

Standing Practice teaches us that changes to our core being sustainable over time do not stick unless we gain access to our foundational internal wiring, to our nervous system and to our baseline intellectual assumptions.

Exile Leadership Standing Practice Primer

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Standing Practice, and all that it represents, is the central tool of our technology, or methodology at Exile. Given that Standing Practice (standing) is going to be extremely foreign to almost all of our readers and clients we feel it is essential that we lay out the big picture of what standing is and the traditions within which it was developed.

Standing Practice is called *Zhang Zhan* in the Chinese, and a great deal of its development and evolution as a practice is rooted in the traditional fighting and healing arts of China. Standing came to China much like Buddhist practice came to China, from the mountains of Tibet. Chinese patriarchs sent their best bodyguards to Tibet in order to learn from the monks living and practicing there how to become better fighters. Among other tools, they came home trained in the art of Standing Practice.

This practice was then passed on from family to family, and its secrets were held tightly within circles of royalty and nobility in the same way as many of the “higher” arts of China. In the Chinese fighting arts tradition this is known as training practices that come from “inside the home” and that are strictly protected. These practices are world’s apart from those that are taught “outside the home” for the public. Standing practice in its complete form has always been taught “inside the home” and as a result there are but a handful of teachers on the planet both capable and willing to teach it. This means that even the few practitioners familiar with standing training and teaching today are likely to have a very limited understanding of how it is done and why.

Such secrecy is a central aspect of most of the world’s wisdom and fighting traditions. In Tibet and Nepal, for example, where hundreds of thousands of outsiders travel to learn the practice of Buddhism, none but a handful are ever exposed to the deeper art that is grounded in an intensity of physical practice similar to that of standing. Instead, they are taught practices that while lovely and beautiful in many ways in no way resemble the rigor and audacity of the practices taught to monks and nuns away from the public eye.

Fortunately, there is one teacher in the United States capable and willing to teach standing, and seventeen years ago I began training with him. His name is Gregory Fong, and I highly recommend a visit to his site, www.ichuan.net. Be sure to view his videos, in particular the ones entitled “Yiquan” and “health stance, combat stance and test of power.” If you have trained your eyes to see quality in movement and the issuing of power you will recognize something extraordinary in his art.

We use standing for two big reasons.

One, almost all of us waste a majority of our energy. We leak emotional energy by succumbing to emotions like stress, anger, and frustration, we leak mental energy by

buzzing thoughts constantly through our heads, and we leak physical energy through poor posture and undisciplined use of energy. The end result is that most of us are tight mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. This fact is perhaps more true with top executives and others who find themselves in environments intensified by great levels of pressure and complexity. Therefore, we have found that if we do not train our clients how to build healthy, sustainable and powerful energy and capacity into their bodies and minds they will struggle to integrate anything else with us.

Two, we have found that the vast majority of top executives, may they be leaders, designers, innovators or entrepreneurs, are missing a critical set of distinctions from their practices. The result is that they often succeed at building a grand structure upon a foundation that is likely to crack as the complexity in our world intensifies. While our technology is grounded in a number of distinctions that we refer to as core principles, the two most important that we present are **the distinction between contraction and expansion and right alignment.**

If we want to grow ourselves and evolve our companies we come to understand these principles on levels much deeper than the intellectual. We come to understand how expansion and contraction, along with right alignment, work on the level of the neuro-physiology that encompasses both the body and the mind. As far as we have discovered, no tool works better to lay the groundwork for such an important set of understandings than Standing Practice.

As we have said, standing as we train it comes out of the traditional fighting and healing arts of China. The central aim of these traditions has always been to develop health and energy, to balance mind and body, and to encourage a powerful and successful relationship with one's environment. These goals and the means of achieving them can be deceptively difficult to understand.

These aims can be achieved only on the basis of a basic foundation that includes the following: proper bodily alignment, muscular activity, breathing, and intention.

At its best, the training will build the following:

1. Proper bodily alignment
2. Correct muscular activity
3. Efficient cultivation and use of oxygen and energy
4. Ongoing refinement of speed and power
5. Cultivation and training of the muscle of intention
6. Evolution of spirit, which is best understood as an evolution of one's sense of possibility and belonging in the world.

Standing practice holds this entire training system together because of its ability to directly and rapidly re-wire the nervous system, open the mind to new ideas and assumptions, and build tremendous health and well being.

To begin Standing Practice, the teacher puts the student in a certain static position. (see first photo) At first, the student is asked to place their feet at shoulder width with knees

bent four to eight inches. They then make sure their knees are over their toes, that their tailbone is pulled in, that their chest is relaxed, eyes open and head slightly up. The arms may be placed at the side or in front of the body with palms faced out as if picking up a garbage can or hugging a tree. The student is asked to focus only on these requirements, and to direct the mind to keeping the body set up in this way.



