

Zhan Zhuang from an I-chuan perspective

by Gregory Fong

Who doesn't know how to stand? But standing the right way is a lot more mentally and physically challenging than people generally think. Students who do not train correctly in I-chuan learn well how to stand the wrong way, and they pay a high price for their diligence: after years of bad training, these students ultimately have more health problems and less energy than when they began. I would like in this paper to clear up some common misunderstandings and confusions about the art of standing (Zhan Zhuang) and to lay out some basic principles of proper training from the perspective of I-chuan.

Some people stand for their health; some stand for martial arts purposes. Either way, however, many students think that to practice Zhan Zhuang is little more than a matter of simply standing still in a special stance, as one tries to "calm the mind" and "relax and sink the chi." One of the most popular Zhan Zhuang postures, for example, is to stand with the feet shoulder width, knees slightly bent, and the hands positioned as if holding a large ball in front of the chest. The student is told to remain in this posture while using his or her imagination to call up whatever mental pictures the teacher or textbook suggests. People figure that simply standing in such a posture will eventually bring them health or increased martial arts abilities. Their hope is that if they stand there faithfully and for long enough, they will one day increase their chi, become more

“centered” or “rooted,” achieve greater bodily awareness and peace of mind, and so on. After all, these are the promised fruits of practice, and this sort of faithful patience in their pursuit is what most teachers and textbooks recommend.

In truth, however, Zhan Zhuang is not just a matter of standing still with one’s hands and feet in different positions, hoping that, with practice, one’s dreams of good health or martial arts ability will one day come true. Someone standing in this way is merely “waiting for something to happen.” A student waiting in this way to “feel the chi” is likely to wait a very long time indeed. The key to standing correctly is instead to stand as though “waiting to act.” Indeed, in contrast to waiting passively for something to happen, waiting to act in this sense is itself a form of action. From an I-chuan perspective, Zhan Zhuang training aims to teach the student always to stand as though preparing to act – to wait actively just like a cat preparing to pounce on a mouse.

To stand properly, one needs to have a basic understanding of the nature of mind and body and of how they work together. Without such knowledge, the recommendation to “sink the chi,” for example, is meaningless. Although such knowledge might seem profound or esoteric, however, once one has a good grasp of a few basic concepts, one comes to appreciate that it is in fact quite ordinary. Indeed, one does not have to be especially smart to stand properly; all one needs, in the end, is a good teacher and some common sense. But just because this knowledge is so simple and common, it is difficult to teach and even harder to learn.

I recommend, therefore, that the student first starting out in Zhan Zhuang training put to one side for the time being all that he may have heard or read about “chi,” “meridians,” “micro-cosmic orbit,” and so on. In the beginning, that is, the student must

focus his attention instead on his actual and immediate experience of his body. In a sense I will discuss briefly below and at greater length in a later paper, the I-chuan approach to Zhan Zhuang demands that the student go to work in the various standing postures, and because the work in question involves real bodily effort, not simply dreaming of “chi,” he must begin his training by attending carefully to his body. The student can understand the other more traditional concepts only on this basis.

To begin, the student of Zhan Zhuang¹ must have a basic understanding of how the skeleton supports the body. More specifically, he must learn the role proper skeleton position plays in allowing the body to bear weight effectively. This is something most students come really to understand only on the basis of long practice in the health stance. The teacher will place the beginning student in this basic stance in such a way that the body’s weight is carried down to the floor instead of to the knees. Beginning students typically find this stage of training very painful, because in order to sustain the position they must use muscles that years of poor posture and bad training have made weak and unavailable. Only a knowledgeable teacher can position the student properly in this basic posture. And only a patient teacher will be willing to put the student back into that posture over and over as the student seeks to avoid the discomfort caused by having to use long unused muscles. As the student continues to practice, he begins to appreciate that the weight of his body is delivered to the floor down the front -- not the back -- of the spine, thus freeing his knees and lower back from the unhealthy demands normally made upon them. Similarly, only long practice in health stance will teach the student the proper relationship between the head, the neck, and rest of the body. Once again,

¹ Note that Zhan Zhuang is only one small part of I-chuan training overall, and it must be understood in that context.

however, the student must rely upon his teacher to put him the correct position and keep him there.

