



QIGONG

Cultivating body

breath & mind

Peter Deadman

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Preface

This is a book about qigong – a time-tested practice that blends skilful movement, mindful absorption and deep, slow breathing. While firmly rooted in the Chinese tradition, I hope that it will also serve as a manual for exploring the wider world of mindful movement.

My aim is to make this transformative practice better known. I have attempted to explain where it comes from, the philosophies behind it and the growing body of scientific research that illuminates it. I have drawn from my fifty-year experience of working in the field of Chinese medicine, my decades of qigong practice and my study of *yangsheng* – the 2500 year old Nourishment of Life tradition. For those interested in learning more, my book *Live Well Live Long: Teachings from the Chinese Nourishment of Life Tradition* can be read as a companion to this one. Because trying to learn qigong from illustrations and written instructions is challenging, I have included links throughout this book to dozens of demonstration videos. I hope this will encourage readers to go ahead and try it out. Regular and committed practice will slowly reveal a treasure that keeps on giving – year after year and decade after decade, a treasure which can truly change our lives.

The cultivation and integration of body, breath and mind has been practised in China since the beginning of recorded history nearly two and a half thousand years ago. For some it was a way of improving health and lengthening lifespan. Martial artists practised to improve their fighting skills. Daoists sought transformation and a merging with the *Dao*, Buddhists with *Sunyata* (‘emptiness’) and Confucians with the Way of Heaven. Teachers of the art of *yangsheng* encouraged their fellow literati to rouse themselves from lazy and indulgent lifestyles, while for traditional medicine doctors it was a way of preventing disease and supporting treatment.

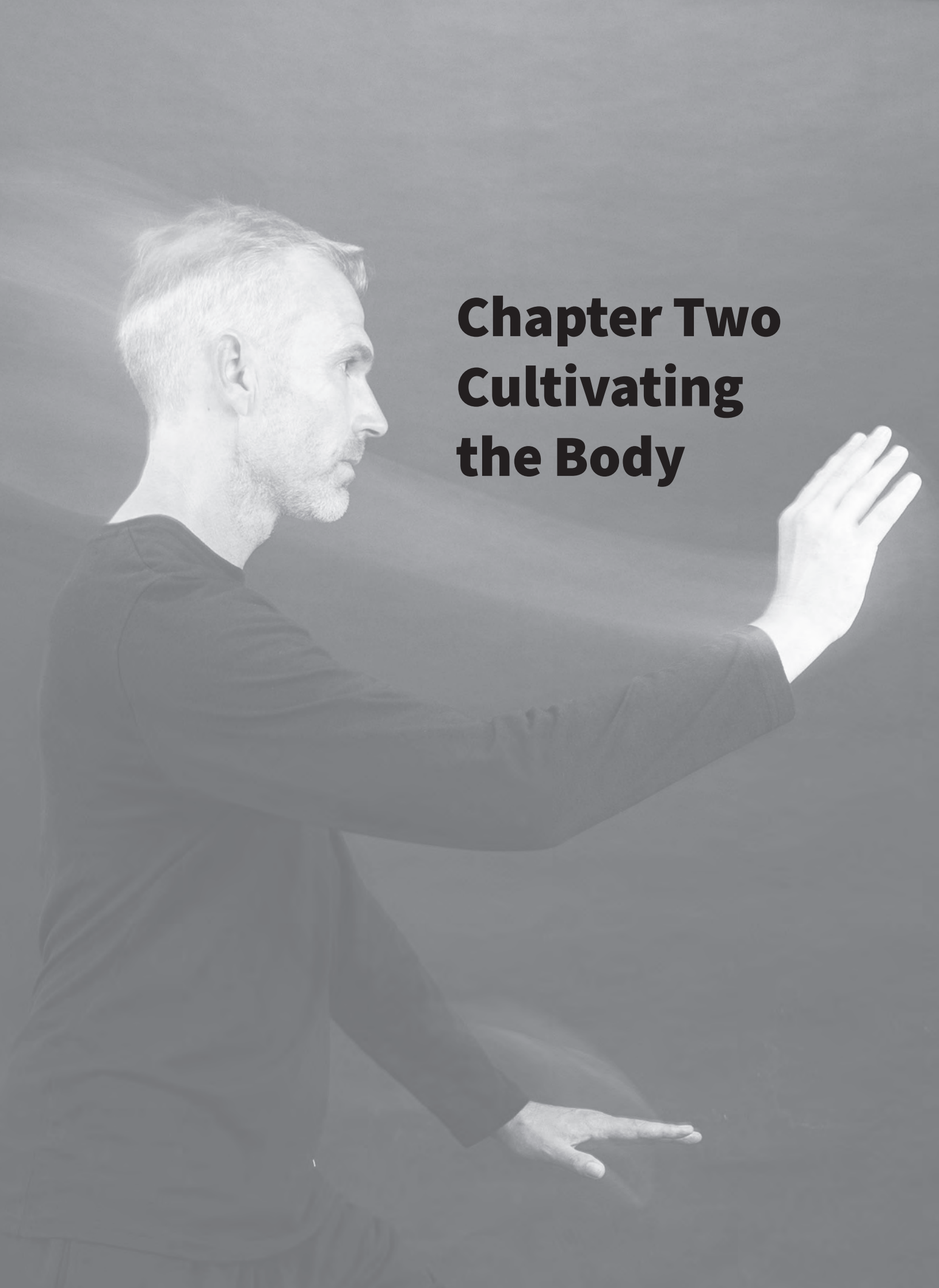
Some of its practitioners favoured quietness, stillness and deep presence. They practised breath control, visualisation, mantra recitation, sexual cultivation and internal alchemy. Others were drawn to the more physical rewards of a strong, aligned and balanced body, and especially to ‘internal’ martial arts such as *taijiquan* (tai chi) - the training of soft but powerful movement. Yet all of these practitioners, in one way or another, were working within the same tradition.

