

The Way of Martial Arts 禅

MONTHLY INTERACTIVE LESSONS TO HELP IMPROVE YOUR DAILY LIFE

BY MASTER ERIC SBARGE

Lesson 29

Stand Still for a Minute...or an Hour

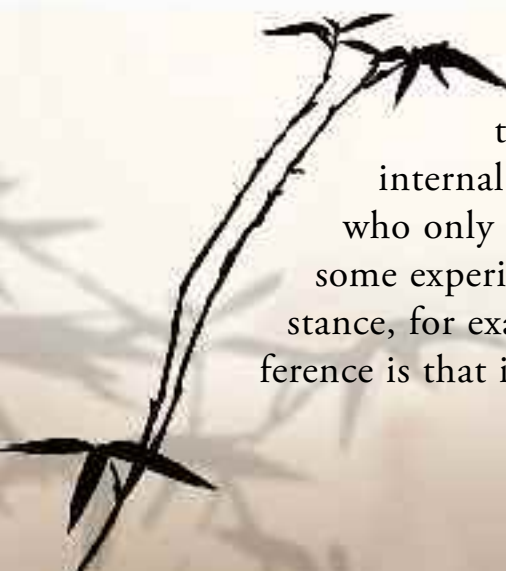
Lesson Five was entitled, “Don’t Just Do Something – Stand There.” The topic of that lesson was Yin and Yang, and standing meditation was presented as an example of a kind of Yin counterbalance to the overly-active Yang lifestyle that most of us lead.

In this lesson, I want to delve deeper into the specific benefits and practice of standing meditation. Called Zhan Zhuang in Chinese, standing meditation often translates as post standing or universal post in English because you literally stand there like a fence post.

Whatever you call it, the practice has several benefits beyond the obvious meditative ones. It develops strength, endurance, improved muscular/skeletal alignment, better breathing, heightened awareness of your center (which improves movement), greater blood and energy movement, and a stronger root. These qualities are essential for both health improvement and martial arts development.



TIPS FOR STANDING IN PROPER FORM

A stylized black ink illustration of a bamboo branch with several leaves, extending from the bottom left towards the center of the page.

Undoubtedly you have already spent a good deal of time practicing universal post or san ti in your tai chi or internal arts classes, but even if you are one of my few students who only does the more external Shaolin or shuai chiao you have some experience with this. We hold static postures such as horse stance, for example, in our external systems’ stance training. One difference is that in external styles the postures tend to be deeper and more

demanding and usually held for shorter periods of time, perhaps making them less meditative and more physical.

Anyway, you are familiar with the practice in some form so I'll get right into some details for our most common stance, which is with feet parallel and shoulder width.

First, your alignment. I always speak in general terms about keeping a "plumb line" with your body. More specifically, this means lining up three points: The bai-hui point (crown of the head), the hui-yin point (perineum), and the center point between the two soles of the feet (centered from heel to toe).

Next, simultaneously imagine the weight on the outsides of the feet, yet spread evenly on each part of the soles of the feet. The toes are gently pressed to the ground.

Then, press the knees slightly outward, as if holding a beach ball between them.

Next, hollow the chest and round the back. If you are holding your arms in the rounded "tree-hugging" posture, you can imagine a ball in your arms and that ball pushes against your chest, forcing it inward. Your upper torso has to go somewhere, so the upper back goes outward. Think of dropping the heart and lungs at the same time.

Think of raising the crown of the head with a light and sensitive energy at the bai-hui point. The chin tucks slightly as you do this.

Generally keep the eyes open, but not staring intently at anything in particular. For practice, you can of course look in the mirror to make obvious corrections to your posture. It's okay to close your eyes sometimes, but you should be equally comfortable keeping them opened.

TIPS FOR MEDITATION IN UNIVERSAL POST

We seek to maximize rooting and chi flow through our standing, and the greatest barrier to both is tension. Therefore, we need to cultivate deep relaxation of the muscles as we stand. By now you having surely seen first-hand that you cannot relax your muscles to any significant level if your mind is not first relaxed. And the only way to relax the mind is to quiet it.

