

First Years with Master Lam

“Don’t move,” said the Master. He was motionless. “Whatever you do, don’t move.”

There was a long silence. Then he spoke again: “You can sing. You can talk. You can dream. Anything to take your mind off the pain. But whatever you do, don’t move.”

There were twelve of us standing in a circle. One whispered desperately, “Sing us a song.” Another cried, “Look at my hands: they’ve gone white and cold as ice.” Rivulets of sweat were running down the face of the woman next to her and dripping from her hands.

“Listen to me and don’t move,” said the Master. We were standing, transfixed by pain and amazement, in a long, bare hall on an autumn evening in London. It was 1987.

The previous month hundreds had packed an overflowing Conway Hall to see Master Lam Kam Chuen perform, for the first time ever in Europe,



the Chinese Dragon Chi Kung form. His energy was explosive.

Now we were standing with him at the outset of our training. No one knew what to expect, or even how to spell or pronounce what we were going to learn.

There were no books on the subject in English. And no one that we knew had ever learned – or taught – this system in this part of the world.

We were at the threshold of the discipline of Zhan Zhuang Chi Kung. The Chinese characters are best translated to mean “standing like a tree – energy exercise”.

It is said to be the most powerful of all the forms of Chi Kung, the ancient Chinese exercise system that stimulates the flow of vital energy in the human body.

“For years this teaching was secret, even in China,” Master Lam told us. “Now it is spreading across the country. At last our Grand Master has given his consent for you to learn. You will be the fourth generation.”



Hundreds responded to the media announcement of Master Lam’s public Chi Kung demonstration in London. Police were called to Conway Hall where the crowd was spilling over the pavement onto the street outside.



Master Lam arranged to be photographed with five of his first Zhan Zhuang students, as a historical record.

The Zhan Zhuang system is all the more remarkable for the fact that it enables a person to reach extraordinary heights of internal strength without moving. You stand in carefully designed postures that help you relax while, at the same time, building up your physical and mental power. It can be practiced by anyone, of any age, anywhere, without special equipment or clothing.

On that first autumn night, however, we could never have guessed at the inner transformation on which we were about to embark.

“Like a tree with its deep roots, powerful trunk and great branches reaching into the sky you will appear unmoving,” said Master Lam. “In reality you will be growing from within.”

“Will you teach us to meditate?” asked someone in the circle. “Is there something special we should be thinking about or is there special breathing we should do?”

“Don’t try to run before you can walk,” he said in response.

“I will tell you a story about my own master in China. When he was young, he suffered from low energy. He heard of a master teaching in a

park in Beijing who could cure him. This was Great Grand Master Wang Xiang Zhai, the first master ever to teach this art in public. He showed the young man how to stand like a tree. He was shown nothing else for three years.

“The young man was so sure he was being denied the teaching he was after, that he decided to make friends with the master’s son. That way, he thought, he could find out the secret.

‘What does your father teach you?’ he asked the son one day. ‘He teaches me to stand like a tree,’ said the son. ‘Does he tell you why?’ ‘Oh no,’ was the instant reply, ‘he just tells me to stand like this every day and if I don’t he beats me.’”

This was to be the method of teaching we also received from Master Lam – the centuries-old classical Chinese system of instruction in any art form, whether spiritual or physical. The medium of teaching and learning is not language and explanation. It is example and practice.

It stretched credibility to the limit. Day after day we were expected to stand utterly still for ever-lengthening periods, lasting as long as half an hour or beyond. Each week we would stand in new – and often more excruciating – positions under the watchful gaze of Master Lam.

He would move slowly around the room, gently adjusting our bodies in silence. One day I remember that he pulled my hands lightly with his thumbs and forefingers. The penetrating heat where he touched me was unbelievable.

Long after he had moved away, my attention was still on the point of my palm where he had made contact.

It was the physical changes that most of us noticed within ourselves first of all, although something else was happening in the silence as well.

One woman who had been without periods for two years after giving up a contraceptive pill found herself menstruating regularly again. Others noticed buzzing and tingling sensations in their hands and feet.

A young woman in her late 20s had been suffering from spontaneous muscle wastage in her upper arm. Doctors could find no cause or cure for it. Her Zhan Zhuang training halted the wasting and gave her arm renewed firmness.

Sometimes Master Lam would stand beside us in our training and slowly pass his hand near our bodies. He would stare intently as if examining some sort of etheric boundary around us. But he resolutely dismissed all our efforts to elicit explanations.

Slowly we became aware of other qualities growing inside us. Stamina and patience. Calmness under pressure. Heightened awareness.

“This was the most compelling thing I had ever done,” said one of the first students. “I got more and more confident in myself and my body. The limits of my power kept expanding.”

