

I-Chuan Standing and Low Back Pain

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Practitioners of martial arts are often surprised at the variety of health benefits that occur in the course of good kung fu training. In I-Chuan training in particular, the standing work involved in producing a more fully integrated and combat-ready body naturally brings about better blood circulation, the release of chronic tension, skeletal realignments and other therapeutic results. While others on this site and elsewhere have explored the development of these processes and their relationship to I-Chuan training, this paper will focus on the standing work as taught by Sifu Gregory Fong and its affect on a ailment common to many westerners: chronic lower back injury and pain.

In the winter of 1998, while hiking on the north Oregon coast, I slipped. In order to avoid falling head-over heels I caught myself with my front foot and at the same time rocketed my rear foot back, ending up in an unintentional, very low 'splits'. Being young and up to that time injury-free, I thought little of it and drove back to the city. Later that night, bending over to move a desk, I felt a 'pop' and then a 'crack' in the middle of my lower back. I found out later that the combination of those two acute stresses had slipped a vertebrae disc out of place, pinching one of the nerves that run from my low back down my right leg.

For the next two weeks I was bed bound, unable to walk without pain. And for the next number of years, whenever I walked more than a few blocks or stood longer than a couple of minutes, I experienced sharp, shooting pain down my hip and leg.

My injury was typical of many lower back injuries. In response, I tried many of the typical therapies used to ameliorate lower back pain: chiropractic therapy, acupuncture, western medicine. While these therapies each relieved the pain for periods of time, none succeeded in significantly altering my body's musculo-skeletal structure enough to keep me from re-injury. Walking or standing just a little too long would inevitably wreck any hard-won relief and bring another round of injury and pain.

By the time I began training in I-Chuan I had learned to function around the pain and I came to Sifu Fong's class primarily to develop my martial prowess. After a few months of training though, it became clear that the achievement of these two goals, the martial and the restorative, ran along parallel tracks. Since it is often muscular imbalance that stands in the way of both optimum health and martial excellence, I soon came to understand my back injury as simply a painful form of the muscular imbalance experienced by almost everyone.

I-Chuan's solution to such imbalance is deceptively simple. It begins in standing, where one works to accomplish certain pairs of tasks: sit down and

stand up simultaneously, lift and put down a bag of rice, prepare to run a 50-yard dash and immediately spring back. All this work happens while keeping the skeleton still, it is only the muscles that go to work. As more directions and 'weight' are added to activity, the muscles have no choice but to learn to work more efficiently. Thus, muscles and tendons that are chronically tight soon relax, as those which are chronically inactive are put to work.

The unique advantage of practicing standing this way is that it allows the body and mind to move in multiple directions, using multiple muscle groups, all at the same time. Exercises like curling a dumbbell or running a sprint, since they require the skeleton to be committed to certain directions of movement, do not build the same level of muscular balance. And, since standing work is not simply a "rep", but an activity sustained over minutes or hours, one is patiently able to create smaller and more refined movement deep within the body.

By taking advantage of the opportunities for minute muscular adjustments that standing continually offers, one slowly but surely brings about a number of distinct physiological improvements unavailable in most exercise. Perhaps most noticeable, especially to people who suffer from musculo-skeletal discomfort, is the redistribution of the downward force of gravity in the body. This downward force, when allowed to travel it's natural route through the bones and joints, releases the muscular stress locked in the hips, shoulder, knees and spinal column which had previously been 'holding up' the body's weight. The release of

that stress permits the skeleton to perform it's natural function and the muscles to relax, bringing integration and power to areas of the body that had before been only tense or dead.

Over time an imbalanced musculature will also pull the body's joints out of their proper alignments. This not only creates further imbalance and makes gravity's job more difficult but increases the likelihood of spinal or skeletal injury. As my own case proves, an improperly supported skeleton will simply succumb to the downward force of gravity and begin to literally fall apart. The heavy muscular work of standing naturally brings the joints back into a correct relationship with each other.

Additionally, as more space is created inside the body by the realignment of the bones and muscles, blood and lymph begin to fill body cavities which were once blocked. I noticed that as my standing sessions became more stable and relatively pain free, the work almost began to do itself. It felt as if my joints and muscles, more buoyant because of the increased flow of fluids, would push and pull themselves into alignment even at times of the day when I was not practicing. The muscles around my low back and hips began to respond to even the smallest conscious intention. Now, a little under two years after first coming to Sifu Fong's class, the muscles around my back and hips are without pain and I am able to walk and stand with ease.

Though I-Chuan standing is by no means a cure-all, daily practice offers a way to access and learn about the inside of one's own body that many other therapies and exercises, working from the outside in, do not. For identical reasons, patient standing training gives the martial artist access to combat information that other practices simply do not. Consistent practice with a capable teacher is the best way of thoroughly accomplishing these goals.