As the student's ability to maintain the health stance grows, his understanding of the role muscles play in standing becomes a little clearer. If he keeps his muscles too loose, his posture will collapse. Mostly likely, he will sway his back, arch his chest, and pull his head back and down on his spine. On the other hand, if he clenches his muscles in order to maintain the posture, he will become rigid and will find it difficult so much as to maintain his balance. Only now does the student begin to understand the particular kind of physical work Zhan Zhuang involves. For standing is not simply a test of endurance designed to see how much discomfort a person can tolerate. Rather than just bearing up under the pain caused holding the posture for any significant length of time, the student must work hard to relax in the stance. The harder the physical work, the more he must struggle to relax. Indeed, the student must learn to relax precisely in order to let his muscles do the work of holding him upright. And this is always so. Consider the physical work involved in carrying a heavy backpack: if a hiker is to bear the weight of his pack, he must position his skeleton properly and then relax enough to do the work of carrying the pack. Otherwise, he will either collapse under the pack's weight or he will quickly exhaust himself by clenching his muscles. There is no secret to this; everyone does it. If the skeleton is properly positioned and one is in fact relaxed, the muscles will respond to the demands weight makes upon them. But this fundamental principle – what is called, “sung-gain” -- is one of the most difficult to understand in this sort of training. There must be exactly as much relaxation as there is work and exactly as

much work as there is relaxation; one without the other is worthless and ultimately harmful.

As I say, the student must learn to go to work in the stance. Unlike a hiker bearing up under the weight of a heavy pack, however, the Zhan Zhuang practitioner must, as it were, supply his own weight. That is to say, because he must do the work of lifting a pack without the benefit of an actual pack, he must himself supply the resistance to movement the pack provides for the hiker. Similarly, he must do the work of leaning against a wall without the benefit the actual wall. He must do the work of hugging a tree and pulling it from the ground without the benefit of the actual tree, and so on. The work the student is asked to do must, in short, be real, something he can clearly see himself doing. This is why a competent Zhan Zhuang teacher will urge his students to work with simple pictures of real work rather than offer them fantasies of “rooting,” “holding up the heavens,” or “starring down a tiger.”

Thus, the first key to standing is correctly to understand how the skeleton and muscles work together when one performs any bodily action. To repeat: the proper position of the skeleton is the one that allows the muscles to respond to the demands work makes upon them.² Once again, however, one relaxes in Zhan Zhuang in order to make such demands. Teachers and students of Zhan Zhuang commonly forget that relaxation without work is useless. Ultimately, the student must learn how to use his “I” [mind] to do the difficult work of punching. In this sort of work and indeed in all movement, the “I” guides the muscles and the skeleton. “I” without the body is like a

² The “official” stances of Zhan Zhuang are designed to let the muscles work in this way, but it is a consequence of the basic principle of sung-gain that there is no one right posture. The posture adopted depends upon the work being done, and vice versa. This is the reason why Zhan Zhuang can be practiced in any of the t'ai chi positions or in none of them.

general without an army. The body without the “I” is like an army without its general. I will introduce this aspect of training below and explain it in more detail in another paper. For the moment, however, it is most important to have some basic understanding of the principle of sung-gain before trying to understand how the mind works in this kind of training.

Let us consider, then, in a little more detail the proper position of the body in the basic Zhan Zhuang health stance.³ The function of the skeleton, as we saw, is to support the body. Without that support, all the muscles and “I” in the world are no better than useless mud. For health, martial arts, and successful functioning in daily life, the skeleton must be positioned so that the weight of the body is carried to the floor through the feet. If the skeleton is out of alignment, the lower back and knees will bear an undue burden in supporting the weight of the body. Whenever standing – either informally or in the specialized context of Zhan Zhuang training – the knees must be positioned at an angle that encourages the leg muscles to respond to the weight of the body, neither locked up nor too deeply bent and always over the instep of the foot (not to either side). In a word, the beginning student should put 60% to 70% of his weight in his heels and then squat naturally just as though he were about to spring forward and into the air.

