

STANDING EXERCISES FOR TAIJI CULTIVATION

By Dale Napier

Cultivation of qi for internal power is among the most important and perhaps least understood aspects of taijiquan training. Like much of taijiquan the exercises are so deceptively simple that they are easy to ignore. When practiced faithfully they provide a powerful punch to your taiji training regimen.

Chen Youze, 20th generation successor from Chenjiagou – the fabled Chen Village – has been touring America in the early part of this year. In his workshops he offers a series of *gongfu zhuang* (standing exercises for a high level of attainment 功夫桩) for cultivating *zhong qi* (中氣), the vital qi of the body. What follows is a detailed description of the first four exercises in the series. Practice them diligently and you can quickly add to your internal power and effectiveness in taiji.

Exercise 1: Static Pose with Sounds

The first exercise is designed to help you draw your qi down into the lower *dantien* (丹田), just below the navel. “Cultivate internal qi,” Chen says, to “accumulate qi to the *dantien*. Only after there is qi in the *dantien* is there elastic, or bouncing, force.”

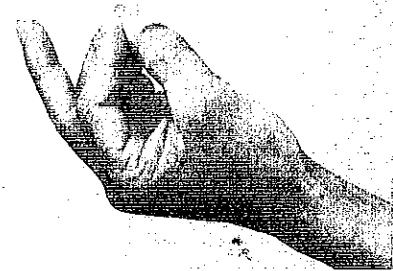
In Taoist thought the lower *dantien* is the cauldron for cultivating and refining your qi into the purest, strongest essence.

To practice this exercise you must maintain the designated pose in stillness for five to ten minutes while repeatedly issuing a series of four “sounds” subvocally. The devil in the details of this exercise involves attaining the correct stance, and working correctly with the sounds.

Stand with your heels shoulder-width apart, the feet turned outward. The

outward angle should be almost forty five degrees away from the forward direction.

Extend your right hand three fists’ distance in front of your heart (photos 1-1, 1-2). Point the outer blade forward with the fingers pointing straight upward, and the thumb crooked. Hold your left hand behind your back at the position of the *mingmen* (Gv-4, the “life gate,” between the second and third lumbar vertebrae 命門). Curl the left hand into a loose fist with the ring finger extended outward.



Think of nothing but the sounds, but do not literally make sounds that can be heard. Instead, “hear” the sounds internally, with a subvocal expression that helps move your qi.

1-1: front view of pose.

1-2: side view.

1-3: back view.



Sound 1: *He*, through the mouth. The sound is like heeeeeeee, softly.

Sound 2: *Xi*, through the nose. The sound is like sheeeeeeee, also softly.

Sound 3: *Xu*, through the mouth. The sound is like schuuuuuu, softly.

Sound 4: *Chui*, through the nose. The sound is like schewy, softly.

Repeat each sound in turn – 20 repetitions, where one repetition involves doing each sound once, in a cycle. As you “hear” the sounds through your nose or mouth, feel the line of qi as it drops into your *dantien*. Do these repetitions slowly and carefully, without rushing. If your goal is to finish as quickly as possible, you will not achieve the desired result.

Exercise 2: Moving Qi In and Out

Having drawn your qi into the lower *dantien* from the first exercise, you are now ready to begin working with it. The goal, Chen says, is “to move qi to make it alive.” This exercise will seem familiar to many, although the details may be slightly different. Each of the final three exercises works to circle qi in a different dimension. This circle works on the plane parallel to the ground.

Stand in the same posture as before. Hold your hands in front of the *dantien*, lightly cupped. Use reverse breathing, through the nose, to extend your qi outward, and draw it back in again.

As you inhale, feel your qi push your hands outward away from your *dantien* (photos 2-1, 2-3). Do not work to make the hands move; let them move of their own accord as determined by the strength of your qi. The stronger your qi, the more the hands will move outward. The important thing is, you have nothing to prove. Let your qi do the talking.

As you exhale, feel the hands pulled back inward to the *dantien*, until they are resting as if glued to your belly (photo 2-2).

There are two keys to doing this exercise correctly: you must be standing in perfect alignment, and your reverse breathing must not disturb that alignment.

2-1: at end of inhale.

2-2: at end of exhale, hands on dantien.

2-3: side view of inhale phase.



Perfect alignment refers to the alignment of three important points: the *baihui* (crown center, Cv-20 百會), the *huiyin* (perineum, Co-4 會陰), and the point exactly between your two *yongquan* (K-1, also called the bubble spring, in the middle near the ball of each foot 湧泉). This midpoint is correct only if you are centered perfectly between your two bubble springs.

Reverse breathing refers to lightly moving your back – your *mingmen* (Du-4) – outward as you inhale. Your abdomen moves lightly inward in conjunction with your back. As you exhale, your back and abdomen return to their starting point.

As you breathe, do not lose your three-point alignment. The biggest mistake you can make, Chen says, is to let your body curve. Often this happens “when the butt sticks out or is pulled in too much.”

When that happens, he says, “qi cannot go down smoothly, which can cause harm. Murky qi cannot go down, and clear qi cannot go up.” This causes qi to accumulate in the chest, which will “cause chest tightening.” Often, he says, this will be manifested by a “great need to sigh.”

Exercise 3: Circling the Qi

The third exercise is more complex. It focuses on moving the qi within the *dantien*, in circles from left to right and right to left. These circles are perpendicular to the ground, parallel to the plane of our bodies. Because spiraling in the *dantien* is so important to generating internal power in taiji – so important to making your techniques work – this exercise is particularly crucial.

