

Proper Posture and Alignment

By Derek Croley

One of the most common ways that most people develop a multitude of health problems comes from simply having bad posture. Things as simple as having your hips in the wrong place, your feet positioned incorrectly, your chest concave, your head positioned incorrectly- all of these can cause serious problems and cause a great deal of unnatural wear and tear on your body. The end result is that Bad posture inhibits your skeletal, respiratory, nervous, and circulatory systems, thus decreasing your physical fitness, ability to deal with stress and illness, and even your ability to think clearly.

Bad posture inhibits your respiratory system causing parts of your body to not get enough oxygen. Most often this happens when you slouch over and don't keep your back straight- causing your lungs to not be able to fill up. It can inhibit your nervous system causing "kinks" and "gaps" in the flow of the systems messages. This leads to all kinds of problems as various parts of your body aren't getting the right messages. Even your circulatory system is messed up by bad posture. Your blood doesn't get to all of the right places if you aren't correctly aligned.

So let's make some simple corrections that will undoubtedly have a tremendous effect on your posture, and therefore your mental and physical health.

First of all, there are five main points to consider. They are the lower Dan Tian(meaning "elixir pool," also called Shimen- "the Stone Door"), the Mingmen (meaning "the Gate of Life") , the Wuji Point (meaning "The beginning without extremes") , the Huiyun Cavity(the perineum), and the Beihui Point (meaning "hundred meetings"). Each of these connect in order to ensure that you are in proper alignment.

The lower Dan Tien is located roughly three inches beneath your navel and for those who study acupuncture points it is located at Conceptual Vessel point 5 (CV 5). In Qi Gung this point is considered the primary location that Chi energy is cultivated, thus the name "elixir pool". For our purposes of postural alignment we will be mostly concerned about the location of this point, though you will find that when your posture is correct your Chi will flow immeasurably better than before. All things work better when properly aligned. The Dan Tien is directly across from the Mingmen. This is translated as meaning "the gate of life." It is located at Governing Vessel 4 (GV 4). The Mingmen is the point in your lower back where many nervous clusters spread out away from the spin. Modern research is experimenting with the idea that the Mingmen might operate as a smaller version of the brain- they are hoping to use this principle to rehabilitate spinal cord injuries.

When your posture is correct, your Dan Tien should be across from the Mingmen. Directly in the middle is the Wuji point. This is the center of your life energy, and possibly the first cell to have life in your body- but for our purposes it is the center of gravity and therefore your center of balance.

The Huiyun Cavity is located on your perineum- directly between your legs . Huiyun means “crossing the genitalia” as this point is located directly between the anus and genitalia. According to acupuncture this cavity is located at Conceptual Vessel 1 (CV 1). The Beihui is located at the very top of your head, Governing Vessel 20 (GV 20). Beihui means “hundred meetings” as this is where all three yang foot meridians meet (the Gall Bladder, Bladder, and Spleen Meridians) as well as the Liver channel. In terms of posture, you want to have the Beihui on top of your head directly over the Huiyun cavity in a straight vertical line. As a side note if you are standing with your feet together this will also line up with the “boiling well” directly in the center of the bottom of your foot.

Directly between the Beihui and the Huiyun is of course located the Wuji point. Therefore, the vertical line formed by the Beihui (on top) and the Huiyun (on the bottom) directly intersect the horizontal line formed by the Dan Tien (in the front) and the Mingmen (in the back) at the Wuji point (directly in the middle of your center of gravity).

To check the alignment of your horizontal line you must figure out if your hips are in the proper position. Understand that if your hips are too far forward or backward your entire posture is thrown off, so this is pretty important. To test yourself put one thumb on your belly button and your pinky pointed at straight down as you can get it. Put your other hand on your lower back- thumb up and pinky down. Move your hips back and forth until your back feels straight based upon the relative positions of your pinky and thumb.

Another way to test your hip alignment is to sit down in a chair. Study the way you have to bend over. If you have to lean forward to sit down, your hips are too far back. If you go down as far as you can and end up flopping your rear out and your head forward, you keep your hips too far forward. When you get the hang of proper hip alignment you will be able to keep your back pretty straight when you are sitting down. It is okay to counter balance yourself by holding your hands in front of you.

To test your vertical posture line, begin with the hip test. From there put your thumb and middle finger just under your clavicle bones and point your index finger straight up to your chin- making sure it touches just under your jaw. This will make sure that your head is in the right spot. Think of having a string pulling up the back of your head, extending your spine. You can also do the nod test. Slowly nod your head until you find the position that it feels like it most naturally sets. You will find that this aligns with the finger alignment test previously mentioned.

When you have done all of this, have somebody push lightly down on your shoulders. You will find that when your posture is aligned correctly there will be no give- they will not be able to push you down. You can also play with putting different things out of alignment to see what the effect is.

Get into the habit of thinking about your posture. By keeping your skeletal structure aligned correctly you will find that your physical health and mental acuity will improve as all of the systems in your body will be able to flow more smoothly. Your life will be much more enjoyable when you take out the kinks. The best way to practice and develop proper posture is through the disciplined structure of an education in the Martial Arts or Tai Chi. These arts are designed to make your body flow in harmony with itself, therefore they spend a great deal of time working to develop posture and alignment.