keep them from going past your toes. In a low stance, the “last ball” is very apparent. It is right behind your knees. In this case it almost feels like a resistance behind your legs on which you find a kind of energetic hold.

The path to a successful Zhan Zhuang practice.

Lastly, I would like to summarize some important key factors which will help you practice the Standing Pole Exercise successfully.

A calm state of mind.

When we practice Zhan Zhuang, naturally we need to cultivate a calm state of mind. When our emotional mind is busy distracting us from our internal world we won't be able to achieve a deep state of relaxation. Negative thoughts often arise when we feel discomfort, especially as a beginner when our muscles feel sore from the previous practice. It's important to know that these thoughts can manifest as tension within our bodies. To prevent us from falling down this negative spiral of tension which can quickly discourage us, we should combine Zhan Zhuang with normal seated meditation. This will help us working on the skill of entering a calm state of mind and ultimately benefit all of our Qigong or internal martial arts practice.

The best method is to sit down, breathe naturally and don't try to control anything. Let in all thoughts, do not get attached or involved them and simply watch them pass. Of course this is easier said than done and still requires practice. There are different ways to lessen the activity of thought, for example using meditation objects or mental activities. You can imagine your thoughts as snowflakes which melt once you have discovered them. Other techniques are counting your breath cycles or imagining yourself as a solid tree with a firm root that's withstanding the strongest winds.

Breathing

Breathing throughout practice should be completely natural. Ideally deep, slow and gentle. However, you shouldn't concern yourself too much with the breath or try to control it. You might have a comparatively short breath at the beginning of the practice but as your state of relaxation increases the breath will gradually settle and deepen unhindered. Don't try to force your breathing into a particular pattern as it will interfere with the natural rhythm of the respiration. If you have been practicing embryonic breathing it will naturally fall into place.

I am aware that the last lessons were packed with information and I absolutely don't expect you to grasp everything at once. Don't worry, as your practice goes on you will slowly make all those experiences yourself and connect all the dots. Generally speaking, obviously depending on the amount of time that you invest in training (especially Zhan Zhuang), you will notice a change within the first couple of weeks. Once you get past that initial phase of sore muscles and superficial tension, your mind will be much less distracted and you can enter a quiet state of mind much quicker. Discomfort (tension) is the number one cause for a scattered and agitated emotional mind. With the decrease of discomfort and the increase of a warm and relaxed feeling you will be able to use your wisdom mind (Yi) to keep the focus on the lower Dan Tian. With practice a lot of the tension created through an imbalance in your body (muscular or mental) will likely have disappeared and your body balanced itself out. This should make this practice feel much easier.

Tips for the beginner.

In order to practice Qigong effectively you need to be determined, confident and eliminate all doubt about the practice. The standing pole exercise comes with its own challenges and it's important to persevere and be patient. It takes time to condition the body and change the constitution of it. Please don't give up when you don't see any immediate changes, relax and your practice will be fruitful.

Practice in your own pace. Motivation and will-power is great, but if you do too much too soon, your body might not be able to keep up and get overexerted. That being said, if you find yourself in discomfort during your practice, try to persevere. In the early stages of practice you might feel some unpleasant physical sensations. A numbness, aches, pains, tingling or trembling. These reactions are natural and nothing to worry about. Your body is going through

a change, getting used to the new position and the improving metabolism and blood circulation. Naturally, as we relax our muscles, we will feel a one-sided tension within our bodies. This is because of our physiological differences in our bodies. We generally have one side that is dominant and therefore slightly more developed but through practice, we will slowly even out these differences. Focus on the tense area and breathe into it, creating space and avoid creating a mental tension by having an aversion towards the unpleasant sensation.

Most of all, enjoy the practice and trust in time to improve the constitution of your whole body which will make all these reactions gradually disappear. The body becoming progressively more relaxed, comfortable and strong.