

ZHAN ZHUANG - THE HIDDEN ESSENTIAL OF TAI CHI TRAINING

Whether we practice Tai Chi for health or martial arts, the inclusion of Zhan Zhuang (Standing Meditation) at the beginning of our daily training session becomes essential if we are to gain many of the greatest benefits spoken of in the Tai Chi Classics and historical anecdotes.

For health, Zhan Zhuang training initiates the body's internal healing, strengthening, unification and enhanced Qi flow which is then amplified by proper Tai Chi practice. In this case Zhan Zhuang becomes the Yin to Tai Chi's Yang. While Tai Chi is often thought of in terms of 'stillness within movement,' Zhan Zhuang may be considered as 'movement within stillness.' Simply put, they are a perfect compliment to one another.

For martial arts, the intimate connection between Zhan Zhuang and Tai Chi is a matter of historical record. Ever wonder about the great accomplishments and stories of the famous internal martial artists of days gone by? Well, pretty much all their feats of martial prowess and/or radiant health would not have been possible without the inclusion of standing meditation to grow, balance and expand their internal power. That, along with training the form and application techniques 8-10 hours a day, made these famous masters appear almost super-human.

In his work, 'The Complete Book of Yiquan,' Mr. CS Tang a native of Hong Kong, states that even Bruce Lee practiced Zhan Zhuang as part of the Yiquan training he received from the renown master Liang Zipeng. Lee was greatly impressed by among other things, Yiquan's instantaneous explosive power, gained through extensive standing meditation.

Many of the separate benefits of Zhan Zhuang and Tai Chi are quite well known. But how is it that Zhan Zhuang's influences directly benefit, improve and eventually transform our Tai Chi practice?

WAYS THAT STANDING MEDITATION IMPROVES TAI CHI

Refines Central Equilibrium

One of the first elements that improves through daily Zhan Zhuang training that precedes Tai Chi form practice is our sense of Zhong Ding (Central Equilibrium.) As we become more and more familiar with the outer and then inner landscapes of our body, we are also, perhaps somewhat unknowingly, simultaneously honing awareness of our

Zhong Ding. The cultivation and refinement of our central equilibrium is one of the elements critical both for improving health and developing strong martial power.

Every time we perform the simple act of maintaining the focus of our feeling-awareness in the Dan Tien, we are among other things, cultivating our Zhong Ding. The ability to maintain continuous awareness of our Zhong Ding throughout the form cannot be overestimated. The Classics say, "...the mind stays with (in) the Dan Tien."

Later, with faithful practice, not only does the 'inner space' of our low Dan Tien expand and open up, but also our awareness of the Middle and Upper Dan Tiens, which all become linked, generating an even greater sense of our Central Channel. Awareness of the Central Channel is intimately related to our sense of Zhong Ding. An important part of the improvement of our Zhong Ding has to do with the opening of the Central Channel. The ability to feel a sense of 'physical emptiness' and later the flow of Qi in this area and indeed throughout the entire body leads not only to stronger internal power, but also to far better and long-lasting health.

And once we have a feel for this, with further training we can reduce the 'size' of our central equilibrium 'cylinder' to a vertical thread of nearly microscopic width. And this is without losing any of our hard-won stability, rooting and balance. For martial arts applications, this type of refinement in our Zhong Ding turns out to be invaluable when dealing with a particularly aggressive opponent. This narrower Central Equilibrium is a hallmark of the Small Frame styles of Tai Chi.

Increases Awareness

Another element of our Tai Chi form which is also greatly enhanced through Zhan Zhuang training is our sense of whole-body awareness and unification; unified movement being one of the basic goals of our form practice. This idea is expressed in the Tai Chi Classics with the phrase, "...one part moves, all parts move."

