

Zhan Zhuang - Standing like a Tree

In Chi Kung - The Art of Intention



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In order to do anything in this life, we must first have Energy.
Guan Tse, ancient chinese philosopher.

Chi Kung

The manifestation of Chi is in everything, including the human body. The chinese study of human energy can be traced back to the reign of the Yellow Emperor, around 2690~2590, and still remains an active and valuable field of study in China, as well as other parts of the world. This understanding of the energy of the human body has lead to the development of exercise systems with the purpose of cultivating and harmonizing the energy flow. Thus **Chi Kung** literally means “to cultivate the Chi.” It is a process of change and transformation that stimulates the energy that flows through the channels of the body towards a natural balance and harmony for mental and physical health. All human activities, be they physical, mental or spiritual, are considered dynamic manifestations of an individual energy. So each body is a reservoir of energy and each human life is ruled by the dynamics of this energy field. Like a miniature cosmos this field embraces each particle of our body, each spark our nervous system, each thought, each emotion.



*Chinese character for **chi***

The chinese character **chi** has two elements that together give the idea of a stove or oven. The upper element is the pot and underneath is the fire. The concept of breath or air is also present in the sense that a pot with water on the fire will release steam.

Chi is the primal medium of which all things in the universe are made. It is the energy or life force which forms the essence of everything. To understand this concept is to have an appreciation of universal energy.

Cultivating Energy

Chi Kung means cultivating energy. **Kung** means exercise or work. So **Chi Kung** literally refers to “internal energy training”. Many systems have been developed with this purpose of training the human body as an energy field.

One of the fundamental principles of chinese medicine is that one is responsible for one's own health. Throughout the chinese-speaking world, people of all ages begin their day by attending to their health. You see them everywhere in the parks and gardens performing various movements - all designed to cultivate their internal energy. Once every person is understood to be an entire field of energy, the idea of energy exercise takes on a deeper meaning.

Zhan Zhuang - Standing like a Tree

With virtually no external movements, **Zhan Zhuang** is the most potent form of Chi King developed. It is a unique exercise system concentrating entirely on the inner workings of the human body through a variety of carefully composed postures. **Zhan Zhuang** means 'Standing like a Tree' and reference to this practice can be traced as far as Lao Tse's writings in the Tao Te Ching, the practice does as it suggests: it develops great inner strength like that of a magnificent mature tree.

These exercises can be performed by anyone regardless of the state of their health. The movements and positions are generally standard, but how they affect each person depends on their individual needs and capacity. Regular practice will ensure that your power will be directed by a mind that is increasingly alert and sensitive.

This program provides essential tools for starting a regular practice that has the potential of becoming a lifetime training research.

The Sea of Chi

Each human life is shaped around a central point. The cells begin to multiply around the area where the fetus is directly connected to the mother's womb. The point of connection becomes our umbilical cord, sustaining the vital exchange between mother and child. Once cut, the cells reform to create the newborn's navel, or belly button which is of extreme importance in the medical model on which Chinese medicine is based. Associated with your navel is the **Sea of Chi** called in Chinese **Tan Tien**. It lies 3cm below your navel, one-third of the way into your body. It is the reservoir of your Chi. One of the first steps in this practice is to ensure that this reservoir is replenished.



Gathering your Chi

We start by standing in a relaxed upright position. Your feet should be placed so they are shoulder width apart, toes pointing forward. Rest your right thumb over your navel and let your hand naturally fall into place on the lower abdomen. Then place your left hand comfortably on top of your right. Look forward and breathe naturally. Practice standing for two minutes. Gradually build up to five minutes. This posture can be used at any time of the day, in any circumstance that the need or the opportunity provides for.

Wu Chi

Body as the string lifts
Two eyes, the spiritual light, reserve;
Two ears listen to Supreme Tranquillity
The small belly is constantly round.

