

Standing Like a Tree (Zhan Zhuang)

Gently stretch a little. Reach your hands up into the sky. Reach your arms out to the sides. Bend a little this way and that. Gently look around and let your neck and shoulder blades move a little.

Then gradually explore bringing together *breathing*, *moving*, and *attending*. How? It depends on you, your body, and your patterns of holding yourself. Just keep mixing your breathing, moving, and attending -- in relaxed and exploratory ways -- until it takes very little effort to stand.

Feel the inside of your body: feet, pelvis, belly, chest, head. Align come from within, rather than trying to line body parts up.

Feel yourself breathing in and out: feel the sensations and movements of the breathing body as it balances, sways, adjusts. Invite your belly, back, shoulder blades, arms, hands, legs, and feet to participate in breathing in and out. Breathing~moving~attending together. Naturally balancing, deeply relaxing.

Qigong is often translated as *energy work* but it may be better to say *cultivating* or *playing*.

Let your weight rest over soft feet and flexible ankles. Let your knees be soft, flexible, slightly bent -- not locked straight, nor bent too far. Let your weight sink down through the legs and feet into the ground.

From the knees down, feel roots going deep into the ground. From the knees up, feel energy rising into the sky.

Let the body balance over soft feet, relaxed. Let tension fall down through the legs into the ground.

Arms may want to rise into a circle in front of your belly or chest. Let them rise! To compensate for the arms rising, the body may sink a little and shift back a little, as if starting to sit down on a big beach ball. You're moving into the first position of standing like a tree.

Let fingers be a little apart, as if there were little balls between the fingers.

Smiling, relaxing, resting, whole body expanding and contracting as it breathes in and out.

Start with short sessions: 5 minutes, then 10, then 15 minutes. Build slowly over weeks and months. After 100 days, you begin to know how to practice, and the practice will start to work on you.

As you add time to your session, relax more and more deeply. Let your weight rest over soft feet.

Let your body balance and breath -- neither fidgeting nor rigid holding.

If you get muscle cramps, or especially if you develop pressure around your neck and head, you need to adjust your efforts -- preferably with the guidance of an instructor.



First position: standing

Stand naturally with the arms hanging down, hands at sides.

Explore how to balance over soft feet, resting your weight, so you don't have to hold yourself up. Rock a little forward onto the balls of the feet, back a little onto the heels, letting the rest of the body adjust its balance. Then come back to resting on the soft centers of the feet.

From knees down, root like a tree, down into the ground. From knees up, let the head float up like clouds in the sky. Relaxing, breathing, moving, attending.

Second position: holding a big belly

Let your arms form a circle in front of you, palms toward you, as if holding a big belly.

Relax the head, neck, torso, pelvis, legs, and feet.

Invite the breath to fill the belly. Whole body naturally filling and emptying as it breathes.

After a while, let arms sink slowly to the sides. Then rest, palms on belly, for a few breaths.

Third position: holding a balloon at your chest

Let your arms rise a bit higher so the hands are chest level, palms toward the heart. As the arms rise, let your body sink down just a little, and rest, as if you were sitting on a big beach ball.

Feel as if there were more beach balls under each elbow, each armpit, and chin -- as if they were holding you up. Or feel that your wrists are suspended from a string around your neck.

Easy as you can, bring together breathing, moving, attending.

After a while, let the arms sink slowly to your sides. Then rest, palms on belly as you breathe in and out.

Fourth position: pushing a balloon at your face

Sink a little more as you let the hands rise to about eye level, with palms facing forward, as if pushing a balloon away from your face. Let shoulders and arms relax. Feel that your wrists are suspended from a string around your neck.

Weight resting, tension dropping, awareness riding breath through the body.

After a while, let the arms sink as the body rises a little to stand naturally.

Fifth position: standing in a stream with arms to the sides

Let the arms extend out to the sides, palms down, as if holding a couple balloons steady on the surface of a flowing stream in which you are standing. Relaxing, breathing, moving, attending.

After a while, let the arms sink slowly to your sides. Then rest, palms on belly, breathing in and out.



Ending the session: standing, palms on belly

No matter how many of the phases you've practiced, end your session by return to standing naturally, arms at the sides, weight resting, balanced over soft feet.

Breathing in and out, feel the sensations and movements of the whole breathing body. Let the body sway slightly to balance itself. Notice how the spine undulates subtly as you breathe in and out. Feel the whole body expanding as you inhale and contract as you exhale.

Then rest one palm lightly on the belly below the navel. Rest the other palm on the first hand.

Be aware of the field of energy in the center of the body.

Feel the edge between your self and the space around you. Where is it?

Just rest there a while, breathing.

As you end the session, carry into your daily activities the intention to bring together breathing, moving, and attending.

Building capacity

Start with 5 minutes in positions one and two. After a few days or weeks, add a few minutes in the next position. Build capacity by practicing daily over weeks and months, until you can comfortably stand for 5 to 10 minutes in each position, for a total session of 30 to 60 minutes.

Short sessions every day, gently exploring the edge of your capacity, are better than occasional marathons.

“Short sessions, many of them.”

gently mix breathing ~ moving ~ attending

See also

George Draffan's website *NaturalAwareness.net*

Lam Kam Chuen, *The Way of Energy* and *Chi Kung: The Way Of Healing*

Will Johnson, *Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient*

