**WUJI ZHANZHUANG – THE ULTIMATE STANCE**

*Wuji zhanzhuang* is the most essential ‘activity’ or ‘practice’ of *qigong*. However, it is probably also the most ignored aspect of *qigong* practice in mainstream *qigong* practice. And even more important, it is, more than anything else in *qigong*, primarily a non-practice. Not something you can do¹. That is, not something you can do according to our conventional and habitual assumptions about doing. Just like we can never hear Zen’s ‘sound of one hand clapping’ if we hold on to conventional and habitual assumptions about hearing.

Depending on how literal we go, *wuji zhanzhuang* can be translated with words like: ‘no limit pole standing’, ‘ultimate posture’, ‘the stance of limitlessness’ or ‘ultimate stance’.

The word *zhanzhuang* alone refers to a wider range of ‘posture practice’ of which *wuji zhanzhuang* is the base and essence². The *wuji zhanzhuang* is considered to be the basis of all other stances, breathing methods, visualizations and movements. According to Chinese cosmology, in which arts like *qigong* and *taijiquan* are grounded, *taiji*, better known as *yin* & *yang*, the ultimate poles, originate from *wuji*. In the classical text on *taijiquan*, a martial art that is based on *taiji* philosophy, it says:

太極者，無極而生，陰陽之母也。

*Taiji*, is born of *Wuji*, that is the mother of *Yin* and *Yang*.

Quite often a *qigong* form begins with the *wuji zhanzhuang*, moves on to *taiji zhanzhuang* and then into a variety of movements. In a similar way, spontaneous movement *qigong* often starts with some form of entrance into the *wuji* state.

*Wuji zhanzhuang* is a non-practice in the sense that it refers to giving up all unconscious neurotic activity, as well as all conscious well-intended activity, including practice.

**To Stand or Not To Stand**

Even though the word *zhanzhuang* literally means ‘pole standing’, suggesting the activity or practice of ‘standing’, it is neither about a pole nor about standing. A pole that has no limits can obviously not be a pole, as a pole stands out in the midst of something else and in *wuji zhanzhuang* one stands aware as everything. Not opposed to or apart from anything or anybody. The reason why the word pole standing is used here, is to refer to the limitless stability that is experienced through awareness of and identification with one’s ultimate empty nature³. This realization is of course not bound to ‘standing’, it can be experienced in any position. It is unconditional. In the Japanese *soto zen* tradition, that stresses sitting practice above standing, moving, etc., the core pointing out

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¹ Yang Jwing-Ming describes the essence of *qigong* as: ‘regulating without regulating’.

² For more information on *zhanzhuang* in general see the *zhanzhuang* fact sheets.

³ Rather than e.g. identifying with one’s relative personality, the dimensions of one’s personality that are unwanted, one’s archetypal personality or a divine personality or deity.
instruction⁴ is ‘shikantaza’, which means ‘just sitting’. In line with this, the standing meditation practice wuji zhanzhuang is also known in Japanese culture as ‘ritesu zen’ or ‘standing zen’.

The good thing about opening up to wuji in a standing posture, is that it can serve a more embodied realization, as it helps to activate our basic energy,⁴ to intensify and deepen the realization of wuji. The embodiment of this realization is further challenged and catalyzed in more demanding postures and movement meditation.

The good thing about doing it in a sitting position is that it is more likely to aid in relaxing, releasing or dying out of neurotic activity. Despite the fact that ‘just sitting’ can, especially for a beginner, sometimes also be a shocking confrontation with the neurotic state of one’s bodymind.

Lying down would also be fine, but may cause sleepiness or lower energy levels, while a certain amount of basic energy is needed for a breakthrough and stabilization of one’s realization. I have been told that the Celts used a meditative practice where one lies down with a heavy stone on the abdomen, in order to maintain just enough basic energy to remain aware and have enough relaxation to let the neurotic bodymind activity die out.

As far as there is a basic directional instruction for wuji zhanzhuang, that should probably be something like ‘just standing’. All other basic pointing out instructions aim at releasing all conscious and unconscious activity, so only ‘pure standing’ and ultimately ‘pure consciousness’ remains.

FORM, ACTIVITY & EMPTINESS

Another way of looking at the activity that is released comes from the meaning of the word ‘ji’, which means ‘border’ or ‘limit’. ‘Wu’ means ‘no’ or ‘nothing’. In this context the word border is equivalent to ‘form’, since a form exists by the grace of having borders, which separates it from environment and other forms. In wuji zhanzhuang we relax, release and dissolve all borders or forms. These borders or forms can be physical, emotional and mental. It can be physical tension that holds us in a specific posture we formed in relationship with other people or certain situations, emotions that are kept in place by bodily tensions and mental gossip or thought constructs that we use to fix others or the world as separate from ourselves, so we become a separate ‘form’, called ‘me’.