We had persisted in the training for two years when Master Lam said very quietly to me, “Would you like to help me write a book about Standing like a Tree?”

For two years we spent many hours in the evenings taping his meticulous instructions, going over rough translations from Chinese texts and making dogged attempts to agree

on Western terminology that might explain the system to an ordinary reader.

Often we were interrupted by the stream of visitors coming to him for Chinese medical treatment, not only from London, but other locations in Europe as well.



Gaia Books took the brave decision to be the publisher. “Do you really think there’s a book in standing still?” asked one of their incredulous directors.

The whole project received a tremendous boost when 70-year-old Grand Master (and Professor) Yu Yong Nian made the journey from Beijing to London to lend his unparalleled authority to the work – to be known as *The Way of Energy*. A dental surgeon by profession, he was the leading authority on Zhan Zhuang in China – and therefore in the world – having studied the system and pioneered its application in hospitals and clinics throughout the country for 50 years. He painstakingly reviewed the book’s dozens of drawings and diagrams.

He was keen to meet the small crop of Western students. “Like me,” he told us at a private lecture, “you may have trouble believing that this system works. But try this. Keep one arm beside you. Raise the other one as if holding a balloon against that half of your torso. Relax. Stay like that for a while. You start to feel the difference between the two sides of your body.”

“The lung on the balloon side is expanding far more freely and absorbing more oxygen. Over time your body begins to change on the inside. The internal changes manifest themselves as they move outwards and you begin to feel warmth and tingling – like ants crawling on your hands, arms and body.”



1. The public turned out in Holland Park for a photo opportunity: the first open-air mass Chi Kung session organized by Gaia Books to promote *The Way of Energy*.
2. Master Lam sends Richard off the stage at the Association's annual dinner.
3. One of his students goes flying during a summer workshop at Hawkwood College, Stroud .

There was another aspect of the art to which we were being introduced. When Master Lam and his wife, Kai Sin, came to London in 1975, he became the first formally recognised teacher of Tai Chi in the UK, appointed by the Inner London Education Authority.

“I put my Chi Kung into my Tai Chi,” he would tell us. We could feel it when we watched him move.

Several years later, in *Step-by-Step Tai Chi*, he included the foundational Zhan Zhuang practice of Wu Chi – the position of primal energy – and specified that the movements of the Small Circle Tai Chi form should be preceded by this energizing practice of standing relaxed between heaven and earth.

There was another way in which we glimpsed the inner power of Zhan Zhuang. Master Lam, as an accomplished martial artist (having represented Hong Kong in international competition) insisted that we learn the martial applications of all the Tai Chi movements he was teaching us. When he demonstrated this, his energy seemed unstoppable.

He had the ability to bounce people around in all directions, seemingly with no effort whatsoever. Most spectacularly, we witnessed his ability to do this without ever touching the person. Years later, we learned he was a master of the mysterious rare power known as “empty force”.

There was another aspect about which Master Lam said little in the early years, although it later became a focus of his life's work: healing.

While working on *The Way of Energy*, I arrived at his home one evening to find him with his right hand completely wrapped up in a huge bandage. He had fixed the broken fence in his back yard by slamming it in place with one blow of his hand. A rusty nail had been driven completely through his palm.

When I came back that same week, the bandage was gone. There was no evidence of the wound. “I used some herbs and my energy,” he said. He asked me to poke my fingers into the spot where the nail had been. The skin had completely healed, the flesh was firm and he showed no pain.



Grand Master Yu and Master Lam at a Gaia Book Fair just before the launch of *The Way of Energy*.

As well as its healing properties, the effects on the brain and nervous system have been studied by scientists in China. An experiment in Beijing examined alertness. Those who were tested for their response to random, infrequent signals immediately after doing a normal Zhan Zhuang practice session had an average response time five times faster than the norm.

Grand Master Yu would always speak movingly of the spiritual dimension of this remarkable system. One evening he called for a copy of the Chinese classic, *The Tao Teh Ching*, and searched for the following lines – telling us that they beautifully expressed the spiritual vision that one day we would come to embrace:

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

– Lao Tse
The Tao Teh Ching

A year or so after his visit, in 1991, *The Way of Energy* was published. It has since been translated into more than a dozen languages and sold tens of thousands of copies.

“For some reason, it seems that us barbarians in the West are now ready for Chi Kung,” said a reviewer in *Here’s Health* magazine.

On publication day, a journalist in Leicester was suitably sceptical: “You’re trying to tell me that standing still is exercise? Can I do it at a bar?”

I remembered the words of Grand Master Yu whose 70-year old hands were as young and graceful as a dancer’s: “It sounds easy but it took me 20 years to really understand this.”

“Can you imagine anyone in the West sticking for years with something they couldn’t understand?” whispered Master Lam to me with a knowing smile.

– Richard Reoch
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