

Yiquan Training: Small Step Fighting Posture (*Hun Yuan Zhuang*, 浑元桩)

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Yiquan uses relaxed standing (*Zhan Zhuang*, 站桩) with kinesthesia to seek, be aware of, perceive, understand, learn from experience, and cultivate the whole-body balanced force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力). This training, called *Hun Yuan Zhuang* (浑元桩) practice, employs the small step on-guard fighting posture. To organize the mind-body (mentally and physically) in preparation for combat, the posture requirements are:

1. To place the body in the optimal posture for the next move,
2. To enable you to deceive your opponent by hiding your intention, reach, strength and weakness, and
3. To maintain comfortable natural ease, appropriate relaxation/tension, and perfect balance for quick spontaneous reflexive action and smooth coordinated movement.

We will describe the left lead small step posture (*Hun Yuan Zhuang*, 浑元桩) but you should practice both the left lead and the right lead postures.

Focus your concentration and enter a mentally and physically tranquil state. Stretch and then relax your entire musculature to achieve an appropriate relaxation/tension state that allows for gentle and supple movement with alertness and readiness for action. Avoid pure relaxation that leads to physical laxness and diminished consciousness. Keep your eyes forward as if looking at a distant cloud. Stand comfortably erect with the hands naturally at your sides, heels together with the feet forming an angle of approximately 60 degrees.

Next, slide your left foot a small comfortable step straight forward in the direction to which the toes of your left foot are pointing and move it one foot's width to your left. The angle between your feet should be neither perpendicular nor parallel. This step is called *Ding Ba Bu* (丁八步). The size of the small step should be comfortable such that you can easily lift your left foot off the ground without assistance from your right leg. Too large a step sacrifices mobility and too small a step sacrifices stability; choose a comfortable, neutral step size. Twist your body left slightly; shift your weight back and down onto your right leg, bending both legs slightly (*Si Qu Fei Zhi*, 似曲非直). Your weight distribution is 30% on your left leg and 70% on your right leg; placing the body in the optimal stance for quick, smooth forward or backward movement. The weight on the left leg should be biased toward the ball of your left foot; do not put much weight on your left heel but do not lift your left heel off the ground (*Zu Gen Wei Xu*, 足跟为虚). Visualize squeezing a balloon between your knees (or visualize imaginary springs connecting your knees); the weight on the right leg should be biased toward the inside edge and the ball of your right foot.

Do not twist the torso; align the shoulder over the hip. Visualize sitting on a high stool with a string pulling the top of your head upward. These results in an intentional mild vertical tension

on your spine that both pushes up and pulls down, yielding an internal isometric that Yiquan calls an “opposing force pair” (*Shang Xia Zheng Li*, 上下争力).

Visualize directing a small force in your left knee forward and upward and a small force in your right hip backward and downward, thus creating a mild forward/backward opposing force pair (*Qian Hou Zheng Li*, 前后争力).

Lift your hands up with the palms facing inwards. The left hand should be forward over your left foot, left of your central line, slightly higher than shoulder level, palm facing your nose. Hold your right hand slightly lower than your left, at approximately shoulder level in front of your body, right of the central line, palm facing your chest. Your right hand should be slightly closer to your torso than your left. Bend and separate your fingers; visualize holding cotton balls between your fingers. Keep all joint bent with angles larger than 90 degrees (*Xing Qu Li Zhi*, 形曲力直).

Visualize holding a large imaginary balloon between your chest and arms. Apply both inward (~70%) and outward (~30%) pressure through the arms (*Heng Cheng Shu Bao*, 横撑竖抱) creating a mild lateral opposing force pair (*Heng Xiang Zheng Li*, 横向争力) between the arms. Do not crush the imaginary balloon; do not let the balloon drop.

