

STANDING QI GONG AND THE PRACTICE OF SHIATSU

By Peter den Dekker

Last june Peter den Dekker had a conversation with John Brown. Peter and John are shiatsu practitioners, one in Amsterdam, the other in London. They are both students of qi gong master Lam Kam Chuen. John Brown started to train under master Lam ten years ago. This qi gong style is called Zhan Zhuang, literally translated as "standing like a tree". John and Peter experienced the great benefits, that the standing qi gong has for shiatsu practitioners and their clients.

THE ORIGINS

In chapter 12 of the Su Wen the Yellow Emperor and his physician Qi Bo discuss the origins of Chinese medicine. Qi Bo explains how geography, climate, lifestyle and diet have all an influence on the art of medicine. After Qi Bo has addressed to the regions in the four principal directions, he finally talks about the center, obviously the most prosperous part of the country. "In the center are flatlands, which are often damp. Many varieties of foods abound, and living is peaceful."¹ Those conditions resemble very much those of the western world in our time. Also the diseases that Qi Bo describes are similar as those in our society: deficiency of the immunity and weakening of the general condition. Independent of the severity of the symptoms there is a general imbalance in the physical, the emotional and the energetic systems. The real need is a type of therapy in which the person concerned is empowered. In the "conventional" therapy there is a specialist and a patient, but setting now would further emphasize the relative passivity of the latter. Qi Bo states that under such a circumstances the various manual therapies and exercises have developed. Even more as the practical outlook of the therapies, it is the difference in attitude. Key issues are motivation and taking-up-responsibility-yourself.

Shiatsu certainly is an exponent of this attitude. It finds its popularity in the urban areas of the western world, which wealth is comparable to the "center" in old China. Along with the shiatsu treatment various exercises can be used. In that way we empower our clients, making them less dependent on our shiatsu treatment. In the search for the most effective and most simple exercises, I practiced various ways of training my body for the last twenty years. They all had unmistakable benefits for my health, but I couldn't use them right away in my shiatsu practice. Sports like jogging boost circulation, but also tire. People with a weakened condition need something which doesn't tire the body, but on the contrary tone it right away. The martial arts I trained, taijiquan and aikido, require an investment in time, which not everyone can or is willing to make. More simple exercise systems like do-in and meridian stretching are not touching deeper levels of health.

COMFORTABLE AND EASY

A couple of years ago I had the good luck to meet master Lam Kam Chuen in London. He teaches standing qi gong, or Zhan Zhuang. I immediately felt that this was the real thing; the style of exercise I had searched for for a long time. Already in my study time I had come in contact with qi gong. There seemed to be many different styles and interpretations of this art; some of them I studied, both in Europe and in China. However, I never felt completely involved in them, because they were complicated and seemed uniquely the realm of highly skilled Chinese masters. Master Lam's style was so simple, that it was hard to believe that it could have such powerful effects on the body. But after some years of practicing his style, I found my health improved enormously indeed. It made my shiatsu handwork better and much more powerful.

An even so important aspect was, that I could use it right away in the clinic. People with hardly any background in bodywork or sports could easily understand and use it. Since then many of my clients have mentioned the benefits they have from the simple standing postures. They don't have to go through a strenuous set of exercises before they feel improvement of their health. The whole struggle with the

discipline, to force yourself to do your exercise everyday, can be avoided if it is simple and comfortable. And this standing qi gong certainly is! I often remember the quote of Moshe Feldenkrais in his book "Awareness through Movement": "... designed to improve ability, that is, to expand the boundaries of the possible: to turn the impossible into the possible, the difficult into the easy and the easy into the pleasant. For only those activities that are easy and pleasant will become part of a man's habitual life and will serve him at all times."⁴

STANDING LIKE A TREE

Standing qi gong is called in Chinese Zhan Zhuang (pronounced as Jan Jong or Jam Jong in Southern China). Literally translated it means "standing like a tree". Its origins go far back in Chinese history. Its modern form was established by master Wang Xiang Zhai, a legendary martial artist in first half of this century. His art was further developed by professor Yu Yong Nian, a now retired dentist from Beijing. Professor Yu initiated to use aspects of Zhan Zhuang for the treatment of internal diseases in Chinese hospitals. Master Lam Kam Chuen is in turn his student and the first who taught Zhan Zhuang in the western world. He wrote the first manual on standing qi gong in English². Since 1976 master Lam lives and teaches in London.