The muscles in the lower back are not meant to bear the weight of the body. The latter should be carried along the front of the spine to the hip joints and from there to the feet. Consequently, the student must remember to keep his lower back as flat as possible. If the lower back is swayed and the buttocks stick out, the body’s weight will be pulled back and off the hips, and the lower back will be compromised. At the same time that

³ I provide a more complete description of the health stance in my earlier paper on this website. See Gregory Fong, “Some Basic Principles of I-Chuan Training: Part One.”

student is learning to flatten out his lower back, however, he is learning to prevent his chest from rising. In the case of most people new to training, the lower back and chest work at cross-purposes. As the student gets tired while standing, he will let his knees slide forward, sway his lower back, stick out his buttocks, and let his chest rise up. With practice, however, the student learns simultaneously to let go of (or “sink”) his chest and flatten his lower back, and he comes to understand that his spine can intelligently respond to the demands made upon it only in this position.

In addition to these points, the student of Zhan Zhuang eventually comes to appreciate as well that the group of muscles in the neck are the key to the proper functioning of the rest of the body. If the neck muscles can’t respond to the demands made upon them by physical work, all other bodily movement becomes mechanical. In effect, if the proper usage of those muscles is inhibited, it is impossible for the student to have access to the involuntary muscular response to the demands that real work makes upon the rest of the body. And those muscles can respond properly only if the head and spine are correctly aligned. Many teachers of t’ai chi and most textbooks on Chinese martial arts urge the student to “sink the chi to tan tien,” but the only way for that to happen naturally is if the chest can relax, and the only way in turn for that to happen is if the neck is positioned in such a way as to allow the body to respond to the demands made upon it. In the end, far from just providing support for the head, the neck is the key to proper standing itself. The teacher must make quite certain, therefore, that student has correctly positioned his head in relation to rest of his body.

A certain amount of practice in the basic health stance therefore teaches the student a great deal about how to align his skeleton correctly. But, as we have seen, he

must also appreciate the physical work his muscles perform in order to maintain the posture he chooses. My repeated emphasis on muscular work in Zhan Zhuang will be confusing to many readers, because most teachers and textbooks counsel students only to relax – as though simply by relaxing they will one day be able to use their “chi” to defeat an opponent. In the end, however, it is the muscles that do the real work of standing, moving, and punching. As I said above, relaxation without work is a waste of time. Zhan Zhuang practice is meant to be hard work, both physical and mental. Proper standing, in short, builds both mental and physical endurance. The goal, however, is not just to strengthen this or that muscle group, but rather to link as many different muscles groups together as possible, so that, ultimately, the whole body will be involved in even the simplest movement. This sort of support in movement more generally is what is meant by moving “in one piece.”

Once the student has a basic understanding of the role the skeleton and the muscles play in standing, he must learn to use that understanding to develop and control his power. Many contemporary teachers extol the health benefits of standing and choose to ignore its role in the martial arts. As I see it, however, the attempt to separate health from martial ability in this way is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of training. As I have said, the student who does no more than perfect the external postures of Zhan Zhuang will accomplish little or nothing. The student who goes further and puts real content into those forms by means of muscular work is working in the right direction. If he stops there, however, he will be leaving undeveloped a third crucial function of his mind and body. What I have to say here about this third aspect of Zhan Zhuang training involves a discussion of movement and only scratches the surface of the topic. I will

have more to say about it in later papers. It is important right at the beginning, however, to emphasize that the development, refinement, and control of power is the ultimate goal of Zhan Zhuang training.

