



# Pa Kua Chang

JOURNAL

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## Ba Gua Zhang's Circle Walk Practice

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與掌  
步法

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of Ba Gua Zhang*

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Training to Fight*

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## *Pa Kua Chang*

JOURNAL

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### **About the Pa Kua Chang Journal**

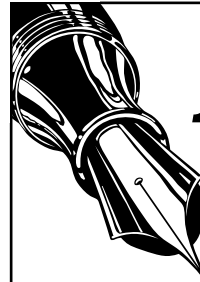
The *Pa Kua Chang Journal* is published six times a year. Each issue features an interview with, or article by, one or more Ba Gua Zhang instructor(s) from mainland China, Taiwan, the United States, and/or Canada. The interviews will report on each instructor's background, current program, training methods and teaching philosophy. By utilizing this format, the intention is to give students an opportunity to get to know prospective teachers and to let teachers possibly gain insights and ideas from learning about the activities of their colleagues.

Chinese names and terms will be romanized using the pinyin system of romanization except when an instructor prefers his name romanized differently. The title of the Journal appears in the Wade Giles system of romanization as it was the system we started with and we kept the original title. Whenever possible, Chinese characters will be listed in parentheses following the first appearance of Chinese terms and names in each article.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this journal are those of the instructors being interviewed and not necessarily the views of the publisher or editor.

We solicit comments and/or suggestions.  
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## *Editor's Corner*

### **Thanks for the Continued Support**

I want to thank those individuals who have continued to support my articles on traditional martial arts instruction. I have received too many letters and phone messages to reply to everyone individually. Please know that your comments are appreciated.

The overwhelming positive response I have received concerning these articles confirms my original assumption that most of the Ba Gua practitioners in this country are very tired of wushu dance routines and "new age," "metaphysical," "esoteric" martial arts. I think it is fine if the dancers want to go to their tournaments and dance and the new agers want to follow their teacher off to fantasy island and believe that reading auras, getting in touch with your "inner child," and trying to push people over without touching them has anything to do with real martial arts skill. But I am very happy to see that most of you want to live in the real world and learn real martial arts.

The support I have received for these articles has not only been from subscribers in this country. I've received letters and faxes from Europe, Brazil, and Asia. One of our Chinese subscribers in Taiwan liked the first article so much that he translated it into Chinese and submitted it to *Li Yu Mei* magazine (Taiwan's leading martial arts magazine). *Li Yu Mei* will be printing the article later this year. I guess people all over the world are getting a little tired of "modern wushu."

This issue is my response to those to those closed-minded individuals who like think that "my way is the only way." Those who think that there is only one correct way to walk the circle, or one correct way to execute single palm change, or only one way to do anything in Ba Gua are living in a very isolated little world. Hopefully this issue will allow them to see that there is more than one way to skin a cat.

### **On the Cover**

Eighty-five year old Ba Gua Zhang instructor Liu Xing Han practices the Ba Gua circle walk in Beijing's Temple of Heaven Park (Oct 1991).

# The Circle Walk Practice of Ba Gua Zhang

*In Ba Gua Zhang, mobility is primary.  
Store then release, evade then return,  
False and true change inside the steps.  
Move like the wind . . .*

So begins the "Song of Ba Gua Zhang" handed down by the art's founder Dong Hai Chuan (董海川) over a century ago.<sup>1</sup> Its message to practitioners is clear - practice the footwork! While there are a variety of footwork components which are practiced by the Ba Gua Zhang practitioner, the major component is trained while the practitioner walks in a circle, or multiple circles, and thus the circle walking practice has become the trademark of Ba Gua Zhang. While one goal of training the circular footwork is to develop Ba Gua Zhang's characteristic evasiveness and mobility in combat, the depth of this practice reaches far beyond its application in self-defense.

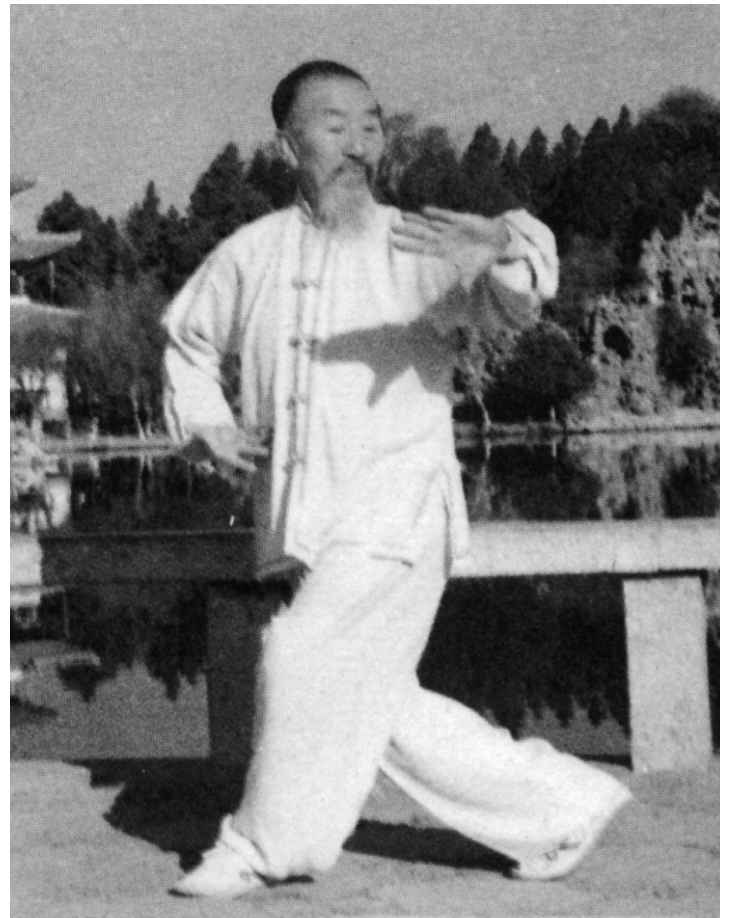
A good Ba Gua Zhang practitioner spends *a lot* of time walking in circles; the question on everyone else's lips is, "Why are you doing that?" If Kwai Chang Caine practiced Ba Gua Zhang his answer to this question might be something like, "Those who practice will know. Those who don't practice will never know." A very short answer which holds a lot of truth, however, since I can't fill up the rest of this article with a flashback to my youth at the Shaolin Temple, I guess I will have to come up with something a little more concrete.

The Ba Gua Zhang practitioner will benefit in many ways from the circle walk practice. Health, longevity, body strength, stamina, coordination, balance, *Qi* cultivation, calming of the mind, mental concentration, mobility in combat, body/mind unity, stillness in motion, etc. - all of these aspects of physical, mental, and spiritual\* health can be improved through simple circle walking. As third generation Ba Gua Zhang instructor Li Zi Ming (李子鳴) states in his book *Liang Zhen Pu Eight Diagram Palm*, "When cultivated to the highest level of proficiency, circle walking serves to regulate physiological functions by balancing metabolism, improving the physical constitution and enhancing the overall health. Therefore, it is not only a way to maintain health, but also a key to longevity. Furthermore, it is a good method for vanquishing enemies."<sup>2</sup> As Li lived to be 92 years of age, he can certainly validate the longevity claim.

Every system of Ba Gua Zhang contains numerous variations to the circle walking practice. While certain principles are always adhered to while

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\* When we refer to "spirit" or "spiritual" here we are not speaking in religious terms. The term is use here in the context of describing one's individual spirit as it is defined in Chinese Medicine. It relates to a quality of vitality



**Ba Gua Zhang instructor Sha Guo Cheng (1904-1992) walks the circle holding the "Rubbing Body Palm" posture**

walking the circle, variations on the theme are many. In this article we will explore the history of Ba Gua's circle walk practice, examine the underlying principles which are common to all circle walking methods, and then take a look at some of the many variations of the circle walk practice available to Ba Gua Zhang practitioners.

## Origins of the Circle Walk Practice in Ba Gua Zhang

The art of Ba Gua Zhang was developed during the mid 1800's by Dong Hai Chuan, however, the circle walk practice which he used as a basis for his art was developed by Daoists long before Dong combined this practice with his martial arts training. Exploring Dong's discovery of this Daoist practice may help the reader understand some of the benefits the Ba Gua Zhang stylist derives from this practice and therefore before we discuss the practice itself we will take a look at its origin.



**Professor Kang Ge Wu (left) of Beijing, China, interviews Daoists to investigate the origins of the circle walk practice**

While conducting research for his master's degree thesis on the origins of Ba Gua Zhang during 1980-1982, Professor Kang Ge Wu (康戈武) of Beijing, China, discovered the following concerning Ba Gua Zhang's origins<sup>3</sup>:

Dong Hai Chuan's ancestors were originally from Hun Dong County in Shanxi Province. Close to the end of the Ming Dynasty the clan started moving North, first ending up in Gou Sheng County, Hebei Province. From there the family split into two branches, one went to Kai Ko village and the other went to Wen An (both in Hebei). Several generations later (around 1813), young Dong Hai Chuan was born in Ju Jia Wu township, Wen An, Hebei. Around the same time, another Dong, known as Dong Xian Zhou (董憲周), was born in Kai Ko village (he will become important later in the story).

In Ju Jia Wu township, there were two predominant families, the Dong's and the Li's. The Li family was literary, a few of them passed examinations and became government officials. The Dong family was poor, but that was all right with young Hai Chuan because he was only interested in practicing martial arts, not studying for scholarly examinations. It is not known exactly which arts Dong studied when he was young, however, it was most likely some form of indigenous Northern Shaolin. Systems that were known to have been practiced in Wen An around that time were: *Ba Fan Quan* (八番拳), *Hong Quan* (洪拳), *Xing Men Quan* (行門拳), and *Jin Gang Quan* (金剛拳). It is said that Dong practiced hard and gained a reputation as a skilled martial artist.

For some unknown reason, the Li's had a rivalry with Dong Hai Chuan. The Li family, being officials, had friends in high places and used their influence to

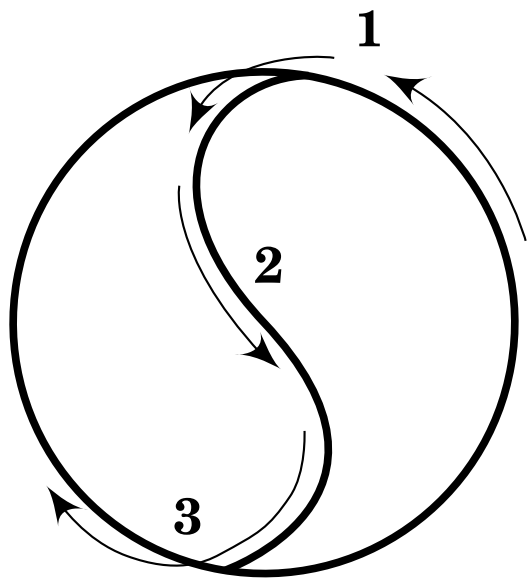
persecute Dong. Eventually he grew tired of the Li's games and decided to leave Wen An in about 1853. At this point in Dong's life, the story becomes vague. He most likely went from Wen An to Kai Ko to live with his relatives. Remember Dong Xian Zhou? It turns out that he was also a martial arts enthusiast and had become very well known in and around his village for his skill at *Ba Fan Quan*. He was so well known that bandits in the area avoided his village so they would not have to confront him. It is very possible that while in Kai Ko, Dong Hai Chuan studied *Ba Fan Quan* with his relative Dong Xian Zhou. Professor Kang's investigation of *Ba Fan Quan* revealed that many of the movements and techniques of this style can be found in Dong Hai Chuan's Ba Gua Zhang.

After leaving Kai Ko, Dong continued south. Reports have him stopping in Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, and at the Da Ba mountain area somewhere along the border of Shaanxi and Sichuan. Although Kang was unable to determine exactly where Dong went and what he did during his travels, the one pertinent piece of information that Kang was able to uncover was that somewhere along the way Dong became a member of the *Quan Zhen* (全真 - Complete Truth)\* sect of Daoism. This sect was part of the *Long Men* (龍門 - Dragon Gate) school of Daoism which was originated by Qiu Chang Chun (邱長春). Interestingly enough, Qiu also invented a method of meditation whereby the practitioner would walk in a circle and, wouldn't you know, this method was practiced by the *Quan Zhen* sect. Delving further into this Daoist connection, Kang was able to find a section in the Daoist Canon which reads:

*A person's heart and mind are in chaos.  
Concentration on one thing makes the mind pure.  
If one aspires to reach the Dao, one should practice walking in a circle.*

This bit of evidence inspired Kang to try and find out more about the circle walk meditation method practiced by the *Quan Zhen* Daoists. What he discovered was that this practice, which the Daoists called *Zhuan Tian Zun* (轉天尊 - Rotating in Worship of Heaven) is very similar in principle to the circle walk practice of Ba Gua Zhang. Researching Wang Jun Bao's book, *Daoist Method of Walking the Circle*, Kang found that while walking, the Daoists repeated one of two mantras. The first of these mantras was used in the morning practice and translates to mean "When Rotating in Worship

\*The *Quan Zhen* sect of Daoism can be traced back to the Tang period (eighth century) in China. It evolved as one of the two main schools of Daoism. The other main school, that of the "Heavenly Masters," has been passed on hereditarily since the Han Dynasty. The *Quan Zhen* sect was based on the Buddhist model of monastic communities. The Western missionaries in China referred to the *Quan Zhen* Daoist as the "Daoist popes." In 1222 Genghis Khan's religious teacher Qiu Chang Chun, a *Quan Zhen* Daoist, was installed by Genhis as head of the religious Chinese. (Reference: *The Taoist Body*, by Kristofer Schipper, translated by Karen C. Duval, University of California Press, 1993.



**Footwork method for changing directions on the circle in the Daoist circle walking practice of the Quan Zhen sect**

of Heaven, the sound of thunder is everywhere and transforms everything.” The second mantra was used in the evening practice and translates to mean “When Rotating in Worship of Heaven, the great void saves us from the hardship of existence.” It was said that the practitioner should repeat the mantra with each movement in the circle walk practice so that “one replaces one’s myriad thoughts with a single thought in order to calm and ease one’s mind.” The Daoists said that in walking the circle the body’s movements should be unified and the practitioner strives for “stillness in motion.” This practice was described as a method of “training the body while harnessing the spirit.”