Zhan Zhuang has five basic postures. The postures are held for a certain length of time, depending on the level of the practitioner. Instead of movement it is within the stillness that circulation is generated. In the beginning this seems hard to believe, but with the just a little practice understanding of the natural logic of the postures will grow. There are many possible variations on the basic standing postures. Beside that the qi gong can also be practiced lying down and sitting in a chair. All positions and variations have their application and are used according to condition and circumstances of the practitioner.

BODY AWARENESS

Peter: In what way do you incorporate the standing qi gong in your shiatsu work?

John: The qi gong can be streamlined for people who have specific problems. At the end of the shiatsu treatment I give people a recommendation, that they might try this form of exercise. It takes only a couple of minutes until they understand what the posture is. I find, that people get confidence if they see that they are able to do something for themselves. They are not becoming solely relyend and just saying "when can I come back to see you again". The five minutes time a day, that they are going to give themselves, will be a help to slowly work through whatever problem they have. To stay dependend on the practioner, would be in line with what happens always in western style of medicine. On the contrary the body is able to do lot of its own healing from within. Very rarely do people come to see me without receiving some kind of exercise, that they can do for themselves, between treatments.

Peter: You speak about exercise. Do you mean in particular the standing qi gong, or any kind of exercise?.

John: It tends to be focussed around the Zhan Zhuang, because of its simpliciy. In my shiatsu training we were taught a moving form of qi gong with eighteen movements and a more complexed way of training. Form the Zhan Zhuang we offer simple postures, which are easy understandable.

Peter: Working in clinic we don't have much time to explain an exercise, so the simplicity of the standing qi gong is certainly a great advantage. But what can you say about its effectiveness compared to other exercises?

John: With many exercises, like do-in, you need to have a certain skill and energy awareness. With the standing qi gong you just have to relax in certain postures and do natural breathing. You become more aware of the energy of your own body through the practice. To be quiet and still is already a change and

benefit for many people. You create the space in which you can experience your body. In a way it is very close to meditation. But in some meditation we often try not to be aware of bodily sensations and to unfocus of the body. That is the difference.

Peter: I guess that depends on what our perception of meditation is. If you go deeper in the tradition of meditation, you can see that the body is not denied at all. The body is taken as the entrance for the whole process of awareness. During one of the periods I stayed in China, I studied in a revalidation institute which was specialised in qi gong. The institute itself was on the grounds of an old Chan (Zen) temple. The actual practice was not done anymore in the temple but in the institute. What they called sitting and walking qi gong looked like sitting and walking meditation, very similar to the Zen and Vipassana tradition. I guessed that the difference is only in the name; the heart of the practice remains the same whatever you call it. In the mind of many oriental practitioners there is obviously not this sharp discrimination between physical, energetic, mental and spiritual exercises.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN?

John: If you are aware of your own bodies' energy, naturally you will become more aware of its interplay with the energy around you. In Zhan Zhuang it is not necessary to think about any particular complex sequence of movements. It is very easy to remember the postures. There is no special technique involved, so right from the beginning you can relax and let it happen. Many years ago I asked master Lam, if certain sensations I experienced in the practice, could be understood as my bodies' energy or qi and if I should try to focus on them. He replied, that if you make an effort to look for it, you stop it from happening. He always emphasizes the importance of staying just relaxed and let it happen by itself. That again seems such a simple thing, not to have to do forceful efforts to gain much. This idea is very deeply embedded in our western minds where we see no pain as no gain.

Peter: No pain no gain?

John: Right. Even in more advanced levels of qi gong practice, relaxation and the attitude of no-effort remain to be true. There is not such a thing as competition in qi gong. What is the role of the qi gong in your shiatsu school (Institute Nei Guan in Amsterdam)?

Peter: In the course of the years Zhan Zhuang got a strong influence on the practice of our shiatsu. In the first place the working postures get more rooted and the hand-to-hara connection gets naturally established. Beside that the whole subject of diagnosis is transforming. The whole matter gets embodied, so a lot of complicating theoretical concepts can be omitted. Even a concept like Kyo and Jitsu can stay abstract if it is not experienced physically. The qi gong enables to experience and understand the body from within the body.