Using the word activity again, wuji zhanzhuang then is to release all ‘relative activity’. That is, release all activity that creates relative forms (body postures, solidified emotions, rigid concepts, etc.). As far as wuji zhanzhuang itself can be called ‘an activity’, it should be called ‘absolute activity’, although in the truly ‘ultimate stance’ one does not experience a difference between the relative and the absolute⁶.

Another reason why a non-specific standing posture – a standing position without a specific goal, form, function, referential context, etc. – is used, is that it is neutral and therefore aids in ‘emptying out’. It is therefore less likely to trigger psychic energy that is trapped in psycho-physical shadow constructs⁷ that would generate ‘forms’ or ‘relative activity’ (specific tension, postures, solidified

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⁴ A pointing out instruction is an instruction that leads to an essential realization.
⁵ Fundamental embodied wisdom energy. The Chinese name for this basic energy is referred to as ‘yuan qi’, which means ‘primordial energy’ or ‘original energy’. The legs, lower body and kidneys play an important role in building up and storing this energy.
⁶ In Tibetan Buddhism this is called ‘Mahamudra’: ‘Great Seal’ or ‘Ultimate Approval’.
⁷ Parts of our psychic energy that are trapped, leaking or kept in neurotic or reactive hyperactivity through posture, tensed muscles, altered ways of breathing, concepts and story lines, emotional disguises, etc. Always partially unconscious.

Michael Greenwood, an interesting integral writer on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) uses the word psycho physical ‘compartments’, that inhibit our experience of wholeness and deteriorate our health and functioning.
emotions, concepts, storylines, etc.) that would make it harder to realize basic emptiness and harder to sustain that awareness.

**APPROACHES**

There is a variety of other approaches to realizing emptiness. The basic *wuji zhanzhuang* ‘practice’ is often primarily characterized by ease and release. A typical Daoist ‘edge’. Words like ‘emptying out’, ‘giving up’, ‘dying out’ and ‘letting go’ are typical for this (initial) entrance into the wuji state. It can be called a ‘yin approach’, ‘passive approach’ or ‘feminine approach’. If you release neurotic activity and enter a receptive state, emptiness naturally dawns upon you, if you don’t resist the intimacy with it (which in itself is a subtle neurotic activity). In that sense it is passive, receptive and feminine.

There are also approaches in which psycho-physical exhaustion is used to an extent where the accessible neurotic energy is exhausted, so one can no longer maintain neurotic activity (grasping at neurotic projections, maintain psychophysical armoring, etc.). See for example the image of the ‘vajra posture’ on left. Trance dance can have a similar effect, but is an ecstatic, rather than meditative approach. It is nevertheless partially comparable to the more meditative ‘death and dying meditations’ of Tibetan Buddhist tantra that mimic the actual process of dying in which one’s assumed self ‘falls apart’ through a process of elemental dissolution, through which one gets an opportunity to discover emptiness or openness.

In the text above *wuji zhanzhuang* is pictured primarily as a passive practice of ‘emptying out’. Even in the exhaustive approach. Words like ‘emptying out’, ‘giving up’, ‘dying out’, ‘falling apart’ and ‘letting go’ are ‘non activity’ pointing out instructions that lead to emptiness. The ‘ultimate stance’ is actually a union of awareness and emptiness, not a dull or unconscious emptiness, since the ultimate nature of the practice is ‘non-dual’, not a practice to separate ‘emptiness’ from form. It is ultimately about recognizing or re-cognizing the essential sameness, ‘isness’, of both form and emptiness. At that level nothings needs to be emptied out, as there (the awareness of the fact that there) is nothing to empty out, nor to empty out from.

For that reason there is also a variety of active practices that strengthen the awareness side of the union of emptiness and awareness. In the beginning, however, the passive emptiness side of the equation is stressed. Just like grounding practices precede energizing, storing, circulating or raising the qi practices. It is generally more difficult to realize emptiness in the midst of neurotic activity.

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8 Neurotic activity may have an undertone of hyperactivity, however passive ignorance or passive aggression are just as neurotic as e.g. aggressive reactivity or dramatic clinging.
Examples of pointing out instructions that focus on the active or awareness aspect of the ‘ultimate stance’, such as minding the space in which thoughts appear, consciously minding the space that appears after releasing thoughts, emotional fixations and bodily tensions, minding the gap between two breaths or maintaining awareness while one dissolves one’s identity in the process of falling asleep, visualizing one’s body to be empty and radiant without substance or any other inherent existence (see below), etc.

In Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism there are also highly active and intense approaches to achieving ultimate realization, the ‘ultimate stance’. The most famous ones are ‘tummo yoga’ (Tibet) and ‘kundalini yoga’ (India). These two are also closely related to ‘sexual yoga’ that uses the power of ‘interactive transformation’ or ‘transformative intimacy’. These methods are not only highly active approaches, but also use ‘form’ and energy work to enter into a realization of ‘emptiness’ or the ‘nondual’. From the Chinese qigong perspective these methods are considered ‘fire practices’, as opposed to the more calm, cool, releasing and flowing ‘water practices’. The most well known Chinese example of this is the ‘xishui gong’ or ‘marrow washing practice’. These are exercises that transform sexual energy or ‘jing qi’, into energy that can support the realization of emptiness. A process or shift known as the transformation from spirit (shen) into emptiness (xu). This can be practiced alone, with or without specific tools, or with partner. A core energetic principle is to collect the vital energy in the central channel (zhong mai). If all our excessive neurotic energy has been released and collects, in its healthy transformed state, in the central channel, we enter into a realization of wuji. The fullness and stability of the gathering of energy in the central channel determines the power and sustainability of the realization of wuji or the non-dual state.

**INTEGRATION**

Even though in theory wuji zhanzhuang is traditionally considered to have the potential of full realization, in real life the process of embodied liberation is further catalyzed, deepened and completed by using a variety of postures, movements and ordinary life activities.

In addition to the integration into other, more specific and/or demanding postures, other aspects of practice and life are incorporated. Staying grounded in the awareness of emptiness within yogic movements, rituals, walking, conversation and daily activities are other arenas of ripening.

The more specific and/or demanding postures may help to release trapped psychic energy, bring it back online or transform it into its natural (wisdom) function.

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9 Also known as ‘sleep yoga’.
10 Bruce Francis wrote extensively on the ‘water method’; see for example ‘Relaxing Into Your Being’ (North Atlantic Books).
11 Also known as chongmai, which is a name that is common in acupuncture circles. Chongmai means ‘thrusting vessel’, the vessel through which the qi thrusts through the core of our being.
12 Chinese yoga (qigong) uses a limited amount of postures. Similar to Tibetan yoga (trulkhor) it stresses movements. Indian hatha yoga is most known for its extensive use of a wide variety of postures. Only recently more movement oriented forms of Indian yoga became popular or were invented from the basis of the more static hatha yoga. Both Tibetan and Indian yoga make extensive use of ‘breath holding’ or kumbhaka in Sanskrit as a way to release psycho-physical shadow constructs.
Another, yet unmentioned approach to *zhanzhuang* practice in general is the ‘spontaneous movement approach’\(^{13}\), which can have profound effects in reintegrating and transforming psychic energy that has gone offline or is otherwise disturbed.

At some point or in some cases it may be necessary to gear the practice more towards ‘unearthing’ psychic energies that somewhere in our life went offline or have not yet fully developed or to include other practices that focus on this dimension of healing and development. If that would was not included on the path of practicing *wuji zhanzhuang*, these constructs would actually be cemented in their already fixed position. Vice versa, premature and incorrect ways of working with these shadow constructs can create a more sophisticated trap. This trap could be named ‘therapeutical super-ego fixation’ as we form a new fixed ego that is constructed out of both an inner client and an inner therapist. We become relatively happy with knowing all what we know about ourselves and our skills do deal with it to some extent.

Since every instruction can be encapsulated as a ‘new’ form, e.g. ‘a good practice’, giving instructions itself somehow needs to be a self-relativising, creative and relational process. Since our habits to grasp at form as a means to uphold our habitual self identification are always partially unconscious, the realization of *wuji* can be deeply catalyzed by a relationship with people who have a certain degree of realization of *wuji* and/or commitment towards realizing it, preferably for the sake of all sentient beings and from a felt solidarity with these same sentient beings.

Books and other multimedia can serve as catalysts, too, however they lack the ‘live’ attunement and guidance that is inherent to a relationship with a teacher\(^{14}\), a fellow practitioner or group of practitioners.

Practicing *qigong* in nature is a very powerful and absolutely necessary element one’s *qigong* practice. Nature is a deep essence of you that is frequently and habitually ignored. In general and as a part of our fundamental identity. For many, nature is stripped away from their self-identification. Because nature, however, is a deep essence of who we are, deeply ingrained in our bodymind, in our fundamental psycho-physical make-up, in our nervous-system, it is also a powerful entrance to re-awaken to our totality, to release from our self-contraction. Practicing in nature has a direct healing impact on our bodymind and energy system, making it fit for spiritual development and the realization of *wuji*.

In a similar way, we habitually ignore and alienate from our fundamental oneness with other sentient beings and the divine realms. Therefore practicing in groups or spiritually charged environments can have similar, additional healing effects.

\(^{13}\) See *zhanzhuang* and spontaneous movement fact sheets for more information.

\(^{14}\) Someone who can speak out of his experience directly. Like Zen master Eno said: “It is only by entering into Samadhi that I can discuss seeing one’s true self nature (kensho) without also talking about self-liberation” (in: Zen Training, Omori Sogen Roshi, page 23).
Figure 7: Example of one of the many ways to enter into the wuji state. Based on a Tibetan Bön-Buddhist practice, as taught by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche.