

ZHAN ZHUANG

The internal athlete part II

by Sam Moor

Standing has foundational, intermediate and advanced levels of practice which emphasise different elements of the same continuum. My aim here is to elucidate key themes

Overleaf 

There are a wide variety of postures and an array of fascinating kinaesthetic tools that train the neuromuscular system in a unique way and, just like seated meditation, it is efficacious in building highly desirable brain plasticity. Postures range from a simple neutral stance to more physically demanding positions and even to postures on one leg.

Bio mechanics

Training seeks to build a real familiarity with, and visceral knowledge of, the raw materials of our own body and mind: all the postures we utilise should move us toward optimum biomechanics, present moment awareness and ease as our default settings for how we move and operate in the world.

We want to 'balance' our skeleton 3-dimensionally within the fluid and elastic elements of our fascial fabric and form a favourable long-term relationship with gravity

We do not want to force ourselves to blindly stand for as long as possible, nor disappear into a trance or think about special things. The aim is to develop a balanced physio-cognitive state of relaxation and non-distraction.

To sustain even a simple body-shape in a balanced way for a period can be surprisingly taxing and educational; any lack of whole-body integration is likely to become evident. Elements which do not exhibit sufficient structural support, appropriate tensional balance and functional connection will rapidly make themselves known, although this is something we are unlikely to notice until we try it for ourselves. Regular tactile cues and guidance from an experienced teacher are invaluable in moving us in a favourable direction because our usual body-mind habits are thoroughly ingrained.

Three dimensions

However, it is difficult for many people to comprehend that when we train in standing we do not want to hold ourselves in a fixed position using either overt control or brute force. Instead, we want to experience how our skeleton balances three-dimensionally within the visco-elastic elements of the fascial fabric in which it floats and learn how to optimise this process. There is a fluid omnidirectional stability that we want to uncover and develop which can provide an incredibly useful basis for human movement and function. As well as building many vital aspects of one's own body-knowledge, doing so allows us to form a favourable long-term relationship with gravity rather than continuing our usual futile fight against it.

The training process instigates as much letting go of that which is excessive as it does build up that which is deficient. If you have spent a lot of time stretching, for example, instead of operating as a well-connected elastic unit your body may exhibit the phenomena of being like separate bits pulled apart – far too loose in terms of useful, sustainable body connection and tensional balance. On



the other hand, if you have engaged with a lot of strength training your body may be far too tight and this too will have its due restrictions and compensations.

While these are simplistic examples every person

“It is hard to convey to intellectuals the intellectual superiority of experience”

Nassim Taleb

exhibits various combinations of such qualities. We all have bits that are too loose, too tight, too strong, too weak, move too much or not enough and yet it all works together, for better or worse. It is the working relationship, balance and integration of the whole that we want to come to know; to uncover and improve our own body-knowledge for ourselves for ourselves.

This presents an impossible task to realise intellectually and a difficult one to actualise via the complexities of

movement alone but standing offers a chance for us to do so because it of its simplicity.

Freeze frame

Comparing this to watching a film, a freeze-frame allows many more details to come to light; you lose the narrative and in doing so you get to see things as they are at that point in time. With the act of deliberate motion taken out of the equation, standing meditation comprises an experiential movement-snapshot and an opportunity to get to grips with the usual distractions of our own internal narrative. An over stimulated and distracted mind is like a wobbly low-definition camera, it is impossible to get a clear picture of what's what:

You are looking out over a large, beautiful lake. It is a stormy day and the surface of the water is being whipped by the wind and the rain to form an endless stream of indistinguishable waves, shapes and patterns. After steadily surveying the scene for a time the storm gradually allays – the surface of the lake begins to settle. Watching quietly and patiently you start to notice how each waning drop of rain and gust of wind distinctly pattern and affect the water. Eventually the storm subsides completely; tranquillity transpires, the lake becomes motionless and clear. To your immense curiosity you can see through the surface and all the way to the lakebed – the fascinating

A body unbound from 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

topography of an underwater world presents itself.

The wind and rain equate to the incessant patterning of a busy mind upon our experience, it masks our ability to see beyond the surface. Via multiple tools implicit in good standing practice we can, over time, gradually lower our base rate of stimulation/distraction and perceive fundamental aspects and qualities of our own body and mind more clearly.