Direct all the aforementioned actions with your focus attention and mind-intent; do not use any brute strength (*Yong Yi Bu Yong Li*, 用意不用力). Use musculoskeletal support to maintain your posture; relax the antagonistic muscles. The requirements for the other body elements are as follows:

Head: Keep the head and neck erect (stand tall); slightly tuck in your chin as if holding a small imaginary balloon between your chin and neck. Imagine a string pulling the top of your head upwards (*Tou Xu Ling*, 头虚领). Relax the facial muscles; maintain almost a smile. The greatest residual tensions are found in the face and neck.

Teeth: Let the teeth lightly touch; do not bite down hard.

Tongue: Allow the tongue to lie naturally, slightly retracted, or rest the tip on the upper palate of your mouth.

Mouth: Part the lips (mouth) slightly.

Nose: Breathe naturally. Do not pay conscious attention to your breathing and do not lengthen or hold your breath.

Eyes: Broaden your focus, expanding your peripheral vision. Imagine looking through a light fog. Visualize seeing the *blue* color sky. As your training progresses to include the combat mindset, narrow your focus to a faraway object, like watching a bird flying near a distant cloud.

Ears: Listen quietly, passively, as if to the sound of falling rain.

Shoulders: The shoulders should be down and relaxed. Slightly round your upper back and hollow your chest.

Back: The spine should be naturally straight, neutrally erect. Relax your lower back and let it fill out as if sitting on a high stool.

Elbows: Prop your elbows out to the sides, but keep them lower than the shoulders. Prop out ~30%; hug in ~70% (*Cheng San Bao Qi*, 撑三抱七). Visualize holding small imaginary balloons in your armpits.

Hands: Keep your hands approximately three fists width apart from each other with fingers slightly bent as if holding small imaginary balloons in your palms. Separate your fingers as if attempting to stretch imaginary rubber bands binding your fingers. Keep your hands in their *comfort zone*: the right hand does not cross the central line of the torso to the left; the left hand does not cross the central line to the right. Both hands are not higher than your eyebrow, nor lower than your navel. They must not touch your torso nor extend beyond your lead foot toes.

Legs: Distribute 70% of your weight on your rear leg and 30% on your front leg. Visualize holding an imaginary balloon between your knees; apply slight inward pressure below the knees and outward pressure above the knees.

Feet: Place the rear foot flat on ground; weight biased towards the inside edge. The front foot should be weighted towards the ball of your foot but keep the heel on the ground. The step size should be small enough such that you can comfortably lift your front foot without straining your rear leg, allowing for quick forward or backward movement.

While maintaining this small step posture with comfortable natural ease and minimum muscular tension, you will use directed mental imagery to guide your intentional “*motionless movement*” (*Bu Dong Zhi Dong*, 不动之动) to achieve three goals:

1. Cultivate mind-body relaxation from *stillness*,
2. Synthesize your neuromuscular actions from this mind-body relaxed state to develop whole-body harmony, and
3. Use Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to achieve total control of your neuromuscular relaxation and tension exchanges, to merge all force components as “*one*”.

This *stillness* training, using proprioceptors to sense and develop the stimuli of the concurrent sequential overlapping movement of joints and muscles to transmit force through the *ground path* (this term is from Mike Sigman) to an impact point, is called *Mo Li* (摸力). The resulting small movement is called “*motion in stillness*” (*Jing Zhong Zhi Dong*, 静中之动). You must minimize and internalize these movements but you must not remain *absolutely still*.

A. Cultivate Relaxation from Stillness (静中求松)

Before attempting any mentally directed (*Yi Nian You Dao*, 意念诱导) exercises, you must learn to be mentally and physically relaxed. Stand in *Hun Yuan Zhuang*. Imagine holding a large fragile light weight imaginary balloon between your chest and arms; visualize holding cotton balls between your fingers and balloons in your armpits. Do not crush the balloons or the cotton balls and do not drop them.