Wu Chi is the fundamental posture, the primal position. The chinese term means 'supreme emptiness'. As all things come from nothing and return to nothing, this posture therefore manifests the elusive beginning and end - like a circle. It is also the posture that brings into alignment our energy with that of the Heaven and the Earth.



We stand upright with the legs shoulder width apart and toes facing forward.
The eyes gaze calmly forward as if at a distant mountain. Without straining, including everything.
Let the arms hang from the shoulders leaving space under the armpits to naturally round them. The elbows and knees gently bent while the body is upright, neither forward or back.
Relax your hips and let your weight drop as if to sit on a large balloon. Imagine that a string suspends your body from the top of your head. Release your muscles into this image.
Practice this position for 5 minutes. As you feel more at ease gradually build up to 10 minutes.

The Full Belly

For this posture it may help to think of the figure of The Laughing Buddha with the broad smile and rotund belly. His belly is not considered fat but rather filled with energy.

When in this posture many people tend to hunch their shoulders or strain their chest muscles as they hold their arms in front. One way to eliminate this unnecessary strain is to imagine there is a strap running from behind and around your neck stretching down to your wrists. Imagine the strap takes the weight of your arms and this will help lower your shoulders and relax your chest.



Begin in Wu Chi.

Relax your lower back and slightly lower your bottom, about 2cm, as if to sit down. This will cause the knees to bend more but make sure they do not come forward over your toes. Bring both your hands up in front of your abdomen as if you were holding them around the fullness that extends beyond your body. Relax your belly and breathe naturally.

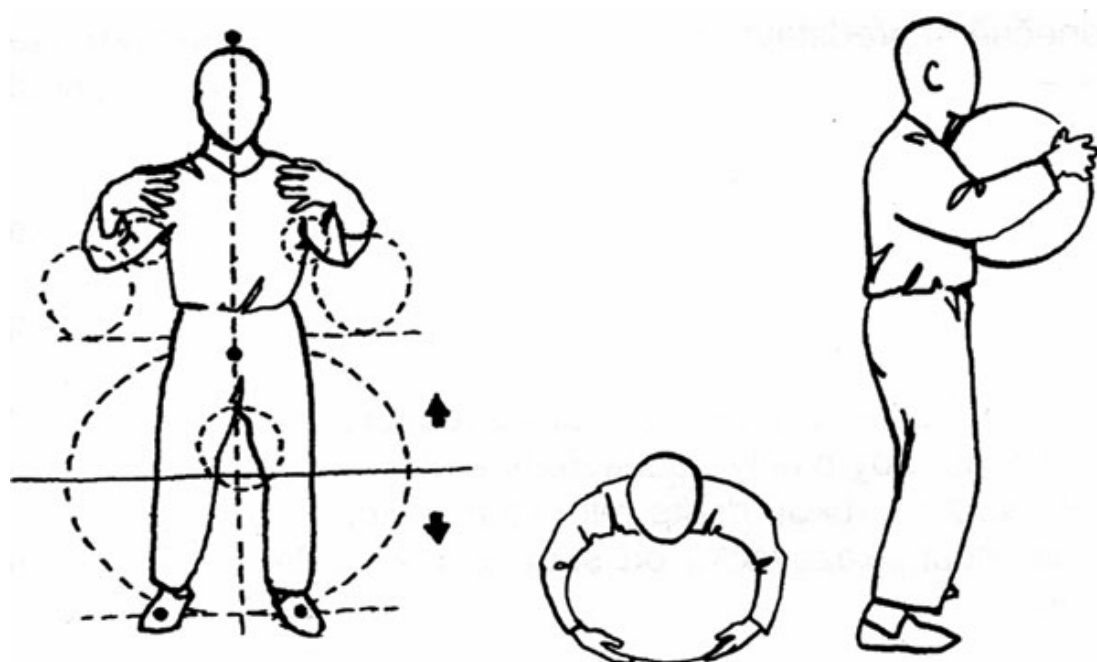
This posture helps your spine decompress and, as you hold a slightly lower position, the extra work done by your leg muscles stimulates the blood circulation throughout the body.

