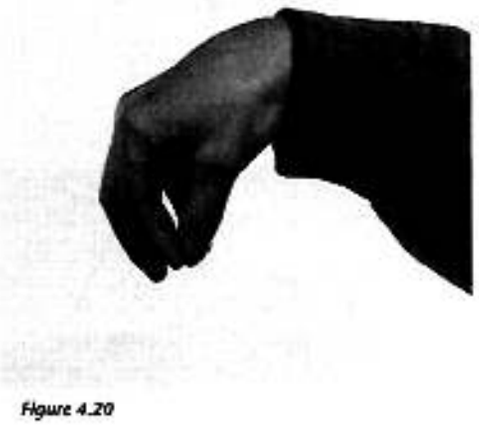

Figure 4.20

Hook Hand

Bunch together the fingertips of the thumb, second, fourth, and fifth fingers. The third finger remains close to the others but with a small gap in between. The fingers point down (or sometimes up) and the wrist is completely relaxed (see figure 4.20). This is the "hook hand" *(gou shou)*.

Hook hand is often used in joint-locking techniques, especially in reversals.

4.9 Standing

As soon as two opponents make contact, there is an energy imbalance. One party applies a force and the other adjusts her structure to neutralize. From the first instant in which this happens, the situation is asymmetrical; some parts of the structure have more energy—are "fuller"—and others are more "empty."

The engagement therefore has two distinct phases: a *wuji* phase in which nothing has happened yet and the opponents are in balance (symmetry), and a *taiji* (small "t") phase in which they have made contact, either physically or by intention. In the *taiji* phase, there is always asymmetry; empty and full have separated and are in a continuous state of flux.

Standing meditation exercises *(zhan zhuang)*, similarly, are of two distinct types. *Wuji* standing is symmetrical and applies little or no physical stress to the body; *taiji* standing is asymmetrical and physically demanding. Both types of standing exercise use

relaxation to develop connectedness and deep coordination, but *taiji* standing additionally trains the static aspects of Taijiquan body mechanics and rooting.

Almost any completed posture from a solo form may be used as a *taiji* standing exercise. The *taiji* exercise presented here is from Small Frame Chen Style *(xiǎo jià)*.

Begin by standing in Basic Posture with the insteps of your feet shoulder-width apart. In other words, your insteps should line up with the outsides of your shoulders. The toes of your feet should point out at a natural angle—about twenty degrees from center—and your weight is centered. Open your right hand and make the fingers completely straight and close together. Raise it so that the fingers point straight up, the tip of the middle finger is about sixteen inches in front of your nose, and the palm faces left. Focus your eyes on the tip of the middle finger. Make your left hand into a hook hand (see section 4.8) and place it behind your back at the base of your spine with the fingers pointing up. Now sink as deeply as you can go into a horse stance (see section 4.7). Your posture should look like figures 4.21a and 4.21b.

Figure 4.21a

Figure 4.21b

Also, observe the following points:

- The right elbow should be slightly "buoyant"; it should neither collapse completely downward nor stick out at an aggressive angle.
- Breathe slowly and evenly.
- Awareness should be centered on the *dan tian*.
- The sphincter and urogenital muscles should gently contract, but not to the point where it causes tension in the body.
- Eyes should be relaxed and about halfway closed.
- Weight should be evenly distributed along the length of each foot, and the toes of the feet may very gently "grip" the ground; that is, they curl down slightly.
- The whole body should be completely relaxed.

Breathing for this exercise is traditionally coordinated with mental repetition of the syllables *e, xi, xu, chui* (one syllable for each exhale or inhale, beginning with the exhale). The purpose is simply to ensure that the breathing remains even.

The first time you try this exercise, you will become acutely conscious of the fact that you never know exactly what your body is doing all at once. You will focus on the correct positioning of, say, your right hand, then discover that your back is no longer vertical; when you correct the back, you find that your left shoulder has become tense, etc. The key to success is a rule that also applies to flying an airplane on instruments: *do not fixate*. Beginners will often seize mentally on a particular problem area while the rest of their posture falters. You should avoid this error by gen-

tly shifting your focus from one place to another (without leaving the *dan tian*), making corrections as needed. Correct, move on, correct again. If you do this diligently over a period of months, you will find that your posture drifts less during each successive practice session because your awareness expands; part of your consciousness remains where you made a correction, even when the center of your attention moves elsewhere. You will eventually develop a comprehensive awareness of your entire posture so that your mind is free to focus where it will without losing track of any individual part. This is a primary objective of the exercise, and a necessary step in learning Taijiquan.

If you have been following the exercise up to this point, you are probably wondering why I have so far neglected to mention its most obvious feature: the intense, searing pain in your legs. After less than a minute, the pain may be so distracting that it seems nearly impossible to attend to correct posture. Nonetheless, you must do so. You must also hold this posture as long as you possibly can. Most students reach the breaking point at about ninety seconds on their first attempt. If you are able to do substantially more than this, then either you have a lot of prior training in Chinese martial arts or your posture is incorrect. Check that your back is vertical, your lower back is not arched, you are sunk as low as you can go, and your weight is evenly distributed across your feet. It is rather easy to cheat by violating any of these rules. You will find, for example, that leaning slightly backward shifts the stress on the leg muscles so that the whole ordeal becomes considerably easier to endure. Unfortunately, the correct posture is the one that hurts most.

If you practice this exercise two to four times a day, you will

begin to see improvement very quickly—probably after a week or so. Your legs will get stronger and you will feel a bit more comfortable each time. As this happens, you must increase the duration of your practice sessions. Increments of fifteen seconds generally work well. The longer you stand, the more benefit you get from the exercise.

4.10 The "Energies"

The Chinese word *qi*, typically translated as "energy," actually refers to a sort of ethereal or potential energy; *qi* does not relate to the direct application of physical power. The word *jin*, also translated as "energy," refers to manifest or kinetic energy. The term "basic energies" in Taijiquan refers to the latter. To avoid confusion, we will instead use the more apt English description, "basic techniques," except when referring specifically to a quality of movement.

Basic Techniques

Bruce Lee (returning to one of my favorite sources) once said, "... the [western] boxer ... uses the basic tools of the jab, hook, cross, uppercut.... Do not let anyone tell you that martial art is different from boxing." He was mistaken about this. Boxing is not, in fact, a martial art—not because it has few techniques, but because of the assumptions it makes about the opponent. If your training assumes that the opponent will do nothing except stand at a polite distance and throw punches, if you have no way to deal with an opponent who grapples, locks, throws, bites, head-butts, strikes with shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, or feet, then you are practic-