

Yiquan Training: Cultivating the Balanced Force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) with Trial and Feel (*Shi Li*, 试力)

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In this article, we will explore the use of “*trial and feel*” (*Shi Li*, 试力) exercises to nurture, to cultivate, to learn, and to master Yiquan’s “*balanced force*” (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力). One must possess at least rudimentary skills in “*relaxed standing*” (*Zhan Zhuang*, 站桩) before proceeding to practice “*trial and feel*” (*Shi Li*, 试力). We will only examine basic skill *Shi Li* (*Ji Ben Shi Li*, 基本试力) and will cover fighting skill *Shi Li* (*San Shou Shi Li*, 散手试力) in another article. The training methods are based on the teachings of Master *Yao ChengRong* (姚承荣老师) of Yiquan Martial Arts Academy (*Beijing Zhong Yi Wu Guan*, 北京中意武馆, <http://www.yiquan-zywg.com/english/home.html>).

To deliver effective force onto an opponent with any maneuver/technique, there must be physical contact/impact as well as movement at the contact/impact point (*Li Dian*, 力点). To maximize your innate abilities (*Fa Hui Ben Neng*, 发挥本能), the movement of that maneuver should be as close to your natural instinctive movement as possible. Instinctive, natural, subconscious, spontaneous movement are the simplest, quickest, and most accurate while conscious choice reactions take longer. Therefore, you should minimize unnecessary conscious choice reactions and select the maneuvers/techniques that work for you carefully and practice them repeatedly until they are second nature to you, until the intentional physical actions of the techniques become habit, until your skills become spontaneous reflexes. The basis of Yiquan is to work with your body's natural responses to develop your spontaneous, instinctive fighting capabilities. The more a maneuver/technique runs counter to your instinctive natural abilities, the more you have to consciously think about that maneuver/technique in order to accomplish it. It is thus harder for that particular maneuver/technique to be a spontaneous reflex, to become habit. Training a maneuver/technique that is against your instinctive natural abilities is futile because that training would fail under stress. Proper intentional physical movements are necessary to “*explode*” your balanced force as external force (*Bao Fa Wei Wai Li*, 爆发为外力) and the actions must become spontaneous reflexes to be useful.

Principles

The essence of “*trial and feel*” (*Shi Li*, 试力) exercises is synthesizing directed mental activities (visualization) with the instinctive natural physical movements of maneuvers/techniques to *explore* (trial) and *experience* (feel) the neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges (*Shen Jing Ji Rou Song Jin Zhuan Huan*, 神经肌肉松紧转换) of your whole-body, and through kinesthetic perception of the pathways of propagation of force components through different body elements (*Xun Zhao Jing Lu*, 寻找劲路) cultivate and nurture your “*balanced force*” (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力). During the movement of a maneuver, by mentally induced perception

of internal and external isometric opposing force pairs (*Nei Wai Zheng Li*, 内外争力), you seek, sense, feel, get to know, find out, learn, and experience the balanced force (*Mo Li*, 摸力). The goal is to cultivate and learn to use the “*balanced force*” with the kinesthetic perception of your whole-body (internal and external) isometric opposing force pairs (*Zheng Ti Zheng Li*, 整体争力), ingraining and strengthening the force propagation pathways (*Jing Lu*, 劲路) while doing harmonious whole-body motion.

“*Trial and feel*” (*Shi Li*, 试力) training and conditioning is the means to achieve harmonious physical actions, and it is the measure to “*try to figure out*” (*Chuai Mo*, 揣摩) the “*balanced force*” (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) embedded in the neuromuscular components of your intentional movements (*Mo Li*, 摸力). It is the transition from “*stillness*” (*Jing*, 静) to “*relaxation*” (*Song*, 松), from relaxation to harmonious whole-body (*Zheng*, 整) neuromuscular coordinated movement (*Dong*, 动). It is the bridge between relaxed standing (*Zhan Zhuang*, 站桩) and power release (*Fa Li*, 发力).