When instructing his students Dong Hai Chuan was noted as saying, “Training martial arts ceaselessly is inferior to walking the circle. In Ba Gua Zhang the circle walk practice is the font of all training.” Ba Gua Zhang instructors instruct their students to walk the circle with the spirit, *Qi*, intent, and power concentrated on a single goal. This is similar to the Daoist method whereby one clears the mind with a single thought. Although Ba Gua Zhang’s circle walk practice trains footwork to be used in fighting, it also shares the Daoist’s goals of creating stillness in motion and developing the body internally.

The general requirements of the Daoist practice was to walk with the body natural and the movements comfortable. The practitioner strived to achieve a feeling of balance while moving slowly. The Daoist practitioners were to walk slowly and gently in such a manner that their Daoist robes were only slightly disturbed by the walking movement. The Daoists started the practice on the Eastern side of the circle with their body facing North. After three revolutions, they walked through the center of the circle to the other side following an “S” shaped pattern like that

described by the *Tai Ji* diagram (see illustration). They then reversed the direction and walked South to West. There was no set circle size. The size of the circle was determined by the practice area. As most Ba Gua Zhang practitioners know, the Ba Gua Zhang circle walking practice is very similar. The practitioner will usually start in the East and face North. In most systems the beginning practitioner will walk slowly, increasing speed gradually. The requirements of comfortable, natural movements while walking in a balanced, smooth manner with no bobbing or weaving are the same as in the Daoist method. While the Ba Gua Zhang practitioner employs numerous methods in changing the direction of the circle walk, the *Tai Ji* diagram pattern is one of the many changing patterns which is practiced by most major schools of Ba Gua Zhang today.

Convinced that Dong Hai Chuan had learned the Daoist circle walk practice as a member of the *Quan Zhen* Daoist sect and had then integrated this practice with the martial arts he had learned in his youth to form Ba Gua Zhang, Kang Ge Wu began to research the arts that Dong was known to have practiced to see if he could detect similarities. Since the Dong family was known for its *Ba Fan Quan* and thus Kang was fairly certain that Dong Hai Chuan had studied this art in his youth, Kang investigated the forms and postures of this art with the elderly practitioners of today. Not



**Beijing’s Temple of Heaven Park has worn dirt paths around many of the trees from the practice of circle walking**



**Ba Gua Zhang instructor Li Zi ming (1900 - 1992) of Beijing, China, holds the "Millstone" posture. This is the basic circle walking arm position.**

only did he discover that *Ba Fan Quan* techniques rely heavily on the use of palm striking, he also found that many of the postures and movements of *Ba Fan Quan* are identical to Ba Gua Zhang. Included in Kang's thesis are photographs of *Ba Fan Quan* practitioners' postures compared to Ba Gua Zhang postures found in Ba Gua Zhang books by third generation practitioners Guo Gu Min (郭古民), Sun Lu Tang (孫祿堂), Sun Xi Kun (孫錫堃) and Huang Bo Nian (黃柏年). He concluded that many of the Ba Gua Zhang postures and movements are identical to those found in *Ba Fan Quan*, *Xing Men*, *Hong Quan*, and *Jin Gang Quan*.

Having found no solid evidence to prove otherwise, Kang concluded that Dong Hai Chuan was the originator of Ba Gua Zhang. He states that after practicing the circle walk practice with the Daoists, Dong recognized the utility of this footwork and body movement in martial arts. Kang believes that Dong Hai Chuan's genius was in coming up with a system of martial arts whereby the practitioner could deliver powerful strikes while remaining in constant motion. Due to Ba Gua Zhang's combination of unique footwork and body mechanics, the Ba Gua Zhang stylist never has to stop moving. The feet are in continuous motion even when applying a block or strike. Kang said that Dong's development of the *Kou Bu* (扣步 - hooking step) and *Bai Bu* (擺步 - swinging step) footwork in directional changes was also an important addition.

## The Circle Walking Method

Practitioners who have studied Ba Gua Zhang for any length of time are no doubt very familiar with

Ba Gua Zhang's circle walking practice. Walking the circle is the cornerstone of the art, all systems of Ba Gua Zhang practice this method and thus "walking in a circle" has become Ba Gua Zhang's trademark. However, even though the circle walking practice is common to all major systems, a student who has studied the art from a variety of different teachers can quickly become frustrated when trying to investigate exactly how the circle walking practice is performed.

There are at least a dozen different circle walk stepping techniques and each teacher seems to have his or her own detailed criteria for practicing these techniques. Investigating the art of circle walking, one may run across some of the following: the lion step, the dragon step, the chicken step, the tiger step, the snake step, the crane step, the

rippling step, the mud walking step, the shake step, the stomp step, the hesitation step, the continuous step, the sliding step, the digging heel step, the gliding step, and even steps such as the camel step and the elephant step. Some of these are different names describing the same step and others are steps used only for specific leg strength and body training. One will also encounter Ba Gua Zhang schools who walk the circle painstakingly slow and others who walk very fast. Then one may also encounter the lower, middle, and upper "basin" walking positions along with a wide variety of upper body postures one might assume while walking. Additionally, there are various sizes and combinations of circles as well as different ground surfaces and apparatus (such as bricks, poles, or stones) that the practitioner will walk on. To the beginning student who simply wants to know how to walk the circle and why circle walking is important, all of this may seem very confusing.

The truth is that the circle walking technique will vary depending upon the result one intends to derive from the practice. There is no one "correct" method. Every school of Ba Gua which is teaching a complete art will have a wide variety of circle walking methods which they practice and each method will be designed for a specific training purpose. Some practitioners, like the Daoists, practice for meditative purposes and thus the walking will be slow and steady with the mind calm and focused; others practice to build leg strength and thus the posture is very low and the step is such that the legs work very hard; others practice to improve stability and balance while in motion and thus the stepping foot is lifted high while the practitioner moves slowly; others practice to improve cardiovascular endurance and develop a high degree of mobility and

thus the walking is very fast and the directional changes are frequent; others practice to develop a balanced *Qi* flow in the body and thus the movement and breathing is very smooth, the *dan tian* is stable, and the stepping method facilitates a full circulation of *Qi* from head-to-toe; others practice to build upper body strength and full body connection and thus the various upper body postures are held for long periods of time, consequently the change of direction is infrequent and the walking position is at a middle or upper level so the legs will not tire before the arms. While some practitioners might practice only one of these methods, others practice many of them. Practice method depends on what component of martial arts development the practitioner desires to improve or at what stage of development in the training process the individual practitioner has reached.

While Ba Gua Zhang practitioners will sometimes argue about the "correct" circle walking technique, the fact of the matter is that there is not one "correct" way to practice this exercise. Those that believe that there is only one way to walk the circle have only been introduced to a very small portion of a vast art form. The incompleteness of their training leads to ignorance. There are, in fact, many valid techniques utilized in circle walk practice, the technique used depends on the results desired. The primary guidelines in practice involve maintaining a relaxed, comfortable posture and focused intention while walking. If these guidelines are followed, variations on the theme are endless.

Because Ba Gua Zhang is an "internal" family martial art, the primary guidelines one will follow during practice are; (1) to allow the body to feel natural, relaxed, comfortable, and connected when walking the circle so that one can encourage a balanced flow of energy in the body and stabilize the body to improve balance in motion, (2) to walk smoothly and continuously so that the body does not waiver, bob or wobble and the overall flow of the movement is always smooth and continuous, never choppy (even when the practitioner changes rhythm and speed or executes a *fa jing* (發勁) maneuver, the movement flows smoothly), and (3) to maintain focused intention so that the mind and body are in harmony.

Tension restricts the flow of *Qi* and throws the body off balance; a comfortable, relaxed body and focused mind promotes a balanced flow of *Qi*, a stable, mobile body, and facilitates quick movement. Additionally, if the practitioner feels natural and comfortable, less fatigue will be experienced and the practitioner can practice longer. Even practitioners who practice to develop upper body and/or leg strength should try to remain relaxed and comfortable while experiencing the muscle fatigue. Important points which most teachers stress to the beginner are all aimed at allowing the body to feel relaxed and comfortable while maintaining certain structural alignments. In the chapter entitled "Exercise Method Conforms to Natural Principles" in the book *Liang Zhen Pu Eight Diagram Palm* author Li Zi Ming states that, "In practice, it is necessary to pay attention to these important details:

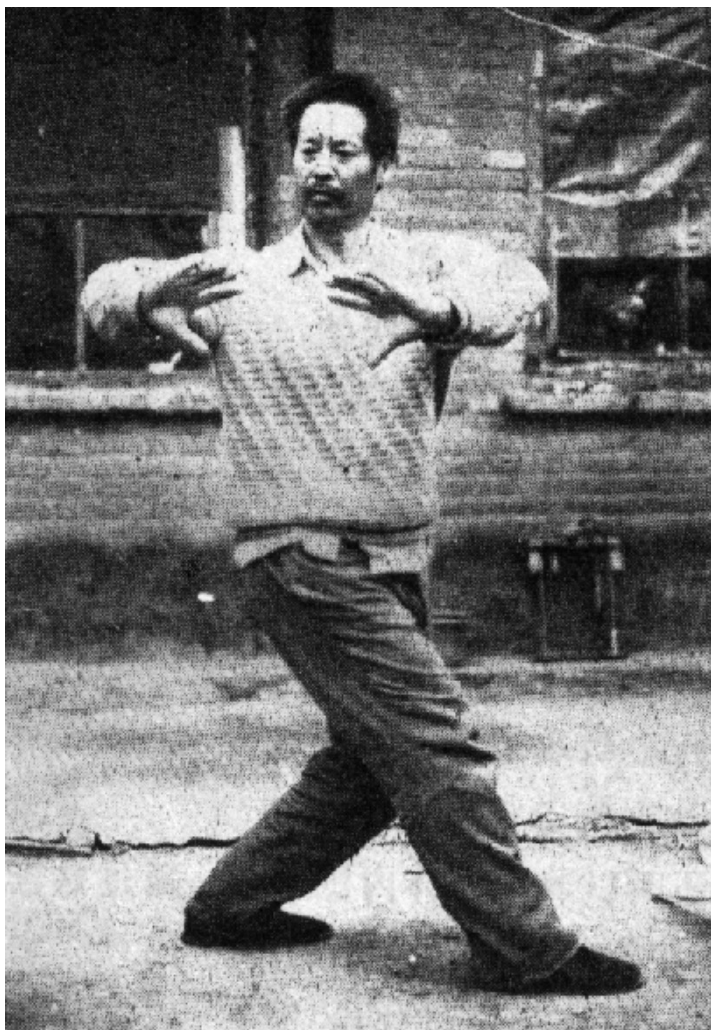
- 1) The lower body is sunken downward while the upper body is held erect.
- 2) The head is held straight up while the shoulders and elbows are dropped.
- 3) The back is rounded yet straight and erect while the chest is held in a hollow.
- 4) The wrists are sunken while the palm remains pressing.
- 5) The waist is relaxed while the buttocks are tilted up and slightly forward.
- 6) The knees are flexed with the toes grasping the ground.

In summary, each part of the body has specific conditions to meet and maintain during the execution of Eight Diagram Palm, but the coordinated synthesis of all these conditions, when performed in synchrony, allows the practitioner to move in a completely natural manner, breathing at ease and moving relaxed. It is a manner of moving in accordance with the laws of natural physiology that we can cultivate more energy than we expend thereby enhancing one's life force."<sup>4</sup>

The upper body posture held while walking the circle will vary from school to school. Typically each school will have a set of eight postures which are held in succession while performing the basic circle walking practice. These eight postures are known as the "Eight



**Xie Pei Qi, a Yin Style Ba Gua instructor in Beijing, China, walks the circle in the "lower basin" position.**



**Cheng You Xin's son, Cheng De Liang, walks the circle holding the "Embracing Moon at Chest" posture. This posture is one of the eight *nei gong* palms in both the Cheng Ting Hua and Liang Zhen Pu styles of Ba Gua.**

Mother Palms", the "Eight Great Palms", the "*Nei Gong* Palms," or the "Inner Palms." In the most common posture, the hips are rotated in towards the center of the circle (about 45 degree off the path of the circle), the forward (upper) palm is held at eye level and is facing the center of the circle, and the eyes are looking towards the center of the circle through the index finger and thumb of the upper hand. In most schools, the lower hand is held 3 to 5 inches below the elbow of the upper arm, however, some schools hold the lower hand down in front of the *dan tian* (see the "guard stance gallery" on pages 16-17). The shoulders are relaxed and allowed to drop down, the back is slightly rounded. The elbows are bent slightly and allowed to sink down. The upper body is relaxed.

The head is positioned so that the eyes are looking straight into the center of the circle (not up, down, or to the side). Typically the practitioner will walk around a tree or pole so that there will be an object of focus during practice. The head and neck position is critical to avoid stress and strain in the neck and eyes after walking for an extended period of time. If the eyes are

not looking straight and the neck is not held erect, the eyes and/or neck can become tired or stiff after 10 to 15 minutes of walking. When muscles become tired or stiff, *Qi* does not circulate properly and becomes stagnant in that area. When *Qi* becomes stagnant in the head and around the eyes, it can be dangerous. The Ba Gua Zhang classics say "Hollow the chest, suspend the crown, and sink the waist."

## Why Walk the Circle?

The circle walk forms the foundation of Ba Gua Zhang training for a number of important reasons, each of them having to do with the development of fundamental physical skills, internal cultivation skills, and fighting skills. In this section of the article I will describe some of the physical benefits, internal skills, and fundamental fighting skills the Ba Gua Zhang practitioner gains from the practice of circle walking.

### Physical Benefits

The physical benefits of the circle walking practice include an increased overall physical strength, improved balance, full body coordination, and functional flexibility. Additionally, cardiovascular health can be improved with the walking conducted at a semi-rapid pace for a sustained period of time. While the basic circle walking practice will give the practitioner benefits in all of the above mentioned areas of physical skill, there are also circle walking variations and special methods which will specifically focus on each of these areas.

