



BASIC STANCES

Basic stances are common to most Chinese martial arts, and to those Japanese arts derived from them, but they are by no means common to all martial arts. In this tutorial, we'll look at the practice of several of the most common stances. These stances are generic; they may not be exactly the same as those practiced at your own dojo, if your dojo does include stance practice. They are useful for personal practice, or for an introduction to what the basic stances are all about, but beyond that, you should go with whatever stance practice your own school teaches if there is any conflict with what you find here. If your own martial art doesn't include stance practice, you can always consider including them in your own personal fitness programme, just as you may include jogging. In my experience, the health benefits of martial arts stances far exceed those of most other exercise regimes.

Martial arts stances are practiced for a variety of reasons. The principal reason is the develop lower body strength and flexibility. This is essential whether you are to 'stand your ground' or 'go with the flow' under an opponent's attack. The alternative is being knocked to the ground, or simply losing balance.

Another reason for practicing basic stances is to develop a stable centre of gravity. Having this good grounding gives you a better sense of balance. If you don't have it, you can end up on the floor even without being struck. Just moving around suddenly, in response to your opponent, may knock you off balance, especially because when you are more keyed up, your sense of a centre of gravity is prone to become erratic. You still have a centre of gravity, of course, but your sense of it is all over the place.

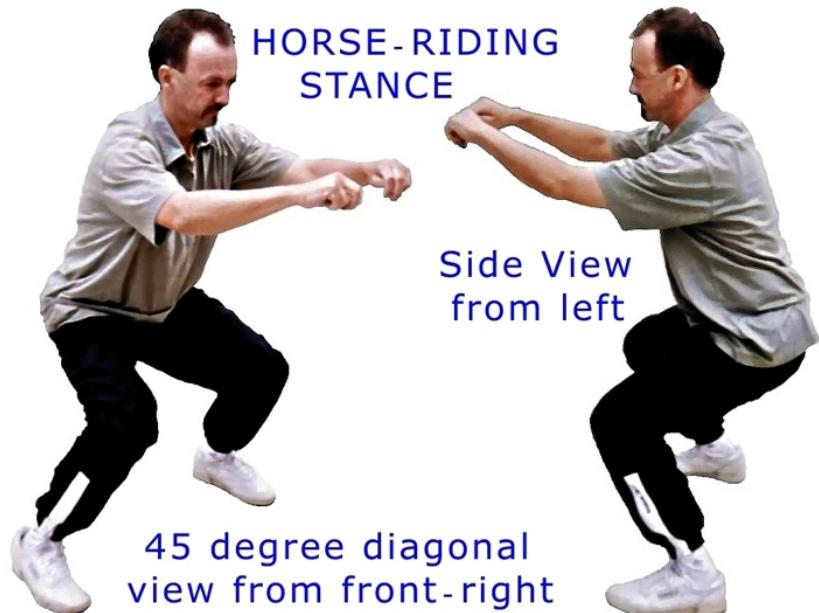
A third reason is psychological. Maintaining stances is not easy, particularly for beginners, so stance practice is one way to train students to endure some level of discomfort for a positive objective.

Training Methods

Ideally, the student should spend about 20 minutes-plus practicing basic stances each day. It has to be said, however, that stance practice is one of the least attractive aspects of all martial arts training. Conversely, it's also one of the most rewarding, in terms of general health benefits as well as martial arts skills. It often seems impossibly unenticing set against practicing the same amount of time against a punch bag, or working out with a weapon, and yet any time you put into stance practice pays dividends.

Horse-riding Stance

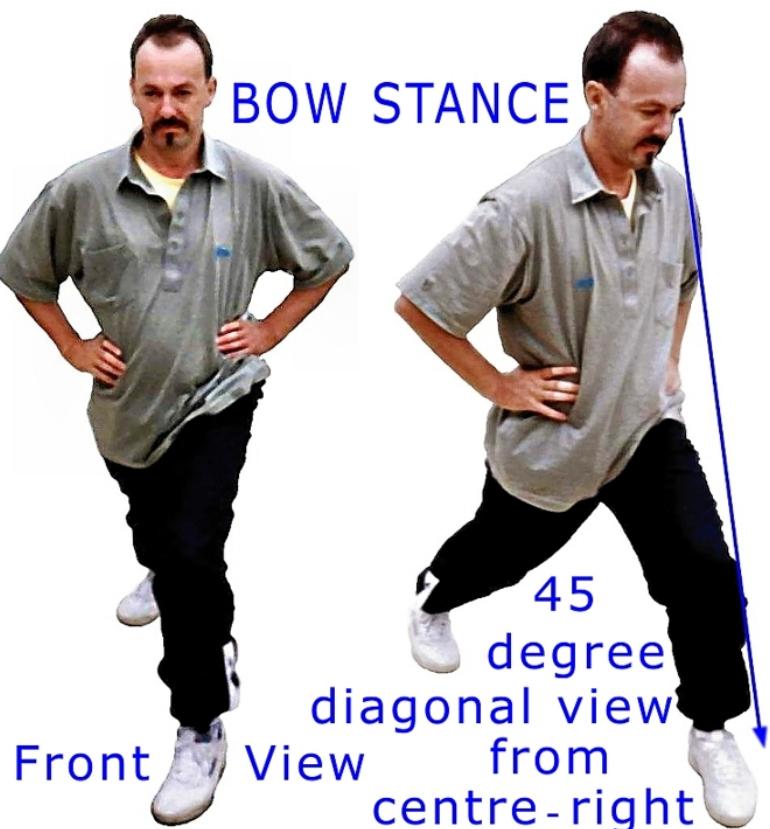
Horse-riding stance, or horse stance is the single most ubiquitous of all martial arts stances, and in most martial arts it's the one which new students learn first.



