

## **I Chuan**

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I Chuan is a martial arts training method that was developed by Wang Hsiangchai. There are five elements to this training: standing, walking, test of energy, push hands, and sound. I have been attempting to learn the art of I Chuan under the guidance of Sifu Gregory Fong since January 1996. I began attending Sifu Fong's class as a new year's resolution and it is the only resolution I have kept to date. I am a physical therapist by profession, and thus have studied the body and how it works.

My dedication and discipline waxes and wanes which continually affects my progress. The following is my understanding of Sifu Fong's teachings of the standing element of I Chuan. I will also try to address some of the physical and mental benefits of standing.

## STANDING POSTURE

The posture I describe is the one Sifu Fong uses to instruct beginning students. A general description is to stand with feet hip width apart or slightly wider, feet pointing forward, knees bent approximately 30 degrees, pelvis is tucked under to flatten the low back, spine is straight keeping shoulders directly over the hips, arms are out in front appearing to cradle a large ball with hands just below the umbilicus {belly button}, fingers are pointing toward each other, palms appear to be holding a small ball as well, chin is slightly tucked, and head is pushing up.

One can picture a string suspended from the ceiling to the head, which holds the body up. The chest should be relaxed, but not caved in while the belly expands. One accomplishes this by letting the rib cage go and allowing the belly to expand with the fullness that was in the chest. Our culture tends to hold the chest up and suck the belly in. This is the opposite of the goal of standing. The spine should be kept straight, minimizing the curves. For the arms, an image to try to recreate is the feeling of pressing the back of the hands onto a table. The resistance should be slight, but maintained. The elbows and wrists should be slightly bent at an angle determined by each individual's body shape. The fingers have a slight bend to them as well and look as though they are holding the imagined ball cradled in the palm to keep it from rolling off the palm. The knees are kept over the feet but push out slightly. One can imagine holding a ball between the knees.

## BALANCE AND THE SIX DIRECTIONS

The core of standing is achieving balance throughout the entire body. Begin with spinal alignment. One must "pick up the head" by extending the neck upward as much as possible without creating tension or tightness in the rest of the body. One counters this upward movement with "sitting down" by extending the sacrum downward with a slight pelvic tilt to flatten the lower back. The head can not extend upward without the pelvis tucking under slightly. The challenge is to maintain effort in both directions and to have them equal each other to cancel the other's effect. As this is very difficult to maintain, one will notice an up and down movement of the body as the opposing forces overcome each other. The ideal result is both sets of muscles responsible for each movement work continuously. Balance referred to in the rest of this paper will refer to this concept. There will be slight body movements with breathing, but all other "voluntary" or movement from the effort of "standing up" and "sitting down" should be minimized.

The key to accomplishing this lies in extending the neck and allowing the rest of the body to be heavy and be pulled down by gravity. In order for energy to circulate, the lower belly must be relaxed to allow it to expand in all directions, the six directions, not just to the front. Sifu talks about maintaining the six directions while standing and moving. One must understand the concept of balance to grasp the concept of the six directions. The idea is to expand the body as if it were a sphere. This means to expand forward and backward, left and right, as well as up and down. Expansion can be viewed as pushing outward in 360 degrees, as if to fill the sphere equally in all directions at the same time. Up and down was touched on above. It is the first pair to work on, in that, if it is not maintained, then the rest of the body alignment will be off or wrong. Each

pair must have balanced effort within its own pair, then must balance between the other pairs. At a beginning level, a student can work on only one pair, or maybe only part of one pair at best. The advanced student will work on all pairs simultaneously. The expansion is done on a macro level {throughout the entire body at the same time}, as well as on a micro {level within every joint}.

One key to balancing the directions is to have equal degree of muscular contraction while using the least amount of contraction to accomplish the balance. This helps to minimize tension that occurs when excessive contraction is used. One then can isolate single or a few muscles at one time, instead of making the entire extremity or body contract. One begins to stand intelligently, with the mind controlling the body selectively, instead of blindly telling all the muscles to contract. One expands forward to same degree as backward and is repeated for each pair at the same time. This requires great physical and mental effort to maintain this balance without allowing the muscles to rest. Rest in this context happens as the contraction of one opposing muscle group decreases. The opposing pair then is allowed to change the angle of the joint by contracting stronger than the its opposing muscle group.