It is well known that prior to Tai Chi's opening movement, Chi Shr - Commencement, we stand with our feet parallel at hip or shoulder width, with our arms resting at our sides. In the olden days this posture (Wuji Zhan Zhuang) was often maintained for an hour before beginning the form movements. In addition to this Wuji posture, Tai Chi practitioners of yesteryear also maintained the seminal Tai Chi postures of Peng, Lu, Ji, An and Dan Pien. (Single Whip) These postures were generally trained individually, and held for prolonged periods of between 30 min to 1 hr - usually one posture per day. The

value of holding Tai Chi postures is truly profound in its ability to advance and elevate the quality and energy of our overall practice.

Deepens Relaxation

One of the primary benefits of Standing Meditation in relation to Tai Chi is its ability to identify the most subtle physical and energetic blockages or tensions. Because of the nature of stillness, with Zhan Zhuang it is difficult to deceive ourselves that we are truly relaxed, when all the evidence, like muscle soreness, or shaking for example, proves conclusively that we are not. Therefore, with the increased relaxation that Standing Meditation inevitably confers (Sung) we are far more able to perceive and identify the various tensions buried deep within the body and go about permanently releasing them.

On the other hand, because the nature of the Tai Chi form involves movement, confirming that we are properly relaxed is often much more difficult to actually verify. The following should be familiar to all Tai Chi practitioners especially during the first few years of training: We are practicing a form movement in class and we're convinced we've got it down, that is until the teacher comes around and makes a slight adjustment to our posture and all of a sudden we feel more relaxed and grounded. And then we realize that we'd been carrying a certain tension of which, we had been totally unaware. Such is the nature of movement versus stillness. Because we're concentrating on the movements, change of posture, etc, we are generally far less aware of previously ingrained tensions. Of course after a decade or more of Tai Chi training, many of these deeply buried tensions do surface and - because we no longer need to think about the movements per se - they can ultimately be addressed with subtle shifts of shape, distance and timing. But aside from rooting out these hidden and overt blockages by acquiring greater perception and feeling-awareness through Standing Meditation, with Tai Chi, this deeper sense of perceptive awareness and judgement, especially in the first years of training, can generally only be gained by being passed from teacher to student on a one-to-one basis.

Heightens Perception, Dissolves Tension

With Zhan Zhuang, although the assistance of a qualified teacher is of course invaluable, the student's own body will begin to inform him of various blockages or tensions almost immediately, starting with the more external and then proceeding - because of the concomitant growth in perception and feeling-awareness that Zhan Zhuang naturally generates - to the more internal, more deeply buried obstructions. During Standing Meditation our perception penetrates the skin, muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones and eventually into the nervous system, internal organs, glands

and bone marrow. Bottom line - proper Zhan Zhuang practice will greatly speed up the disillusion of tension that Tai Chi certainly requires. In this regard what might take 8-10 years of Tai Chi training alone could be reduced to as little as something like 3 years when an hour of Zhan Zhuang training precedes our daily form practice. Now imagine how much effect 10-20 years, or more of daily Zhan Zhuang training would have on our Tai Chi. This is why the old masters had 'that look' in their form and one of the reasons they were able to fight as they did.

The idea of an increase of perception or expansion of awareness is one of the hallmarks of regular Zhan Zhuang training and one of the most important benefits as far as the ability to improve and deepen our Tai Chi. Since this aspect of Zhan Zhuang is fairly well known, the question becomes; how does Standing Meditation actually achieve these accomplishments. Although the results are undeniable, the actual method itself - how it works - is somewhat shrouded in mystery.

One answer lies in the word 'meditation' from the name, 'Standing Meditation.' In Zhan Zhuang and indeed with Tai Chi, we apply one-pointed concentration in the low Dantien. ("...the mind stays with the Dan Tien.") With Zhan Zhuang, in addition to the Dan Tien, we may also use our 'center' or the navel area for our focal point, as with certain types of Taoist meditation. For the sake of this discussion we'll refer to this area as the low Dan Tien.