The gravitas of gravity

A simple way of looking at standing can be as the experiential study of gravity – our body is the subject and one's mind needs to be calm and stable in order to observe the results objectively. Let us imagine that, for a fish who spends her whole life in water, the very sensation of being immersed is so continuous that it would hardly be noticed. I do not know what the experience of a fish is like, but I do know that the persistent force of gravity is something we do not usually notice. Despite this, gravity is one of the most significant players in how the human body is organised and how we move. A fun example: when you jump into a swimming pool one immediately feels the whole body enveloped and supported by water – the sense of freedom is quite liberating. However, when you clamber out again you probably don't stand there and remark: "Ah gravity my old friend, how supportive!" But you could...

Standing is an excellent tool for traversing an

experiential path toward making gravity our friend by creating an optimum tensional balance across the entire fascial network of the body. One skill vital to this process is the release of unnecessary tension at progressively deeper levels. Releasing that which impedes the body from effortlessly supporting itself re-familiarises us with how we can deal with gravity in an optimal way and incurs significant gains in body awareness, postural stability and motor control. Furthermore, it facilitates considerable all-round health benefits.

Letting go

This act of letting go can be counter-intuitive but poses a rewarding challenge, for don't we all spend an inordinate amount of effort holding on to things? A tense body is a blunt and unfeeling instrument, extremely uneconomical and highly prone to injury and illness. While we neither want a body that is over-stretched or a floppy mess there is an intelligent middle way between the two extremes. Unfortunately, we do not know any better until we do and that means to continually accrue a wider experiential or 'felt' frame of reference.

Developing the release signal

If you clench your hand into a fist and hold it tight for a while you can see that the colour changes as the fluids are squeezed out from the tissues. After some time you may feel that the tension also manifests in the arm and shoulder and eventually other places too. If you persist for long enough you will start to lose the feeling in your fist completely, for along with the flow of fluids, your neural





functioning and perception will be severely impeded. When you eventually release the hand back to normal it is quite a relief: the colour returns as the fluids rehydrate the tissues and sensory perception and function are revived.

If you were to do the opposite and stretch your hand and fingers out as much as possible it would be the same as squeezing your hand into a tight fist but in reverse. It is certainly no better or more useful, all the same restrictions will manifest. When you release your over stretched hand back to normal, relief ensues once again.

The release signal is a specific command that your mind gives to tell your fist, or overstretched hand, to let go and return to normal. In order to be able to do this you already need to know where your hand is in your internal, or felt, body map. This is easy because we are usually reasonably aware of our hands, but not so the rest of our body. Through the lens of stillness, standing creates an opportunity to look for and build the feeling of the internal architecture and landscape of our body whilst doing something quintessential to human movement: balancing whilst upright. By developing and applying the release signal we can gradually restore the whole body back to balance and away from fixed extremes.

“It is important to note that this is not acquired by ‘trying’ to do it, that is counter intuitive”

New experience

Once a person has reached a certain benchmark, a new experience of how the body supports itself will come to light. Rather than being continually oppressed by gravity, a body unbound from inappropriate tension is at liberty to respond to it with ‘free’ support from the ground upwards; to effortlessly inflate in all directions with awareness, fluid stability and elastic movement potential. This has many similarities to the liberation of being in water but because we are immersed in gravity and infused with liquid ourselves, exhibits a highly desirable and sustainable balance between stability and freedom of movement.

It is important to note that this is not acquired by ‘trying’ to do it. It is counter intuitive. We do not want to pull ourselves up, suck bits in, try to be tall or tight-and-light, such in-fighting results in more unwanted tension. Neither do we want to collapse into a soggy heap in a bid to relax. Instead, our progress comes as the natural result of release combined with an open-minded sensory inquiry into omnidirectional balance.

Overview

The genius and efficacy of standing lies in its simplicity. The absence of deliberate movement allows one the chance to discover and develop fundamental attributes of the body and mind that we usually miss due to habituation. By repeatedly bringing the wandering mind back to internally observing our standing form, not only can we develop some considerable skill in mindfulness, but also uncover an ever-deepening level of body-knowledge and awareness of ourselves as a holistic unit of function. 🧘

Sam Moor teaches Chen tai chi and yiquan in West Sussex
www.sussextaichi.co.uk www.theinternalathlete.net