



ZHAN ZHUANG

The internal athlete

by Sam Moor

Many years ago, a teacher said that, to truly understand movement one must get to grips with stillness. I have certainly found this to be true: for stillness is to movement as silence is to sound

Overleaf 

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If, for some strange reason, I were restricted to choose just one thing to share with people from the trove of body/mind arts that I have trained in and taught for many years it would undoubtedly be zhan zhuang, the art of standing still and more commonly known as standing meditation. For no matter how unlikely a contender for developing oneself the simple act of standing still might seem, for me it would be quite an easy choice. Out of the many training methods that I have enjoyed, endured and taught over the years, including the more orthodox systems of exercise of my early days, no other ticks quite as many boxes as Standing. Nor have I come across any other practise that illustrates how all those very boxes that we might want to tick, but usually assume to be separate, are in fact inextricably linked.

I have spent many hours standing still and, although somewhat challenging, a large proportion of that time has been rather wonderful and, on many levels, quite liberating. In terms of improving all other aspects of my training it has been invaluable and deeply informative in terms of accruing fundamental ‘body knowledge’ for myself from myself.

Easy to miss

A large part of the motivation for my choice would be inspired by the fact that it is very common for us to completely miss the simplest treasures of physical reality that are only tangible in the present moment of the here and now because our minds are almost permanently distracted by the constant buzz of habitual busyness; a discursive noise completely unrelated to what is happening in and around us in real time. To be able to do anything well, and I mean that in the most genuine sense, this issue is something that we must first recognise and then get to grips with. For if we do not, which is all too often the case, we live at the mercy of a top-down dictatorship comprised of our thoughts and one that impels us on a constant search for a better experience than the one we are currently having.

More stable

If we could slow down and stop for a time, we might give ourselves a chance to experience life from a clearer and more stable perspective and the futility of this rush would be more than obvious: there is no other time than now and it is in the omnipresence of the present moment that life unceasingly reveals itself.

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact” – Sherlock Holmes

Like seated meditation practice, standing meditation can be an excellent tool to address this serious impediment to the quality of lives. However, it comes with the major bonus that it serves as an excellent method for training the body at a deep level. Through the lens of physio-cognitive stillness, which standing builds in increasing acuity, we can access and develop qualities of the body that are always with us regardless of what we do, and that ‘normal’ exercise and movement frequently fail to give light to. As our experience changes so too does our understanding, if we can be open minded; and can you think of any genuinely valid reasons not to be open minded? The balanced body development and awareness skills we can build from standing practice can significantly alter our assumptions about how we use the body and mind for the better, and I mean better in every way.



Surprisingly difficult

Another reason for my choosing standing would stem from my fascinating experiences of having taught it to many people over the last two decades, if only for a class or two. That the more complex a skill the more difficulty we might experience in the learning of it. Yet although being incredibly simple, the majority of people found standing surprisingly difficult to do for more than a few minutes despite being proficient in other fields of training; and here I’m referring to standard fitness enthusiasts as well as practitioners and teachers from the realms of yoga, dance, Alexander Technique, pilates and numerous martial arts.

Through a lens of physio-cognitive stillness we can discover and develop the fundamental qualities of the body and mind that are with us whatever we do

That someone who can run a marathon, bench-press their own body weight, or easily perform a full backbend can fail to be able to stand still for more than a few minutes, without experiencing serious physical and mental discomfort, poses some fascinating questions about the ways in which we train our bodies and what we assume to be useful in doing so.

When beginning ‘stillness training’ this usually takes the form of sitting or lying down. While they can be meritorious, standing meditation is significantly more functional; for when we want to move in our lives it is usually when standing upright and balanced on either one or both feet.

Cultivating a clear sense of how your entire body is connected and balanced in all directions, all the time, and learning to let go of what impedes this process, naturally orients the way in which one moves and operates to be, simply put, more balanced.

To be able to actualise such a thing requires ongoing perceptive physical training, the systematic soothing of the nervous system and a calming of the mind. It then becomes quite possible to stand still for an hour or more and enjoy a deep sense of balance and ease, even in positions that are physically demanding.

A body unbound from unnecessary tension is at liberty to respond to gravity with free support from the ground upwards; to effortlessly inflate in all directions with fluid stability and elastic movement potential

A body of knowledge or ignorance?

It seems that people have complicated relationships with their bodies. We constantly adjust ourselves and modulate our experience to avoid discomfort, usually without even realising it, and yet we are more than content to sit in strange positions for hours on end while we watch flashing lights on a screen. When we are not sitting down, we assume it is a good idea to flagellate our bodies and contort ourselves into bizarre positions regardless of the intense discomfort such actions incur and their distinct lack of relevance to how we live the rest of our lives. We do not usually train to feel our bodies more, instead we usually train to feel them less as if to escape somehow, and as a result frequently impede or destroy the very body that we are meant to be training in a bid to achieve abstract goals – goals in fact which are just ideas in our head.

If our felt sense of how the body balances and functions as a single unit were clearer, then our subsequent training notions would be better. From such an experiential standpoint it would be obvious not to go to movement or exercise extremes frequently enough that they either compromise our internal organs, destroy our joints or fuel



neurosis. Indeed, we would be equipped to know how to come back to operating within a boundary of all-round balance as a most useful default setting. Discomfort is a natural part of life and there are many types of comfort and discomfort that we can experience.

Standing meditation is about the process; it does not require any beliefs or theoretical knowledge. All it requires is a willingness to regularly immerse oneself into the experiential study of one's own body and mind whilst doing something simple and quintessentially human

Funnily enough the challenges that people face when they incorporate standing into their training often mirror the amount of benefit they will be able to glean from doing it. However, there is something about stillness training that sometimes makes it hard for us not to take such challenges personally, especially if we are usually driven by aesthetics, external validation or competition. Once you take away the 'doing' aspect of movement you are left with the current state, for better or worse, of the raw form of your body and mind; it doesn't get much more personal than that. Indeed, many people can't sense their bodies at all unless there is a strong stimulus. This is analogous to being deaf to all but the loudest of noises – not particularly useful – but once one's hearing improves the vast nuances of sound can be surprisingly educational.

There are many common mind/body hurdles that we all face. Standing can help us overcome them and see them for what they are: myriad shifting natural phenomena within the broad range of our overall experience. With regular training, sensible guidance and the passage of time, much can be discovered about the essential mechanisms of the human body and mind and one's deeply engrained physical and cognitive habits; perceiving them more clearly offers us a chance to let go of the ones which do not serve us well – and cultivate the ones that do. 🧘



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