**Legs:** In terms of physical strength the circle walk practice will benefit both the legs and the upper body as well as torso and upper and lower body coordinated strength. Obviously the legs benefit from the walking itself. A practitioner who wants to focus on strengthening the legs will walk in a lower posture. Additionally, all circle walk variations (as outlined in the next section of this article) benefit the legs in different ways. In other words, the stepping method can be modified depending on what aspect of leg strength the practitioner is trying to develop. For example, some practitioners practice a high "crane step" whereby the foot of the stepping leg is lifted to about knee height before stepping forward. This trains the practitioner to be stable and balanced on one leg and thus provides a foundation for Ba Gua's leg trapping and sweeping techniques. Some practitioners take this idea a bit farther and walk on top of bricks, poles that have been driven into the ground, or different sized stones that have been arranged in a circular pattern. These are all methods of improving balance and stability while remaining in motion.

In addition to walking the circle in a low stance to improve leg strength or walking while utilizing the "crane step" to improve balance, there are other various methods of improving leg skill while walking the circle.



Some practitioners will pick up the stepping leg and then shoot it straight forward with force as if kicking to the lower part of an opponent's shins with their toes. This step, called the "thrusting step" or the "shake step," provides a foundation for some of Ba Gua's kicking methods. Some practitioners from the Yin Fu style will walk the circle with the stepping foot always landing in the *bai bu*, or toed out, position in order to train the use of this step in hooking an opponent's leg or kicking to the opponent's shin with the bottom of the foot. In general, a Ba Gua practitioner who is walking the circle with the focus on developing leg strength will primarily be concerned with leg strength which facilitates stable, balanced, and smooth whole body movement.

**Upper Body:** When training specifically for upper body strength the Ba Gua practitioner will walk the circle for long periods of time while holding static upper body postures. This practice facilitates the training and strengthening of secondary muscle groups and tendons. When holding the static upper body positions the practitioner will try to relax the major muscle groups and thus access the smaller secondary muscles and tendons which are responsible for body alignment and stability. These muscle groups are not usually under conscious control because they are not the muscles which actually perform physical body movements. Their function is to keep the body in place and stable while the bigger muscles are actually performing the movement of the torso and limbs. By holding upper body postures until the major muscles are fully fatigued, the secondary muscles have to work harder and thus they are trained more completely. Exercise such as weight-lifting work to strengthen the major muscles, however, do not train the secondary muscles and "stability" muscles fully. The result of static posture holding is a very stable, connected, and integrated whole body power. Practitioners who really want to get fanatical about this aspect of training will hold light weights in each hand (the practitioners of old used balls of mud or stones). However, most instructors recommend that students spend a very long time holding the postures without weights before adding light weights.

**Torso:** In Ba Gua it is extremely important that the torso (which will include the areas of the waist, hips, pelvis, and inner thighs) is strong and flexible. The torso provides the connection between the upper and lower extremities. In all internal styles the principle of power "coming from the legs, directed by the waist, and expressed in the hands" is very important. The "waist" in this case includes the inner thighs/groin area, the hips and pelvic region, and the lower torso. If the movement of the torso is not strong and coordinated with the entire body, the power in the legs will not be expressed in the hands.

During the circle walk practice the torso is trained during the change of direction. While practicing the basic circle walk practice most schools will change directions by executing the single palm change. The

movements of the single palm change are extremely important in training the torso. When changing directions and executing the twisting and turning movements of the single palm change the practitioner focuses on the movement being driven by the legs and being directed by the inner thigh/pelvic region.

Whole body coordination relies on the proper movement of the upper legs and lower torso and thus the change of direction on the circle during the circle walk practice also develops the practitioner's ability to coordinate the upper and lower body. Additionally, the turning and twisting movements executed during the change of direction on the circle serve to develop a functional flexibility.

By functional flexibility I am referring to training which works to stretch and loosen muscles that will need to be supple and loose during the execution of Ba Gua. It is great if someone can perform the full splits,

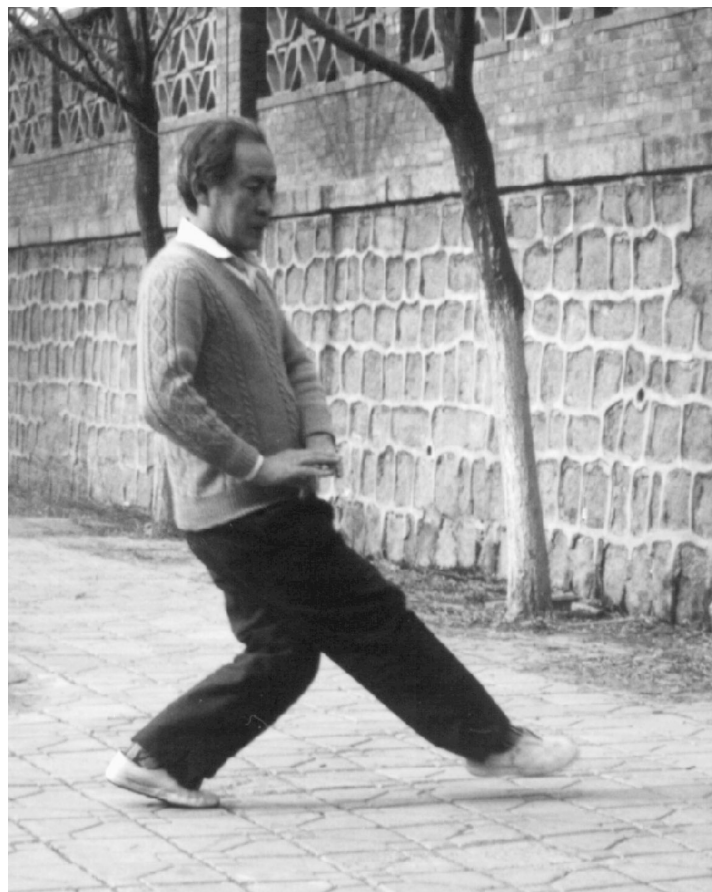


**Li Zi Ming's student, Zhang Hua Sen, walks the circle holding the "Heaven and Earth" palms**

however, performing the splits or being able to put your foot behind your head is not nearly as functional in Ba Gua as having a loose and supple twisting and turning movement throughout the whole body, especially in the pelvic region. There are many individuals who have very limber leg muscles, however, when asked to stand with their feet and knees facing forward and twist their hips as far as they can to one side or the other, they discover that the muscles in their pelvic region are not so loose. In Ba Gua functional flexibility involves twisting and rotating the muscles and suppleness in the joints. Twisting the legs, twisting the hips, twisting the torso, twisting the shoulders, and twisting the arms. Additionally, the twisting is executed in a coordinated fashion while maintaining whole body connection. These elements are all trained in the single palm change.

### **Internal Cultivation**

Internal cultivation during the circle walk practice involves the cultivation of a mind/body connection, the development of what is referred to in Chinese as "stillness in motion," a connection between the "inside and the outside," and a keen awareness of one's "center." During the circle walk practice the mind is calm and the breathing smooth. The combination of a calm mind and smooth breathing is the first step in creating a strong mind/body connection and a feeling of being "still while in motion" (the inside is "still"



**Sun Zhi Jun of Beijing, China demonstrates the extended mud walking step**

while the outside is in motion). Beyond that there are many different images and visualizations that different schools of Ba Gua will utilize during the circle walk practice in order to create a stronger mind/body connection. Some use something as simple as focusing on an object such as a tree or pole which is placed in the center of the circle while others have more elaborate visualizations. Some imagine walking through water, thick air, or waist deep mud, others imagine that they are walking on thin ice or on a very slippery surface, while others imagine energy moving in their body in various ways. The images and visualizations that can be used are endless. Personally, I have found the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle to be the most effective. The more elaborate the visualization, the farther removed from the concept of "stillness in motion" one becomes.

Awareness of one's center and how that center relates to the rest of the body while walking the circle and changing directions is another important concept. In Ba Gua the practitioner is very concerned with the relationship between his center and the opponent's center. He will want to "protect" his center while trying to off-balance the opponent's center. Additionally, most of the movements in Ba Gua require that the practitioner become skilled at moving from his center or moving around his center. Thus, the keener the awareness of the center and how it relates to the rest of the body during movement, the more effective and efficient the practitioner will become. The practitioner works to become aware of his center in the circle walk practice both during the walk and during the directional change.

### **Fighting Skills**

In Ba Gua Zhang fighting, footwork is primary. The footwork must be executed such that the upper body is always stable so that no movements are "telegraphed" and that the body is always rooted into the legs and ground. Additionally, this stability must be maintained even when the practitioner is moving quickly. All of the skills mentioned above, strength, flexibility, coordination, balance, awareness of one's center, etc., are important fighting skills which are trained, at their most basic level, during the circle walk practice.

In a combat situation, the most important skill for the Ba Gua practitioner is the ability to change directions rapidly and smoothly while maintaining balance and stability (rootedness in motion). Bending the knees slightly and sinking the *qi* to the *dan tian* when walking the circle in a smooth, continuous manner stabilizes the body and places the center of body mass and center of gravity in a position which optimizes the ability to maintain balance and rootedness while in motion.

The walking practice trains stability in motion and stillness in motion. Here the concept of "stillness in motion" not only refers to stillness on the inside, but also refers to stillness of the upper body while the legs are in motion. If the upper body is bobbing, swaying,

weaving, or otherwise moving with each step, you will be telegraphing your motion. The change of direction during the circle walk practice also trains the ability to move rapidly and efficiently around one's center. This skill is also extremely important to the Ba Gua fighter. For more information about circle walking as it applies to fighting skill see the article "Advanced Circle Walking: Training to Fight" on page 23 of this issue.

## Circle Walking Variations

As discussed above, there are many benefits the Ba Gua Zhang practitioner can gain from the circle walk practice. The circle walking method employed will depend upon the result desired. Below I will discuss several of the most common circle walking methods employed by Ba Gua practitioners. I have divided this section into stepping methods, body methods, and mental methods (use of intention).

### The Step

While there are literally dozens of different stepping methods Ba Gua practitioners will employ while walking the circle, there are three main methods which are practiced by most all schools. Each school may have their own special names for these steps, however, these three methods are most commonly known as the mud walking step (or snake step), rolling step (or lion step), and the crane step. Below I will outline the characteristics of these steps as practiced by several different schools of Ba Gua.

**The Mud Walking Step:** The "mud walking" step ( 蹚泥步 - *tang ni bu*), also commonly known as the "dragon step," the "gliding step," or the "snake step," is one of the most common Ba Gua stepping techniques. This step is not a method that is used very often in combat, however, it is an excellent training step and thus it is practiced by beginners in many schools. This step trains balance and stability in motion, thrusting or shoveling power in the legs and encourages an increased energy flow to the legs and feet.

Although there are numerous variations of this step being practiced by the various schools of Ba Gua, the basic step consists of the stepping foot sliding out along the ground, or hovering just over the ground, as the foot steps forward. As it is one of the most commonly practiced stepping methods in Ba Gua, a wide variety of variations have subsequently developed. In order to explore some of the mud walking step variations that are practiced today by various Ba Gua schools I will divide the mechanics of the step into three sections: picking up the rear foot, the actual step forward, and placing the stepping foot down.

1) Picking up the rear foot: While executing the mud walking step some practitioners never allow any part of the foot to raise up off the ground more than an inch or so. In other words, the entire sole of the foot always remains flat and parallel to the ground. This



**Sun Zhi Jun demonstrates the use of a deep bai bu step in trapping the opponent's leg**

means that when the rear foot begins to step forward the heel does not lift off the ground, the entire foot remains flat.

Practitioners of this method have several reasons for executing their steps in this manner. The first is that they are concerned with maintaining the entire foot close to the ground while stepping so that if an outside force hits them at anytime during the step, both feet will quickly be in a stable position on the ground. Li Zi Ming style Ba Gua practitioners walk in this manner and Li gives this reason in his book, "When either foot steps forward it is necessary to lift the foot flat and step on the ground flat so that neither heel shows nor the anterior of part of the sole shows. If either the heel or sole is visible, it would be impossible to stand stable at that point in time and would provide the opponent an opportunity to attack."

Another reason for practicing this step is to train the psoas muscle and inner thigh muscles to engage more completely while walking. If the entire foot remains flat while the rear foot is coming off the ground it requires that these muscles be used to lift the leg. When the practitioner learns to walk using the psoas and inner thigh muscles in a more complete manner when stepping the steps become very powerful and stable. After practicing this method the student will notice that the legs are better conditioned even when executing normal walking steps or any of the other Ba Gua stepping methods.

The second method of picking up the rear foot utilized by Ba Gua practitioners while executing the mud walking step is to allow the heel to come off the ground as in normal walking. The heel lifts slightly and then as the foot is brought forward it flattens

## The Mud Walking Step (Foot Remaining Flat)



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**

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## The Mud Walking Step (Heel Raising Up)



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**

out parallel to the ground. These practitioners are less concerned with working the psoas muscle and more concerned with the forward extension of the foot portion of the step.

2) Stepping forward: At least two variations on this theme exist, one where the foot is never lifted off the ground at all, but slides along in contact with the ground when stepping, and the other where the foot is lifted off of the ground slightly and hovers just over the surface of the ground when stepping.

While most practitioners will step forward smoothly with a consistent movement of the stepping foot, practitioners who practice the "hesitation step" will stop the forward movement of the foot momentarily when it reaches the position of the other leg. The stepping foot is held parallel to the ground and about an inch high off of the ground. The momentary pause helps the practitioner work on balance and stability while executing the step. This step is also referred to as the "chicken step" by some schools.

3) Placing the stepping foot down: In the mud walking step, when the stepping foot moves forward and is placed in position on the ground it can be done so in several different ways. Practitioners who allow the foot to slide along in contact with the ground during the entire transition forward will either allow the foot to stop sliding when they reach a natural stepping distance or they will push the foot forward a bit farther

after it has reached the comfortable stepping distance and thus they will execute an extended step.

