

If you're prepared to "walk the walk," you will eventually learn one of the greatest gifts China has to offer.



This final step of the "earth gua" sequence. Note the defender's left hand has pushed under his right, sealing the attacker's arm and allowing the sword to continue.



THE Line IN THE Circle

BY LEWIS PALEIAS

The “jian,” a narrow blade, double-edged straight sword, has been revered and respected as the “King of Short Weapons” throughout thousands of years of Chinese culture. It is one of the most difficult weapons to perfect. According to an old proverb, “A hundred days of barehand, 1,000 days of spear, and 10,000 days of sword.”

Lacking the strength and power of the saber, it requires speed, technique, and finesse. While the saber was a military-issue weapon, the sword became a symbol of the scholar class and the aristocracy. Along with its obvious self-defense uses, it was felt that the “Art of Fence” could also improve health and refine one’s character.

Although there are vast differences between the myriad styles of Chinese kung-fu, whether northern/southern or internal/external, almost all sword forms take on the characteristics of “fast tai chi” — that is, smooth, flowing, graceful, darting (in and out). Only ba gua zhang straight sword appears startlingly different; the body gliding gracefully clockwise and counterclockwise around a circle while the sword is held still, piercing the center.

Ba gua is an art of principle, not an art of technique. Dong Hai Chuan’s genius was that he took an art based on certain principles of body motion, footwork and fighting strategy and taught his students (all seasoned martial artists) how to apply these principles to the arts with which they were already skilled.

The usual progression of learning ba gua is barehand, saber, staff, spear, straight sword and specialty weapons (such as deer-hook swords, wind/fire wheels, double hook swords and scholar pens). The movements associated with each weapon develop the body in ways that barehand training cannot. The weight of the weapon (ba gua weapons are extra heavy and long) changes the way the body moves, and the mental and spatial awareness changes as you send your energy and intent out to its tip. The reality of weapon training in ba gua zhang is that, since it is an art of principles, anything can be used as a weapon. (To prove

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this, one of my teachers picked up two pillows and beat me senseless with them. I'm just glad it wasn't a Coke can.)

From basic sword forms, you progress to sensitivity drills, two-person parry/counter drills, and target hitting, which all lead to true fencing.

The Eight Energies

Just as in the barehand sequence, there are "eight mother palms" in the jian set. These eight basic energies are *zou* (walking the circle); *zhuan* (turning left or right); *fan* ("overturning" — twisting the wrist inward while walking clockwise); *gou* ("wrapping" — twisting the wrist outward while walking counterclockwise); *an* (pressing down with the sword); *ti* (lifting the hilt upward), *liao* ("scooping" — cutting with circular motions); and *chuan* (stabbing or piercing in any direction).

Walking the Circle

The trademark of ba gua is walking the circle. Dong Hai Chuan often said, "Training martial arts ceaselessly is inferior to walking the circle. It is the font of our training." Naturalness is the most important element to cultivate. Before any forms, simply walk the circle with the sword. As you learn to blend with the sword, the awkwardness and disconnected feeling will gradually disappear as it becomes an extension of your body. Walk slowly, gradually increasing speed, your attention focused through the sword's tip to the center of the circle. Keep your weight on the rear foot as it propels you forward in a smooth and balanced manner with no bobbing or weaving.

The Big Beginning: Wu Chi Posture

"Wu chi" refers to chaos — the state of energy before the creation of the universe.

1. Stand comfortably in a high horse with the sword held in the left hand straight up behind the arm and the right relaxed at your side. This is the first "standing meditation."

2. Squat, lifting the sword horizontally chest high and blade flat, and



The defender stop-hits (*chuan*) his attacker before she can swing (1). He then deflects and parries (*sao*) in an arc (2). He up cuts (*ti*) by lifting the hilt (3).



This is an example of *tiao* or support. As the attacker moves in (1), the defender circles off her line to the right (2) and cuts under her wrist from the outside to the inside (3).

cover the hilt with the right hand.

3. Step back (left foot first) and stand straight with heels together and toes turned out into an open "ba stance;" the arms hang down at the sides with the right hand holding the sword pointing out horizontal to the ground and the edge vertical. Again stand this way for a while without moving. As there are two dots in the yin/yang symbol, this is your second wu chi meditation.

The Big Bang

From stillness comes movement: "tai chi." Tai chi is when, at the instant of creation, the swirl of chaos is separated into the archetype energies of the universe: yin and yang.

4. Sink down a little, pierce the center of the circle with the sword palm down, while the left hand (in the "secret sword hand position") moves under the right. Form this by keeping the index and middle fingers together and pointing straight while the fingertips of the thumb and other two fingers curl and touch. The Sun style holds this hand form differently.

5. Continue sweeping your sword horizontally to your left side (palm up), while not moving the left (your arms are now crossed). Focus down the tip of the sword.

The Heaven (Tian) Gua

6. Swing the sword in front of you, lifting the hilt to your forehead while the blade remains vertical but still at heart height, ending in an up cut with the palm facing out. Simultaneously, the left hand moves down in front of your groin while your left heel lifts off the ground. Pause.

7. Sweep the sword upward and out to the right side shoulder height, blade horizontal, while separating the left hand out to the left (palm down) and stepping the left leg out to the left.

8. Continue the swing by turning the palm up and sweeping the blade toward your left and angled close to the ground. Your right hand stops in front of your abdomen; your left fingers touch your right arm while your right leg steps close to your left foot in the pigeon-toed "ba stance."

9. Keep lifting the hilt in an upward cut until your right hand is level with your mouth.



This is the application of tuo or support. From the on-guard position (1), the attacker smashes down (2). The defender circles to his left and cuts under the wrist from inside to outside (3).



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— Dong Hai Chuan



This is the application for zao or circle walking. From the on-guard position (1), the defender steps to the left and shaves his attacker's wrist (2). He continues circling and pierces to the left (3). He then spins to "ba step" and slashes behind the knees (4).

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10. Separate your hands as you step out with the right leg and pierce the center of the circle with the sword, your left hand pushing up and outward, palm out. The right palm and wrist are twisted inward; the sword held horizontally with the blade vertical. Take a half-step out with the right leg and walk the circle clockwise, blade piercing the center.

The Earth (Kun) Gua

11. On the eighth step, place the left foot next to the right in the "ba stance."

12. Step out with the right foot to

the right as you swing the sword horizontally (waist high) to the right, palm down. The left hand swings down to the lower left, palm down.

13. Step with the left foot next to the right in "ba stance," while you finger jab with the left, palm up.

14. Step out with the left leg while you pierce the sword to the left, sword horizontal and edge vertical with the palm twisted out and the back of palm in front of your forehead. Your left hand is wrapping across your body and thrusting, palm down, to your right. Step out with the left leg and walk counterclockwise. Change to clockwise circle walking (Heaven Gua) by repeating steps seven-through-ten.

Perseverance is the Key

I was once told that learning ba gua was like entering "graduate school." As walking is the cornerstone of this art, just keep walking the circle. The combination of a calm mind, smooth breathing, and natural movement is the first step in creating a strong mind/body/spirit connection. When you become comfortable in one stepping method, try another. There are many stepping methods in this art: mud walking, rolling step, crane step, and tiger step, to name a few. If you're prepared to "walk the walk," you will eventually learn one of the greatest gifts China has to offer. ☯

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Spinning to the Outside. The attacker swings from the inside out (1). The defender swings the attacker off line in to a "ba" and deflects (2). He then cross-steps with his right leg and his left hand pushes her elbow (3). He spins his left leg into "ba" and chops down on her spine (4).