Given this variety of intentions it is no surprise that a host of different names was used throughout its history. Ever since the 1950s, however, the name qigong (or sometimes the ‘internal arts’) has largely supplanted most of them and serves as an umbrella term for many of these varied approaches.

Qigong needs no special equipment or special clothes, is free, and can be practised anywhere - from a mountain top to a bedroom. Its aim is better health, longer life, connection to something greater than ourselves and effective and compassionate action. It can enhance every aspect of our lives.

Those of us committed to its practice know what a rich gift it is. It is my hope that this book will go some way to explaining why slow, mindful movement is so good for us. I also hope to instil in others the same love of qigong that has inspired me for over three decades.





Chapter Two Cultivating the Body

“What the entire body treasures is jing, qi and shen. Shen is engendered from qi; qi is engendered from jing; jing transforms into qi; qi transforms into shen. That is why jing is the root of the body, qi is the host of shen, form is the mansion of the shen.”

Lin Peiqin, Qing dynasty

Video: standing qigong

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*“When your body is not aligned,
The inner power will not come.
When you are not tranquil within,
Your mind will not be well ordered.
Align your body, assist the inner power,
Then it will gradually come on its own.”*

Nei ye (Inward Training), 4th century BCE³¹

*“Be still like a mountain, move
like a great river.”*

Classics of Taijiquan: Exposition of Insights into the Thirteen Postures³²

Jing-qi-shen – the three treasures

Together *jing*, *qi* and *shen* are known as the three treasures. They play an important role in the worlds of internal alchemy and Chinese medicine, while in qigong they can be understood at their simplest as the body (*jing*), the breath (*qi*) and the mind (*shen*). All three are cultivated equally and all three nourish each other, with the ultimate aim of transforming and refining the *shen*.

Beginning with the body, we work with posture, alignment, release and spaciousness, developing a higher level of awareness and enjoyment of our physical being. Rooted and stable, we lay the foundation for the development of *qi* and *shen*.

Next we cultivate slow, deep *dantian* breathing. This adds to the vitality that body work gives us while at the same time calming and stabilising the *shen*. Without this smoothing effect, the aroused energy risks becoming coarse and even harmful to ourselves and others.

The ultimate aim is refinement of *shen*. The calmer our centre and the greater the awareness that we experience through practice, the better able we are to cultivate both daily and transcendental wisdom. Daily wisdom is that which we build from lifelong learning, honest self-awareness and openness to change. Transcendental wisdom is glimpsed when our individual ego with its tiresome weight of desires and opinions falls away – perhaps only for brief moments - and we merge into everything that is, the *Dao*.