Those practitioners who allow the foot to hover over the ground slightly as the foot is brought forward will place the foot down in one of four different ways. The first is to place the foot down flat so that the entire surface of the foot contacts the ground at the exact same time. The second is to place the foot down so that the toes dig in first and then the heel is set down. The third is to allow the toes to come down first and then continue to push the foot and allow it to slide forward in an extended step. The fourth is sort of a combination between the two different methods of bringing the foot forward. These practitioners allow the heel to rise up off the ground when they step and then they will flatten the foot so that it is parallel with the ground by the time it reaches the position of the opposite foot. At this point the foot is placed on the ground toes first and then slid forward on the ground and stops at a natural stepping distance.

The sliding of the foot forward in an extended step is trained primarily by individuals who like to use tripping and sweeping techniques. As they move towards the opponent they will quickly slide their forward foot behind the opponent's front foot or in-between the opponent's legs so that they can set up to lock the opponent's feet and legs before they execute a throwing, trapping, or tripping technique.

## The Rolling Step



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**

## The Crane Step (Foot Landing Flat)



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**

As you can see, there are numerous variations of the mud walking step in the execution of lifting of the foot, the transition forward, and the placing down of the foot. Other variations and combinations exist and each instructor will have their own methods of teaching and points of emphasis. Above I have simply described the most common variations in general terms. No one technique is more "correct" than the other, they all have merit.

**The Rolling Step:** The "rolling step," also commonly referred to as the "lion step," the "continuous step," and the "small fast step," is executed in a comfortable heel-toe walking fashion. Since it is the quickest most natural step and is easily and efficiently combined with the *kuo bu* and *bai bu* steps, it is often used in combat when speed and agility in motion are required.

The rolling step is very similar to natural walking, however, the knees are bent lower and the practitioner keeps the upper body stable without allowing it to bob up and down, wobble forward to back, or sway side to side. The hips, shoulders, eyes, and top of the head are all held level and the only movement occurs below the hips. The entire upper body remains relaxed, comfortable, and motionless. If someone were watching a practitioner walk the circle in this manner from the other side of a wall that was about hip height, the practitioner's upper body should be so smooth that it would appear as though the practitioner is sitting

on an object which is moving around in circles. The upper body should give no indication of what the feet are doing.

In order for the walking to be smooth and the upper body motionless the legs must act as shock absorbers and the heel-toe rolling motion of the feet must be very smooth. When the practitioner's heel is set down there is no thud, it is set down very light and soft. The transition from heel to toe is very smooth, as if the practitioner had small rocking-chair type rockers on the bottoms of the feet. The transition of weight across the stepping foot is very smooth and continuous.

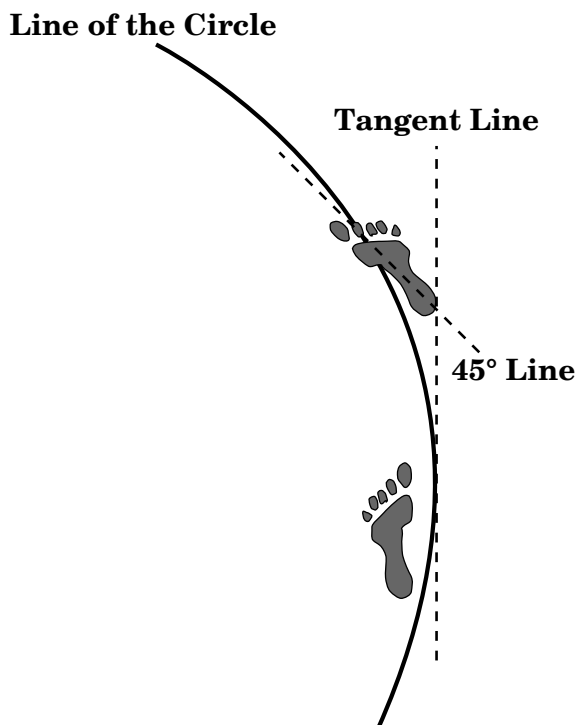
**The Crane Step:** The "crane step," which is also sometimes called the "chicken step," is executed with the stepping foot being lifted to about calf or knee height before it steps out. This step is primarily practiced to improve balance and rootedness on one leg for use when kicking, trapping, and sweeping with the legs. Yin Fu (尹福) was said to have been fond of utilizing the crane step. Yin Fu was also said to be so skilled at leg trapping and sweeping that his feet and legs were as sensitive as a skilled push-hands practitioner's hands and arms. Walking with the crane step will help to develop the balance and stability necessary for these leg skills.

In stepping forward with the crane step some practitioners will slide the foot out as in the mud walking step, some will step out heel-toe as in the

rolling step, while others will allow the foot to land flat so that the entire surface of the foot arrives at the same instant. In executing the crane step, some practitioners will step out smoothly while others will hesitate and balance on one leg before stepping out. The hesitation occurs when the stepping leg reaches the calf or knee of the other leg. The crane step is also typically the step which is used when practitioners practice walking on top of bricks, stones, or poles.

**The Foot Placement:** When practicing the circle walk, almost all schools that I have encountered have a similar foot placement in terms of the angle at which the foot is placed in relation to the line of the circle. The outside foot (foot furthest from the center of the circle) cuts in at approximately 45 degrees to an imaginary line which is tangent to the circle. The inside foot steps relatively straight ahead (parallel to the line which is tangent to the circle). Angling the outside foot helps the practitioner circumnavigate the arc of the circle. The exact angle of the outside foot will depend on the size of the circle, however, as stated above, this foot will usually angle in approximately 45 degrees when walking in an average sized circle (see illustration).

While each of the above mentioned stepping methods have their unique purpose in terms of foundational skill development, they also have purpose in fighting. Each of the stepping methods has an optimum time it can be employed in a fighting situation. Some steps are ideally suited to different kinds of techniques and different kinds of terrains. The stepping method employed (both linear and circular) in combat will



**Circle Walk Foot Placement**

constantly change depending on the situation, the opponent, and the environment. In all complete systems of Ba Gua there are complete methods of training and this means the usage of a wide variety of stepping methods in both practice and application.

## **The Body**

Here I will use the term "body methods" to describe the height of the body, the alignment of the body, and the upper body positions used when walking the circle. When speaking of body height in reference to Ba Gua circle walking practice, practitioners often refer to the "three basins" (*san pan* - 三盤). The three basins are the upper, middle, and lower, and refers to the height of the body as determined by the bend in the knees. In the upper basin posture the knees are only bent slightly. In the middle basin posture the knees are bent more and thus the body is lowered, and in the lower basin posture the knees are bent so that the thighs are almost parallel to the ground while the practitioner walks the circle.

Obviously, the lower one bends the knees while walking the circle, the stronger the legs will become. Lower basin posturing is primarily a leg strengthening exercise. The normal circle walking position is middle basin. One will walk in the upper basin posture if they are a beginner and have weak legs or if they are focusing the practice on the development of the upper body and do not want the legs to tire before the arms.

The alignment of the body when practicing the circle walk primarily has to do with the position of the torso, which includes the waist, hips, pelvic region, and inner thighs/groin area, and the spine. Some schools will teach the beginning students to walk the circle with the hips, shoulders, and head square to the path of the circle instead of looking in towards the center of the circle. In this practice the beginner is concentrating on the foot work and the hands are either held down by the sides of the body with the palms pressing downward or are in front of the body (either at lower abdomen or chest level) in an "embracing" posture. Some schools also utilize this body posture while holding arm positions where both hands are extended out to the sides of the body in some fashion (there are many variations on this theme).

Eventually all schools of Ba Gua teach the students to walk the circle with the eyes looking in towards the center of the circle. The body is twisted from the inner thigh area so that the hips are facing at a 45 degree angle in towards the center of the circle. The shoulders are aligned with the hips. The different upper body postures the practitioner will hold while walking the circle in this manner are many. Each school will have their own set of eight separate postures that they use. The most common posture is the "guard stance," which is also known as the "millstone" posture, the "dragon" posture, or the "green dragon thrusts its claws" posture. See the "guard stance gallery" on pages 16 and 17 of

*Continued on Page 18*

# The Signature Ba Gua Zhang Circle Walk



Zhang Zhao Dong (張兆東)



Huang Bo Nian (黃柏年)



Wang Shu Jin (王樹金)



Sun Xi Kun (孫錫堃)



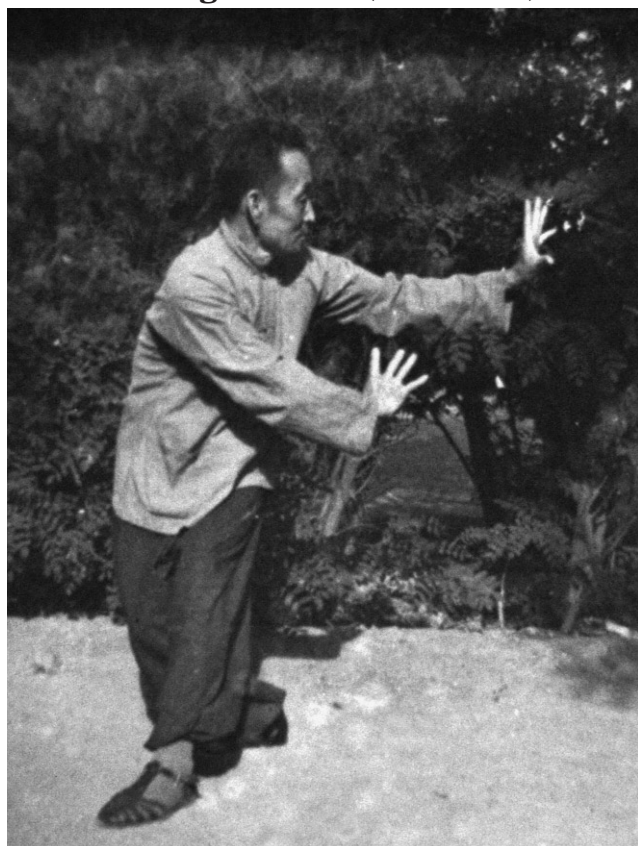
# Posture - A "Guard Stance" Gallery



Cheng You Xin (程有信)



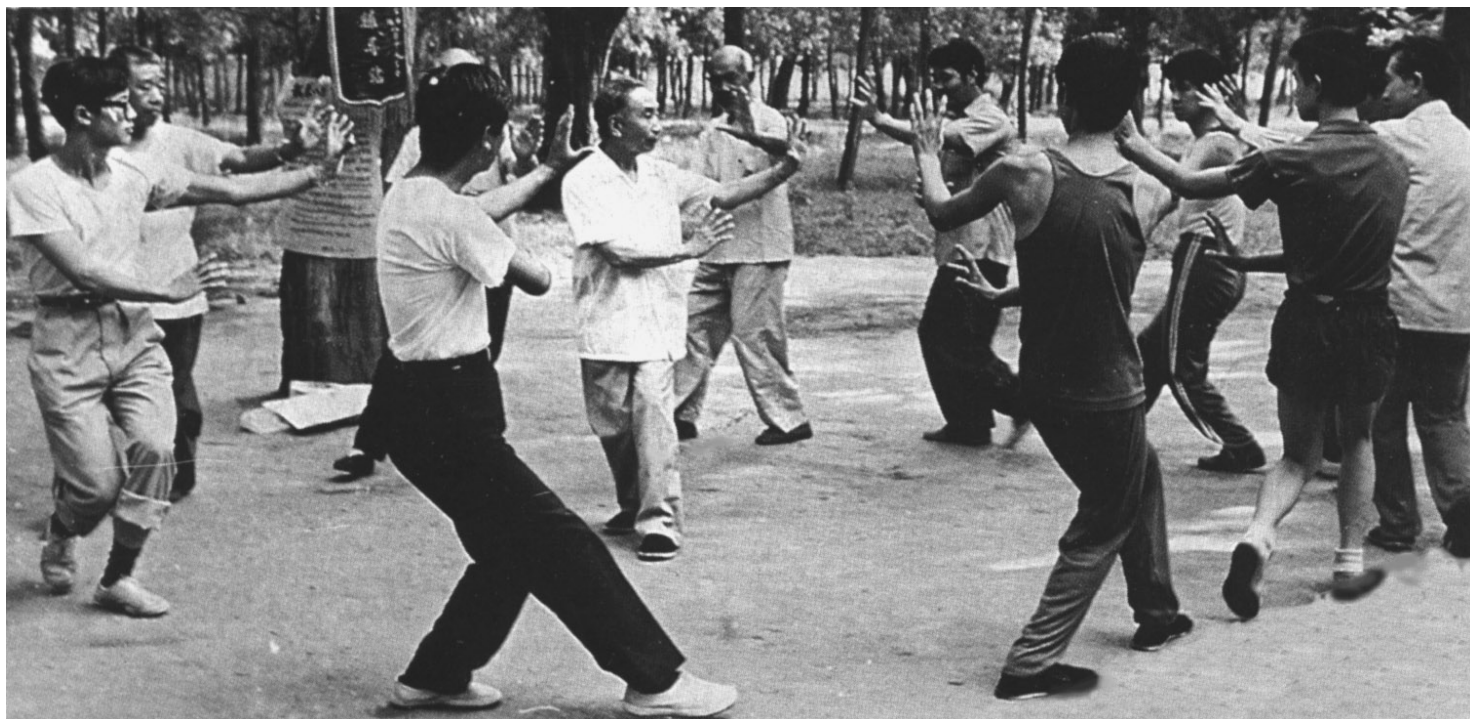
Fu Zhen Song (傅振嵩)



Liu Feng Cai (劉鳳彩)



Cheng You Long (程有龍)



**Ba Gua Zhang instructor Liu Xing Han teaches the circle walk practice to a group of students in Beijing's Temple of Heaven Park in the early 1980's.**

this issue for examples of this posture.

Another variation which occurs in the circle walk body posture is the position of the spine. While most schools will maintain a straight spine, some teachers will have their students hold the spine perfectly vertical while others will have their students tilt the spine forward slightly. The tilted spine, characteristic of the Yin Fu style, brings the body weight forward a bit so that it is centered between the legs (or just slightly in back of center). When the weight of the body is more towards the center, between the legs, the change of direction can be executed faster.