Try staying in the posture for 5 minutes. Then return to Wu Chi.

Holding the Balloon

This position is more strenuous and needs more time for the muscular and nervous system to adapt. The effort involved greatly increases the flow of Chi in your system and this increased energy activity may cause unusual sensations. Tension, tingling, numbness or trembling may be experienced varying from person to person.

It is very important to be aware of your alignment during this posture and with this awareness try to adjust as tensions or discomfort arises. Keep checking how you are holding your head, if your shoulders and chest are relaxed and if you are breathing naturally.



Begin in Wu Chi. To move into the new position slowly sink down, this time about 5cm, keeping your upper body upright and spreading the weight evenly into your feet. Slowly raise both your arms in front of you as if to gently embrace someone. Bring your hands up level with your chest, but not as high as your shoulders. Your elbows should be slightly lower than your wrists. The distance between the fingertips of your two hands should be approximately the width of a fist. Open your fingers so there is space between them. Keep them round, alive but not tense.

The inner work of this exercise is simply to stand still for several minutes at a time. Start gradually, 2 minutes at a time and then increase as it becomes more comfortable.

Opening Outward

In this position you feel a strong surge of Chi, that may increase your body temperature and make you sweat. Tingling, shaking or trembling may occur for with this posture the training is being taken to a further threshold of difficulty. It makes greater demands on your nervous system developing stamina and ability to concentrate. It should be practiced only after you are comfortable with the previous postures.



From the Holding the Balloon posture, lower yourself even further taking care not to let your upper body lean forward, lengthening and releasing the lower back as you feel the increased effort on your legs. Raise your arms and turn your palms outward, away from your face, so the backs of your hands are level with your eyes. Your fingers remain slightly spread and thumbs relaxed and the intention is to gently push away.. Try to to relax into this intention.

At first, stay in this position briefly, half a minute perhaps, extending gradually the permanence. If it becomes to painful in the deeper position, you can move slightly up to relieve the legs.

It is important to imagine the space around you as actively supporting the body and arms.

Extending to the Sides

As your energy develops it begins to act like a powerful current flowing with growing strength from deep inside you, out to the furthest margins of your body. This next posture encourages this process. You remain stable while experiencing the increased flow of Chi.



Start in Wu Chi, move into Holding the Balloon and stay for 5 minutes.

Lower yourself deeper, about 5cm more, as if your entire upper body weight were resting on the imaginary balloon under your buttocks. This sense of sinking downwards is extremely important as it develops your connection with the energy of the earth.

Slowly move your arms down and out toward the sides. Your hands should be level with your waist, slightly in front of you. Your hands are relaxed, but alive and fingers gently spread apart. Relax the shoulders, elbows and wrists.

As you train the other postures, start with 3 to 5 minutes in this one and then gradually increase the length of time.