So, we need to preoccupy the mind to "quiet the wild monkey." We have a few methods to achieve this.

First, we can focus on the breathing. The breaths should be smooth, quiet and naturally elongated. The longer you stand (at least up to a certain point) the quieter and less obvious the breath becomes, sometimes to the point that you don't really feel like you're breathing. Let the mind calmly and quietly just observe that feeling.

Alternately, we can focus on sinking the chi. Some people erroneously focus on trying to move the chi within the body, but this is to no avail. If we think of sinking the chi, it automatically moves more robustly through the body.

To sink the chi, we bring the focus to the dantian. We meditate on the dantian as our center, visualizing the breath coming to and from it, and using it as the reference point from which our awareness of any other part of the body is located. If we think of the crown of the head and the soles of the feet as the top and bottom of a sphere, the dantian is the center of that sphere and the rest of our body falls somewhere within the sphere.

ESTABLISHING YOUR PERSONAL ZHAN ZHUANG ROUTINE

None of us are identical, and so our needs aren't identical. With that said, I believe every student capable of standing can benefit from regular zhan zhuang practice.

Sometimes you will hear the recommendation not to stand and practice when you are too tense. If you listen to that advice, you will almost never practice. We are all too tense most of the time – that's why we need our post work.

But on the other hand, we don't want to over-practice and cause greater tension, either physically or mentally.

Start with just a few minutes at a time and gradually build up, perhaps adding a minute or so each week. Regular practice of short sessions is always far superior to sporadic practice of long sessions, as it is with most aspects of our kung fu training.

A reasonable goal is to build up to 30-60 minutes of daily standing if you want to be a proficient fighter. For health, half that time can be sufficient.

I recommend doing some light warm-up before standing – in my case I

usually do Beating the Heavenly Drum for a few minutes. Then it's good to shake out and stretch the body a bit afterwards.

So there you have it. At the time I am writing this, I've been practicing zhan zhuang to one degree or another for 29 years. I continue to discover new things, both mentally and physically, particularly when I go through phases of more intensive zhan zhuang practice.

My personal opinion of zhan zhuang? It's one of the few things I wish I had done a whole lot more of in my early years of training.

EXERCISE ONE

Take note of any times you are standing during the day: In the shower, waiting on line somewhere, etc. Try to adhere to all of the physical guidelines outlined above for the duration of your standing

EXERCISE TWO

Stand in universal post with your arms rounded as if hugging a tree. Now change your arm position a few times, perhaps to various postures from your form. Try to observe how each change of arm posture impacts the torso and legs – does it cause you to deviate from the physical guidelines above?

ASSIGNMENT

Briefly describe your “typical” state of mind when doing zhan zhuang, at least as you perceive it. Send your thoughts to me at lessons@thepeaceful-dragon.com. Please put “Lesson 29” in the subject line.

RECOMMENDED READING

Warriors of Stillness:

Meditative Traditions in the Chinese Martial Arts, Volume 1

By Jan Diepersloot

Here you'll find the most comprehensive explanations on the value and methods of “standing” available, from a practitioner of Tai Chi and I-

Chuan. I-Chuan is an internal martial art that emphasizes standing above all other forms of practice. The standing practice is presented in relation to push hands practice, making this a must read for push-hands enthusiasts. Volume 2 is worth reading, though in my opinion not as beneficial as Volume 1.



Every month a book or article will be suggested by Master Sbarge. Reading about topics related to the arts you are training in will help you get the most out of your practice. Just remember that reading can never replace your practice! Each month's recommended reading is purely optional, though Master Sbarge may on rare occasion ask that you do read a particular book.

For additional reading suggestions by Master Sbarge, go to <http://www.thepeacefuldragon.com/books.shtml>. For any book or other item you purchase through The Peaceful Dragon website's link to Amazon.com, a percentage is automatically sent to The Peaceful Dragon. We appreciate your support of our school.

Note: All Peaceful Dragon students are urged to complete monthly assignments because they are important for you to fully benefit from your training.