### **The Mind**

Mind/Body integration is one of the most important aspects of any internal martial art. Therefore, the mind plays a very important part in the circle walk practice. At the beginning levels, when the student is trying to work on becoming comfortable with the physical movements of the circle walk, the mind remains calm and relaxed, focused on the center of the circle, while gently reminding the body of the important points of practice. Basically the mind is trying to become aware of the physical body and thus takes a physical inventory. Are the elbows sinking downward? Are the shoulders relaxed? Are the steps light? Am I bobbing up and down or wobbling back and forth? Am I allowing my energy to sink to the *dan tian*? These kind of gentle reminders serve to increase body awareness and help the practitioner remember the important points of the practice.

After the practitioner becomes comfortable and familiar with the physical movements of the practice the mind can become increasingly aware of what is

happening in the body. Some schools of Ba Gua will teach certain mental visualizations designed to move energy in the body. While some of these visualizations can become quite intricate, most teachers feel that the mind should begin to become more quiet instead of more active. The physical movements of the circle walk and the changes of direction will move energy where it needs to go in a naturally correct manner. Therefore, the student should allow the energy to move as it will and simply observe the movement and become aware of how the energy is naturally moving in the body. Once there is an awareness, the student can then follow the natural movement with the mind. Most teachers simply recommend that the mind be relaxed, the energy sink to the *dan tian*, and that the mind have a keen awareness of the physical movement. If all movements are executed smoothly and continuously with focused intention then there can be a full mind/body connection.

### **Changing Directions**

In terms of learning how to apply Ba Gua in an actual combat environment, the change of direction is the most important component of the basic circle walk practice. It is within the change of direction that the techniques of Ba Gua are usually applied. The change of direction in the circle walk practice also trains the Ba Gua body coordination, full body integration, functional flexibility, and whole body power. The torso is trained so that the upper and lower body are in harmony and Ba Gua's rotational power is developed while executing the change.

The primary movement utilized to change direction during the basic circle walk practice is the single palm

change. The single palm change is the most important move in Ba Gua in terms of training the body and developing the power of Ba Gua. The single palm change is also the most important component of Ba Gua in its combat application. If a practitioner can learn how to execute and apply the single palm change properly, he will be well on his way to developing a high level of Ba Gua skill.

Like everything else in Ba Gua, there are many variations of the single palm change. Each school will execute the single palm change in a slightly different manner and within each school there are also many variations that are practiced. Ba Gua is based on the principle of change, therefore, nothing is fixed. In practicing any aspect of the art, whether it be stepping method, the single palm change, or any given technique, the Ba Gua practitioner will execute a wide variety of variations. I know of no complete system of Ba Gua that only executes one variation of single palm change. Most schools will have at least five or six different ways of executing this movement. Everything from the hand and arm positions, to the direction the body twists, to the positioning of the feet, to the positioning of the body are varied in the practice of single palm change.

## The Benefits of Circle Walking Practice

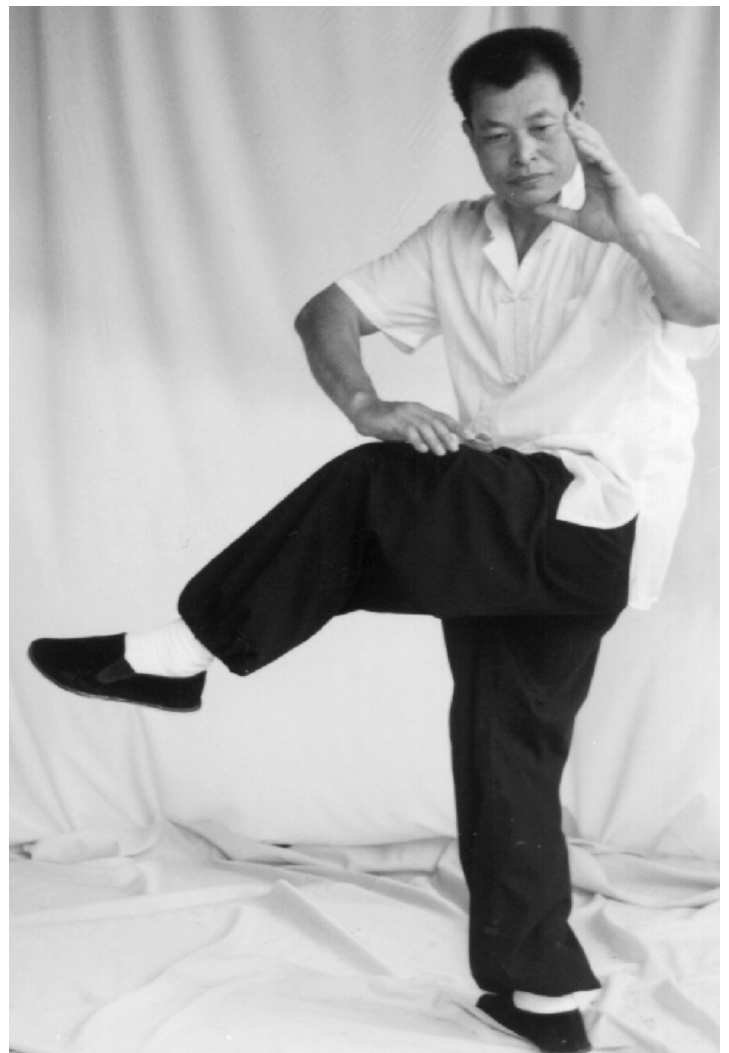
No matter what circle walking technique is utilized, if the practitioner is relaxed, the body is aligned properly and the intention is focused, positive results in the physical, mental, and spiritual realm will follow. The practitioner's primary goal in practice will determine the walking technique employed and the technique employed will result in a more pronounced level of growth in one or more of the components which make up our physical, mental, and spiritual existence. In this section I will briefly describe some of the direct benefits a practitioner might experience if the focus of the practice is in one of three areas: meditative practice, *Qi* development practice, and/or physical development practice. The Ba Gua Zhang purist will be concerned with development in all three of these areas in training the complete art.

### Circle Walking as a Meditative Practice

The circle walk exercise of Ba Gua Zhang originated as a Daoist *Qi* cultivation and meditative practice. In the world of Chinese martial arts, this practice can be compared to the *Zhan Zhuang* (站樁), or standing meditation practice which is an integral part of the Shaolin and Xing Yi Quan training systems. However, there is one important difference; in Ba Gua Zhang circle walking the practitioner is constantly moving. Zhao Da Yuan (趙大元), a well known Ba Gua Zhang student of Li Zi Ming in Beijing, China, states that the circle walk, or moving, meditative practice directly reflects the Daoist influence. The Daoists of the *Long*

*Men* sect were concerned with a unification of Man, Heaven, and Earth and therefore believed that if the meditative practice was conducted while in constant motion, one could better blend with the patterns of nature and absorb the *Qi* of Heaven and Earth. Zhao continues by saying that nothing in nature stands perfectly still and thus remaining in constant motion while meditating is more natural. Whereas the Buddhist meditation is static and the focus is inward, the Daoist circle walking practice is a moving meditation with the intention focused outward. In this circle walking practice, the practitioner seeks to blend with the natural world.

The practitioner who walks the circle with the meditative aspect of the training as a focus will walk at an even, fluid, steady pace. The speed of the walk can be slow to moderate. The walking step should be natural, comfortable, and continuous. The knees should be bent and the hips and waist sunk slightly so that the *Qi* sinks to the *dan tian*. Lowering the center of gravity encourages the *Qi* to sink; maintaining a smooth, fluid walking motion stabilizes the *dan tian* so that the *Qi* will settle. If the body bobs up and down or



**Lai Tian Zhao, a student of Wang Shu Jin who teaches in Tai Chung, Taiwan, lifts his leg high when changing directions on the circle to help train balance and stability**



**Liang Zhen Pu style Ba Gua practitioner Guo Guang Quan practices the circle walk in Beijing's Temple of Heaven Park everyday**

wobbles back and forth while walking, the *dan tian* will be disturbed. When the *Qi* sinks to the *dan tian*, the mind can more easily maintain a meditative focus.

While walking, the practitioner will maintain focused on an object such as a tree or pole which is placed at the circle's center. The breathing is smooth and relaxed and the practitioner may choose to repeat a mantra while walking as in the Daoist practice mentioned earlier in this article. This mantra does not need to be of religious significance, it can be as simple as repeating, in your mind, the number of times you have walked around the circle. It can be anything that will keep the mind from wandering.

Typically the practitioner will walk in one direction for a desired number of rotations and then switch directions and walk the other direction for the same number of rotations. Training sessions last between 30 minutes and one hour with the practitioner circumnavigating the circle's perimeter, alternating between the clockwise and counterclockwise walking directions. The method utilized to change directions will vary from school to school. When training the circle walk as a meditative practice, the change of direction is

always very simple and executed in a smooth and fluid fashion so as not to disturb the practitioner's mental focus and concentration. The upper body posture the practitioner assumes while walking will also vary from one school to another. The practitioner may choose to hold the same upper body posture throughout the practice session, or change the upper body postures with the change of directions on the circle. Each of the different upper body positions is designed to have a specific influence on the body's energy.

### **Circle Walking for Qi Cultivation**

Walking the circle with *Qi* cultivation as the main priority in practice will not differ greatly, in terms of mental focus, from the meditative circle walking practice discussed above. In the meditative practice the practitioner's goal is to maintain a calm mind and focused concentration while the *Qi* collects in the *dan tian*. In walking the circle for *Qi* cultivation, the mental focus and breathing pattern will remain the same, however, the walking step, body posturing, and direction change will become a bit more complex.

When walking as a meditative practice, the practitioner's step is smooth and natural. A natural heel-toe walking step executed in a smooth, fluid natural walking manner is well suited for meditative practice as it is the most natural and comfortable. This step is sometimes referred to as the "lion step" or the "tiger step" by Ba Gua Zhang practitioners. In walking with *Qi* cultivation as a priority, the practitioner may want to change the walking step to the "snake step" (also known as the "dragon step" or the "mud walking step") or the "crane step" as these stepping methods are designed to encourage a strong flow of *Qi* from head-to-toe.

In the "snake step" the heel is only brought up off the ground slightly when stepping, and as the foot is brought forward, the bottom of the foot remains parallel to the floor and hovers just slightly above the floor. When the foot has come forward and is ready to step down, it is placed on the ground such that the entire foot lands flatly on the ground at the same instant. There is no heel-toe rolling motion as in the "lion step." The "snake step" is a bit more difficult to perform than the natural heel-toe walk of the "lion step," however its advantage is that it helps bring *Qi* down to the legs and feet and thus it is a good method to employ in *Qi Gong* circle walking practice. The "crane step" is similar to the "snake step," in that the stepping foot slides out above the ground and is placed down flat, however, in the "crane step" when the back foot is picked up off of the ground it is brought up to the level of the knee of the other leg before it slides out to take the advancing step. Lifting the leg helps "pump" the *Qi* down to the stepping leg and also helps the practitioner develop balance and stability.

While the "snake step" or "crane step" footwork encourages a balanced flow of *Qi* to the legs while walking, the practitioner's static upper-body posture and focused intention will influence *Qi* movement in

the upper body. Each school of Ba Gua Zhang will typically have eight different walking postures which the practitioner will transition through during the course of the *Qi Gong* circle walking practice. Each posture is designed to have a different influence on the body physiologically and energetically.

Typically the practitioner will walk in one direction holding a certain upper body posture for a desired length of time and then change directions and walk in the opposite direction holding the same posture. Upon the next change of direction the practitioner will then change to a different upper body posture and perform circle revolutions in both the clockwise and counterclockwise directions holding that posture before changing to another posture.

By the end of the practice the practitioner has spent time walking in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions holding all eight of the static upper-body postures. Each posture is usually held for the same number of circle revolutions, however, since each posture influences the *Qi* circulation to the body's vital organs in a different manner, a student who is experiencing a particular health problem may be advised to hold one or two postures longer than the others in order to help his or her body seek a balance.

Holding a static upper-body position while walking the circle with focused intention and calm mind helps to balance the *Qi* in the body and gather *Qi* in specific areas as influenced by the unique posturing. The movement sequence executed while changing directions on the circle is designed to take the *Qi* that has been gathered and direct it to new locations. The movement of *Qi* will differ with each different changing maneuver. Some changes will promote a spiraling movement of the *Qi*, some changes will influence its movement upward or downward, while other changes will encourage the *Qi* to collect or disperse. Each change effects the movement of *Qi* in the body in a different way.

Through the process of continually gathering *Qi* during the static-posture walking phase of the practice and then moving it through the body during the various changing maneuvers executed when changing directions on the circle, the aware practitioner will gain valuable experiential knowledge concerning the ebb and flow of *Qi* in the body.

In his book, *The Fundamentals of Pa Kua Chang*,<sup>5</sup> Park Bok Nam recommends that the student practicing the *Qi Gong* circle walking method walk in one static posture until a "*Qi* feeling" is developed throughout the body. After the practitioner has cultivated the "feeling," he or she should then execute the directional change in a smooth, fluid, and connected manner so that the *Qi* feeling remains constant during the change. The focus while walking in the static posture is to feel the body fill with the energy of that posture. When executing the change, the awareness is placed on maintaining the full body *Qi* feeling while the body's energy shifts and adjusts with the physical movement of the change.

Upon ending the circle walk practice, Park Bok Nam recommends that the practitioner remain standing in a comfortable posture with the hands resting down by

the sides of the body for several minutes. Attention is focused on the palms and the *Qi* that has gathered there. The student allows the hands to hang loosely by the sides, relaxes all of the body's joints, and places the concentration on the "*Qi* feeling." Typically this "*Qi* feeling" will first manifest itself in the hands as fullness, heat, and/or tingling.