In practice, there are a huge range of postures which are known as 'horse-riding stance'. Often, the stance is sub-divided into 'high' and 'low', or even 'high', 'medium' and 'low' versions, which apart from height, retain the other characteristics of horse-riding stance in that particular art. The above horse-riding stance is typical of northern Shaolin Gung Fu (Kung Fu). The main difference with southern Shaolin is in how wide apart the legs are. In southern Shaolin, and most Japanese and Korean martial arts, the legs are kept wider apart (see the [beater tutorial](#) for an example).

Bow Stance

Bow stance, otherwise known as 'forward stance', 'front stance', and by various other names, is probably the second-most common of all martial arts stances. Again, there's a good deal of variation between different schools, but basically, this stance features one leg placed in front, with bent knee, and one behind, kept straight. Typically, the student is taught that his line of sight towards the floor will reveal the front tip of the foot barely visible beyond the knee.



In bow stance, as in horse-riding stance, how high or low the stance is differs from school to school; the above illustration is just a typical average.

Solo Stance

Solo stance, otherwise known in English as 'one-legged stance', or 'independent stance', is another commonly-seen stance, and probably the one which varies least from school to school. Basically, the student assumes a typical standing posture, then raises one leg until the angle of the raised leg is at an angle close to 45 degrees from the body. In Shaolin, the position of the foot of the raised leg is required to cover the knee of the other leg.



Cross-legs Stance

Cross-legs stance, or cross-legged stance, is a commonly-seen stance, usually practiced as a transitional stance, which is to say a stance seen mostly making the transition from one stance to another.

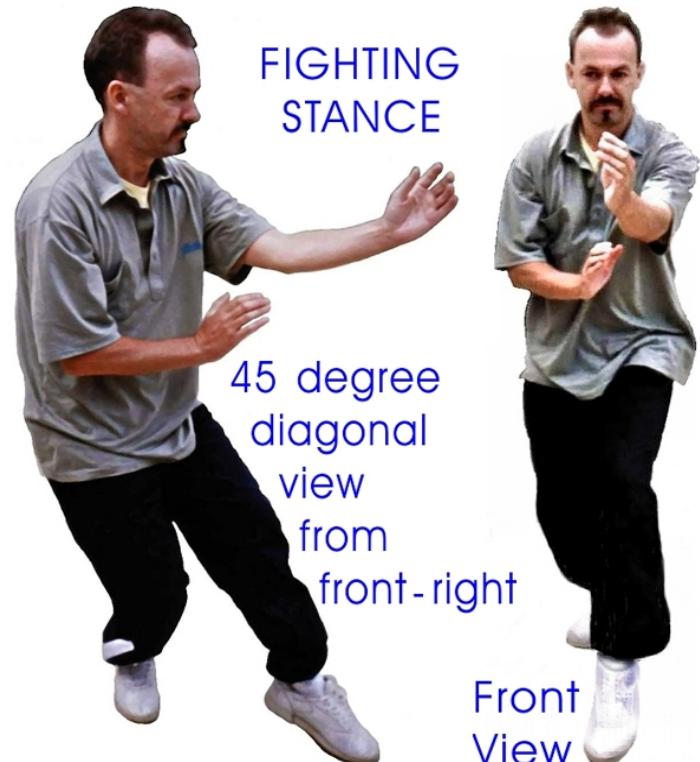
CROSS-LEGS STANCE



Fighting Stance

Fighting stance, known also as 'ready stance', or 'empty stance', is seen in most martial arts which feature stances, and is also closely related to stances such as '3-7 stance' and '4-6 stance'. These are so-named because 30% (ie., three-tenths) of the weight is placed on the front leg, 70% on the back, or 40% on the front and 60% on the back (in actuality, few students are so precise in their practice, and what you usually see could be either, or even '2-8' or '5-6'!). Anyway, in all cases, most of the body weight rests on the back leg, while the front foot touches the floor only lightly. Also in all cases, the body area available for attack is reduced by the angle of the stance, which is to say that if you stand in a 'normal' position, with feet side by side at shoulder width, there is a greater area available for your opponent to strike. In a fighting stance, one shoulder is held further back, making it more difficult for the opponent to reach the upper body on that side, while the arms protect the upper body on the other side, making it more difficult for an opponent to get a strike in on that side.