Intentional Movement and Proper Form (*Xing Shi*, 形式)

Appropriate intentional physical movement of *Shi Li* (试力) maneuvers must be instinctive, natural, and conform to: “*curve physical form to deliver linear force*” (*Xing Qu Li Zhi*, 形曲力直). Always keep your hands within the “*comfort zone*”: no higher than your eyebrow, no lower than your navel; left hand does not cross the central line to your right; right hand does not cross the central line to your left; do not push forward beyond your lead toe; and do not collapse your *frame* and let your arms touch your torso.

Mind-intent (*Yi*, 意) in the form of visualization, mental directed activities (*Yi Nian You Dao*, 意念诱导), and kinesthetic perception (*Ti Ren*, 体认) are essential factors. You must *explore* (trial) and *experience* (feel) the interacting isometric opposing force pairs (*Zheng Li*, 争力) between different body elements (visualize imaginary springs between different body elements), the results of neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges induced by visualization, and the kinesthetic perception of transmission of forces through the concurrent sequential overlapping movement of body parts to deliver the *balanced force* from the ground to your hand (*Ba Li Shi Chu*, 把力试出). Proper *body mechanics*, optimal *alignment* and *connected-ness*, are prerequisites (*Lian Tong Yi Guan*, 连通一贯).

The following three *Shi Li* classes with three maneuvers each will adequately cover most basic skills training requirements:

A. Basic *Shi Li* Maneuvers (*Ji Ben Shi Li*, 基本试力)

1. Level push-pull (*Ping Tui Shi Li*, 平推试力) – dominant force forward/backward.
2. Paddle water (*Bo Shui Shi Li*, 拨水试力) – dominant force upward/downward.
3. Open-close (*Kai He Shi Li*, 开合试力) – dominant force lateral left/right.

- B. Push Hands *Shi Li* Maneuvers (*Tui Shou Shi Li*, 推手试力)
1. Hook/Hang (*Gou Gua Shi Li*, 勾挂试力) – dominant force forward/backward.
 2. Down-press/Up-Lift (*Fu An Shi Li*, 扶按试力) – dominant force upward/downward.
 3. Press/Hang (*Fen Gua Shi Li*, 分挂试力) – dominant force lateral left/right.
- C. Body (Core/Torso) *Shi Li* Maneuvers (*Shen Fa Shi Li*, 身法试力)
1. Spinning/turning (*Xuan Fa Shi Li*, 旋法试力) – dominant force forward/backward.
 2. Bobbing Turtle (*Shen Gui Chu Shui Shi Li*, 神龟出水试力) – dominant force upward/downward.
 3. Waving (*Yao Fa Shi Li*, 摇法试力) – dominant force lateral left/right.

These maneuvers are not unique; they represent the quintessential training exercises to acquire neuromuscular coordination for harmonious action to ingrain the using of your “balanced force” (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) in the three primary dimensions: forward/backward, upward/downward, and lateral open/close (left/right).

Procedures and Methods

When doing these basic skill trial and feel (*Shi Li*, 试力) exercises, be sure to use the actions of your core/torso to “drive” the actions of your arms and legs (*Shen Cui Dong Shou*, 身催动手); merge the actions of every body element into one comfortable natural harmonious whole-body movement (*Shu Shi Xie Tiao*, 舒适协调). When any one element moves, it must move only as part of your whole-body, never independently; your hands, feet, torso, and mind all move in unison as every body element affects the whole-body (*Yi Dong Wu Bu Dong*, 一动无不动). Simultaneously, the natural winding of your musculature should be used to induce “not readily visible” natural spirals, rotations, and twisting of your torso and limbs (*Yi Dong Quan Shen Zhuan*, 一动全身转).

Novice should initially adhere to the physical form (*Xing Shi*, 形式) of the sequential pattern of movement of each maneuver and use mind-intent to direct your force (*Yi Yi Ling Li*, 以意领力). Visualize external resistance (e.g., imagine moving in molasses) and internal isometric opposing forces (e.g., visualize imaginary springs between body elements) and do the movement with relaxed comfortable motion. Do not use brute strength; use just enough force to meet the mentally induced resistance (*Yun Jing Ru Chou Si*, 运劲如抽丝). Do not relax completely and be slacken (*Song Er Bu Xie*, 松而不懈) but avoid being tense and rigid (*Jin Er Bu Jiang*, 紧而不僵).

When practicing any new maneuver, you should focus your primary attention and mind-intent (*Yi*, 意) on *experiencing* the isometric opposing force pair in the dominant force dimension (*Er Zheng Li*, 二争力). However, though each maneuver specifically emphasizes a dominant force dimension, motions in all six directions are always present, and the external and internal

isometric opposing force pairs in all physical directions must always be balanced (*Gong Zheng Yi Zhong*, 共争一中). Eventually, you must extend your mind-intent (*Yi*, 意), awareness, and kinesthetic perception to include all isometric opposing force pairs between every one of your body elements; each force must have an intentionally induced opposite to maintain equilibrium (*Shun Li Ni Xing*, 顺力逆行).

From experience, it is most efficient to master one *Shi Li* maneuver before attempting to learn others. Practicing many different *Shi Li* maneuvers without experiencing and ingraining the proper whole-body neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges (*Shen Jing Ji Rou Song Jin Zhuan Huan*, 神经肌肉松紧转换) actually slows down your overall progress.

The aim of trial and feel exercises is not just to learn the sequential movement patterns of a maneuver/technique but to cultivate and nurture the balanced force, to develop the force propagation pathways (*Zhao Jing*, 找劲), and to lay the foundation to “explode” your internal power as external force with the maneuver (*Bao Fa Wei Wai Li*, 爆发为外力). Using proper whole-body mechanics, start practicing every new *Shi Li* maneuver with large, smooth, even, slow movement. Let us illustrate this with an example; let’s do the Hook/Hang *Shi Li* maneuver (*Gou Gua Shi Li*, 勾挂试力); the neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchange cycle is as follows:

Action of the Maneuver	Neuromuscular Condition
Start Posture	Relaxation
Slow, smooth, even forward push	Tension
End Posture	Relaxation
Slow, smooth, even backward pull	Tension
Start Posture	Relaxation
.....

The complete maneuver includes two neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges; your balanced force may have a dominant direction (either forward or backward) but it must remain balanced in all six directions.

When you have mastered the neuromuscular coordination of the large, smooth, even, and slow movement, you must lay the foundation for discharging/releasing force from any position (*Sui Shi Fa Li*, 随时发力) and in any direction by visualizing both forward and backward forces simultaneously. With the Hook/Hang *Shi Li* example, during your forward push or backward pull, you may stop momentarily at any point to explore discharging forces in different directions (forward, backward, etc.) resulting in a complex neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchange cycle:

Action of the Maneuver	Neuromuscular Condition
Start Posture	Relaxation
Forward push	Tension
Momentary stop	Relaxation
Continue forward push	Tension
Momentary stop	Relaxation
Continue forward push	Tension

.....
End Posture	Relaxation
Backward pull	Tension
Momentary stop	Relaxation
Continue backward pull	Tension
Momentary stop	Relaxation
Continue backward pull	Tension
.....
Start Posture	Relaxation
.....

Thus, for each complete maneuver, the neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchange cycle can be as complicated as your imagination. This is different from that of relaxed standing (*Zhan Zhuang*, 站桩) where the “periods” of the cycles are much shorter.

