



TAI CHI CHUAN

www.taichijournal.com

No 23

& Internal Arts

£3.00



WINTER 2006/7

Taijiquan: The Art of Receiving, Heavy Sword Practice, Yin/Yang Principle in Tai Chi, China: Visiting the Homes of Tai Chi & Kung Fu, Zhan Zhuang - The Spirit Within, Elements of Tai Chi Applications, Chi Kung Healing, Internal Arts Events - Reports from: Germany, Italy, Canada & China, Zhengzhou, Chen Village & Shaolin Temple - 15 years on, Chinese Cults & Sects.

Zhan Zhuang



The roots

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.

Zhan Zhuang is an ancient technique between meditation, martial arts and Traditional Chinese Medicine. Its origins are remote. One of the first references to this kind of exercise is in the Huang-ti nei ching (Classics of Medicine of the Yellow Emperor, 2690-2590 BCE), which is probably one of the most ancient books in the medical field.

These postures, practiced and transmitted secretly in the martial arts circles, have been openly shown to the public since the beginning of this century. Wang Xiang Zhai, a very famous Chinese martial arts master of that period, created from these techniques the foundation of a new martial art called I Chuan (Mind boxing). He used to say "The immobility is the mother of any technique".

Today, these techniques are increasingly studied by practitioners of internal martial arts, including tai chi. Its applications are many. It is a core practice for beginners, advanced students and experts of any style, a key exercise to continuously nurture and develop our standards of practice.

The Chinese Yoga

"Yoga" in sanskrit means "unity", unity of the spirit and the universal truth. Yoga suggests the union of knowledge, action and devotion in order to achieve unity, *advaita*, the universal spirit.

Following Ayurvedic science, the human body is divided into six main parts : head, chest, both arms and both legs.

The knowledge is located in the head, the heart represents devotion and the legs and the arms mean action. Yoga combines the three locations which function simultaneously, in perfect harmony.

The external immobility of the Zhan Zhuang postures and their link with the *asanas* or yogic postures has suggested the qualification of this technique as "Chinese yoga". Its final goal is also to achieve the unity of the human being, in perfect balance between the earth and the sky universal forces.

Spirit Within

Chinese medicine asserts that when a part of the body is ill, the global energy of our bodies loses balance. Everything is related, body, mind and emotions. A complete energetic discipline like zhan zhuang allows us to dissolve blockages to progressively achieve a better physical and moral shape. This state of fitness is visible from outside. We become more alert, full of vigor and perfectly available for the chores of our everyday lives. This technique, as well as the asanas, is also a form of meditation. By keeping our consciousness in our *Dantien* (point located three fingers below the navel) and by relaxing all tension, a state of inner peace and tempered happiness appears. It is an indescribable state and its effects have positive influence in our lives.

Step by step guidelines of practice

The four main attitudes in life

As humans beings, we are all supposed to be able to put ourselves properly into the main basic positions of standing, sitting down, lying down and walking. However, most of us, driven by the needs of our sedentary and so called "busy" lives, do not pay special attention to these four main attitudes in life. Bad postures have simply become a bad habit. As a result, persistent back problems and a state of chronic fatigue might appear. It is not necessary to demonstrate that the body position has a direct effect on our emotional state. Retreating and defensive positions usually match with a declining spirit. Your body is desperately trying to tell you that it is time to take care of yourself!

Zhan zhuang practice creates a state of being which helps us to "unlearn" all these bad habits and to return to a more natural, comfortable and healthy posture. In time, we become able to apply the structural principles of zhan zhuang in all the chores of our everyday lives. Waiting for the bus, washing dishes, sitting, lying down, cooking, driving... Any situation becomes a laboratory of experimentation and a way to improve our practice. Progressively, you will hold a better position when sitting in front of your computer or television. As a result a general state of well-being, physical comfort and tranquillity will impregnate all of your daily life.

Principles of practice

Find a quiet place for your daily practice and try to avoid extreme climatic conditions when practising outdoors. Indoors, choose a clear, well ventilated room.

If your energy level is very low (exhaustion, depressive state, physical pains etc...), use some instrumental music to always start your exercises in a positive and pleasant way.

Ideally zhan zhuang should be practiced a little everyday. A three or four times a week practice can also bring you some results. In any case, it is better to exercise a bit everyday instead of relying in big and exhausting sessions from time to time.

It is possible to do the zhan zhuang exercises from a sitting or lying down position. These techniques will not be detailed in this article, but it is important to know that they exist. They are particularly convenient for the sick, the very old and physically impaired. Occasionally, someone in good health who feels tired can use these techniques to get fit again. Zhan zhuang is for everybody. It is just necessary to continuously accomodate the training to your fitness level.

When you start practising this technique, two aspects are important: first, relax the whole body, second, fix your posture. Keep focused on these principles without trying to apply them too seriously. It is normal to have some incoming thoughts which "pollute" your practice. Do not try either to control or to stop them. Instead, watch their coming and going as you would watch clouds passing by through the sky. Rather, focus on the body sensation of tranquility and comfort during practice. Let your practice become your rest...