Standing qigong - zhan zhuang

The practice of *zhan zhuang* (standing like a post or standing like a tree) is common to all qigong and many martial arts schools. For some it is the heart of practice – combining the skills of alignment, release, body-mind-breath integration and mindful presence. In martial training it builds strength, power and warrior spirit.

It may be hard to understand how the simple act of standing without moving can be so profound and so rewarding. However, we are used to the idea of sitting meditation, and since standing qigong is both a meditative and a physical practice it should not really be surprising.

The first part of standing practice is organising the body structure.

The feet

The feet are generally placed shoulder-width apart. Since this is a rather vague term we can take a plumb line from shoulder's nest (the hollow where the shoulder meets the body - page 24) down through the nipple line and the centre of the hips, knees and ankles.

The insides of the feet are parallel. This allows equal widening across the pubic bones and groins at the front and the sacrum at the back. However,

our anatomy varies and for some - whose feet naturally turn out or in - it will be too much of a strain. We should encourage but never force posture.

The next step is to release the knees and become aware of how that lowers our centre of gravity. This allows us to maximise the contact between feet and floor and observe if our weight favours one foot over the other. We can also check the outside and inside edges of the feet. If we have weak or fallen arches, then the insides of the feet will tend to collapse and more body weight will pass through the medial (inside) surface of the knee, risking long term pain and discomfort. Making sure we can always feel the outside edge of the foot on the floor will counteract this tendency. Similarly, but less common, if we suffer from bow legs we can make sure we feel the inside edges of the feet.

Six acupuncture channels pass through the toes, so we want to keep them alive and strong. One way to do this is to imitate the way a kitten gently claws at its mother's belly, alternately drawing our toes inwards as though clawing the ground and then spreading them long and wide and connected to the floor.

The body weight is generally centralised between the front and back of the foot with one proviso. There is only a single acupuncture point on the sole of the foot – the origin point of the Kidney channel. Its most common name is *Yongquan* (Gushing Spring) but it is also known as *Dichong* (Earth Surge). These names convey the image of rising water or earth energy. In acupuncture it is used to 'return the unrooted back to its source' – in other words to lower excessive yang rising to the head. It was this point that Liu Guizhen (the originator of modern qigong) was told to stand and focus on for 102 days while repeating a specific healing phrase (page 122).

We should therefore stand in a way that maximises awareness and openness of *Yongquan* and its surrounding area and avoid taking the weight too far back into the heels.

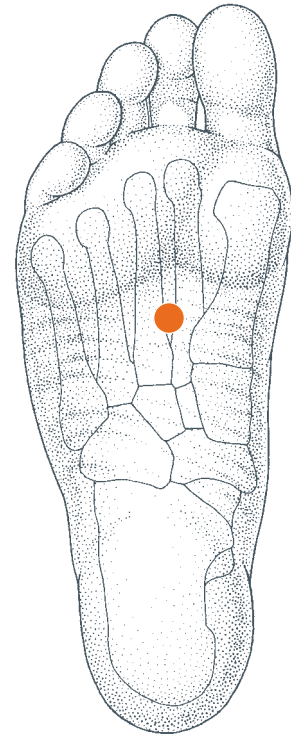
The knees

The first and most important part of knee awareness is that they should be released. This means they are slightly bent - or considerably bent in challenging martial standing practice. If instead we lock and tighten the knees, we raise the centre of gravity (losing our root) and hinder the free flow of qi through the legs.

Next, we want the body weight to pass through the centre of the knee joint. If the knees deviate inwards, or more rarely outwards, the weight drops through one part of the vulnerable knee joint only. When it passes evenly through the centre of the knees, our legs and crotch region will form a smooth arch.

It is equally important to protect the front of the knee by ensuring that the patella (kneecap) does not extend beyond the toes.

Keeping the knees released can be a challenge for beginners. Most of us are not used to working the thigh muscles so much and leg discomfort or pain is common. There are two main reasons for this - muscle tension and muscle weakness. With practice we learn to identify and release unnecessary muscle activation while strengthening the whole lower limb, especially the quadriceps muscles, which will benefit knee health.



