

Standing practice revisited: learning and continuing to learn

Anne Snyder August 3, 2005

Although standing practice (zhanzhuang) is not the whole of i-chuan training, it could be called the primary workshop for its development. For an excellent analysis of standing practice, the serious student would do well to study the other papers on this site, especially those of Sifu Fong. First and foremost, standing is the key to realizing the benefits particular to i-chuan training, including building and using energy efficiently. Yet, if you do not continue to develop your standing practice through hard work and study, you might as well be jogging rather than training for health or martial arts.

In this paper, I'll discuss how we learn to stand and what standing teaches us. Looking closely at two areas that we work on while standing—sung-gunn and muscular motion—shows how we can use standing practice to continue to learn.

Three ways to learn zhanzhuang

First, the serious student of i-chuan should know that all the following methods will fall short of completely teaching the student how to practice zhanzhuang. At heart, i-chuan has no method, but to teach it at all, one has to come up with something that students can understand. Then, when they can experience the feeling of the example in their own body, they can add their personal experience to these methods and better evaluate and understand their own progress. What follows is a look at three of the ways students learn to stand.

When students join Sifu Fong's class, the first thing they are asked to do is stand. They are instructed to look straight ahead and place their feet parallel, shoulder's width apart; the hands are palms up, fingertips a few inches apart, resting in front of the belly; elbows push out at the sides; neck is raised; chest relaxed, and tailbone tucked in. They are also asked to stand up at the same time they sit down and, finally, to balance their posture. Even this short summary is quite a demanding list of requirements to perform in sequence, much less all at once.

What's more, the muscles are weak and the mind wanders. That is, the precise adjustments that Fong gives to the student's posture target the weakest muscles. Both weak and tight muscles hold tension and when tension is released during standing, the body shakes. This is natural, as is sweating from the effort of holding the posture for some ten or twenty minutes. The good news is that all the shaking and sweating in standing every day gradually builds energy as well as muscular and mental endurance. Diligent students learn that it takes vigorous mental and physical work balanced by deep relaxation to stand as required for any reasonable length of time. Using the list of requirements helps the student keep on course and prevent major errors and omissions.

Another way to learn is by using real examples: stand as if picking up a baby. If students really do this, many of the list's requirements will naturally be realized: the neck picks up as the hands and fingertips grasp and lift the "live" weight; the elbows naturally go out to the sides; the feet push down as the knees bend and the curve in the lower back flattens as the hips rotate forwards and up.

And it happens all at once, naturally. In fact, there is much more information in such a picture than in any list; plus, it is integrated, balanced, and alive since they are holding a “real” baby, not a “stone” of equal weight. The student is guided to discover that using a real, living activity as a learning resource adds a rich perspective to their understanding of this training. Of course, if they simply daydream about the picture, there will be no benefit.

So, why not just give the simple instruction to pick up the baby rather than the laundry list of requirements? In practice, both are usually given since most students are not accustomed to learning in the latter way. They are used to the list rather than the mental picture, so the list will usually get better results. Learning how to learn from a mental picture is a key to training: efficient, but not at all what most people are used to. We are used to learning by memorizing step-by-step instructions, not from analyzing an experience or using a mental picture to pick out core elements. Using a list of requirements should give the student some physical and mental experience to draw from when they are presented with the notion of learning about resistance through mental pictures.¹

Using strong mental pictures works because it awakens the mind and body in a way that simply remembering a list of instructions won't. On the other hand, it's also easy to miss key points. So the list helps us to evaluate how completely we are implementing the picture. The picture takes more thought and investigation to understand, but it can give us more information and help us to integrate and enliven the requirements from the list. To work from mental pictures effectively, students are asked to make such pictures very real, not just in their imaginations but in nerves, bones and sinews.

Now, here's a more detailed look at how this works. Say you are lifting a real hundred-pound bag of rice. It's unlikely you would be theorizing about the task or daydreaming about it. You would adjust your body structure carefully, positioning it so you could keep holding the shifting weight of the bag firmly and then lift it without straining your back, dropping it, or falling down. You would naturally place the arms, legs, knees and elbows each at its optimal angle: arms stretched out in front with fingers grasping the bag, fingertips dug into the fabric, knees bent deeply, legs squatting to get under the bulk of the bag, feet pushing down, neck lifting everything upward, and so on. Your intention would be to pick up the heavy bag of rice. Because there is heavy physical resistance there, you wouldn't need a list of requirements. Implementing the intention is a serious enough task to command *all* your mental and physical effort.