When the practitioner has obtained this *Qi* feeling during the execution of any exercise, he or she will want to relax for several minutes and concentrate on this feeling after the exercise has been completed. By concentrating on the feeling, a mind/body/nervous system connection associated with this feeling will develop. The more developed this connection becomes, the easier it will be for the practitioner to bring *Qi* to the palms or other parts of the body. With continued practice, the student will be able to produce this effect just by thinking about it. Later, increased amounts of *Qi* will flow to the palms naturally, when it is needed, without conscious thought.

One goal in practicing Ba Gua Zhang as a self-defense art is to be able to move *Qi* very rapidly to the palms (or any other part of the body) when striking. When the mind/body/nervous system connection has been fully developed, as soon as the body moves the *Qi* will be there and the movement of *Qi* to the palm will be rapid and spontaneous. Forging the mind/body/nervous system connection during and after the circle walk practice will help the practitioner reach this goal.

### **Circle Walking to Train Physical Strength**

Training physical strength while executing the circle walk practice can be accomplished in a variety of ways. If the practitioner wants to train the legs, he or she can walk in a very low posture or walk very slowly holding each step with the weight on one leg; if the practitioner wants to train balance and stability he or she can execute a walking technique which incorporates high steps, or walk the circle on top of bricks; if the practitioner wants to train the respiratory function or improve cardiovascular fitness, he or she can walk very fast for an extended period of time.

There is no set walking pace for the circle walk practice. I joined one class in Taichung, Taiwan, in their circle walk practice and it took us 45 minutes to complete 10 revolutions of a circle which was about 10 feet in diameter. Later, when I was in Beijing, I was walking the circle in a class where the teacher kept yelling faster, faster! At his pace I could have completed about 300 revolutions of the circle in 45 minutes. There is also no set circle size. While a circle of eight steps is standard, a larger circle is used by people practicing in big groups while a very small circle is used by those practicing advanced footwork drills and hip/waist flexibility training.

Practitioners wishing to improve upper body strength and full body integration will typically hold the static upper body positions for long periods of time before changing postures. When this practice is executed with the major muscle groups in a state of relaxation,

the secondary muscle groups and tendons begin to develop and the body is trained to work in a unified manner. This integrated and unified “whole body” strength is an integral part of developing power in the internal martial arts.

Zhao Da Yuan, of Beijing, China, states that the element that makes the circle walk practice “internal” is the link between mind and body that is forged during the circle walk practice. He explains that when the average person contracts a muscle, 45 to 50 percent of the muscle fibers in that muscle “fire.” A trained athlete, or a person who repetitively works a set of muscles performing a certain task, may contract about 70 percent of the muscle fiber in a given muscle for a given purpose. His theory is that if the practitioner holds a static upper body posture with focused concentration for an extended period of time, as in the circle walk practice, he or she will be able to develop the ability to get more muscle fiber to contract at the same time for the same purpose. Holding a static posture for an extended period of time, or moving very slowly as in Tai Ji Quan, a more complete physical development occurs than in exercises where the body moves rapidly. Secondary muscles are conditioned and the body learns to act in an integrated and unified fashion. Zhao states that if the practitioner trains the Yi (意 - intention) during the circle walk practice, and thus develops a highly refined physical awareness, the mind can better focus and control the body’s function.

Walking in very low postures, walking on top of bricks, holding one’s arms out until they are about to fall off, or walking around the circle at high walking speeds are all fairly extreme methods of practice. The truth is that if the practitioner walks the circle for approximately one hour per day, bending the knees so that body is at a mid-level stance allowing the Qi to sink to the *dan tian*, and walks at a moderate pace, changing directions on the circle every ten to fifteen rotations, and constantly insures that the body does not bob up and down or wobble back and forth while walking, the physical benefits in terms of leg strength, upper body conditioning, respiratory function, cardiovascular function, nervous system function, immune system function, Qi development, and peace of mind will be phenomenal.

## Conclusion

Ba Gua Zhang circle walking is not one exercise practiced for one specific purpose, but can be many exercises practiced to achieve a variety of physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. Variations on the theme are numerous. What we have presented in this article are only some of the most common circle walk methods. There are many other methods that we have not mentioned. Some schools walk the circle backwards, others walk the circle while facing outside of the circle instead of facing the center of the circle. Anything is possible as long as the practitioner adheres

to the basic principles.

Aside from the fact that the circle walk practice will help improve concentration and focus, develop strong legs, aid in Qi development, and improve physical and respiratory stamina, this practice helps the practitioner develop the ability to remain relaxed, integrated, stable, and rooted while in constant motion and teaches the practitioner how to execute the highly evasive footwork required in tactical application. This ability is vital when applying Pa Kua Chang as a fighting art.

Holding static upper-body postures while walking enables the practitioner to develop his or her body and forge strong structural connections and alignments. Maintaining structural integrity and root while constantly walking is the first stage of learning how to apply powerful strikes to an opponent while remaining in constant motion. As discussed previously, this ability is characteristic of Ba Gua Zhang.

In his book, *Liang Zhen Pu Eight Diagram Palm*, Li Zi Ming states: “Footwork and circle walking in Eight Diagram Palm requires the ability to walk quickly and slowly, to walk lightly and freely, and also to be able to walk gently with strong force. Proper training of the footwork requires strict adherence to these guidelines. This demanding regimen of leg training enables one to embody gentleness within lightness and to appear gracefully soft externally while concealing firm strength in the interior. The skill derived from this training enables the practitioner’s footwork to tread with stability, firmness, and nimbleness while maintaining flexibility and liveliness in the waist, arm and palm striking quickly and with agility. Only in this way is it possible to harmonize the three parts, that is, the upper, middle and lower and realize the goal of ‘the body following the steps to turn, the palms following the body to change and the steps following the palm to turn.’ This is the method to manifest the form of ‘walking like a swimming dragon, changing gestures like an eagle and turning the body like a monkey.’”<sup>6</sup>

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### Footnotes

- 1) Li Zi Ming, *Liang Zhen Pu Eight Diagram Palm*, translated by Huang Guo Qi, Compiled and Edited by Vincent Black, High View Publications, 1993, pg 43.
- 2) Ibid, pg 7.
- 3) Kang Ge Wu, “Studying the Origins of Pa Kua Chang,” 1984.
- 4) Li Zi Ming, pg. 14.
- 5) Park Bok Nam and Dan Miller, *The Fundamentals of Pa Kua Chang: The Method of Lu Shui-T’ien as taught by Park Bok Nam*, High View Publications, 1993, pg. 96.
- 6) Li Zi Ming, pg. 9.

# Advanced Circle Walking: Training to Fight

Everyone who has ever practiced Ba Gua Zhang has been given the lecture about the importance of the circle walk practice. Stories abound about the old masters having been allowed to practice only basic circle walking methods for the first several years of their Ba Gua training. While the previous article in this issue discussed some of the great benefits of the circle walk practice, many readers may still be wondering exactly how this footwork is employed in a combat situation.

The basic circle walk practice is primarily a training exercise that the beginning and intermediate level student practices to build a strong Ba Gua Zhang foundation. The advanced Ba Gua practitioner will also continue to practice the basic circle walk to continually reach deeper levels of internal awareness. No matter how long an individual practices the basic circle walk, there are always deeper levels to discover. When Ba Gua Zhang instructor Park Bok Nam was training with his teacher, Lu Shui Tian (盧水田), in Korea, his teacher required that Park practice the basic circle walk exercise every morning for one hour. At the end of one year of practice Park came to his teacher and said, "After practicing for one hour everyday for the past year, I now understand this circle walk practice." Lu only shook his head and laughed. He said, "Just keep practicing." After another year of practice Park came to his teacher again and said, "I now know why you laughed at me last year when I told you that I understood the circle walk practice. After practicing another year my knowledge is much deeper and I can say that I now really understand this practice." Again, Lu laughed, shook his head and told Park to keep practicing. Park has now practiced the basic circle walk exercise for nearly 35 years and he says that there is always something more to learn.

Although there are always deeper levels of experience one will gain from the basic circle walk practice, a skilled Ba Gua practitioner engaged in a fight is not going to walk in complete circles around his opponent. This is just not practical in a realistic situation against a seasoned fighter. If you are fighting a skilled opponent and take more than two or three steps in one direction, you have set up a pattern that he will immediately use against you. It is ridiculous to think that you will be able to stalk your opponent by walking in circles around him waiting for an "opening." If this is your idea about how Ba Gua circle walking is used in a real fight you are going to be in for a rude awakening when you meet a skilled opponent.

The key element in Ba Gua's employment of footwork is not to try and move in circles around the opponent at arm's length, but it is to either try to out flank the opponent or open up his center. In either case, as soon as you move, you are closing with the opponent,

not running around him. Your goal is to gain an advantageous angle of attack. Simply running around someone at arms length is a big waste of time in a real fight. A skilled opponent will eat you alive before you take your third step if you try such a thing. The only time this tactic might be used is if you are trying to bait the guy to set him up.

We can look at Ba Gua's employment of circle walking footwork from two perspectives; one is when the opponent initiates the attack and the other is if you want to initiate the attack yourself. Preferably you will initiate the attack yourself or bait the opponent into attacking you where you want him to attack you so that you can set him up. The idea that some practitioners have of Ba Gua being a "passive" and "defensive" martial art is a pile of "new age" nonsense. If you are going to fight with someone, you do not sit and wait for him to attack or walk in circles around him waiting for him to attack. You move in without hesitation and you flatten the guy in most efficient and effective way possible.

If the opponent initiates the attack and you chose to employ the circle walking footwork (circular footwork is not the only stepping method used in Ba Gua), the initial idea is to move out of the way of the opponent's



**Park Bok Nam executes advanced circle walk pole training practice**

attack. However, we do not want to simply run away, we want to move in such a manner that we avoid the opponent's attack while simultaneously setting ourselves in a position for immediate counterattack. Evasiveness in Ba Gua is not about running away from the opponent, it is about closing with and destroying the opponent as quickly as possible without meeting force against force. We do not want to engage directly, we want to be a bit sneaky about how we close with the opponent. We want to use optimum angles of attack and use the opponent's force against him, but we will do so very efficiently with no wasted movement and allowing no gaps for him to move. This means moving around his attack, but at the same time moving towards him and inside his defenses. A skilled opponent will immediately take advantage of any gap in either time or distance you give him to work with. Your footwork, body movements, and hand techniques should be executed such that the opponent has no time to react or space to move.

While evading an opponent's attack and instantly delivering a magnificent, fight stopping, counterattack is a dream come true, more times than not, it is not reality. If the opponent is skilled, he will not let you get away with it. We can also never forget about Murphy and his laws. If something can go wrong, it will go wrong. This is where having the ability to change direction very quickly while remaining stable becomes vitally important. When you launch your counterattack against your opponent's initial attack you are already "thinking" about what comes next and you are prepared for anything. (This "thinking" is more a body knowledge than an actual thought process. In other words, your body is prepared to continually attack, adapt, and move.) You never assume that your first technique is going to work. You never want to think like a "one shot wonder" who imagines his first attack, or first counterattack, will devastate his opponent. There are

many martial artists who feel that they can hit so hard that one shot is all it will take to defeat the opponent. There are others who think that they have some special techniques that no one can counter. "Welcome to fantasy island." If your opponent is skilled it will be very difficult for you to ever land your first shot and it will be even more difficult to land a direct hit with full force. You must be prepared to continuously attack while changing and adapting to the situation.

When training to fight you always imagine that your opponent is much bigger, much stronger, and at a much higher skill level than you are. You also must respect Murphy and consider that what can go wrong, will go wrong. Your mind must stay one step ahead of your body at all times, you use your listening skill and as soon as you feel how the opponent is reacting to your initial attack, you immediately change appropriately and continue attacking. The art of Ba Gua is philosophically rooted in the concept of change and physically rooted in the footwork and single palm change. Being able to change directions rapidly with balance, stability, and power is the important part of Ba Gua's use of the circle walk practice in fighting. Therefore, advanced circle walk training is focused on training these components.

In the second instance mentioned above, that of you yourself initiating an attack, the same principles apply. Initiating an attack is a three step process: gain a reaction, bridge the gap, finish him off. The first step is to gain a reaction from the opponent. This can be accomplished in any number of ways. This can also be viewed as a "set up" or a "jab," however, it is not simply a false ploy. Most of the time it is a realistic movement which will hurt the opponent if he does not respond to it. But we will always assume that he is a good fighter and will be able to successfully counter our initial movement.

The next step is the "bridge." The bridge is used to open up the opponent and get inside where we can really do some damage. The type of bridge which is used will depend upon the opponent's initial reaction to the first move. If the bridge is successful, then we can follow up with a finishing technique. If the opponent is skilled, we may need to employ several quick, repetitive bridging maneuvers before we can get inside on him or out flank him. Also, once inside we may need to apply a series of fast, powerful finishing techniques before the opponent is thoroughly defeated. Once the Ba Gua Zhang practitioner gets inside on the opponent, he will continue to stay inside until the job is finished. There is no bouncing in, striking once, and then bouncing back out as in sport fighting for points. Once you are inside, you stay until the job is finished. Again, it is your footwork that keeps you there.

A skilled opponent is not going to let you continue hitting him from a vulnerable angle, he is going to move. Utilizing your footwork, you stick on the opponent like glue. Where he goes, you go and you don't let up until the job is done. Park Bok Nam calls getting inside on the opponent "opening his door." He says that once



**Park Bok Nam executes the "figure eight" walking pattern around a set of three poles**





**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**



**Photo 7**



**Photo 8**



**Photo 9**



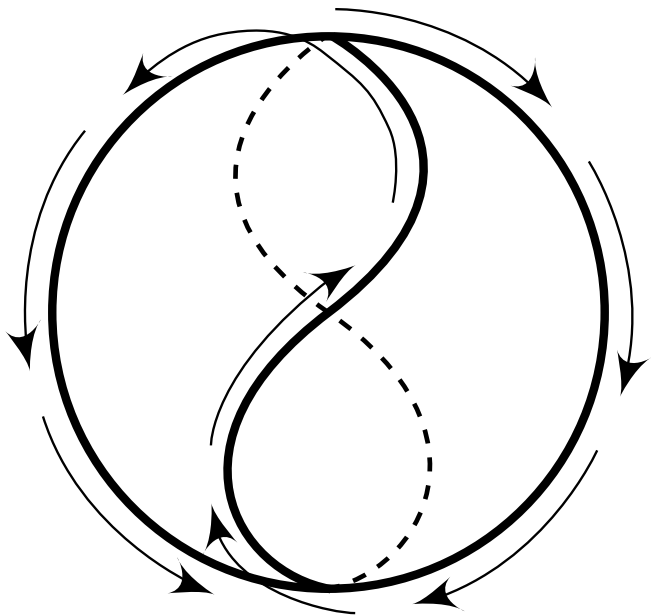
**Photo 10**

the door is open, you do not let the door close until you have finished the job.