At first when we focus our mind and feeling-awareness in this region, our perception is generally quite amorphous, in other words somewhat vague and the area in question, much larger than our absolute 'Centerpoint,' which in fact, can be very small. But as we continue to practice, our ability to hone a more precise focus greatly increases until we achieve a very, very small 'diameter' of a sphere almost like a pinpoint. Of course this will take some time, but each day we train we are building and growing much more than just focus. We are cultivating energy. For most this takes the form of an increasing sensation of warmth as more and more of our 'total consciousness' comes into play.

As we continue to refine our focus over the years, something extraordinary seems to happen. The more of a pinpoint focus we are able to achieve, the more our 'peripheral awareness' concomitantly broadens and we are able to take in or be aware of, more and more of the area surrounding the Dan Tien, until finally we become simultaneously aware of the entire body. This apparent paradox or dichotomy is something we need to get used to, in that it occurs a number of times and in a number of ways as the meditation aspect of our training progresses. This paradox, the ability to feel the entire

body as well as the Dan Tien, turns out to also be highly important in our Tai Chi practice, especially as we approach the more advanced levels of training.

External Bodily Awareness

In addition to the types of focus mentioned above, at the beginning of our Zhan Zhuang training we may also use a 'direct conscious focus' in order to work with the more external aspects of the body which include such things as muscles, tendons, ligaments as well as part of our nervous system. This is the beginning of the conscious 'Hardwiring' process that eventually connects or 'joins' the various body segments - muscle groups, joints, nerve path firings etc., to our Dan Tien. This is a continuing process that spans a fair amount of time as all the muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints learn to move in concert with the expanding and condensing of the low Dan Tien.

During standing meditation it is also possible to use our innate ability to surrender to gravity in order to gain more relaxation and tissue elongation. We can use this ability to let our tissues relax downward in order to open up, unblock and release tight muscles and joints. We allow any tension to descend through the torso and/or the extremities and then out through the hands and feet. Let's say we're standing in Wuji posture or 'Holding the Ball' and we feel tension or soreness in the elbows. In this case we first put our feeling-awareness in our shoulders and relax them as much as possible - surrendering to the downward force of gravity, so that the muscles of the shoulders and upper arm (Deltoids, Triceps and Biceps) relax and elongate. We continue with this release until that elongation reaches the center of the elbow joint. From there we empty out the elbow and allow the newly found relaxation and elongation to move down through the forearm, wrist and hand. With Zhan Zhuang this technique can be fairly easily applied almost anywhere in the body. With Tai Chi on the other hand, at least at first, this is far more difficult to accomplish simply due to the activity of movement. So when this method is gained through Standing Meditation, it can bring about a much greater external relaxation and also connection within our Tai Chi movements. In other words, if through Zhan Zhuang we have learned to keep our shoulders and elbows relaxing downward, then when we move through a Tai Chi form, this all-important feeling will be far better served, resulting in much more effective Tai Chi movements, right from the start.

Internal Bodily Awareness

Once most of the external aspects of the body are joined to the action of the Dan Tien, we can then focus deeper inside with the aim of incorporating first the bones, and later, the internal organs, bone marrow and even the glands. This has to do with

'harmonizing' the various frequencies involved and then 'tuning' them to the frequency of the Dan Tien. Of course this requires much more sensitivity than the external elements, but it is possible. When our feeling-awareness can penetrate into the bones and marrow, it is then that we are able to do what Mr. George Xu has termed 'Bone Tai Chi,' an advanced stage of practice.

In addition, the ability to feel deeply into the body (which leads the Qi) creates a number of quantum boosts in one's health and vitality. As one of my teachers once put it, "wherever you can feel, there is the Qi." In terms of health, it is our inability to feel into certain areas in the body that can allow 'dis-ease' to develop. On the other hand, wherever our consciousness can penetrate, it is like shining a light on that specific region which has the effect of enlivening it and inundating it with our vital energy. This is one of the powerful ways that Zhan Zhuang combined with Tai Chi actually improves our health.