To make it even more challenging, i-chuan practice suggests we don't use a real bag of rice. Instead, the mind directs the body to pick up a virtual bag of rice. Your brain spurs your body to react just as if the weight, volume and shape were real. Plus, the virtual bag continuously shifts as the rice flows from one area to another, and the bag keeps getting a little heavier as though more rice was trickling in. So, you have to constantly pay attention to it. Every time the rice shifts, you feel a slight shock that alerts your nervous system, and quickly causes you to respond by slightly adjusting your posture and increasing effort.² To do this at all takes the kind of concentrated

¹ This training can be made more difficult than it has to be when approached with old habits of learning. Attachment to such habits can be a major roadblock that will prevent the student from accepting and making use of different ways of learning, perhaps even preventing any learning from taking place at all. Following instructions isn't enough, yet you have to follow instructions precisely to begin to learn.

² This “shock and adjust” idea will be discussed in the third section of this paper, in the discussion of muscular motion.

intention that Fong encourages us to practice when he says “every action starts with a thought.” Here’s the key: if you make your thought as compelling as actually lifting a growing, shifting, hundred-pound bag of rice, you will definitely be focused and working continuously in a stable posture.

What else can we learn from this mental picture? Remember, not just at first but also throughout, the bag is getting heavier, the rice is shifting, and you don’t want to drop it. When you try this, you may find you just get tight and tense. Some students squint and their fists clench as they try really hard to do what is asked. But they find that this kind of rigid attention can’t last long. They burn out and become exhausted. Or they continue to the point where they put unnecessary stress on the heart. Others become distracted and don’t understand that they are only daydreaming about the idea of picking something up rather than really doing the work. Everyone makes many mistakes, so knowing you are making a mistake puts you on the road to setting it right. Learning from such mistakes teaches us to discern between what works and what doesn’t.

Again, the answer is to find the happy medium for mental and physical work. You want enough intensity to keep going, but you don’t want so much that you are overwhelmed and frozen. Nor do you want so little that you become distracted and lost. To summarize, the idea is to somehow generate enough mental focus to engage the muscles so that they continuously exert increasing effort in response to gradually increasing resistance. We’ll talk more about this “happy medium” idea in the next section.

Of course, the third way of learning i-chuan is through observation of an able teacher. Those of us in Sifu Fong’s class in Portland are privileged indeed. If you can find such a teacher who has worked intelligently on developing his own skills to a high level, you are very lucky. You can observe what it looks like to work continuously and with focus in all the ways we have discussed. From such a teacher, you can see what zhanzhuang (and i-chuan) really looks like; gain understanding of the ideas that explain the work, and learn how to check your progress. Your teacher can work with you, adjust your posture, challenge your thinking and help you develop your skills and understanding. Of course, the teacher can only point the way: it is up to the student to determine how they will walk their own path.

We’ve discussed three ways to learn standing: from a checklist of requirements; from compelling mental pictures; and through direct observation of an able teacher (and, naturally, doing what he tells you to do). Gradually, students should add a fourth way of learning: making sense of the practice through their own experience and experiments. As sensitivity and physical intelligence develop, the student will feel a sense of connection and alignment that can’t be learned any other way. The student may ask: why follow these particular requirements? The requirements are taught because they work, and as the student stands with more muscular connection and alignment, they should test why this is so. Then the real learning begins. After some weeks, months or years of diligent and thoughtful practice, at least two things should be clear. Doing real work (even virtual real work) teaches us to be 1) firm without being too loose or too tight, and 2) alert and continuously working. To continue learning how to stand (an unending process), we’ll now more deeply explore these two related concepts: sung-gunn and muscular motion.