Skillfully executed rapid changes of direction in conjunction with changing the palms and whole body power provide excellent opportunities to bridge the gap and open up the opponent. If you can execute rapid change of direction in combination with stable steps and flanking movements it will be difficult for the opponent to keep up with the changes. This is why the change of direction is so important in Ba Gua. In advance circle walking practice the circles become smaller and the change of direction more frequent.

In advanced circle walk training the practitioner learns to change directions rapidly while changing the palms and maintaining balance, stability, and full body coordination. While these concepts are also trained in the basic circle walk practice the difference here is that instead of continually walking around the center of the circle, in the advanced practice, the practitioner walks around the center while also moving towards the center. The circles become very small and the walking patterns turn into "figure eights" or spirals. Because of the difficulty of walking in tight circles and changing directions rapidly while maintaining balance, speed, and coordination, all of the important concepts that are trained during the basic circle walk practice must be in place before the practitioner moves on to the advanced circle walk training.

While each school of Ba Gua will have their own methods for developing the advanced circle walk practice, in this article we will explain the advanced practice as it is taught by Park Bok Nam. In Park's system the first practice a student will graduate to after the basic circle walk is the yin-yang circle walking pattern as shown in the diagram below (the arrows indicate the walking pattern) and the photographs on the previous page. The changing of the palms in this pattern is executed as the practitioner transitions



**The Yin-Yang circle walking pattern**

through the middle of the circle. A pole or tree is placed in the center of the circle and the changing of the palms and the directional change of the body is coordinated with the movement towards and around the pole as if the pole was an opponent.

The important component of this practice is the timing of the palm change, the smoothness of the steps and the ability to keep your center facing the opponent. In order to accomplish this, the turning of the body around its center as the palms are changed while you move around the pole becomes very important. You maintain a consistent optimum angle in relation to your opponent by turning your hips and shoulders at the appropriate time during the transition. The timing of the palms changing position and the rotational movements of the arms in conjunction with the rotating torso are also important points in this practice.

The yin-yang pattern is the first of the many patterns that are practiced as part of Park's "pole training." After the student has practiced the yin-yang pattern around one central pole and become proficient in the mechanics and timing of these movements, the practitioner will then begin to practice walking a "figure-eight" pattern around two poles. From there the student will progress to walking a double figure-eight around three poles. This pattern is demonstrated in the photographs on the opposite page.

When working with either the two or three pole configuration, the distances between the poles are varied so that the student will become accustomed to navigating smaller figure-eights and larger figure-eights. When working with three poles, the distance between each of the poles will be varied so that the first figure-eight around pole #1 and pole #2 might be small and the subsequent pattern around pole #2 and pole #3 might be larger. In addition to the figure-eight pattern, the student will also practice small circles around the various poles in conjunction with the figure-eight patterns. In other words, the practitioner might execute two consecutive figure-eight patterns around the three poles, then execute a full circle or two around pole #1 before continuing the figure-eight pattern. Varying the patterns gives the student experience in varying the timing of the palm changes, varying the footwork patterns, and the varying the coordination of the body's turning and twisting movements.

Walking in smaller, tighter circles, and changing directions frequently facilitates the development of the *kuo bu* (扣步) and *bai bu* (擺步) steps. The ability to apply *kuo bu* and *bai bu* quickly and efficiently not only teaches the practitioner how to change directions rapidly while remaining stable, it also develops flexibility and adroitness in the pelvic region. Additionally, the student begins to develop the ability to utilize the *kou* and *bai* steps in hooking and trapping the opponent's legs.

In addition to utilizing the *fan zhang* (翻掌), or overturning palm movement when navigating amongst the poles, the student will also practice changing amongst the "eight mother palms" that were also



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**



**Photo 7**



**Photo 8**



**Photo 9**



**Photo 10**



**Photo 11**



**Photo 12**

practiced during the basic circle walk exercise. By executing these movements the student not only becomes familiar with the rapid twisting and turning movements of the body, but he also becomes familiar with various basic arm movements. When the arms, body, and legs can all be coordinated while the practitioner is navigating the tight twists and turns amongst the poles, he will discover many new applications of these basic movements. Many of Ba Gua's throwing techniques come out of these changes.

Once the student becomes adept at changing amongst the poles utilizing the basic arm movements of the "eight mother palms" he will then begin adding striking and kicking maneuvers to the pole training practice. The poles are made from bamboo, rattan, PVC pipe, or some other flexible material that is buried into the ground. The practitioner can kick or strike the pole and the pole will have some give to it so that it absorbs some of the energy of the strike and bounces back. In this practice the practitioner will never stop moving amongst the poles while simultaneously kicking, striking, and rapidly changing directions. Some poles are kicked, some are hit, and others are not touched but evaded as the student continually moves around the poles. In this practice, the student learns to strike while remaining highly mobile and learns how to quickly change and move after a strike has been applied.

After the three pole practice, the student will move to four poles in a square pattern and then to five poles



**Park Bok Nam executes the pole training practice amongst poles positioned in a "tee-pee" pattern**

(one in the center and one on each side). Again, the distances between the poles are not always the same, they are all varied. After the five pole practice, the student will continue adding poles, one at a time as his practice improves, until there are nine poles, one in the center and then eight out to each direction. This is Ba Gua's famous "nine palace" pole training practice.

Many of the schools of Ba Gua practice the nine palace pole method. However, Park believes that it is important that the practitioner develop the pole training in gradual steps by first starting with one pole, then two poles, then three, etc. The training should be developed step by step. If the practitioner cannot utilize the proper movements when walking around two poles, he will only become confused if more poles are added. As each successive pole is added the student adds a new dimension to his practice.

There are many different "games" one can play while working the pole training method in order to develop different Ba Gua skills. Some poles are kicked, some hit, some avoided and the circular pattern is always varied. Sometimes small circles are executed, sometimes the circles are bigger, sometimes the figure-eight pattern is utilized, sometimes a spiraling pattern is employed; all possible variations are explored.

When Park was practicing the nine pole method with his teacher, Lu Shui Tian, Lu had tied a small rope to the top of each of the bamboo poles. As Park was circling, moving, and navigating amongst the poles Lu would pull on one of the ropes and one of the poles would shake. When Park noticed a pole shake he would immediately have to move in a attack the pole that was shaking. There are many such variations that can be practiced with the nine palace pole training.

The pole training practice in Park's system does not end with the nine palace pole arrangement. After the student has become familiar with working the nine poles, he will then remove the center pole and slant the four side poles in towards the center, thus forming a tee-pee shape with these poles. Utilizing this configuration the practitioner is not only required to navigate among the poles, but a height variable is added due to the slanting poles. While walking, circling, and turning the student must also adjust the body height to go under and around the slanting poles. The angle at which these poles are slanted can also be varied.

In the application of Ba Gua as a fighting art the practitioner must learn how to be highly mobile and evasive while at the same time moving in and continuously attacking the opponent. Evasion in Ba Gua does not mean running away or escaping an attack, it means avoiding the opponent's force and strength while simultaneously counterattacking at the most efficient angle and then continually changing as to maintain those efficient attacking angles until the fight is over. The advanced circle walking practice as described above helps the practitioner begin to develop this ability.

# Martial Arts Taught in the Old Tradition (Part III)

## What is Ba Gua Zhang?

Eight to ten years ago almost of the articles that were written in magazines about Ba Gua Zhang painted Ba Gua as being an "esoteric," "secret," or "mysterious" martial art. Most of those descriptions were simply being used in an effort to hype the article or the person writing the article. Whenever anyone talks about internal martial arts and uses the words "esoteric," "mysterious" or "metaphysical" my b.s. meter is immediately pegged. I think that instead of esoteric, secret, or mysterious a more appropriate word would be "misunderstood." It is natural to think of things that we don't understand as being "mysterious." As I have discussed in the last two segments of this article, the misunderstanding of Ba Gua Zhang is a result of fragmented teaching and the standardization which has occurred in mainland China as a result of the modern wushu. The fragmentation and standardization have both served to severely limit the way many practitioners view this art.

In my job as editor of the *Pa Kua Chang Journal* I have fielded numerous phone calls and answered dozens of letters from people asking, "Does Ba Gua use point striking?," "Does Ba Gua use the fist?," "Is there such a thing as linear Ba Gua?" I could probably construct a sentence that read "Does Ba Gua have \_\_\_\_\_?" and fill in the blank with any martial art technique except "circle walking" and "palm strikes" and find someone who has asked that question about Ba Gua. Most individuals who have heard of Ba Gua, but have not practiced it, would probably say, "Ba Gua? That is where they walk in circles and strike with their palms." That is the limit of their Ba Gua knowledge and thus they believe that is all there is to Ba Gua.

For years I have also been listening to Ba Gua practitioners, who look at what other Ba Gua practitioners are doing, say, "That's not Ba Gua, that's Xing Yi," "That's not orthodox Ba Gua, that is a synthesis," "Ba Gua doesn't have that, that looks like White Crane," "He is not walking the circle with the correct Ba Gua step," "He is not doing the correct single palm change." It reminds me of the old story about two blind men trying to describe an elephant after each has had the opportunity to feel opposite ends. They are both trying to describe and define the same thing from their extremely limited perspective.

Ba Gua has linear footwork, Ba Gua has point striking, Ba Gua has throwing, Ba Gua has kicking, Ba Gua hits with every part of the body, Ba Gua uses whipping energy, Ba Gua uses linear energy, and Ba Gua has joint locking. If it can be used effectively and efficiently in a fight, Ba Gua Zhang has it. It would be ridiculous to think that a martial art that has not only survived, but flourished for over 100 years would not utilize anything and everything that can be effectively used in combat. It would be like a country preparing for war and saying, "We are not going to have an Air Force because that is not part of our style."

Everyone tries to fit their idea of Ba Gua into a nice tight little definition. While I do not believe that any martial art can be strictly defined, the nature and philosophy of

Ba Gua, that of variation and change, is in vast contrast to the idea of concrete definition. Dong Hai Chuan (董海川) is said to have taught each one of his students differently based on their size, character, and martial arts background. Thus, Dong taught each of his students differently. This was his genius. He taught fundamental principles of body mechanics and tactical fighting strategies that could be incorporated into any given set of martial techniques or any given way to apply force. Ba Gua is an art of principle, not an art of technique, and thus there is a Ba Gua way to apply any technique from point striking to ground fighting. Once the student understands the physical, philosophical, and tactical principles of Ba Gua, they can apply those principles to any physical movement or technique.

If I were required to define Ba Gua Zhang, I would say that Ba Gua Zhang is a complete and effective martial art system which utilizes natural and efficient physical skills and strengths and *emphasizes* the use of evasive footwork, powerful palm strikes, and turning and twisting body motions while maintaining whole body strength and mind/body unity. Notice I used the word "emphasizes," not "is limited to." My viewpoint is that if the movement is natural and efficient, meaning that the body is relaxed, the mind and body are unified, and the alignments of the body are such that natural strength is being utilized instead of brute muscular force, and the movement is initiated in the legs, directed by the hips, and expressed in the hands in a natural, fluid manner then that movement, technique, or gesture could be a part of Ba Gua Zhang. While the flavor of Ba Gua suggests turning, twisting, and coiling motions in the footwork, body movement, and hand applications, and this flavor is evident in the movements and techniques of anyone who is practicing or using Ba Gua, Ba Gua is certainly not limited strictly to these movements.

In my opinion, anyone trying to define Ba Gua Zhang too rigidly is severely limiting themselves and the art. However, this tends to be the nature of the Western mind. In order to try and understand things, we in the West love to fit everything into a nice tidy definition. The analytical western mind habitually tries to divide the dynamic, ever changing aspects of reality into static and quantitative compartments. We seek to understand through compartmentalization and an attempt at concrete definition. However, by dividing things into small parts and trying to define them we miss a great deal because the reality of the whole is above and beyond the reality of the parts. It is the nature of our western mind to dwell on one thing at a time to the exclusion of everything else, to define things so narrowly that we impose upon ourselves a limited understanding. A study of any classical Chinese concept, including medicine, philosophy, or martial arts, utilizing the analytical tools we have grown accustomed to in the West only leads to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.



**Bodyguards and caravan escorts, like those shown above in this photo of a famous bodyguard company in China, being realistic fighters, were more concerned about what worked than what style the techniques came from.**

In the old days (prior to 1920) the practitioners of martial arts did not try and strictly define styles or standardize any martial arts forms or techniques. If something worked, meaning that it was efficient, effective, and natural, it was good. Definition of styles and standardization of teaching and practice did not begin to occur until the 1920's in China when the martial arts were organized and taught publicly (see the part 2 of this article in the previous issue of the Journal). When I was in Shanghai in 1991 and studying Yang style Tai Ji with Fu Zhong Wen (傅鍾文) some individuals were asking him about the differences between this style Tai Ji and that style Tai Ji. Fu said, "In the old days no one was concerned about what style of Tai Ji anyone practiced, Tai Ji was just Tai Ji. It wasn't until later that people started to try and differentiate Tai Ji into different styles."

Prior to the 1920's most of the martial artists in China practiced martial arts to gain jobs as bodyguards, residence guards, caravan guards or for use in protecting their home village. In other words, they trained in order to use their arts for real. Because they trained in a certain style, and each style of martial arts does have its characteristic flavor, the flavor of their motion and technique was representative of their style. However, if you are fighting for your life, you are not going to exclude techniques, moves, or gestures that work. Every complete system of martial arts has kicking, sweeping, trapping, throwing, striking with all parts of the body, grabbing, seizing, locking, point striking, and about any other thing one could think of to use in a fight. Back then in Northern China martial arts was martial arts, you learned as much as you could to stay alive. Each art has its specialty, but that doesn't mean anything else was ignored. Today martial artists become to compartmented because they only study the one aspect of their art which is that art's special aspect. They are not studying the complete system. This is also how fragmentation occurs in the martial arts.

