

CHAPTER TWO:

ZHAN ZHUANG – A SIMPLE FOUNDATION

A seed hidden in the heart of an apple is an orchard invisible.
~ Welsh Proverb

Introducing Zhan Zhuang Qigong

In this short section, we will explore the basic practice of *Zhan Zhuang qigong*. This is a simple, yet profound practice that is found in both traditional qigong systems as well as in the internal martial arts of *Tai Chi Chuan*, *Hsing Yi Chuan*, *Yi Chuan*, and others.

It is considered by many, including myself, to be the foundation for all that follows in the study of *qigong* and internal martial arts. This is largely because it involves the direct – and simple – cultivation of *qigong's* core principles.



Zhan Zhuang (pronounced “jan joo-ahn” or “jan jong”) translates as “standing like a tree”. Like a tree, it begins with a humble seed, a simple idea, that can then expand into a truly powerful and meaningful cultivation. In the internal arts, it is often wise to start with the simplest of ideas and practices and then progress from there. *Zhan Zhuang* gives us this opportunity. It also provides us with a reference point that we can always check in with if anything in our practice becomes overly complex or unclear.

I have studied this practice with five accomplished instructors and each has a slightly different approach to it. In this book, I'll include what I consider to be the essence of their teachings in addition to a few of my own perspectives. In this beginning section, we'll start with the bare bones of *Zhan Zhuang*, then in Chapter Seven we'll revisit this practice with greater detail to include the principles we'll be discussing along the way.

Beginning Zhan Zhuang Practice

My own study of *Zhan Zhuang* began some 23 years ago with the simplest of instructions:

Part One:

Sit upright, breathe deeply and relax, and when you're ready...

Part Two:

Stand upright, breathe deeply and relax, and when you're ready ...

Part Three:

Raise and round the arms as if holding a large ball, breathe deeply and relax.

*“Manifest plainness,
Embrace simplicity,
Reduce selfishness,
Have few desires.”*
- Lao Tzu

That's it. In the beginning, there is no further instruction, nor the need for it. There is an elegance in this simplicity. It allows everyone to participate without even the hint of not being able to or of not understanding or remembering the practice. It can return us to a kind of refreshing humanness. Everyone can sit, we can all breathe, we can stand, and we can extend our arms as in an embrace.

If we never explored any further nuance or level of practice here, we would still benefit from these basic instructions. If a student were to dedicate a little time each day to applying these basic ideas, they could develop quite a lot over the course of time.



They might notice where they have good posture and where it needs improvement. They might discover areas of held tension due to either stress or habit and how to let some of it go. They might come to ponder what it means to actually relax deeply, how to breathe in such a way as to support themselves more fully. They could develop stronger legs, stronger back and core muscles, greater peace of mind and presence from simply standing quietly. They might notice an increased acuity in hearing, tactile sensation, and even clarity of mind. They might discover other surprising and wonderful things about themselves and their connection to the world around them.

Meanwhile, there might be some discomfort to work through in the process as the mind slows down and the body settles into a deeper balancing process. And the discipline of allowing this to occur without force might afford a deeper sense of self appreciation and quiet presence.

The challenge to this kind of practice is in having sufficient faith that it is worth one's time and energy. This may be especially true if one is introduced to this practice through written material. It is often easier when working with a live human being who can demonstrate that there is great value in such a foundational exercise as this. I hope to assure you, as well as I can through this simple book, that there truly is. And that all other qigong is informed by this beginning study and simple, but profound cultivation.

Wu Chi

Zhan Zhuang qigong is sometimes referred to as *Wu Chi* qigong. The term *wu chi* is a Taoist concept that refers to an original state of unity and wholeness. It is an essential quality of undifferentiated Oneness and the absence of conflict that exists before opposites (*yin* and *yang*) emerge. Perhaps you've noticed such a state of inner peace during meditation when the mind is calm and serene or while listening to a beautiful piece of music or communing in nature or with a close friend. It is a feeling/being state in which there is such a depth of harmony with oneself and with the world that the boundaries of self and other seem to dissolve and only love and an expansive, deep sense of well-being remain.

Some say that this state of being is our natural state and all else is but the “human drama” playing itself out as we return ultimately to this intuitive, spontaneous, all-inclusive state in which “we do nothing and yet nothing remains undone”. In this state the “Good” expresses through us and flows to us without effort.