Sung-Gunn: relaxed and firm together

The next time you play tennis (or even watch it), pay attention to how your movements are neither too relaxed (you don't drop the ball) nor too tight (you don't send it over the fence): somewhere in the neighborhood of firm is about right. You apply enough force and spin for it to land where you've aimed, and you aim well because you're alert and focused on what you are doing. Likewise, when you stand, look for this quality of firmness—neither too weak nor too tight—both in your mental state and in the way your body works: this is the “happy medium” idea we touched on earlier. It is a relative, not an absolute concept: there is a range to it. The Chinese call it sung (relaxed)-gunn (firm): not one after the other, but both together. Sometimes more relaxed, sometimes more firm, but always both together. Why together?

Fong tells us:

“If too sung, you can never get back to gunn.

If too gunn, you can never feel sung.”

This is key. In fact, most of the problems we encounter in training come from ignorance of the sung-gunn³ principle. After you work hard at standing as described in the previous section for some time, you might ask yourself, why isn't my standing perfect? What's missing? How do I answer these questions?

First, look inside. While you stand, pay attention to how it feels inside your body and you will likely discover both knots of tension and areas that sag, even a little. The clenched areas pull the structure out of alignment; too much tension constricts breathing and reduces energy. Finding the knots and releasing tension allows the muscles to relax enough for the posture to be better aligned. A properly aligned person has an even, smooth feeling that comes when left and right, front and back, up and down are all arranged around a central vertical axis, something like the central pole of a big top tent. The neck and head rise upward while the rest of the body sits down. On the other hand, relaxing too much allows the structure to collapse and what follows is a mess: loss of support, energy and focus. Either way, it is a problem that comes from the habit of not using sung-gunn.

As you look inside, also look outside. The quality of sung-gunn affects your perception and ability to focus outside yourself. When you stand, you not only align the skeleton and firm up the muscles, you *do* something. Whether picking up the virtual bag of rice or sparring with an opponent, you learn to exercise in relation to the world. You may be asked to pull a distant tree toward you. Working effectively at this instruction will require mental and physical sung-gunn, among other things. If you daydream about the distant tree or squint at it with clenched mind and body, your results will be nil. If you work at it with a calm, focused mind and from a balanced structure, your chances of making something useful out of this peculiar instruction become better.

Further, you may also find that a collapsed structure goes with a distracted or daydreaming mental state: it is hard to stay alert while you're slouching. And conversely, a rigid body often goes with a fixed mental state, lacking the resilience to respond to the body's shifting movements. To some degree, everyone tends toward one or the other extreme, sometimes both in different areas. For example, once you've built up some strength and endurance, you might clench certain muscles

³ Sung-gunn is also a critical principle in test of power. In that case, sung-gunn becomes gunn only at the instant of impact, then immediately reverts to sung-gunn. For more on sung-gunn, see Sifu Fong's and other papers on this website.

to maintain a rigid posture and then daydream about standing: the resulting posture is too gunn in the body, too sung in the mind.

Why do we have this type of problem? First, look at our everyday lives. Normally, the brain puts the body on automatic pilot as much as possible. That's why you can easily eat a hot dog, talk on a cell phone and walk down the block without really thinking about the mechanics of any of those activities. The brain is a master of multi-tasking and tries to use the least amount of effort to get the job done. While this might be handy for daily activities, it is the opposite of what we try to do in zhanzhuang.

Here, we don't want to merely think about physical activity, or participate on automatic pilot, we want to work hard consciously. A quick glance at the teacher won't do it. We have to pay continuous, close attention to the demanding physical activity of standing as long as we are doing it. Of course, this is no easy task. The i-chuan practitioner is keenly aware of the strenuous physical experience of standing. We analyze what we do and theorize about how to make training better. This is useful (and should certainly be attended to). The thing is, even daydreaming *about* training *during* a workout tends to disconnect us from the actual experience of, say, planting the feet on the ground and using the whole body to lift a virtual bag of rice.

Just as when the brain goes on automatic in relaxing, it can go on automatic in tightening up. Either extreme is a mistake. If you've ever taken a test when you are nervous about your performance, you know what it means to freeze and lose focus. If you've ever been to a boring lecture in a dark room, you know what it means to be distracted and lose focus. And if you've ever been standing and forgotten what you are doing or discovered you are clenching muscles to remain in a rigid posture, you've experienced a sung-gunn problem. Working on sung-gunn—firm, but neither too loose nor too tight—while you are standing can help you to bring balance and a quality of unified movement to your training. It means you are alert to the work your body is doing. You feel both how your body responds inside and to the world outside. You are working continuously to be active and make both intellectual and physical sense of the tasks you are working on.