Whole-Body Unification - Hardwiring to Low Dan Tien

This process seems to occur either consciously or unconsciously when we start to practice Standing Meditation. As we concentrate on the low Dan Tien, over time more and more of our body begins to 'harmonize' with it. In addition to the more unconscious connections that begin to happen of themselves, we can also apply the conscious methods, linking each part of the body to our center, one at a time and then in groups. For example, after consciously connecting the shoulders, elbows, wrists and hands separately to the low Dan Tien, we can then work on the simultaneous activation of the whole arm from the shoulder through the fingertips in relation to the expansion and condensation of our center. ("...one part moves, all parts move.")

With Zhan Zhuang this is often done using the breath, while with Tai Chi we must also be fully aware of each movement and the way the body connects to our center as we perform it. With enough repetition, eventually we can hardwire the movements of the entire body to our low Dan Tien. Once this is done, then, with continued training the process becomes interred in the subconscious and will manifest almost automatically whenever we practice. This sensation of whole-body movement is a very important goal in our Tai Chi practice. This sensation is also quite present in Zhan Zhuang, although it manifests in a somewhat different manner which propels the practitioner into deeper levels of the meditative aspect. For more information on the how-to's of Hardwiring, check out the book 'Inside Zhan Zhuang,' Pg 139-142.

Growth of Internal Energy and Power

As we continue our training, we begin to repair and improve old injuries, latent disrupted energetics and other health problems. Eventually we are able to harmonize and balance the primary energies of the body. We do this by bringing more and more of our consciousness to bear in the Dan Tien until we are able to activate the body's own self-healing mechanisms. When these systems are brought online, one of the main ways by which healing occurs is through a major improvement in circulation of both Qi and blood.

When most of the blockages have been removed from the body's channels there becomes a more abundant free-flow of Qi coursing through all the meridians. This increased flow not only improves the practitioner's health, but also plays a major role in the ability to transmit martial power. Once again it is the ability to continually focus and properly maintain that focus in the low Dan Tien that will eventually cause it to fill and then 'overflow.' Once this happens, continued training creates among other things, a condensation of the Qi, making it more highly concentrated, some would say more dense and also more highly electrically charged. It was said that when the great Chen Master, Chen Fa Ke issued power, in addition to being thrown back a great distance, his students also reported feeling a strong electrical charge, like a child accidentally sticking their finger in a light socket... In terms of health, this type of 'electrified' Wei Qi (Defensive Energy) - which is also part of the immune system - acts similar to an outdoor bug light which zaps the creatures if they get too close. So the 'bugs' from airborne colds or flu cannot get past the body's defensive energy and one remains unaffected while those around the practitioner may unfortunately succumb and get sick.

Awareness of and Ability to Direct Intention and Qi Flow

Among the other factors already mentioned as greatly benefiting from our meditative practice, we are also simultaneously cultivating and building our intention. Once again this paradoxically occurs by holding our single-pointed focus and bringing more and more of our consciousness to bear in a relaxed manner. With enough practice over the years, similar to the Qi itself, our intention goes beyond mere thought or desire and becomes something tangible, that is, something a training partner or opponent can actually feel. In other words, our intention becomes translated into something substantial. This is how great masters like Ma Yueh Liang could send people flying in different directions with apparently no added movement.

For health, the ability to use intention to lead the Qi is an invaluable tool for clearing blockages, reducing excesses, strengthening deficiencies, healing old injuries and

increasing one's overall vitality. In this regard, an exercise called 'Around the World' meditation is a great aid. This Zhan Zhuang method involves leading the Qi through all the basic acupuncture meridians in a specific sequence. The exact order is Lungs, Large Intestine, Stomach, Spleen, Heart, Small Intestine, Urinary Bladder, Kidneys, Pericardium, Triple Warmer, Gall Bladder and Liver. After that, we run the Qi through the Du and Ren meridians several times (small circulation) and then return everything to the low Dan Tien. Following this, any excess energy can then be vented out through the soles of the feet and the palms.