Assume the same stance as before. This time you will exhale through the mouth, although still inhaling through the nose.

Rest your right fist in your left palm, with the left thumb on top and knuckles resting in the palm. Both thumbs are outward, away from the body (photo 3-1).

Start with your fist below the belly. As you inhale, slowly move it up your left, then across the top. As you move the fist down the right side and across the bottom, exhale.

As you move your fist toward the right side, shift your weight toward the right leg, as shown in photo 3-2. As you move your fist back toward the left, shift your weight as in photo 3-3. Thus you are continuously shifting back and forth as you spiral with your fist. Your weight should be in the center when your fist is in the center, either above or below your *dantien*. Be sure to synchronize the breathing with the movements. Perform 20 repetitions in each direction.

According to Chen, this exercise is “moving qi in the *dantien*, the abdomen and thoracic cavity. Qi leads blood in the body. According to Chinese medicine, qi is the commander of blood.” Circling qi around the *dantien*, he says, involves “cultivating the root, and lubricating the waist.” The key is to “relax the *kua* [the fold where our upper thigh meets our abdomen 跨] and loosen the waist.”

3-1: beginning.



3-2: inhaling to left side, about to move up.



Exercise 4: Circling toward the Front and Back

The final exercise circles qi in the remaining dimension, front to back to front, like a ball rolling forward or backward. This seems slightly confusing at first because it involves rising up and down as the arms and hands circle up the middle and down the sides, but the truth becomes obvious with practice.

Assume the same stance as before, only a bit wider. Cross your hands at the wrist and make them into fists. Place them above your navel – left hand on top for men, right hand on top for women (photo 4-1).

Inhale, rising up with your hands rising up your middle. The hands should slowly uncross, fingers extended and uniformly spaced, palms outward (photo 4-2). As you inhale, pull up lightly on the perineum.

When your hands reach the top, let them float down the sides, palms down. Exhale and release the

3-3: exhaling down right side, about to move back across.



Exercise 4, beginning with hands crossed in front of waist.

perineum. As your hands reach chest level, slowly close them into fists. As your hands approach the bottom, bend at the knees and *kua*, lowering yourself so the fists can brush past your knees (photos 4-4, 4-5). As they brush past, cross them at the wrists and begin rising again until you reach the original posture (photo 4-6).

For the first 20 repetitions, visualize – and try to feel – your *dantien* rolling over from back to front. As you rise and inhale, let the circle within your *dantien* roll up and over toward the front. As you lower and exhale, let the circle drop down the front and roll under toward the back, like a wheel rolling forward.

For the second 20 repetitions, have your *dantien* roll in the opposite direction – up the front as you rise, down the back as you sink.

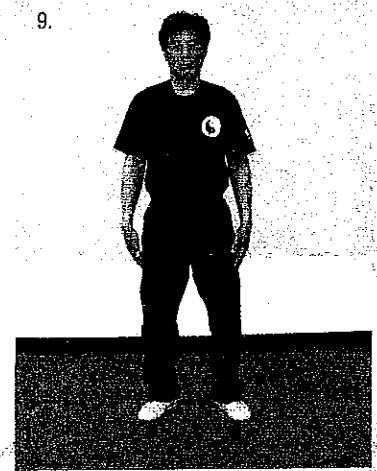
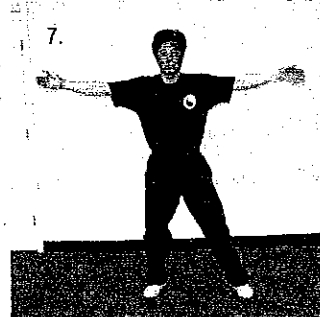
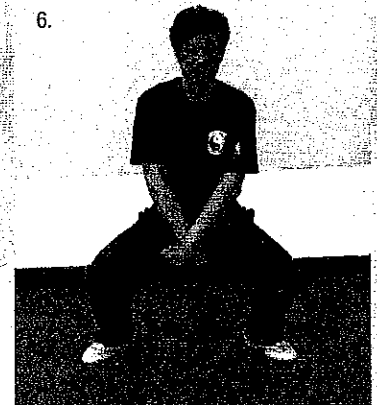
Chen says the primary concern with this exercise is the need to “quiet the heart mind (*xin* 心). If not quiet, the body cannot relax. Thinking about other things, the heart is not quiet. Remove all distractions.” He says that “if *xin* is not quiet, movement and qi cannot synchronize.” He says that the inability to do this is usually a sign that a person has problems in his/her life that are causing the distractions.

Conclusion

These qigong exercises are unassumingly straightforward. On the surface they seem so simple that there must be little to them, but their roots run deep. As Chen Youze says, “There is no end. The



2. Near top of inhale, preparing to sink with exhale.
3. Exhaling down, about to close fists.
4. With closed fists, nearing bottom.
5. Closed fists about to cross in front.
6. Crossed fists, now ready to begin to rise with new inhale.
7. Having finished all repetitions, beginning to close.
8. Closing exercise. 9. Exercise complete.



methods must be mastered by the practitioner” in order to gain the benefit sought. You must “practice very hard. It is not enough just to ‘know’ it. You must meditate upon it.” ☯

Dale Napier teaches Tai Chi & Qigong in Houston, TX. Visit his website at www.elementaltaichi.com