We get some of idea of what the development and control of power involves by considering how the student of I-chuan learns how – primarily by learning to punch -- to transfer the power developed in Zhan Zhuang to his opponent. If the reader has followed my exposition so far, it should not be difficult to understand the basic principle of how power in the punch is developed. Any bodily movement that has the support of the entire muscular skeletal system will have power. The more of that system I can bring to bear on the task of moving (my hand, example), the better supported and stronger will that movement be. The point should be entirely clear if we consider the work involved in moving a heavy weight with my hand. Because the weight provides resistance to movement, I must modify my skeletal structure and recruit more muscles in order correctly to move my hand. The student of Zhan Zhuang must learn to lift that same weight and indeed to move it about, but without the benefit of real weight in his hand. He must learn to “do the real thing without the real thing.” The martial artist confronts an additional problem, however. He must learn how, in an instant and all at once, to transfer his energy to his opponent. That is, once he has developed his power, he must learn to use it.

In order to be able in this way to transfer his energy, the student must have both power and speed. An adequate explanation of each of these concepts would take us well beyond a discussion of Zhan Zhuang itself, but the student needs to have some grasp of the direction his training is taking him, so I would like to say something briefly about

speed and power here, with the understanding that a more complete discussion will have to await another paper. The student must understand three things about power: (i) the development of power; (ii) the direction of power; (iii) the point of impact. Above all, the student must understand that properly transferred power should penetrate his opponent, not simply push him.

(i) One learns to control the development of one's power by regular and intensive Zhan Zhuang practice. Over time, the student of Zhan Zhuang learns how to provide better and better support for whatever posture he adopts. The thoughtful student comes quickly to appreciate that there is no end to this aspect of training, because there is no end to the support he can call upon his body to provide. Thus, the longer and more intelligently the student practices, the more of his musculature he is able consciously to recruit in order to work within the posture.

(ii) Because the muscles work efficiently only if the skeleton is properly positioned, the direction of power is a function of one's distance from one's target. Distance is controlled by footwork, but because a discussion of footwork is outside the scope of this paper, I cannot provide anything like an adequate account of this aspect of training here. The basic problem the student must learn to solve, however, should be clear: because he can deliver whatever power he has only if his posture is correct, he must learn to move himself into this posture with respect to his opponent, and he must learn to accomplish this movement without destroying the structure and support his Zhan Zhuang practice has helped to develop. At this point in his training, the student must begin to learn how to move correctly.

(iii) Finally, the student must learn to control the point of his punch's impact. This is the most difficult aspect of punching to describe in a clear and helpful way. The following points will have to suffice for the present discussion. First, the student must understand that a proper punch is not thrown; it is released. That is to say, the boxer trained correctly in Zhan Zhuang punches by instantaneously letting go of all the muscles that a moment before had provided resistance to his movement in the direction of his target. Once again, Zhan Zhuang practice is designed to teach one to provide as much resistance as possible in as many directions as possible but without the benefit of real weight. The greater the resistance that is released in the proper direction, the more power there will be in the punch. Note, however, that the student must always be working against this resistance. He must, therefore, learn to distinguish working in this way from simply clenching his muscles. Resistance can be released in an instant; tightness cannot. A student who is tight must do two things in order to move, both of which take time: first, he must relax his clenched muscles, and second, he must initiate movement. By contrast, the student working against resistance must, in effect, simply stop holding himself back. Second, the student must learn precisely when and how much to firm up on impact.⁴ If he firms up too soon or too tightly, none of his power will be transferred to his opponent; he will merely push or shove him. If he firms up too late or not firmly enough, he is liable to break his hand or wrist. The student must let go of the tension in his whole body and be about to move both immediately before and after the moment of impact for the power actually to penetrate his opponent. In the end, the student's ability to solve this

⁴ With good instruction and much practice, the student should come to understand the difference between being "firm," in this sense and being tight. As I have indicated, even a large and otherwise powerful individual cannot transfer much power, if his body is too tight upon impact. I will do my best to explain this difference in greater detail in another paper.

problem is entirely a function of his sung-gain: his skeletal structure and his split-second muscular control.