With the introduction of divisive thinking – thought which divides and isolates – it is said that *wu chi*

recedes and we have the birth of mutually dependent opposites – *yin* and *yang* (upper and lower, inner and outer, good and bad, etc.). These opposites are only “real” from a particular perspective or “way of thinking”, yet antagonistic opposites appear real and remain so until they are dissolved back into the *insight* of *wu chi*. Until we fully return to the unity consciousness of *Wu Chi*, we have the ability, through practice, to experience life's “opposites” in greater and greater harmony rather than in conflict. The state of *Tai Chi*¹, exists when *yin* and *yang* are in harmonious, mutually supportive balance. Consider an automobile tire for example. When the pressure on the inside (*yin*) is in balance with the strength of the material on the outside (*yang*), we have a round, functional tire. In a relationship, we have balance and harmony when both parties (interchangeable *yin* and *yang*) are respected, cared for, and able to express themselves easily and authentically. A healthy human body is another perfect example of *yin* and *yang* elements in dynamic supportive balance.

If the balance of *Tai Chi* breaks down, various degrees of chaos and suffering may result as *yin* and *yang* become less harmonious and more contentious. For instance, if one places too much emphasis on external activity and not enough on inner support (nutrition, rest, etc.) one can move quickly out of balance. The opposite is likewise true. If a government prefers power through force over the well-being of its citizens, all manner of distortions will occur and the health of the country will degrade until balance is restored.

One of the objectives of deep qigong practice is to cultivate greater levels of balance and harmony between *yin* and *yang*. (This is also true for martial arts such as Tai Chi Chuan.) This objective is achieved through developing good physical alignment, relaxing and releasing held areas of tension, calming the mind and emotions, using attention and focus in creative and uplifting ways, enhancing the smooth circulation of *chi*, and more. Beyond this cultivation of balanced *yin* and *yang*, the objective of more “advanced” qigong practice is to ultimately realize once more the all-inclusive state of *wu chi*.

In the meantime, our qigong can begin to approach this undivided, whole-hearted, quality. This is to say, we can use our time to more deeply and peacefully accept ourselves and the world around us without reservation, with more and more unconditional good will. We can seek to balance our energies, release our stresses, tensions, and fears, and allow ourselves the grace to rediscover and embrace the peace and serenity that exists as a fundamental part of our true nature. As we sincerely pursue this objective, we inexorably discover deeper insights and inner resources that support us along this path.

The Further We Go, the Deeper It Gets

Much that follows from this point is but further clarification and exploration of the initial practice outlined above. To be sure, there is a lot more to say about it. There are shortcuts to making deeper progress and ideas that can help expand and enhance your experience. You will, no doubt discover your own as well. And yet, all we are really doing is sitting, standing, relaxing, breathing... smiling all the while as we cultivate good will within ourselves and for the world around us. All else is in service to this. It's simply being very, very human.

“Who can wait quietly while the mud settles? Who can remain still until the moment of action?”
- Lao Tzu

I find the quote by Lao Tzu (above) both interesting and inspiring. It speaks directly to the heart of Zhan Zhuang practice. As we show up for our practice consistently, intelligently, dynamically, we allow much of the confusion and stress of modern life to settle. We remain still until inspired to adjust

¹ The Chinese term *Tai Chi* refers to both the martial art (more correctly written *Tai Chi Chuan*) as well as the Taoist philosophical term which refers to a state of harmony between complimentary opposites.

how we are sitting, standing or, by extension, moving about and making our decisions through out our day.

This can be of great benefit to us as we navigate through our modern culture so typified by rapid thinking and reactivity. I have noticed in myself the pull to become swept up in habits and patterns that are often not in synch with the genuine needs of the moment. Cultivating quietness and stillness supports a greater awareness of our own authentic direction, our true, healthy needs, and those of our world around us. This awareness empowers us to respond in more helpful and creative ways. It also allows us to step away from the conjured dramas of every day life. The mind becomes more at ease and resourceful as our busy-ness and agendas fall away like so many pebbles to the bottom of a deep lake. In this quiet, present space we learn to take less for granted and gratitude surfaces naturally, refreshingly.

Slowing down, letting the mud settle, listening quietly and attentively both within and around us allows for our intuition and intelligence to emerge more easily and enjoyably.