This leads to another key of balancing the directions. Each of our muscles have an optimum length it can contract. One must learn to find that length while standing. There are two groups of muscles that act on a joint. One flexed the joint while the other extends the joint. These are called agonist and antagonist muscles. One must find the exact joint angle that allows these two muscle groups to work against each other with the same effort to create the desired balance.

## PHYSICAL BENEFITS

A physical benefit of standing is achieving an entire body workout in 10 minutes if it is done correctly. Standing works as many muscles as one can manage at a time. The muscles one wants to work are not the major muscle groups we typically use for daily activities. The idea is to work the supporting, smaller muscles that we do not use, that we allow to atrophy and then will not be able to use as we age. This is the old "use it or lose it" adage.

Physiologically, if work is distributed throughout the body, fatigue is lessened in the primary muscles typically used. This will also decrease risk of injury to an individual group as the work load is distributed to several muscles. By working so many muscles at the same time, the heart becomes conditioned by asking it to supply oxygen to so many muscles at one time. In time, one's heart becomes more efficient. The body, particularly the muscles, must learn how to perform physiological functions while under stress so it has no choice but to become efficient over time. Blood supply is increased to all muscles, which will promote health by bringing fresh nutrients and carrying away cellular metabolic waste products.

Another benefit of standing is body awareness. Body awareness is increased by constantly monitoring exactly which muscles are used and to what degree they are used. Benefits of this are injury prevention and early illness detection when it is easier to treat. One can learn to conserve energy by exerting only the amount of muscular and mental effort needed to accomplish the task. The result is greater endurance and avoidance of injury from over exertion. This is seen at the levels of the entire body as well as of individual muscle groups.

## NEUROLOGICAL BENEFITS

On the neurological side, body awareness comes from the mind being "aware" or "connected" to the rest of the body. One can maximize the interpretation of information from the sensors of the proprioceptive system. Proprioception receptors in the joints and muscles give the brain feedback as to its position in space and the performance of a task. In order to ensure the requirements of standing {maintaining the six directions}, one must be acutely attuned to this constant feedback and make corrections immediately. As one can imagine, this is very demanding mentally. The lag time between interpreting the feedback, seeing the errors, and making the corrections can decrease only through practice. One could think of this cycle as a "muscle": the more it is worked with, the stronger it will become and the quicker it can react.

One can challenge the brain, therefore, by challenging the body. In order to maintain the ideal joint angle, the proper degree of muscular contraction, and the correct body alignment, the brain has to be constantly monitoring these requirements and making adjustments. This is a two way connection: the body placing demands on the brain and vice versa. It starts with the brain or nervous system and only continues as long as the brain is engaged in the monitoring activity. The more the brain is challenged over time, by asking it to monitor multiple tasks, the greater it's ability to detect small movements or changes in the system. One could say the brain becomes more sensitive and the body therefore does as well due to the connection they share. Through placing such demand on the nervous system, standing keeps all the neural connections to the muscles alive. One is born with millions of synapses, axons, and neurons. If one does not use them, they atrophy and lose their connection. By keeping this system challenged, one increases one's reaction time above that of an individual

that does not stand. One can even have a reaction time that is considered normal for a much younger person. The ideal is to have the body react to a situation before the thinking or conscious part of the brain registers the need for action.

Studying Tai Chi with a strong I Chuan base has profoundly changed my life. I have learned a great deal about my personality, as awareness skills I gained from physical observations have spilled over into psychological observations as well. I am grateful for the patience Sifu Fong demonstrates in every class. He seemingly is tireless in repeating the same things to me for over five years: stand up and sit down, relax your chest, too tight and too weak, sit back, not enough, and you are day dreaming. As I wrote this paper, I realized that it will never be completed, that my understanding is constantly changing, thus I continued to revise this paper. So it is with I Chuan, I will never complete my study of it. My goal is to incorporate the principles of standing discussed above through every movement I make during the day. This will then result in the great health benefit that I Chuan offers.

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