Again, the genius of Dong Hai Chuan was that he invented an art based on certain principles of body motion and fighting strategy and then taught his students how to apply those principles to the techniques they were already good at. He taught Yin Fu (尹福) how to apply Ba Gua principles to his Shaolin (少林) technique, he taught Cheng Ting Hua (程庭華) how to apply the Ba Gua principles to his Shuai Jiao (摔角) techniques and he and Cheng Ting Hua taught Li Cun Yi (李存義) and Zhang Zhou Dong (張兆東) how to apply the principles to their Xing Yi. In other words, Ba Gua principles can be used when applying any given movement or technique and the result will be Ba Gua. Ba Gua is an art which is founded on principles, not a set of given techniques.

I think that the martial artists who say, "Ba Gua has this and Xing Yi has that, and Tai Ji has this other thing," have a very narrow view of what the internal martial arts are about. Each art emphasizes certain things and executes everything with their own flavor, but it is ridiculous to think that some internal arts have some moves while others don't. If it is efficient and effective, it will be used. Ba Gua uses straight line footwork and Xing Yi uses circular footwork. This is not a Ba Gua man executing a Xing Yi technique or a Xing Yi man executing a Ba Gua technique. From the start Ba Gua had straight line footwork and Xing Yi men practiced circular footwork before Ba Gua was even invented. Xing Yi's *Pan Gen* (盤根) exercise, which looks exactly like Ba Gua circle walking in a small, tight circle, was written about in the *Earth Dragon Canon* (地龍經 - *Di Long Jing*) and handed down by Li Neng Ran (李能然). So you cannot look at a Ba Gua man practicing straight line sets and say "That comes from Xing Yi," or look at a Xing Yi man walking in circles and say, "That comes from Ba Gua." Complete systems of martial arts contain all efficient and effective aspects of martial movement and technique. It is ridiculous to think otherwise.

## ***Pa Kua Chang Related Periodicals***

**Qi: The Journal of Traditional Eastern Health and Fitness:** Insight Graphics, Inc., P.O. Box 221343, Chantilly, VA 22022 - Steve Rhodes and his crew at Insight Graphics continue to provide readers with interesting information relating to all aspects of Traditional Eastern health and fitness. The magazine is produced in a very high quality format.

**Journal of Asian Martial Arts:** 821 West 24th Street, Erie, PA 16502 - This is a high quality publication which provides well researched articles in a scholarly fashion.

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### ***1994 Calendar of Pa Kua Chang Workshops and Seminars***

<u>Instructor</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Contact for Information</u>
<b>Park Bok Nam</b>	Mt. Madanna, CA	29 Sept. - 2 Oct	Dan Miller (408) 655-2990
<b>Park Bok Nam</b>	Seattle, WA	8 October	Glenn Wright (206) 584-4647
<b>Kumar Frantzis</b>	New York, NY	22-23 October	Frank Allen (212) 533-1751
<b>Zhang Jie</b>	Santa Fe, NM	22-23 October	Jim Cox (505) 474-2871
<b>Kumar Frantzis</b>	Brookline, MA	27 October	Bill Ryan (617) 277-2975
<b>Park Bok Nam</b>	Boston, MA	15 November	Marc Sachs (508) 668-2239

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# Pa Kua Chang Instructors Directory

**Frank Allen**  
342 E. 9th St.  
New York, NY 10003  
477-7055

**Bai Guang Tao, O.M.D.**  
P.O. Box 1307  
Norwich, VT 05055

**John R. Baker, D.C.**  
9971 Quail Boulevard #803  
Austin, TX 78758-5791  
(512) 873-8105

**Loriano Belluomini**  
S. Andrea Di Compito 55065  
Lucca, Italy  
0583/977051

**Vince Black, O.M.D.**  
P. O. Box 36235  
Tucson, AZ 85740  
(602) 544-4838

**John Bracy**  
151 Kalmus, #M-7-B  
Costa Mesa, CA 92626  
(714) 557-8959

**Jim Burchfield**  
4168 South Saginaw St.  
Burton, MI 48529  
(313) 743-1450

**Col. (Ret.) Y.W. Chang**  
2731 Palmer Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
(504) 861-3674

**Peter Chema**  
60 McLean Ave.  
Yonkers, NY 10705  
(914) 965-9789

**Wai Lun Choi**  
2054 West Irving Park Road  
Chicago, IL 60618  
(312) 472-3331

**Robert Claar**  
Box 6291  
Carmel, CA 93921  
(408) 394-7921

**Joseph Crandall**  
1564A Fitzgerald Dr. #110  
Pinole, CA 94564  
(510) 223-9336

**James C. Cravens**  
1040 D West Prospect  
Oakland Park, FL 33309  
(305) 938-6992

**Daniel Crawford**  
Peaceable Hill  
Brewster, NY 10509  
(914) 278-2558

**Kenneth S. Cohen**  
P.O. Box 234  
Nederland, CO 80466  
(303) 258-7806

**Andrew Dale**  
P.O. Box 77040  
Seattle, WA 98133  
(206) 283-0055

**Frank DeMaria**  
105 Kramers Pond Rd.  
Putnam Valley, NY 10579  
(914) 528-3192

**Joe Dunphy**  
211 N. Fredrick Ave.  
Gaithersburg, MD 20877  
(301) 921-0003

**Joseph Eagar**  
150 E. Mariposa  
Phoenix, AZ 85012  
(602) 264-4222

**Larry C. Eshelman**  
2814 Broad Ave.  
Altoona, PA 16602  
(814) 941-9998

**Dan Farber**  
173 Jersey St.  
Marblehead, MA 01945  
(617) 631-6966

**Bryant Fong**  
P. O. Box 210159  
San Francisco, CA 94121  
(415) 753-3838

**Robert Fong**  
P.O. Box 2424  
Bellingham, WA 98227

**Kumar Frantzis**  
1 Cascade Drive  
Fairfax, CA 94930  
(415) 454-5243

**Andrew Glover**  
3308 18th St.  
Davenport, IA 52804  
(319) 386-7204

**Glenn Guerin**  
134 E. Kings Highway  
Shreveport, LA 71104  
(318) 865-3578

**Kenny Gong**  
241 Center St. 31 Fl  
New York, NY 10013  
(212) 966-2406

**Nick Gracenin**  
28 North Pine Street  
Sharon, PA 16146  
(412) 983-1126

**Adam Hsu**  
P.O. Box 1075  
Cupertino, CA 95015  
(408) 973-8762

**George Hu**  
2206 Woodlake Park Drive  
Houston, TX 77077  
(713) 493-3795

**Chien-Liang Huang**  
8801 Orchard Tree Lane  
Towson, MD 21204  
(301) 823-8818

**Andy James**  
179 Danforth Ave.  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M4K 1N2  
(416) 465-6122

**Jang Kui Shi**  
P.O. Box 1677  
Santa Cruz, CA 95061

**Jiang Hao-Guan**  
1490 College View Dr. #1  
Monterey Park, CA 91754

**Ray Hayward**  
2242 University Ave.  
St. Paul, MN 55114  
(612) 782-0387

**Benjamin Hill**  
1626 Sedwick Ave  
Bronx, NY 10453  
(718) 294-8320

**Jerry Alan Johnson**  
P.O. Box 52144  
Pacific Grove, CA 93950  
(408) 646-9399

**Stanley Johnson**  
847 Jadewood Dr.  
Dallas, TX 75232  
(214) 283-9136

**James Keenan**  
P.O. Box 1173  
Lowell, MA 01853  
(508) 460-8180

**Jan Lane**  
346 East 9th Street  
New York, NY 10003  
(212) 777-3284

**Stephen Laurette**  
123 Madison St.  
New York, NY 10002  
(212) 629-2004

**Brian Lee**  
821 San Mateo Rd.  
Sante Fe, NM 87501  
(505) 986-0969

**Johnny Kwong Ming Lee**  
3826 Manatee Ave W  
Brendantown, FL 34205  
747-0123

**Leung Kay Chi**  
53 River Street  
Central Square, MA 02139  
(617) 497-4459

**Shouyu Liang**  
7951 No4 Road  
Richmond, B.C., Canada  
V6Y2T4  
(604) 273-9648

**Lin Chao Zhen**  
685 Geary St. P.O. Box 605  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 921-6978

**Lin Chih-Young**  
84-35 Corona Ave  
Elmhurst, NY 11373  
(718) 779-5909

**Edgar Livingston**  
224 South Haven St.  
Baltimore, MD 21224  
(301) 732-4890

**Kevin Lovas**  
3852 Parkdale  
Cleve Hts, OH 44121  
(216) 382-6759

**Nan Lu, O.M.D.**  
396 Broadway, 5th Floor  
New York, NY 10013  
(212) 274-0999

**Ray McRae**  
30 W. Carter Dr.  
Tempe, AZ 85282  
(602) 345-1831

**Bow Sim Mark**  
246 Harrison Ave  
Boston, MA 02111  
(617) 426-0958

**Chick Mason**  
1130 Beaver St.  
Bristol, PA 19007  
(215) 464-6548

**Dan Miller**  
620 Lighthouse Ave.  
Pacific Grove, CA 93950  
(408) 655-2990

**Harrison Moretz**  
8007 Greenwood Ave. N.  
Seattle, WA 98103  
(206) 784-5632

**Al-Waalee Muhammad**  
P.O. Box 301216  
Houston, TX 77230-1216  
(713) 661-2107

**Dr. John Painter**  
1514 E. Abram St.  
Arlington, TX 76010  
(817) 860-0129

**William Palmeri**  
16404 North Aspen Dr.  
Fountain Hills, AZ 85268

**Park Bok Nam**  
11101 Midlothian Turnpike  
Richmond, VA 23235  
(804) 794-8384

**Mike Patterson**  
8204 Parkway Drive  
La Mesa, CA 92041  
(619) 698-6389

**Richard & Iva Peck**  
7312 Zephia Cir.  
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**Chris Quayle**  
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**Peter Ralston**  
6601 Telegraph Ave  
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**Russell Sauls**  
3438 Hwy 66  
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**Rick Schmoyer**  
1907 Electric St.  
Dunmore, PA 18512

**Sheng Lung Fu**  
116 East Pender St.  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada  
432-1153

**Jacopo Silicani**  
Via Sette Martiri, 32  
35143 Padova, Italy

**Michael Smith**  
8511 #2 Rd.  
Richmond, B.C. Canada  
(604) 241-0172

**Edward Star**  
1220 Market, N.E.  
Salem, OR 97301

**Gary Stier, O.M.D.**  
2300 Lake Austin Blvd.  
Austin, TX 78703  
(512) 445-1950

**G. S. Torres**  
932 15th St. Suite #4  
Miami Beach, FL 33139

**Carl Totton**  
10630 Burbank Blvd.  
No. Hollywood, CA 91601  
(818) 760-4219

**Jason Tsou**  
330 S. San Gabriel Blvd.  
San Gabriel, CA 91776  
(818) 287-0811

**Eric Tuttle**  
P.O. Box 2166  
Kingston, Ontario  
Canada K7L-5J9  
(613) 542-9025

**Larry Walden**  
3806 Olympic Blvd. W.  
Tacoma, WA 98466  
(206) 564-6600

**Liqun Wang**  
1921 Walnut St  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
(215) 977-8963

**Li Wang**  
440 Hawkeye Ct.  
Iowa City, IA 52246  
(319) 353-4599

**Timothy Warfield**  
5th & Lehman St.'s  
Lebanon, PA 17046  
(717) 274-9840

**Fred Weaver**  
110 E. 43rd St.  
Kansas City, MO 64110  
(816) 561-7183

**Alex Wang**  
3314 Venables St.  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada  
(604) 251-1809

**Brian Weatherly**  
4846 Gary Rd.  
Bonita Springs, FL 33923  
(813) 495-3919

**Martin Werner**  
510 N. Alma School #173  
Mesa, AZ 85201-5458  
969-9471

**Y.C. Wong**  
819A Sacramento St  
San Francisco, CA 94108  
(415) 781-4682

**Glenn Wright**  
P.O. Box 11272  
Tacoma, WA 98411  
(206) 584-4647

**Dr. Fred Wu, Ph.D.**  
520 Dendra Lane  
Worthington, OH 43085  
(614) 885-7512

**Grace Wu**  
122 1/2 N. St. Francis  
Wichita, KS 67202  
(316) 264-9640

**James Wu**  
24156 Kathy Ave.  
El Toro, CA 92630  
(714) 583-1096

**Wen-Ching Wu**  
PO Box 14561  
East Providence, RI 02914  
(401) 435-6502

**George Xu**  
4309 Lincoln Way  
San Francisco, CA 94122  
(415) 664-4578

**Yang Shu-Ton**  
290 West Ave., Suite D  
Tallmadge, OH 44278  
(216) 633-1914

**Jane Yao**  
50 Golden Gate Ave, Apt 502  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 771-7380

**Robert Lin-I Yu**  
2113 Sommers Ave.  
Madison, WI 53704  
(608) 241-5506

**Yu Cheng Huang**  
P.O. Box 166851  
Chicago, IL 60616-6851  
(708) 679-3113

**Luigi Zanini**  
via Faccio, 73  
I - 36100 Vicenza  
ITALY 0039 444 563696

**Zhang Gui-Feng**  
2844 Hartland Road  
Falls Church, VA 22043  
(703) 698-8182

**Zhang Jie**  
1402 Northeast 155th St.  
Seattle, WA 98155  
(206) 368-0699

**Zhang Hong Mei**  
750 Myra Way  
San Francisco, CA 94127  
(415) 334-8658

**Zhang Hong-Chao**  
3729 North Ravenswood  
Chicago, IL 60613  
(312) 883-1016