

Taking The Fangs From The Snake

by Glenn Moore

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“Take the fangs away from the snake and it can not bite you,” explained my teacher, Master Bok-Nam Park. Although it was many years ago, I can still remember that phrase vividly. I had just finished one of the hardest fights of my life and felt like everything in my body was broken or at least bruised. I felt a little humiliated and ashamed of myself. Not only was the person I just fought larger and faster than me, he also had the longest arms and legs of any human I had ever met. We struggled for a long time and finally, in total disgust with myself, I grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground - taking a few punches in the process. After I had him on the ground, he panicked and I was able to choke him out with a Judo hold that I had remembered. You would be totally amazed at what you can remember when someone is pounding on your head. Not too graceful or glorious of a victory, but I could just not get by those arms and legs to do any damage to his head or body. I was lucky that we were the only two people in his school at the time, or I’m sure his students would have finished me off while I was trying to choke him out.

I had driven over three hours to challenge him, and had plenty of time to think as I drove back to my teacher’s school. I knew that my teacher would be angry with me because I had been fighting. I also knew that there was a serious flaw in my fighting method and that he was the one that could correct it. As I got closer to the school, I tried to decide just why the fight had gone so badly and why I couldn’t penetrate to my opponent’s body or head to do any damage. That was the question I had to ask.



“Take the Fangs from the Snake and It Can Not Bite You.”.

When I arrived at the school, my teacher was not there. He had stepped out and would be gone for a while. I hurried to change my clothes, do my warm up and stretching exercises, and just generally be ready to ask questions when he came back. About a half hour later, he came in, and I could tell he was not happy. Someone must have ratted me out about the fight. I knew that I should not have told anyone about my plans. Finally, I got up the nerve to ask him my question. He looked at me real funny like and said something about wasting his time because my head was full of rocks. Finally, he stopped what he was doing and said, “Take the fangs from the snake and it can not bite you.” I just stood there, waiting for a little more information, because I did not want to confirm his remarks about my head being full of rocks.

He looked at me, sighed as if to say he understood that my head was indeed full of rocks, and began to show me what he meant about the “fangs of the snake.” For about an hour I had a lesson that I will never forget. The lesson started with my teacher asking me to put my hands up in a guard position and attack him. Have you ever had one of these types of lessons? Knowing that each time you attack you are going to pay a formidable price but the information you gain somehow makes it worthwhile. If you have ever trained with an Oriental teacher, I would be willing to bet that you have had at least one lesson of this type. Some of the information gathered from that session is the subject of this article and I hope that you will be able to use it in your quest for martial knowledge.

Ask most students what their best targets are in a sparring match, and the response will usually be the oppo-

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ment's head or body. This is a reasonable reply especially from tournament fighters since tournament rules usually limit the targets to the body and the head. But in real fighting, it is desirable to first take the "fangs" away from any opponent. Now, it is clear that humans do not have real fangs, but they do have hands, arms, legs, and other body parts that can be used as weapons. The more of the opponent's weapons that can be removed from action, the more opportunities will become available to reach that elusive torso or head target without paying a penalty. In our system of Ba Gua Zhang, as taught by Master Bok-Nam Park, this is done by utilizing many different Ba Gua principles including Jab+Bridge+Finish, Distance, Angle & Degree, Speed Combinations, Whipping Body Motion, Elbow Strikes, and Stepping (including Circle Walking Stepping). We will discuss some of these principles in this article.

The Principle of "Jab + Bridge + Finish".

First, let's talk about the principle of Jab+Bridge+Finish. In order to make an effective attack, all elements of this principle must be applied. As a confrontation begins, both opponents are searching for a way to attack. If both are sophisticated in their fighting abilities, they won't just try to bang away at each other. They will each try to formulate a strategy for attack that will place them in a position to initiate their attack successfully, and that will also cause some type of disharmony in their opponent's defenses. Ideally, this would be a move that places the attacker in a position where he or she could attack continuously without the worry of being counterattacked. In Ba Gua, if an attack is begun with a technique that leaves the attacker open for an immediate counter then the attack is not sound and is not complete.

The Jab.