When we train, especially after a number of years, our practices may produce more energy, sometimes far more energy than our body needs or can use for its normal daily functions. In this case we vent out the excess so as to restore a working balance. As we continue further, after some years of training, besides the low Dan Tien, the body will also automatically store some of the additional Qi generated during practice, first in the fasciae and later in the bone marrow. When the storage reaches the marrow we are well on our way to greatly improved health.

Transference of Zhan Zhuang Qualities to Tai Chi Movements

Almost from the first weeks of Zhan Zhuang training we begin to bring the enhancement of the qualities we are gaining, directly into our Tai Chi practice. Often one of the first benefits we become aware of is a new and enhanced perception of each posture and transition. This new postural sense reflects a more refined feeling and understanding of our Central Equilibrium along with a greater awareness of our low Dan Tien and center. This new and evolving 'sense of center' allows the majority of our conscious awareness to remain focused in our Dan Tien while, through our improving peripheral cognition, we are simultaneously aware of our extremities in action. Over time, this awareness expands into the feeling of everything - energy, intention, motivation and movement - going to and coming from our Dan Tien/Centerpoint.

As the linkage of our outer and inner frames begins to take shape during Zhan Zhuang training, our joints, cavities, nervous system and the flow of Qi and blood become joined with the Dan Tien. When this is applied to our Tai Chi movements, our entire body seems to expand and condense continually as we proceed through the form. In addition, we may feel various sensations such as warmth, course from the Dan Tien throughout the torso, out through the extremities to the palms and feet - and then back again. As we continue with this practice we may find a sense of space and then emptiness develop in our abdomen, torso and finally the whole body. With this comes a much deeper sense of relaxation as the movements seem to play out, of themselves. As

part of this joining Zhan Zhuang with Tai Chi, we can also experience a tremendous feeling of 'lubrication' in all the joints, such that things like rotation, extension and retraction feel effortless. The upper limbs may feel like they have no weight while the lower extremities feel grounded into the earth, and yet 'springy,' able to move in any direction instantly. This can also manifest as a clear interconnectedness between the front and back legs, such that we are aware of the constantly changing dynamic interplay between the two.

The awareness and interconnection of all the body's 'springs,' once Hardwired through Standing Meditation practice, and then again throughout all the Tai Chi movements, is, in terms of health, the basis for major improvement in all manner of joint problems including many types of arthritis. Internally the benefits are almost incalculable. Profound healing begins to occur in the Yin organs - Liver, Heart, Spleen, Lungs and Kidneys, as well as the Yang organs - Gall Bladder, Small Intestine, Stomach, Large Intestine and Urinary Bladder. Altogether this generates a tangible increase in our vitality which, with daily practice, may continue well into old age.

For martial arts, this same awareness and control of the body's springs allows us to release or issue tremendous power with a minimal amount of outer movement or even at first contact. As for the internal organs, they become "soft and supple," filled with an abundance of Qi. This, along with an almost astronomical increase in one's Wei Qi allows us to take a powerful blow - should that be necessary - with little or no effect to our body.

Imbedding Zhan Zhuang into a Tai Chi Form

A gentle, gradual way to incorporate the Zhan Zhuang element into our Tai Chi form practice directly is to simply stop and hold the 'end' of each posture for between 1 and 3 breaths (or more) before proceeding to the next movement. I highly recommend trying out this method. Because if you do, one thing is sure; each posture that is maintained in the manner described will rapidly take on an entirely different - more relaxed, integrated and 'open' feeling than ever before.

The technique is simple: Start your set as usual. When you reach the 'end' of a posture - pause - then exhale and inhale. Feel a 'sinking' from the base of skull and the secret spot in the brain (at the intersection of the eyes and ears) all the way under the feet on the exhale. When you inhale again, feel an overall expansion of the entire body from the low Dan Tien out to the extremities which propels you into the next movement. Also, during the suspension of movement, feel the body making micro-adjustments in the

posture itself. Once you've gone through the set or sequence you've been training, repeat it again in the way you normally practice and see what differences you feel.