Remember, it is not the goal to ingrain the precise physical movement of any maneuver into muscle memory; the goal is to cultivate your balanced force, to ingrain the force propagation pathways, to be able to deliver force at any point in any direction (随时一紧，随时发力). Your training should emphasize the awareness and attention to the kinesthetic perception of the transmission of forces through the concurrent sequential overlapping movement of your body parts to deliver the balanced force (*Zhao Jing*, 找劲). Begin with slow large movement to ingrain the motion into muscle memory to achieve harmonious movement (*Zheng Ti Xie Tiao*, 整体协调). Then practice slow small movement to develop agility, the ability to switch between maneuvers. However, to be able to “explode” your internal power as external force onto your opponent, you must practice power discharge/release (*Fa Li*, 发力). Begin with soft fast large movement to examine and experience your delivery; then use focus (tensed) discharge to strengthen your explosive power. Finally, practice fast focus with small motion to discharge power (*Quan Da Cun Jing*, 拳打寸劲). The rapidity of neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges (*Song Jin Zhuan Huan*, 松紧转换) contributes significantly to the sudden explosiveness (*Jing Zha*, 惊炸) of the power discharge. Therefore, trial and feel (*Shi Li*, 试力) exercises must include slow large movement, slow small movement, fast large movement, and fast small movement practices to cultivate the ability to discharge your balanced force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) from any position at will.

Training Guideline

Cultivating the balanced force (*Hun Yuan Li*, 浑元力) with trial and feel (*Shi Li*, 试力) can be achieved only through appropriate sequential training levels. The following is a brief outline:

- Level 1: Fixed step, single maneuver training, with primary attention and awareness on one dominant force dimension.
- Level 2: Fixed step, single maneuver training, with visualization on all six force directions in sequence.
- Level 3: Fixed step, multiple maneuvers in sequential combinations.

Even in these elementary levels, movements in all six directions are always present, and all force components must be balanced in all directions. Use *Yi* (意) to direct your force to re-pattern your neuromuscular system to use proper body mechanics (optimal *alignment* and *connectedness*, etc.) to achieve whole-body harmony (*Yi Yi Ling Li*, 以意领力).

Level 4: Synthesize wading step (*Mo Ca Bu*, 摩擦步) with each maneuver.

Level 5: Integrate wading step into multiple maneuvers in sequential combinations.

In these intermediate levels, when synthesizing stepping with maneuvers, whole-body harmony must be maintained (*Zheng Ti Xie Tiao*, 整体协调), and the pathways of force propagation from the ground to your hand must remain pure (*Lian Tong Yi Guan*, 连通一贯). Synthesize your mind-body to achieve simultaneity, with *Yi* (意) and force arriving simultaneously. Merge all force components as one harmonious force (*Yi Dao Li Dao*, 意到力到).

Level 6: Incorporate free step (*Bian Bu*, 变步) with multiple maneuvers in combinations.

Level 7: Free step and *form-less* maneuvers.

At the advanced levels, mind-intent (*Yi*, 意) and force become inseparable and indistinguishable; they are merged as one (*Yi Li Bu Fen*, 意力不分). Form becomes *form-less*. The goal is to develop your innate abilities, to be able to adapt and change according to your opponent.

Conclusion

In trial and feel (*Shi Li*, 试力) training, the emphasis is on using visualization (mental directed activities) and kinesthetic perception of neuromuscular relaxation/tension exchanges to re-pattern your whole-body coordination and to cultivate your whole-body balanced force with mentally induced isometric opposing force pairs. You start from large, smooth, even, and slow movement and work towards small, fast, and focused movement to develop the ability to deliver “*sudden, startling, explosive force*” (*Jing Tan Jing*, 惊弹劲). The power release must be crisp and sharp. From experience, the best results are obtained from developing your innate abilities with minimum number of maneuvers with simplicity of movement.

In Yiquan *Shi Li* (试力) training and conditioning, though we emphasized procedures, methods, postures, and form (*Xing Shi*, 形式), do not be limited or bounded by them; though we stressed the importance of the intentional component (*Yi Nian*, 意念), do not be conscious of its control. If you have mastered the whole-body harmony and the neuromuscular coordination of a maneuver, you are not limited by its physical form and may adapt, change, refine, and re-invent with total freedom to become *form-less*. Then, skills become spontaneous reflexes. Finally, the effectiveness of training procedures and methods is ultimately judged by outcome. Those that do not produce the desired results must be re-examined and refined.