This first move, the Jab, not only must place the attacker in an advantageous position but also should distract the opponent. The Jab can be something as simple as a look or a body twitch, but in Ba Gua the preference is to hit a pressure point or nerve in some part of the opponent's hand, arm, or leg. This can be quite painful and will focus the opponent's mind on the pain and away from his or her intended fighting strategy. The execution of this type of Jab is not as simple as it may sound. It requires studying the anatomy of the limbs until these sensitive points and nerve locations are easily spotted with the eye. Then, it requires many hours of practice to hit them properly, accurately, and reliably. These Jabs must be repeated hundreds of times in practice. The student utilizes a partner who plays the role of an opponent. When the student thinks that he or she has a specific Jab technique down, the practice partner will change his or her position and angle slightly and the practice will begin again. This is done to give the student experience in adjusting to changing looks and circumstances.

The Bridge.

After the Jab, the attacker's continuity should carry him or her into some type of Bridging movement. This might be a blow to a point of the limb close to the body, a Chin Na application, or a sticking motion, which carries the attacker to the opponent's body. Master Park emphasizes that a Ba Gua practitioner should be able to apply Chin Na at any point after a blow is struck. Conversely, after any Chin Na application is applied, a blow should be able to be delivered. This makes for a very refined method with only small amounts of movement required in both the Chin Na and the striking techniques. However, in keeping with the Ba Gua goal to first "take the fangs away from the snake" an initiating blow would be the most appropriate technique to apply. The attacker could follow with another hand technique or, by "folding," he or she could bring the elbows into play. The elbows are a particularly devastating weapon at this range and can become a Finish as well as a Bridge. In Ba Gua, tremendous time is utilized in honing the use of the elbow as a weapon. It is practiced until it becomes a learned response.

In Ba Gua, all movement "just happens" after the attack is initiated. Master Park often says that there is only one idea and everything that happens after that is in reaction to environmental input or is a learned response not requiring any thought. This only comes from continual practice of technique and from meditation to make

the mind calm so that it does not miss the input. This does not happen quickly. It is very easy to see why there are so many casualties and dropouts in internal martial arts today. Society demands instant gratification, and internal martial arts demands patience and constant repetitive work.

The Finish.

The Bridge can often be the end of the fight but to complete the attack one must follow through with the Finish. The Finish comes out of the Bridge and it can develop into a body or head attack. If this is done, it is always as a continuation of the movement started with the attack initiation. Lien Huan, or Continuation of Motion, is important for Speed Combinations to be utilized. Speed Combinations are a series of techniques in Master Park's Ba Gua method that are practiced repeatedly for smoothness, speed, and power. When a Speed Combination is utilized as a Finish, it would only look like a blur of motion to an observer. Master Park's advice is to "open the door" (either front, side, or back), make an entry, and complete the attack before the door can be closed again. Ba Gua practitioners who become good at this spend many hours repeating their Speed Combinations over and over again. They work out the continuing numerical combinations as defined by the Yi Jing (I Ching), and "bore themselves to death" repeating them. But, boredom has its own reward in this case. I have seen both Master Park and my Senior, Glenn Wright, strike more than thirteen times in one second with great power. Yes, boredom has its own reward.

I hope that the following illustrative sample application will give you an idea of what I have been referring to when I say "Take The Fangs From The Snake."

Sample Illustrative Self-Defense Sequence.

This self-defense sequence demonstrates how one might "take the fangs out of the snake" by disabling the opponent's leg when he kicks. Master Park loves to attack vital points on the legs when the opponent throws a kick. A well-placed punch to a vulnerable point on the opponent's ankle, knee, or hip can render the opponent's leg useless. Some might think that it is dangerous to attack an opponent's leg with a punch because you may be leaving your face unguarded if the opponent follows the kick with a hand attack. In order to insure that the opponent is unable to successfully use a foot/hand combination, Master Park always pays strict attention to angles of attack, distance, speed, and accuracy. If the components of distance, angle, and speed are properly executed, the opponent will be left without an opportunity for counterattack.

These principles of distance, angle, speed, and precision are studied in great detail in Master Park's method. Ba Gua Zhang is highly effective only if the practitioner has a great appreciation for subtle angles of attack and defense, and utilizes these angles along with a finely tuned knowledge of distance. You cannot be sloppy or careless and expect to gain skill in Ba Gua. Because the photographs of this illustrative self-defense sequence only show four snapshots of the action, some of the techniques may not look very effective to the uninitiated. However, when this sequence is executed with a high degree of speed and precision, they are extremely effective.



*Photo #1: Attacker Throws a Front Kick,
Defender Strikes at Foot*

The attacker throws a straight front kick. Master Park intercepts this kick before it has reached its peak acceleration or peak power. He applies a straight punch to the small bones of the opponent's upper foot. He has adjusted the distance between himself and the opponent so that if he misses the kick with his punch, the kick

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will not hit its mark and the opponent cannot quickly attack with his hands.