Yongquan Kidney 1



“The weilu [tailbone] is straight and the shen connects to the head top; the whole body is light and free moving, the head top as if suspended.”

The Taijiquan Classics Thirteen Postures Song, Anonymous³³

“At every moment keep the attention in the yao; if the belly is thoroughly relaxed, then the qi soars.”

The Taijiquan Classics Thirteen Postures Song, Anonymous³⁴



The sacrum and tailbone

To help maintain our rooted connection, the triangular sacrum is released downwards like a spearhead sinking into yin earth. At the same time the head gently lengthens into yang heaven. We can visualise an upward pointing triangle on the back of the head which mirrors the downward pointing sacrum and then feel them moving gently away from each other.

Releasing the yao

The yao (literally the waist) is the core of the body and encompasses the waist, lower back, hips, groins and lower abdomen. It is where the largest bony structures and some of the largest muscles (both deep and superficial) are located. Once again, the focus is on release. Doing so, we become aware of the pelvis naturally sinking and hanging under its own weight, encouraging rooting of the whole body. If we bring our awareness to the lower back we might feel a gentle traction – as though we were lying down and someone was gently pulling our legs. This creates a feeling of space between the vertebrae, and especially between the last lumbar vertebra (L5) and the sacrum.

Widening across the hips

We can identify the outer hip bones and then gently widen them away from each other. This will only be a small movement and until we free up the soft tissue we may have to start by just imagining it. What we want is a sensation of spreading across the pubic bones and groins at the front and an equal widening across the sacrum at the back. Both areas are then held open while being softened and released.

The shoulders and shoulder blades

We begin by gently taking the outer edges of the shoulders away from each other. This mirrors what is happening with the hips though it is much easier to do. At the front we want to feel a widening across the collar bones and an opening through ‘shoulder’s nest’ – the hollow where the shoulder meets the body. At the same time we want to widen across the upper back, allowing the shoulder blades to slide away from each other. This will round and open the back and create space in the armpits (‘large enough to hold an egg’ is a common description).

Keeping the armpits open helps us to drop and release the shoulders to allow unobstructed flow between the body and the arms. The easiest way to test this is to do the opposite - hold the arms tight against the body and feel how the shoulders constrict.

Once the upper body is gently widened like this, the attention shifts to letting the shoulder blades sink into the lower back. The shoulder blades, like the sacrum, are downward pointing triangles and it can be helpful to feel all three releasing downwards at once.

We commonly lift and tighten the shoulders when we are tense and stressed or concentrating on a difficult task. Not only is this associated with, and triggering of, the ‘fight or flight’ sympathetic state but there is hardly any activity that it benefits. Releasing and dropping the shoulders during qigong standing helps us slowly become more aware of when we raise and tense them at other times of the day.

The arms

The arms hang loosely, somewhat in front of the body, with the palms facing backwards to help keep the armpits and upper back open. We then release through the shoulders and down through the upper arms, elbow joints, lower arms, wrist joints, palms and finger and thumb joints. The centres of the palms (*Laogong*) open like a flower with the fingers and thumbs gently spread like petals. It is useful to check that the elbow joints are softened since they can be the site of hidden tension.

Alternatively the arms can be rounded in front of the belly, directing *Laogong* towards the *dantian*.

The chest

The chest is relaxed and hangs naturally. It should feel empty ('like an empty bell') with the lungs and heart quiet. We may be conditioned or taught to draw the shoulders back and thrust or raise the chest when we want to feel strong and confident. It is, after all, the military posture seen on parade grounds all over the world, even though it raises the centre of gravity and reduces stability. It is never encountered in martial arts, except perhaps during pre-fight exchanges in an attempt to 'out-cockerel' the opponent.

We may also be tempted to expand the chest outwards and upwards in a desire to breathe deeply. This can actually reduce oxygenation and increase feelings of stress and tension (page 75).