FIGHTING
STANCE



45 degree
diagonal
view
from
front-right

Front
View

Stance Routine Video

The below video is of a short stance routine. Ideally, each stance should be held for a couple of minutes or more, thus in reality, the routine would last a total of 15+ minutes. The video includes all the stances covered in this tutorial, as well as another one, generally known as 'drop stance', or 'tiger-taming stance' (a variation of this stance can also be seen on title graphic of this tutorial).



Health Benefits

The health benefits of regular stance practice are enormous, which is why I recommend them to anyone, even non-martial artists. Along with increased lower body strength and flexibility comes better blood and chi circulation. In addition, the cumulative effect of pressure being applied to different parts of the soles of the feet is comparable to a thorough foot massage.

The best example I can think of which illustrates the immense health benefits of stance practice was an experience I had while living in Brighton, England, in 2004.

At the time, I was working in the kitchen of a local school from 10 in the morning till 2 in the afternoon and in a similar menial job in the evenings. One unusually bright and warm Spring morning, I decided to take a stroll down to the beach, about 10 minutes walk from my home, and bought a newspaper and a snack for breakfast on my way there. It was not yet 8am; I had plenty of time.

However, the news about the US-led invasion of occupation of Iraq was thoroughly engrossing, and I ended up reading the paper as I walked across an area known as Hove Lawns, which lay next to the pedestrian beach front. No problem with that, except that the lawns were about a foot and a half higher than the promenade itself, and when I reached this difference in height, my eyes were still glued to the paper.

Oblivious to difference in height, I took a step into thin air, then my right foot hit the ground and I fell over as a sharp pain simultaneously shot up my leg. After sitting on the edge of the elevated lawn for a couple of minutes, massaging my painful leg, I attempted to continue walking, only to find that putting any weight at all on my right foot was excruciatingly painful. I hobbled to a bench, sat down again, and wondered what I should do?

It was obvious that my foot was far too painful for me to cycle to work after just another hour or more. There was no way I would be able to do that. I really needed to see a doctor, but how? My G.P. was in Portslade, it was a full twenty minutes walk from my home with no direct bus route from either my flat or my present location, which was a further ten minutes in the opposite direction. The main hospital was on the other side of town, even further away. I was two days from payday, and had no more than a couple of 'quid' in my pocket and little more in my bank account, so I couldn't take a taxi.

Finally, I decided that first I had to get home before deciding the next step (no pun intended!). The walk back to my flat, which normally took ten minutes, took me nearly 40. I could barely put any weight at all on my right foot. When I finally got home, it was as much as I could do to call in to the school kitchen to explain that I wouldn't be able to work that day or the next.

What a downer! In addition to the discomfort, I seemed to remember that if I needed to take more than two days off work, I would need a note from my doctor. And knowing how badly I had hurt my foot, it was hard to imagine even walking normally two days hence. I fell onto my bed and straight into sleep.

Waking in the mid-afternoon, I found my foot, though comfortably throbbing while I lay down, was still as painful as several hours earlier if I tried to put my weight on it. The only way to get around, even in my flat was either by hopping or on all-fours (even to the toilet!). Finally, I decided I had to try to cure this problem myself.

I knew that the martial arts stances I had learnt were about the only kind of exercise I could possibly manage restricted to my flat, and even then it seemed doubtful that I could do them all. Using my desk and chair as props, I managed only about half the stances, and for no more than about half a minute for any of them. After another couple of hour's sleep, I had another stance workout, and discovered I was able to hold all the stances for longer, and more of them.

And that's how that evening and the following morning were spent. By the afternoon of the second day, I was able to walk almost normally, and by the time of the my last stance workout that evening, I could do all the stances for more than two minutes. On the third day, I cycled to work and back with no problem. But I didn't leave it there. I had a couple more stance workouts that evening, and at six o'clock the next morning, I even went for a jog! That represents a full recovery in less than 72 hours. It's hard for me to imagine such a rapid recovery without the stance practice; in fact I had almost resigned myself to several weeks of discomfort. After this, I swore I would practice at least some stances every day.