Quite quickly, the student finds this seemingly simple activity very difficult both physically and mentally. Physically, this position forces the body to rely upon muscle groups that over time have been ignored. These muscles are weak, and when they are asked to be of service they start to hurt. Mentally, the mind quickly wavers in its concentration, especially as time passes and the pain increases. Bringing the mind back to its focus on the requirements thus becomes a challenge in its own right.

One is likely to ask at this point a very good question: how could simply standing like hugging a tree or picking up a garbage can and holding this position represent a significant

practice of any kind?

Well, the first thing one learns in standing is what right alignment means, and learning this is incredibly important because all the benefits we have been talking about depend upon the proper structural alignment of the body and the mind.

There is a simple explanation for this. Every object or body that stands upright - may it be a large building, a sandcastle, or the human body - must be held up in such a way so that it will not fall down. Engineers spend years learning how to build buildings using strategies to ensure that their projects will never fall to the ground. This means that every piece, from the foundation to the steel beams to the consistency of the concrete, must be laid out absolutely perfect. Otherwise, over time the building will collapse.

While there are many aesthetic variations in the ways that buildings look, they all are built according to very strict and similar structural codes. Our bodies resemble buildings in many ways, and while aesthetically every body differs, the same structural laws of proper alignment govern all bodies. This means that if I drop my head when I walk, or stick my butt way out when I stand, or lean to one side when I think I am standing straight, my structural alignment is off. Over time, small structural problems, again just like with tall buildings, will become large problems that can lead to serious health issues that impact everything from the way we think, to the way we breathe, to the way we work with complexity and conflict.

So, like good engineers, we spend most of our time as beginners correcting the structural mistakes that over time we have learned to accept as normal parts of our body. And I want to stress that everybody that is new to the training begins at this stage. If this stage is skipped, no matter how good their technique becomes, they will never advance very far. This is so because if the body, or the building, is not set up right, eventually the law of gravity will take over and the structure will come crashing down or be in need of endless repair.

If we look again at a building to understand Standing Practice better, we can imagine that a building, after it has begun to sag from poor structural alignment, will put more weight on some parts while removing weight from others. When this is corrected, and the building is put upright again, those areas that have not been holding weight may have become weak. They will then “complain” when asked to be of service. The body is the same way. If, as an example, I have learned to compensate for my weakened tendons in my arms by relying on my biceps, my triceps, my chest and my shoulders, when I ask my tendons to go to work while standing they complain. Moreover, mentally, my brain has been conditioned to send signals to these familiar muscle groups whenever I need my arms to go to work. Getting my brain to rewire these signals, and demand action on the part of my tendons and other little used groups, requires vigilance and disciplined attention.

It is precisely this rewiring that is so essential and encompasses the deeper power of our art. By working the body in this way, over time we are able to rewire and reorganize our systems to support expansion on every level: physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually:

- We recruit new muscles and new brain activity.
- We grow intense health into our system.
- We build stamina, flexibility and resiliency.
- We correct structural flaws in our bodies.
- We learn how to transform old and invisible patterns of contraction in the mind and body into an expression of expansion in a way that is eminently concrete, replicable and sustainable.
- As we build muscle and mental capacity via the standing we cultivate oxygen, which in turn supports the expansion of energy, which in turn allows for the recruitment of more muscle and brain capacity in a dynamic, symbiotic exchange.

As this process evolves, the student learns to comprehend what it feels like to improve the mind and to refine speed and power at a truly astonishing rate. ***This evolution of speed, power, clarity and breath is the bridge to spirit, to a sense of deep belonging and confidence in oneself and one's environment.*** Our goal as practitioners, trainers and teachers at Exile is to guide our clients into this space of accomplishment. Which, beyond the obvious implications for supporting success in any endeavor, represents a foundation for a beautiful life.

Keep in mind that these last crucial aspects of the training are very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about with someone lacking a solid foundation in the standing practice. It all may seem like an outrageous grouping of claims, and I would be right there with you if I was unfamiliar with such a practice. However, my experience personally, and with the thousands of people that I have worked with over the years, backs up the claims incredible as that may sound.

The proof is in the demonstration. If we truly reflect back on our lives, when have we fundamentally changed our physical and intellectual orientation? Did it happen sitting in a chair listening to a lecture? Did it happen in a conversation, in an exchange of ideas? Did such a shift last?

Standing Practice teaches us that changes to our core being sustainable over time do not stick unless we gain access to our foundational internal wiring, to our nervous system and to our baseline intellectual assumptions. Standing practice, surrounded by a host of other tools designed to stimulate and evolve the neuro-physiology, was designed to get us there.