The head and neck

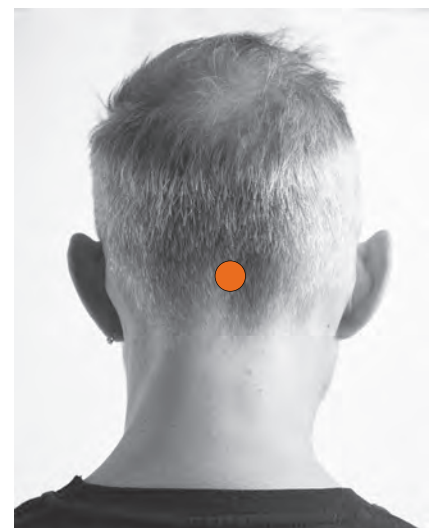
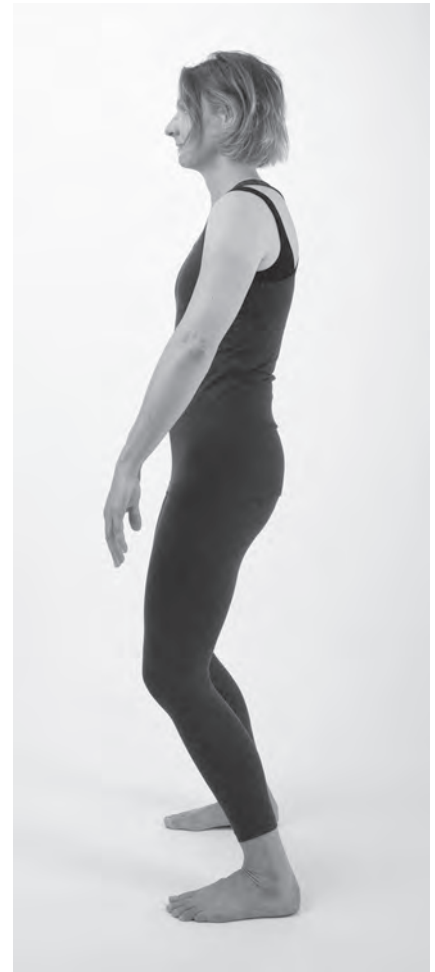
We tuck the chin down slightly in order to slightly flatten the neck curve. This is to ensure that when we gently lengthen the head towards the sky, we don't pull the chin up and compress the neck.

An alternative way is to identify the hollow on the back of the head where the acupuncture point *Fengfu* lies. We can locate it by running a finger down the middle of the back of the head until it reaches the bony occipital protuberance and then allow it to fall into the hollow beneath. If we take this point backwards (away from the front of the body), the neck will naturally flatten and gently elongate. What we want to feel is a rising and a growing (but not an active stretching) through the centre of the neck, the centre of the head, and the crest of the head, just like a plant growing effortlessly towards the light.

We can also focus on the space between the skull and the very top of the spine, feeling it expand and grow – just like we did at the base of the spine, indeed we can hold both openings in our awareness at the same time.

The face

We can progressively release the forehead (especially the area between the eyebrows), the eyeballs deep within their sockets, the sinus cavities below the eyes, the jaw, cheeks, lips and throat. Tension in what is called the stomatognathic system (the teeth, jaws and surrounding soft tissues) is known to negatively affect the posture of the whole body, probably due to its effect on the central nervous system and the bodywide fascia.



Fengfu Governing vessel 16

The tongue

The tip of the tongue rests on the top palate just behind the top teeth and then softens and melts. In Chinese medicine diagnosis the tip of the tongue corresponds to the Heart which houses the *shen*. When the tongue stays relaxed – even in the midst of concentration and effort – it helps keep the mind and body relaxed.

Alternative postures

Standing with the arms hanging down by the sides is the best posture for starting the *zhan zhuang* journey. However, there are a number of alternative positions which can be explored once we are able to stand comfortably and enjoyably for a reasonable length of time – for example 15-20 minutes.

Rounded arms. This is known as *hunyuan* (Completely Round or Round Smoothness) or *chengbao* (Tree Hugging Stance). Here, the arms are raised to shoulder level (or a bit higher) and rounded - like hugging a large tree. The palms face the body and the tips of the fingers are a couple of inches apart. The shoulders and shoulder blades are widened away from each other then released downwards into the lower back. The elbows travel forwards to avoid collapsing the arms into the chest. This can be a challenging position to hold for any length of time, but the better we can relax what does not need to be active, the easier it becomes.