So, this is where we will begin. It is a simple practice that will afford you many benefits as you make it more your own with each passing day. Take your time, explore and as we add greater detail in the sections to follow, remember that this is all quite simple. Fold in new ideas gently as you will, notice what works for you, and grant yourself the permission to explore and innovate on your own. With greater mastery always comes greater simplicity. Somehow this seems built into the fabric of things. I am grateful for the profound elegance of our true nature which becomes more and more apparent as we practice and apply ourselves.

From Discomfort to Comfort

It is useful to bear in mind that, as with many new pursuits, there may be some initial discomfort. I have worked with many students over the years for whom sitting and standing upright brought some muscular irritation. This was due to years of held tensions and old postural habits such as slouching. When we then ask the body to bring itself back into balance, some of our muscles may require a little time to relax and strengthen in order to perform properly. Take your time, move and stretch a little when necessary and know that before long you will be feeling stronger and more relaxed than ever.

A point of emphasis in good qigong and internal martial art is the principle of comfort. We are always seeking the easiest, most natural, and “comfortable” way to get things done. Note that comfort here does not mean “lazy”. Rather it refers to a state of increasing alignment to our authentic nature which ultimately leads to greater ease and efficiency. For instance, most people would probably agree a posture that respects an upright and well aligned skeleton is superior to one that is hunched or slouched. Yet achieving good posture may not initially be easy if one is used to something different. It can take a

A Grateful Heart Settles Easily

I was given a gratitude practice some years ago that I still do at night before going to sleep. It simply involves noting to yourself at least 10 things from the day just past for which you are grateful. You can take a few moments to scroll backward through your day and just acknowledge those people, places, things, or experiences for which you are genuinely thankful. Then note at least 5 things in which you experienced success in some way.

This is a wonderful way in which to drift off to sleep and it conditions our mind to actively notice the countless positive things each one of us are blessed with on continual basis. As I have practiced this over the years, I have found it easier and easier to find deep appreciation for even the “smallest” of things: a talk with a friend, a walk on a brisk autumn day, a friendly store clerk, an unexpected smile.

As we allow ourselves to simply sit, stand, and move as the mud gently settles, we can become deeply grateful for the miracle of our lives. Indeed, each breath is a gift. Psychologically and energetically this is powerful practice and valid part of the study of Zhan Zhuang qigong.

bit of time to relax and strengthen core muscles so that the body can maintain good alignment. Yet as we achieve this, we typically find that we feel more comfortable and effective in whatever we are doing. This is the kind of comfort we are looking to develop. Comfort through aligning with our nature.

This applies on many levels, physical and non-physical. An important non-physical example is what we refer to as “boredom”. In this culture, we have a seemingly endless sea of distraction. We are constantly offered all manner of entertainment, diversion, and irrelevant information, anything to tap into our time, energy, and money and distract us from our natural selves. Taking the time to quiet the mind and focus in the present moment can, initially, produce a feeling of discomfort, mild anxiety, or boredom. This need not be the case, but if you happen to experience this, just know that it is quite normal in the beginning of qigong and meditation practice for that matter. Taking the time to move through “boredom” or other forms of discomfort is well worth the effort. In Buddhist thinking, this becomes a kind of attainment and power of mind. After a bit of practice, discomfort and boredom gives way to a greater conscious connection to your true self which feels deeply calming, centering, and empowering. It is well worth giving ourselves the grace and time to realize these higher states of self-attunement.

In order to achieve this, it is often important to gently press through perceived limitations so that we can become stronger, more flexible, more relaxed and responsive, all of which will eventually result in a far greater comfort than before.

Quick Review

1. *Zhan Zhuang* means “standing like a tree”. It is a simple but dynamic and alive practice that cultivates many qualities at once.
2. It begins with an easy sequence of sitting then standing, while breathing and relaxing, then arcing the arms as if holding a ball. From that basic understanding, we then expand and further develop the theme according to ideas that follow in the sections ahead.
3. *Zhan Zhuang* is largely a study and cultivation of our “true nature”. The practice allows tensions to fall away, energy to circulate more freely, and the mind to find a deeper awareness and state of present responsiveness.

Action Plan for Chapter Two

1. **Daily Practice:** Begin by simply following the instructions above. Enjoy the time to get used to the basic practice, settling into your own feeling of rhythm and sensibility.