Relaxing should not be assimilated with a sedative state. Traditionally, we say: outside, remain quiet as Buddha. Inside, be alert as a tiger ready to bounce on its prey. 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 goes together in an outside static but inside very dynamic exercise.

At the same time as long as you continue to develop your sensitiveness, you will become aware of all the blockages and changes that are taking place inside your body. In this posture, the mind and body work together as a whole. The guidelines are simple yet the details are numerous and some of them need to be settled down progressively. Enjoy the process. Look for quality instead of quantity. Ten minutes of serious practice are more valuable than two hours of empty zhan zhuang.



Follow these instructions carefully. The inner trip is about to start...

- Stand with your feet 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 "dantien". With time and practice, you will feel the need to raise them progressively. Let it happen naturally and do not force your posture.
- 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 your breath to settle down smoothly into the dantien. It is very important for beginners not to deliberately try to push down the breath. This can be damaging to the internal organs. In fact we can shouldn't force the abdominal breathing, it should develop naturally through consistent practice.
- Relax your "kwa" (hips).
- Bend your knees slightly and relax them. Do not allow your body weight to rest on them. Do not practice a low posture if you are a beginner or if you are physically exhausted.
- Relax your ankles.
- Relax your feet.
- Make sure that the body weight is equally balanced between your both feet.
- Relax and stretch your spine.
- Relax your back.
- Align "Bai hui" (DU 20), located on the top of your head, and "hui yin" (CV 1), located between the anus and the perineum.
- "Listen to a soft rain behind your back". Through consistent zhan zhuang practice, you will become aware of the eight subsidiary directions (front, back, left, right, front right, front left, back right, back left). Keeping your attention exclusively to the front of your body will allow your energy to rise. As a result you will find it difficult to remain quiet and focused. Therefore, it is advisable to maintain a "listening feeling" behind your back in order to achieve quietness and to enhance the development of vital energy inside your dantien.
- For some students, particularly beginners, closing the eyes during the posture can be a source of tension or unbalance. If so, open your eyes from time to time, or keep them opened all the time. Just avoid looking around too much. One of the advantages of keeping the eyes closed is to improve focus and to induce tranquillity.

The Author

Victoria Windholtz was born in Spain in 1971 and started practicing martial arts intensively at the age of 10. For many years she was a member of the French National Tai Chi Team. She won four golden medals at European Tai Chi Championships held in Denmark in 2002. She has also been a French National Champion for five years and was awarded 3rd place performing "Tai Chi Sword" at the Wushu World Cup held in Beijing in 2000. In January 2004, she received a special prize from the French Ministry of Sports for her outstanding results in international tai chi competitions. Her meeting with Grand Master Chen Xiao Wang marked an important stage in the development of her practice. Today, she is particularly interested in the true transmission of Tai Chi principles as a life art which contributes to the global development of the human being. Victoria currently runs her own school of Chen style Tai Chi in Paris and teaches in France and internationally. She will be teaching at Tai Chi Caledonia in 2007.

www.victoriawindholtz.com

Having completed your practice session slowly lower your arms at either side of your body. Take your time to finish this exercise. Place both hands, one on top of the other, covering your dantien. When you start moving, take your time to relax your shoulders, elbows and hands. Make sure that your dantien is fully relaxed. Do not rush. For women the right hand is against the stomach and for men the left. The "Lao Gong" (PC 8), acupoint (placed in the middle of the hands) should align with the dantien. Some rotation of the dantien should follow, as a closing technique. When you stay in zhan zhuang for around twenty minutes or more, you can rotate your palms around the dantien 36 times in both directions. Then rest both hands over your dantien for a few seconds. The whole body should feel relaxed, quiet and stronger after practise. Finally, allow yourself a few seconds before returning to other activities. A nice walk in the park, some stretching exercises or even some self-massage are excellent ways to finish your daily session of zhan zhuang.

Finding a good guide to improve your practice

When you start practising, useful advice is a must. It prevents you from making mistakes which can either alter or inhibit the results of this practice. The approach between beginners and advanced students is usually very different. Each approach, each practice, caters for different needs and different goals. An experienced and skillful teacher should be able to accommodate the corrections at each level and provide a personal path for each student. Basic structural corrections must be done from the first few lessons to avoid bad habits. Corrections should be progressive as the beginner's body is unable to take the enhanced "chi" flow which will be created by postural changes. Bad postures are usually a result of psychosomatic experiences and they should be corrected gently, respecting the student's evolution and his/her body sensations. Zhan zhuang is a step-by-step process, and there are no short-cuts for this practice. Persistency and patience are the keys. Of course, good teaching methods are also very important.

A way towards freedom

This beautiful practice is also a source of spiritual inspiration - a way. Ancient Chinese masters used to require their disciples to be able to endure bitterness in order to reach true "gong fu" (mastery) in martial arts. In fact, the serious practitioner must continuously overcome his/her weakness and to show courage, will and determination to keep his/her practice and progress alive. This is naturally applied to zhan zhuang. Practice is a continuous personal challenge towards physical, emotional and spiritual higher levels. With time and dedication, the experienced student will eventually become the master of his/her own practice.

Zhan zhuang is a style within no style. It is a unique technique of knowledge and personal development, and its simplicity and profoundness are a way towards the true freedom.