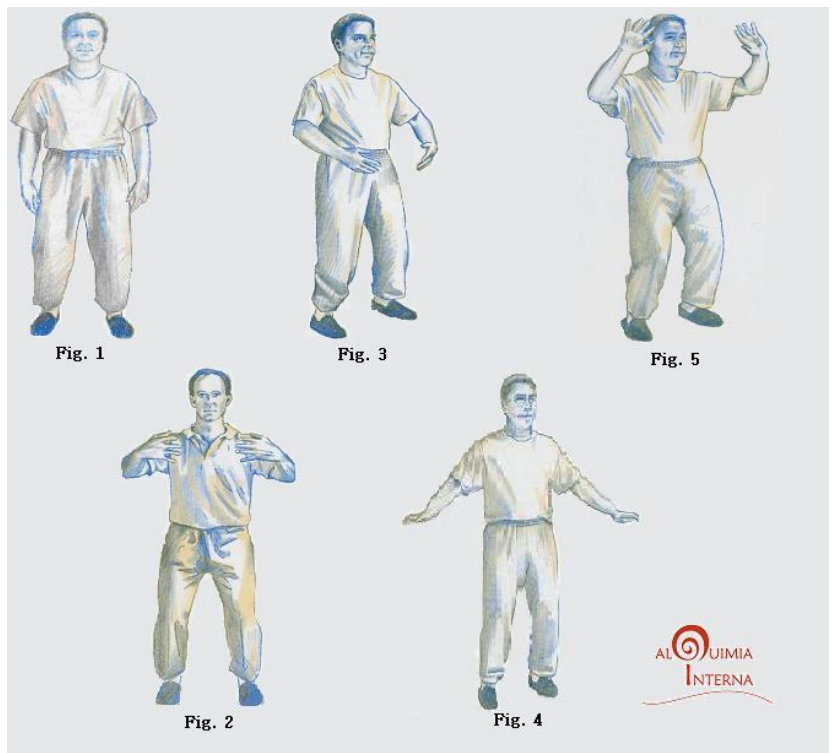
The Full Sequence

It is advised to train each posture separately first until your nervous and muscular system is somewhat familiar. Then the training can evolve into a sequence that can stimulate and refresh the practice. Go through the sequence in the most relaxed manner possible using soft instrumental music if you wish. Make the transition between each position slowly and smoothly.

To begin, and after each posture, gather your energy into your Tan Tien.

Sequence:

- Gather your Energy-2 min
- Wu Chi 3-5 min
- Gather your Energy-2 min
- The Full Belly -5 min
- Gather your Energy-2 min
- Holding the Ballon 3-5 min
- Gather your Energy-2 min
- Opening Outward 3-5 min
- Gather your Energy-2 min
- Extending to the Sides 3-5 min
- Gather your Energy-2 min



The Decision to Practice

In the book *What I talk about when I talk about running*, Haruki Murakami tells us about when he interviewed the Olympic runner Toshihiko Seko and asked him:

"Does a runner at your level ever feel like you'd rather not run today, like you don't want to run and would rather just sleep in?" He stared at me and then in a voice that made it abundantly clear how stupid he thought the question was, replied, "Of course. All the time!"

The decision to practice is taken daily and in that choice is the discipline. To connect with your body and take the responsibility of listening and caring. Our modern lives are characterized by daily hubbubs and demanding schedules. Anxiety and tension have become the norm in our everyday routine. So the challenge involves taking steps to include the practice of cultivating energy and making it happen. There are a few simple ways of making this choice easier.

To decide ahead of time how long you will practice and where this will happen may be decisive in starting a routine.

Setting aside "emergency exercises" for when you are caught in unexpected circumstances or when you simply don't have enough time give you an extra chance to stay with the practice. Sometimes interrupting the routine is enough to make you lose ground and give up.

Engaging in the practice as a permanent research being aware of when you need more stimulation. This can mean taking a group class, asking a friend or colleague to practice with you, researching a question you have or discussing an issue with a teacher.

The motivation to keep a practice going has to do with so many different aspects but in the end what makes is the difference is the ability to stay curious and willing to question and dig deeper. The responsibility of practicing comes from that need.

'Most people run not because they want to live longer, but because they want to live life to the fullest. If you're going to while away the years, it's far better to live them with clear goals and fully alive than in a fog, and I believe running does that. Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life.'

'What I talk about when I talk about running'- Haruki Murakami

The Butterfly



Many times changes that happen around us are more obvious than the changes in our body.

When we practice Cho Kung we change. When we stand in the postures those changes begin in profound and subtle ways that affect every aspect of our being.

These changes begin within and are unseen. They take time and careful work, like the way a butterfly emerges from the caterpillar's form.

The butterfly begins its work in stillness. Out of its own body it spins a chrysalis. It draws power inward to itself, ceases all movement, and begins its journey to new life.

The work is silent and invisible, until one day, renewed and re-patterned, it emerges into light.

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Sites online:

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Peter Den Dekker : www.standingdynamics.com