

Master Gao Jiwu talks about his Martial Arts Experience

The first art I learnt was changquan (longfist) as well as weapons such as straight sword, broadsword, spear and staff. With this solid foundation established, my father began to teach me baguazhang, taijiquan and xingyiquan.

We refer to the art we practice and that my father passed down as Gao Style baguazhang this is because my father Gao Ziyong did not only learn baguazhang. He also studied xingyiquan, taijiquan and dachengquan. What's more, all of his teachers in these arts were exponents of the highest level. He learnt xingyiquan from Li Cunyi, taijiquan from Yang Chengfu and dachengquan from the founder Wang Xiangzai.

Gao Ziyong, my father, paid great attention to making the art he learnt truly functional. He was not concerned with techniques that are pretty but with those that worked. As well as the teachers listed as his official masters he also trained with many others. For example he took the Crane Step from the Song family style of baguazhang. This he recognized was worth practicing so as to train root, balance and coordination. Furthermore he saw such training as a kind of moving qigong with its own intrinsic value. Our whole family came from a tradition of not only learning the martial arts but also of really using them.

My grandfather Gao Wencheng was once challenged by a rich external boxer whose nickname was Nan Ba Tian. This man was a meat wholesaler and extremely wealthy. He was also very strong and practiced with an extremely heavy dadao (large saber) as well as using very heavy weights. He said that he did not believe that baguazhang would work against his boxing and so Gao Wencheng invited him to attack any way he wished. He charged in and my grandfather stepped around him so that his front foot was behind Nan Ba Tian's back leg. At the same time he inserted both his arms under his armpits and used his shoulder to bump him across the courtyard and out of the front gate into the street. Now Nan Ba Tian was a gentleman and he immediately acknowledged that he had lost and knelt before Gao Wencheng offering to become his disciple. My grandfather said that this was not necessary, but the defeated Nan Ba Tian insisted on treating Gao Wencheng and 100 guests to an expensive dinner. This was a man who understood wu de (Martial Morality).

My father was able to learn from so many prominent masters because of the reputation his father enjoyed and because at that time the masters of all these internal styles were friends and they exchanged knowledge. For example when Gao Ziyong learnt xingyiquan from Li Cunyi, he was only in his early teens. He was learning from his father's friend. There was no need for him to become a disciple.

Gao style baguazhang is how we refer to our art because my father took his knowledge, experience and skill in all these arts and applied them to his baguazhang.

At the foundation level of training emphasis is placed on the hexing bu (crane form stepping); this is the basic walking learnt. Only after the student has learnt he xing bu does he go on to learn the more common tan ni bu (mud treading step) This is done in order to learn four fundamental facets of baguazhang movement. These are song, wen, man and yuan ? Relaxed, stable, slow and smooth.

Song (alert relaxation) is a concept that many people are familiar with as emphasized in taijiquan but in baguazhang the use of song is somewhat different. In baguazhang we concentrate on song in two places, the shoulders and the hips. The rest of the body must have jin (power).

Once the student has begun to manifest the four attributes to some degree he or she is able to progress to the tan ni bu (mud treading step) which trains the body in basic skills. The exponent learns to sink the hips, to move backwards and forwards smoothly with speed and stability. This ensures that when the baguazhang exponent is in action he naturally has these attributes.

Another important aspect of our foundational training is the practice of zhan zhuang (standing post). My father emphasised this due to his training with Wang Xiangzai. This is a stationery practice but then we have our own moving qigong, which is the first circle-walking form that the student learns, the dingshibazhang (fixed eight forms palms). This form is first practised with the he xing bu. The stepping is coordinated with the breathing. This form, thus practised, not only promotes good health but also develops jingli (power).

In order to really master baguazhang, in my opinion, the most important thing is to “lian yi bu lian li”, that is to train the intent not the strength. This means that correct strength or power comes from correct intent.

What characterises the internal martial arts is that we train the intent first, then the energy (qi) comes from this and finally the strength or power comes from the energy. In Chinese this is referred to as yi,qi,li (intent, energy, strength). In the external martial arts the initial emphasis is on xing, the shape or form. In baguazhang this is not so important unless of course you are talking about demonstration to impress others.

In baguazhang ultimately we train to have yi, qi and li together in the same way that we have both hard and soft supporting each other ; you might say mutually complementing each other.

When all is said and done however, the most important baguazhang training practice is walking the circle. Whenever you have time walk the circle. The other thing is to practise palm changes. What differentiates baguazhang from other arts, its specialities shall we say, are agile footwork and constantly changing palms. These changing palms are to be found in the 64 hands form, all of which may be practised on bags or trees . In Beijing we use trees both to walk around and to hit.

Like Taijiquan, Gao style baguazhang also has pushing hands although it is not emphasized as greatly as in taiji. We have single-hands pushing hands and double hands shiliroushou (testing strength pliable hands). Through these methods we learn how to develop and use ting jing (listening energy). When you listen in this way you can hear your opponent’s strength and that is the time to attack !

Our pushing hands is different in intent and focus from that of taijiquan pushing hands. In taijiquan we try to be as song and sensitive as possible, focussing on yielding. In baguazhang our power is much more positive and obvious, not hard coming from soft but hard and soft together, supporting each other.

In order to get the most from pushing hands you must learn how to concentrate your power into the specific points where your opponent is applying force against you. For example against a push to your shoulder you meet the opponent’s force at the shoulder and raise your own front hand so that the wrist intercepts with your opponent’s arm. The two points of force must meet his force exactly, this neutralizes him precisely and thus constitutes jie jing (intercepting power). This allows you to use ting jing (sensitivity) to ascertain the direction of their force and then you can neutralize it. When You can use jie jing (intercepting force) to meet their power then you can change. In baguazhang we never fight against the opponent’s force. Instead when we meet it we change. You must have the ability to defend, attack and turn a force to the left or the right. Forward and backward movement depends on your follow-stepping ability. When you are training pushing hands you must treat every opponent as a friend whom you can learn from. If they have a particular skill then you can learn it from them. Never miss an opportunity to exchange skills with anyone who has them.

Apart from this we also practice all of the 64 hands techniques with a partner, each taking the role of either attacker or defender.

In some styles this is practised as a continuous, flowing sequence but we practise only one or two moves at a time. Certainly the moves may be connected to run together but sometimes the result is a little bit contrived.

If you are a serious student of the martial arts you must be wary of what you hear or believe concerning secret teachings. Some teachers have a high level of skill but are, by way of character, conservative. They do not want to give out freely what they have worked so hard for. Such people often refer to this or that secret.

Another type of teacher is the one who does not have much knowledge so he jealously guards what is his. In the case of the first type, they have expended much time, money and effort to acquire something so that they feel their students should do the same.

In the case of the latter, they don't really have enough to teach so they jealously guard what little they have, again under the guise of secrecy.

My father Gao Ziyang was unlike either of these types. He had a great deal to teach and he desperately wanted to teach it. His greatest fear was that his students should fail to attain any level of skill.

Finally I should like to give some simple advice to those who truly wish to master baguazhang. First of all the student must be diligent; but also that they must make sure that they are learning from a teacher who teaches correctly. Then the student must train bitterly, what we call in Chinese *kulian*, that is they must be able to work very hard and put up with a great deal of pain. This *kulian* is a painful process.

At the same time they must be diligent in ensuring that they practise correctly and adhere to the principles. With good basics, a strong foundation, powerful and flexible legs and waist then they will surely make good progress.

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