Palms facing the earth. We can take a wider stance (ensuring the arch of the legs remains well rounded), allow the sacrum to sink towards the earth, gently widen across the pubic bones and sacrum, and keep the head and neck softly long to heaven. The palms face the earth and connect. *Laogong* in the centre of the palm is open and alive, as is *Yongquan* in the soft centre of the foot. We can then simply dwell in the mutual connection of palms and soles. Alternatively we can practise breathing in through both and drawing the breath into the *dantian*, then breathing back through the body and limbs and out of the hands and feet.

Santishi (three pile standing). This standing posture comes from the martial art of *xingyiquan* and is a core part of its internal skill training. It engenders power in the legs and body, a warrior spirit and focused concentration and determination. Because of the detail required, it is best to learn this from a teacher or – second best - there are a number of YouTube videos.

In addition to these standing poses, there are many others, especially in the practice of *Yiquan* (page 134).

The next step

Once we have established our posture, a variety of mindful practices can be incorporated.

Progressive relaxation

We can run our mind from the top of the head down through the body like a scanner, releasing all the way. If we discover areas of stubborn tension we can first ‘breathe into’ them and then let them go as we breathe out. Or we can work down the front, then the sides and finally the back, progressively relaxing deep into the soft tissue, joints, blood vessels and even



bones. Or we can visualise our body transforming from a solid to a liquid and then a gas – eventually becoming indistinguishable from the air surrounding us. However, discovering and then releasing areas that we have held tight through much of our lives may take months of practice.

Selective focus

Rather than whole body awareness, we can direct our mind to specific parts of the body. These may be areas of pain, discomfort or disease, in which case we can practise the breathing in and releasing out method described above. Or else they may be acupuncture points or ‘energy centres’. Common examples include *Yongquan* on the soles of the feet; *Laogong* in the centre of the palms; shoulder’s nest and the groins; the *dantian*; and the ‘four gates’ acupuncture points (bilateral *Hegu* and *Taichong* - page 164). The practice is to bring focused awareness to these areas until they come alive under our attention, and then allow them to open and expand.

Some people also like to work with light – especially in the case of pain and disease – visualising white, golden or coloured light streaming through the whole or part of the body

Open awareness

Meditation is broadly of two kinds. In the first there is focused attention, for example on the body or the breath or – in various Buddhist practices – on Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, blue sky, empty space or the fact of our inevitable death.

The other is open awareness. We simply observe whatever comes into our consciousness – thoughts, sensations, pleasure, pain, emotions – allowing them to pass by, standing calmly within the stream of time.

“The perfect mind is like a mirror. It does not move with things nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things but does not retain them. Therefore the perfect mind is able to deal successfully with things but is not affected by them”. Zhuangzi, 4th century BCE³⁶

Affirmations

These are phrases we can repeat like a mantra. Examples include ‘I am well’, ‘I am healthy’, ‘I am happy’, ‘I am strong’, ‘I am grounded’, ‘I am calm’, ‘I relax’.

Breathing

Standing qigong is an ideal opportunity to develop deep, slow, lower abdominal breathing.

Challenges

Zhan zhuang can be challenging, and at the beginning we may experience physical or emotional discomfort or pain, sometimes after just a few minutes. On the one hand we have to persist and on the other we have to be kind to ourselves. This is not a ‘no pain, no gain’ practice and above all we should not force it so that we develop aversion and turn away. Finding the right balance is part of the practice itself, and how we respond to it can help illuminate how we approach the rest of our lives.

“Arrange the posture of the whole body properly, keep the body upright, have no thoughts, strengthen the nerves in stillness, adjust the breath, warm up and nourish the muscles, let every cell activate naturally. The strength comes from the inside and reaches the outside smoothly in the whole body. Thus, one does not train the bones and the muscles, yet they get trained by themselves, one does not nourish the nerves but they get nourished by themselves, one should especially experience and observe their barely perceptible movement and activity. When one has done it for long enough time, one will know that standing brings many inexhaustible wonders.”

Wang Xiangzhai, 1885 – 1963, martial arts and qigong master³⁵



Santishi