BURN OUT AND RECHARGE

John: And how do you use the qi gong in clinic work?

Peter: If before the treatment we do together some qi gong we both benefit from it. I can recharge my own energy and the treatments get stronger with less effort. My clients seem to be much better prepared to go into a state of relaxation. And they are better prepared to be touched. I guess the meridian system as a whole is already activated. Most of my clients appreciate this preparation. The effects of standing qi gong on my own body became only clear after several years. I realised, looking backwards, that I was not very receptive for catching a cold. Also in busy work periods I tend not to exhaust myself anymore. Due to the qi gong practice, I got more understanding about energetic and emotional borders. Burn out syndrome for therapists is always an important subject, even within shiatsu. Or do I have to say: specially within shiatsu!! The whole day we touch bodies, so there are lots of opportunities to lose your own energy!!

John: If you seriously dealing with energetic body work, there is the whole issue of protection. Energy is like water; it flows from high to low, positive to negative. So if your energy is in abundance it can easy be drained away by touching bodies which are tired or ill. It is much better to help people to use their own resources to heal themselves. Rather than saying: here am I, and trying to fix them with your own energy. Dangerous stuff!

Peter: The issue of energetic interaction should be of main importance in shiatsu education. And not only in theory, but specially the practice of it. The last years I am taking the freedom to limit the lenght of treatments. The practice of qi gong has helped me to be more aware of the moments in which people start to drain me. Or, that I start to give myself away in an unhealthy way. Sometimes the actual treatment doesn't last longer than five or ten minutes. We than spend more time to do excercises together. This set up is beneficial for both. As shiatsu practitoners we are not physiotherapists nor masseurs, so what should be the reason to fill the full half hour or hour in with techniques? That is only habit and expectation. The effectiviness of the treatment is certainly not dependent on the lenght of it.

BODY EDUCATION

John: Indeed. How can you adress to the energetics of others if you are not in touch with your own? When I started to study shiatsu, I had already many years of experience with qi gong. In my shiatsu training various teachers said, that you have to feel whether there is energy or no energy in a certain point, kyo or jitsu. For myself it didn't appear to be a problem. To learn to locate points, even not knowing their energetics, was a very natural thing with my qi gong background.

Peter: I feel this way of learning the anatomy and energetics of the body is so essential in shiatsu education. Because there is so little movement during the Zhan Zhuang practice, there is lots of opportunity to travel with the attention to various places in the body. It is like an anatomic meditation. The nature of points and meridians get clearer without the interference of the thinking mind. The knowledge of point energetics has been gained by bodily experience. Many generations of practitioners throughout history have contibuted to this knowledge. Nowadays shiatsu is often learned by studying the theory, the final outcome of something, what was originally pure experience. An actual reverse of the learning proces. With Zhan Zhuang you can again sense the whole of the cosmology of the body. And from their discover the details, the meridians, the points.

John: Just like a dotted news paper photo. If you study one dot at a time you never will get a clue to the whole image. Only from some distance you can see the image. After a period of qi gong practice, I began to feel a layer of energy around my entire body, just like an extra coat. It felt as if there some light pressure on the surface of my body. Not one single meridian seemed to be activated, but indeed the whole network. Now I think I am much better off practicing half an hour Zhan Zhuang, than spending that time reading about qi gong from a textbook.

Peter: Quiet a discovery!

John: You know! You have to be patient; standing still can seem difficult and quiet boring at times, but I recommend this practice to everyone! It is never to soon to begin!

Standing alone and unchanging,
One can observe every mystery,
Present at every moment and ceaselessly continuing –
This is the gateway to indescribable marvels.

John Brown is a senior student of Master Lam Kam Chuen. John works as a shiatsu practitioner in London and teaches taijiquan and qi gong. Peter den Dekker is trained as an acupuncturist and shiatsu practitioner. He is director of Institute Nei Guan in Amsterdam, a training institute for meridian-shiatsu and qi gong. Peter is guest teacher in shiatsu schools in London and Vienna, Austria. He trains qi gong under the tuition of Master Lam Kam Chuen.

For Zhan Zhuang Qi Gong lessons in London please contact:

- John Brown, tel. 0181-3653148 e-mail johnbrown8@compuserve.com
- The Lam Clinic, 70 Shaftesbury Avenue, London, 0831-802598

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