So how do you work on sung-gunn? Think of a time when you were rowing a boat, climbing with a heavy pack, bicycling uphill or some such heavy physical activity. Or go to the pool and swim a few laps. Remember how it felt and how your mind and body worked together. Using mental pictures like these helps you work effectively on sung-gunn. Work with some risk to it focuses your brain and, as long as you stay absorbed in your activity, you won't be on automatic, frozen or distracted. When there are real consequences to losing focus, you have to stay on task. After all, you don't want to drift in the wrong direction, fall off the mountain or start rolling backwards. When your mind drifts away from the task, putting you in danger (whether of falling on the floor or off a cliff) the loss of balance alerts your nervous system, you feel the shock, and snap back into alignment, quickly restoring your balance. The jolt of adrenaline makes you become more alert and attentive. The same thing happens in i-chuan: as you go off balance (in a somewhat controlled way), your body shocks you and you snap back into balance. You keep focus because you don't want to take an unnecessary punch or lose an opportunity to go in with your own.

Movement in stillness: muscular motion

As you work on sung-gunn it makes sense to also work on developing muscular motion: movement in stillness and stillness in movement. This is often spoken of in the martial arts. How does it work in i-chuan? One way to understand it is to simply regard the difference between movement and stillness as a difference in distance. Understand that the distance a muscle actually moves when it expands or contracts is quite tiny, so it is possible to move only the muscles while standing, leaving the skeleton still and stable. Call this muscular motion: we'll get back to it shortly.

Appropriate distance, or range of motion, is reaching out to the limit of effective movement. Put another way, it's how far you can move before losing muscular connection. This is something you can feel when you lift your arm. If you begin with a feeling of connection between the torso and the arm then, as you lift the arm, at some point you will lose that feeling of connection. Time spent standing can be used effectively to play with this concept and to develop a good sense of where and when the connection is working and where and when it starts to disappear. You get a sense of "this far and no further." Then when you stand, walk or work on test of power, you can look for that same range of motion and extend it, work within it and maintain it.

Now, another way to talk about range of motion is by using heavy resistance. Recall from the first section of this paper that heavy resistance was what made the mental pictures compelling. Here we use heavy resistance to help understand range of motion. Rather than having some set notion that x distance is the furthest we can reach before losing muscular connection, think of it as "how far can I move while picking up this 100-lb bag of rice?" If I'm carrying a 100lb bag and put my weight on my front foot, I can go forward only so far before I lose balance and fall. To keep me from falling, some muscles will quickly contract, shocking the brain and pulling me sharply back into alignment. So, in this case, the body tells me what I need to know. Resistance can teach you your range of motion, so in this view it's not something you memorize; it's something you feel.

Let us look beyond standing for a moment to add a new element to the mix. When we take a step, the brain signals some muscles to expand and some to contract, initiating the movement of the skeleton. The back foot pushes down and backward and the whole body takes a step forward and up. Simple.

Now think of the beginning of a 100-yard dash: stretched out low, fingertips on the ground, one foot forward and one back, suddenly a jolt: the runner hears the starting pistol and takes off. It is that unpredictable moment of take-off that we're looking for. It is the instant when, hearing the gunshot, the nervous system zaps the front foot to respond. In an instant, it has grabbed the ground and pushed fully backwards so the body is sent flying forward into the sprint. There is no hesitation and the flow from the start through the first step is continuous. It is in heavy standing that you learn to wake up your nervous system. Just go a little deeper and put a higher percentage of body weight on the back foot and your brain will be totally occupied with what you are doing.

So we've got descriptions of taking a simple step and starting a race. If you compare these two pictures, which is more compelling? That is one reason why Fong suggests using the 100-yard dash as an instructive mental picture: it sparks the brain and the brain grabs the body. Adding some snap to both ends of the step, take that first instant of the 100-yard dash and apply it both forwards

and backwards while standing in combat stance.⁴ Remember the concept of muscular motion that was introduced at the beginning of this section? Take that tiny muscular motion, expanding and contracting, and apply it to both the front foot going backward and the back foot going forward. The back and forth motion is continuous as long as the muscular connection is sustained. And, of course, it can only be sustained if both body and mind have the sung-gunn together. One can use the mental picture of the simple step at first, but don't get stuck there: move on to the 100-yard dash exercise as quickly as possible.

Understanding the differences between a movement originating in the muscles (100-yard dash exercise) and a normal skeletal movement (simple step) is critical to making progress in this training. We use the large movements to learn to coordinate the skeleton: the skeleton moves the muscles. Then, we do the opposite: we use the muscular motion to expand and contract, moving the skeleton. That first instant is an unpredictable moment, so if you know when it's coming, you've failed. You've created a form rather than a response. When we stand, we can learn to recognize and sustain that first instant of muscular motion as well as the quality of movement resulting from sustained muscular connection: that quality consists of sung-gunn plus muscular movement.

If you have an able teacher, you may usefully observe this very different quality of movement. In fact, we all are capable of it. Why? Because it is exactly how we moved when we were small children. The good news is that we can recover it through this practice and it will benefit us to do so. Ideally, standing, walking, test of power and all the i-chuan training that we do should be natural and unforced. In all these, the more the start of each movement comes from the muscles (rather than the bones) and the more we pay continuous attention to sustaining the muscular connection with sung-gunn, then the more likely it is that we can learn to move efficiently.

Why doesn't it work?

So far we've discussed how we learn, how we think, applying the sung-gunn principle to developing muscular motion, and I've made suggestions to help build these ideas into training. Why? Again, "every action starts with a thought." Power⁵ is issued when the brain triggers a muscular connection to move the body. More muscles recruited and actively engaged means more power, especially if moving comes from several coordinated muscle groups. That's why we work while standing: i-chuan is all about developing and releasing power efficiently.

So why doesn't this work for many students? The short answer is that your old habits defeat your efforts. Even if, in the first instant, the muscles move the skeleton, they then tend to relax and allow the skeleton to continue the movement. After the first instant of shock (that starting pistol instant in the 100-yard dash example), it's easy to forget what you're doing. Then the brain goes for the easy solution—skeleton moving the muscles rather than the type of muscular movement we discussed earlier. Skeleton-initiated movements are empty: they are disconnected from the source of power (muscular movement) and from the brain's attention. Remember that bit about the brain

⁴ For a detailed discussion of health and combat stance, please see Sifu Fong's papers on this site.

⁵ Of course, there are more factors brought to bear in issuing power: mass, momentum, angle of movement, speed and coordination, to name a few. As mentioned earlier, we build power through standing and release it when we move. It's beyond the scope of this paper to go into great detail on these topics, so the serious student would do well to study other papers on the site as well as trying to work it out for him/herself.

going on automatic pilot? That's what's happening here, with both the brain and the body. We are accustomed to not thinking about walking, so as soon as we take a step, we are likely to fall into the habit of mindlessness. Everything falls apart: focus is lost; muscular connection disappears, and the powerful surge we started with is simply gone.

To work on this effectively, we now have looked at three (really four) methods of learning and two concepts that should provide enough content to explore for quite some time. We build new habits or, more accurately, we discover our original ways of moving and apply them to this particular training.

That is why Fong tells us not to think about punching during training. We are asked to think about lifting the arm, taking a step, or other mental picture that we are familiar with. We walk every day, so using our natural walking and other movements seems like an efficient use of what we already have. But eradicating habitual poor usage takes time and effort. This is not something that changes overnight or with the realization "oh, that's what happened." To make sense of the teachings we acquire, we daily test our training through standing and working out. Then we take what we have learned from testing power back into standing to discover and eliminate the mistakes. Of course, you can never eliminate all the mistakes, because real learning never ends.

As you explore and develop your mind and body both by itself and in relation to an opponent, many questions will arise for every answer you find. In this training, you get great exercise as you learn. The goal is to work on tasks that will help us achieve better health and more effective martial arts: standing, test of power, walking, and so on. Using the tools we are given and those we build ourselves, we strive to build energy through standing, test it in different contexts so that we can efficiently issue maximum power at the moment of impact, recovering quickly, ready to respond with focused physical intelligence.