1. Breathe naturally through your nose; do not lengthen or hold your breath.
2. Use musculoskeletal support; maintain your posture, relax all antagonistic muscles.
3. Focus your attention on mind-body relaxation.

Visualize that you are positioning your body into a comfortable natural posture to “take a rest with no conscious mind-intent”. Do not be conscious of meeting the requirements of the posture; assume you have mastered them. Relax and let your weight pass through your skeletal structure to the ground. In maintaining your body posture or *frame* (*Jian Jia*, 肩架), optimum *connected-ness* (*Lian Tong Yi Guan*, 连通一贯), *alignment*, and equilibrium, some muscles will be in a state of slight tension. Relax and let your subconscious responses instinctively maintain your balance and reproduce the *feeling of relaxation*. In relaxed standing, relaxed does not mean absolutely lacking of tension, slackened, slumped down, physically lax, careless or indifferent. Indeed there is tension within relaxation; there is relaxation within tension; one begets the other (explore and examine the opposites). The proper relaxation/tension exchange (*Song Jin Zhuan Huan*, 松紧转换) and whole-body harmony must be maintained. The relaxation desired is relaxation of the muscles and attitude; not that of attention. Beginners sometimes mistake limp-ness (physical slack-ness) with relaxed-ness and therefore slump and slacken. This is wrong.

B. Develop Whole-body Harmony from Relaxation (松中求整)

When you can attain mind-body relaxation on demand, you may begin the kinesthetic perceptive practice of *Mo Li* (摸力). Relaxed standing fighting posture training (*Ji Ji Zhuang*, 技击桩), uses mental directed activity in a relatively stationary posture to execute muscular tension (*Jin*, 紧) and relaxation (*Song*, 松) exchanges; use kinesthetic perception and self-exploration. This “*motionless movement*” (*Bu Dong Zhi Dong*, 不动之动) training synthesizes your mind and body into a whole-body harmony unity by using mental imagery or mental visualization to guide your kinesthetic perception and neuromuscular coordination system to re-pattern your neuromuscular system into a new habit of using whole-body strength and force (*Zheng Ti Li Yi*, 整体力一). Appropriate relaxation and tension exchange (*Song Jin Zhuan Huan*, 松紧转换), equilibrium and balance, *connected-ness* and *alignment*, and multi-directional balanced force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) are cultivated in this stage.

Stand in the small step posture (*Hun Yuan Zhuang*, 浑元桩). Visualize hugging an imaginary tree with your entire body; your arms, torso and legs are all in contact with the tree. Though this imaginary tree is massive and immovable, attempt using your entire body to slowly and slightly push the tree forward, pull it backward, lift it upward, plant it downward, rip it open and squeeze

it together. Focus your mind-intent to lead your action; do not use any brute strength. Keep relaxed at all times and move all your body elements in unison. *Feel* the linkage of the concurrent sequential overlapping movement of each body component as it transmits the force from the foot pushing off the ground to the hand. Sense the opening of the joints (ankles, knees, hip, torso, shoulders, elbows and wrists) as you take up power from the ground. Slight movement of every body element is all that is necessary. Large movement is inferior to small movement and small movement is inferior to the minimal, almost imperceptible, *motion in stillness* (*Jing Zhong Zhi Dong*, 静中之动). Mentally induced kinesthesia is used to cultivate your whole-body neuromuscular coordination, to seek total control of tension and relaxation exchanges, and to nurture your balanced force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力).

From the perspective of *Hun Yuan Zhuang*, you can study the relationship between focus-concentration/mind-intent (*Yi*, 意) and force/strength (*Li*, 力). Yiquan emphasizes the supreme importance of the intentional component of the mind because the mind controls all voluntary physical actions. Master Wang XiangZhai wrote: “*Perceive and figure out the force/strength imbedded within your mind-intent. The mind is the commander; the force/strength is the soldier. Mind-intent becomes force.*” The initial level is to use your mind-intent to guide your practice without using any brute force/strength. The second level is to combine your mind-intent and your force/strength so they “*arrive simultaneously*”. Finally, merge and integrate your mind-intent and force/strength. Your martial ability becomes art when your mind-intent and force/strength are inseparable and indistinguishable.