Important Point: (When using the fist in a straight punch, Master Park always teaches his students to use the top two knuckles of the fist aligned with the bones of the forearm so that there is a great deal of stability in the punch and support in the bones of the hand. Unless the alignments are correct, there is a good chance that the hand can be broken if the opponent has a powerful kick. However, if the alignments are correct and the punch properly applied, it will be easy to break bones in the opponent's foot and not suffer even the smallest ache in your hand. Details of correct body alignment must always be considered when executing any strike.)



Photo #2: Defender Then Strikes at Knee

Immediately after striking the opponent's foot, Master Park will step in towards the opponent, execute a pivot step, and quickly strike the opponent's knee with his fist. He adjusts his angle to be to the outside of the opponent's body and off of the opponent's line of attack. Since he has closed with the opponent, getting this outside angle will make it difficult for the opponent to effectively utilize his hands in a counterattack.

Important Point #1: (This one-two punch sequence to the foot and knee is executed very quickly. One aspect of Master Park's Ba Gua method that makes it so effective is the speed at which all of the combinations are executed and the precision of the body placement. Master Park's students train repetitive footwork and speed combination drills hundreds and thousands of times in order to gain the speed and precision necessary to make all of these techniques effective. Without the proper foundation in both the repetitious footwork drills and the speed combination hand training, it is difficult to properly execute many of these attack sequences against a skilled opponent.)

Important Point #2: (From this point in the sequence, Master Park can choose any number of possible follow-on techniques. He might choose to use his fist or elbow to attack the opponent's hip joint. He could easily move around to the back of the opponent and attack the kidneys and/or spine. He might choose to kick or sweep the opponent's right leg. There are any number of possible ways he could continue this attack.)



Photo #3: Attacker Continues with a Punch,
Defender Blocks

Here, we have the attacker trying to counterstrike Master Park with his left hand. Master Park quickly changes his right hand from a fist to a Yang Palm (palm facing upward) in order to block the strike. This short, quick, tight motion can be quite powerful when executed with the whipping action of the body. This maneuver sometimes called "Unicorn Whips its Head" or "Giraffe Whips its Neck," is a very common technique in Master Park's Ba Gua method and the power generation mechanics are practiced frequently. When this move is executed optimally, the motion is very small and the opponent's strike is deflected very efficiently in that there is minimum motion for maximum effect.

Important Point: (In Master Park's method of Ba Gua, students learn how to execute every striking/blocking technique with both "heavy" (Yin) power and "shock" (Yang) power. Additionally, the power can take on characteristics which range anywhere in the Yin/Yang continuum. In other words, a strike/block can be soft, light, and adhering; it can be heavy, redirecting, and controlling; it can be quick, fast, and percussive; or any combination of these characteristics can be applied. Looking at the technique in Photo #3, Master Park could apply a very sharp, crisp, percussive whipping power in order to damage the opponent's arm or he could utilize a soft, receptive energy in order to redirect the opponent's strike to set up for the next move. The situation and feeling of the moment will usually dictate which response is most appropriate.)



Photo #4: Defender Then Strikes at Body

From the position in Photo #3, Master Park once again has numerous options for the finishing technique. Here he chooses a single palm strike to the opponent's upper chest. This strike can easily damage the opponent's heart and/or lungs, depending on how it is applied. If Master Park chooses to apply this single palm as a "heavy" rather than a "shock" strike, he could set up a throw by sweeping or locking the opponent's front foot at the same time that the "heavy" strike is applied.

Important Point: (If the opponent had tried to strike with his right hand, Master Park could have blocked with his left hand and continued on with a right single palm strike or even a double palm strike to the opponent's upper chest. Remember, you must be cautious of your opponent's ability to apply all of his weapons, and you must be prepared to change and adapt to any circumstance.)

This illustrative example of how to "take the fangs from the snake" is a small representation of the many techniques that can be employed in order to take advantage of this principle. Students in Master Park's school conduct hours and hours of "research sparring" in order to perfect these and other similar sequences.

Practice your Ba Gua in good health and happiness. I wish for you the best kind of boredom. Ha.

Finally, I would like take the time to say how very fortunate I have been to be able to study with my teacher, Master Bok-Nam Park. I owe him a debt of gratitude that I will never be able to repay. So, from the bottom of my heart I would humbly like to say to Master Park, "Thank you, for your time, patience, and loving guidance. It is not often that one can be touched by the greatness of another and for this I am thankful to you."