So much, then, for power. Speed is also crucial for proper punching. Here, as elsewhere, however, there is much room for misunderstanding. Something's speed, as people usually understand the term, is measured simply by how quickly it moves from one point to another. This sort of speed has to do with the skeleton's velocity. It is mostly physical, and it has little to do with I-chuan training. There is an upper limit to how fast one can move one's skeleton from one point to another, a speed greater than which one simply cannot move. If such rapid skeletal movement is all one understands by "speed," one must be prepared to find that one day one has reached one's speed limit and to recognize, as one ages, that one's movements can only grow slower by comparison to one's youthful maximum. From an I-chuan perspective, however, a boxer's speed is a function of how fast he can organize his muscular skeletal support for and in movement. Consequently, there is no obvious limit to the development of one's speed: there are always more muscles to recruit to support movement, and there is always room to speed up one's ability to recruit them. From this perspective, then, speed is a function of "I" or mind. How fast can one send out messages to the muscles? How strong is the signal one sends? How many muscles can one link together all at once? How strong are the connections one forges? How long can the muscles recruited keep up with the demands made upon them? In short, are one's muscles trained to respond intelligently to the demands made upon them, or are they simply large and dull? Dull muscles and weak "I" create resistance and reduce one's speed (in either sense).

In general, people misinterpret the nature of bodily movement, and think of it solely in terms of the skeleton. This is the chief reason most students' t'ai chi forms appear so empty and lifeless: there is no muscular work in those movements because there is no "I" behind them. Typical t'ai chi movements are slow in both senses of the word. Kung-fu students, by contrast, are typically instructed to move fast in their forms and drills and to put power in their blocks, kicks, and punches. Obediently following such instructions may help a devoted student develop strong techniques, but it will never generate the sort of refined muscular control at which I-chuan training aims. Thus, although he moves his skeleton quickly, there is no speed (in the sense of instantaneous muscular integration) in his movement. For all his hard work, the typical kung-fu student is doing little more than rapidly rearranging his skeleton according to set rules. For the reasons I have indicated, however, this sort of mindless rearrangement of the skeleton itself can never generate real penetrating power in his punches.

These, then, are some of the key concepts of I-chuan Zhan Zhuang training: skeleton support, muscular control, and "I." If one's understanding of these concepts is sound, one has a good chance of making real progress – for health or for martial arts – in this form of training. On the other hand, without an adequate understanding of these basic principles, one is truly in danger of wasting a great deal of time and energy and of creating real health problems.

Training in the way I have indicated in this paper is extremely challenging. The student wishing to practice Zhan Zhuang in the light of the principles I have laid out must constantly rouse himself and go to work. Training in this way places constant demands on both the mind and the body, demands it is difficult if not impossible for the student ever adequately to answer. That's the bad news. The good news, however, is threefold. First, there is truly no end of the progress one can make in this training. There are always more muscles and groups of muscles one can learn to recruit to perform even the simplest bodily movement, and one can always increase one's speed and skill at recruiting them. There is, in a word, no end to the power one can develop in this sort of training. Second, whatever progress one makes, however modest, is immediately beneficial. One's health improves and one's thinking and moving immediately have more content. And if one practices martial arts forms of any sort, movements that were formerly lifeless begin to have content. Third, one already knows everything that I-chuan training teaches. That is to say, the training aims to remove obstacles to the natural functioning of mind and body, not to add new and artificial forms to a pre-existing body of knowledge. Different students will progress at different rates, but they will all make progress and all in the same direction: each toward his original mind and body and away from all the artificiality with which years of neglect and bad training have saddled him.

No matter how carefully one presents Zhan Zhuang in writing, there is no substitute for working with a knowledgeable teacher. Only such a teacher can correct the student's inevitable misunderstanding of the instructions provided. I have tried in this paper only to point the reader in the right direction and to help him to avoid spending endless hours in a fruitless pursuit of health and martial arts ability. To be worthwhile,

Zhan Zhuang training must involve heavy mental and physical labor. Without going to work in the postures, one will certainly be wasting one's time. Nevertheless, the idea of "going to work" is easy to misunderstand. So if there is further interest in this topic, I will try my best in a later paper to make clear what such work involves. I encourage the reader to let me know if indeed he has such an interest.