Methods and Procedures

Use directed mental imagery (visualization) to guide your whole-body neuromuscular coordination training as follows:

Step 1: Begin practicing by seeking/sensing force with kinesthetic perception first in one direction then in both directions of a single dimension e.g., forward/backward. Mentally “*feel*” the solidity and weight of your imaginary tree, visualize pushing your imaginary tree forward and pulling it backward using the entire body.

Step 2: When you are comfortable and can “*feel*” this immovable tree add other dimensions, do forward/backward, up/down, and open/close. Next, you should mix up and change the sequence; move this tree in any direction at will without any preset sequence. You must develop the capacity to move and deliver the balanced force in any direction with whole-body harmony of action.

C. Total Control of Neuromuscular Relaxation/Tension Exchanges (松紧运用自如)

When you have mastered the whole-body harmony of action and force, you should increase the switching speed from one direction to another so it becomes a blurred, fuzzy continuum. Move from sensing resistance in a single direction to sensing it in multiple directions simultaneously and no direction in particular. You should seek a mental state of emptiness that is yet hyper-aware, which affords the greatest potential for effectively releasing the balanced force. It is not

necessary to focus your mind-intent yet you are ready to react in all directions instantaneously with no conscious thinking. In essence, you relegate your actions to your *un*-conscious response. Your mind enters a “fuzzy” state in which you are in a state of high focus attention, ready to move in any direction. This is the coordinated whole-body harmony unity with alertness and readiness for action for which Yiquan strives. If unprovoked, there is no reaction. However, any stimulus will draw quick smooth spontaneous reactions with an *explosion* of your balanced force. This mental state is similar to that of good swimmers forgetting the presence of the water through which they are moving.

D. Develop Spontaneous Reflexes (自动化)

Hun Yuan Zhuang is used in Crisis Rehearsal and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to internalize maneuvers into spontaneous reflexes. Stand in the small step on-guard posture. Without any external physical movement, mentally visualize a crisis in which you need to fight. Your mind is most susceptible to visualization suggestions when you are *relaxed* and *still* (*Jing*, 静). Play a mental movie of the entire conflict/confrontation with you using the selected maneuver/technique; *executing it perfectly*. You must know the correct actions/movements of a maneuver before you can visualize using it. This crisis rehearsal, with you coming out on top, will send positive signals to your brain; reinforce and encode your neural transmitters, sensors and muscles to perform this maneuver/technique. This is called imaging in NLP. Large numbers of repetitive visualization will ingrain the skills to become spontaneous reflexes, help you to stay relaxed when you need to use the skills for real. It is important to be in control of your visual image; start with slow motion to picture the *successful execution* of each part of your maneuver or technique; speed up only when they become natural. Do not introduce any negative image. This mental practice is even more effective if you *feel* (kinesthetically perceive, *Ti Ren*, 体认) as well as *see* (visualize) the activities of the maneuver/technique you are mentally practicing. Be realistic and let the motions flow with no conscious effort. Visualize solutions consistent with your physical ability. Do not day dream and cheat yourself with self-delusion, i.e., visualizing motions that you cannot perform. Be positive, visualize successful execution; eliminate negative mental distractions.

“Boxing with no preconceived method; the mind holding no deliberate thought; method-less-ness and empty-minded-ness are the awakening to the true knowledge.”

In this article we have discussed the practice of *Hun Yuan Zhuang* and introduced the concept of opposing force pairs called *Zheng Li*. *Zheng Li* is at the core of, and inseparable from, all Yiquan exercises. *Hun Yuan Zhuang* should be practiced with the intent of strengthening your combat mindset, courage, and confidence while cultivating the whole-body balanced force.