

DARE WE AWAKEN THE SLEEPING DRAGON?

by Park Bok nam

*Come not between the dragon and his wrath”
William Shakespeare’s King Lear, Act I, Scene 124*

The seething energy of the sleeping dragon dwells within us all. If awakened in the proper manner, the dragon can bestow unfathomable powers; but if aroused incorrectly, it will consume everything in its path. You face this challenge when you tease the dragon with the circle walking exercise of Ba Gua Zhang. Doing the exercise correctly brings enormous benefits. Doing it incorrectly . . . well, who knows what the dragon might do?

As you learn to correctly awaken the “dragon” (i.e. your Inner Energy), it is necessary to understand more than just the physical movements of walking the circle. In this article, I will discuss some of the theories and principles you should apply when walking the circle. Applying these principles will provide you the maximum gain for the amount of time you have to invest. To facilitate this endeavor, I will break the exercise into sections, presenting them in sequence, and I will offer suggestions for enhancing and improving your performance.

PREPARING TO HUNT THE DRAGON

Prepare your body by quieting your mind. By doing meditation and breathing exercises prior to walking the circle, your mind will be quieted and your body relaxed. Relaxation of the body accomplishes several things:

RELAXATION SAVES ENERGY

When you tense a muscle, either consciously or subconsciously, you expend some energy. By relaxing the muscles, you save this energy and can expend it toward a more useful endeavor.

RELAXATION HELPS THE BODILY FLUIDS FLOW BETTER

When your muscles are not contracted, the blood and the lymph have a more unrestricted path through which to flow. This also aids the functioning of our internal organs, thus making you healthier.

RELAXATION ALLOWS THE INNER ENERGY (QI, PRANA) TO FLOW BETTER

It does this by eliminating the blockage brought about by tightly contracted muscles.

RELAXATION ALLOWS YOUR MUSCLES TO FUNCTION LONGER WITHOUT FATIGUE

This allows you to walk the circle longer, increasing your benefits from the exercise.



BEGINNING TO AWAKEN THE DRAGON

In Ba Gua Zhang, as in most martial arts, the beginning of the exercise, or form, is of great importance. The tone or mood of the whole exercise is determined at this time. If you are bubbling over with thoughts of the night before, or with tomorrow’s hopes, your mind will not have time for the “now.” The “now” is the most important part of our lives. After all, is the past not gone forever and is the future not partially governed by what we do “now?” At this time in the circle exercise, it is important that you bring immense concentration to bear on the present, sink the inner energy (qi) to the psychic-center (Dan Tien), and become open to any environmental input. While environmental input is real in a self-defense situation, during the circle exercise you bring it about

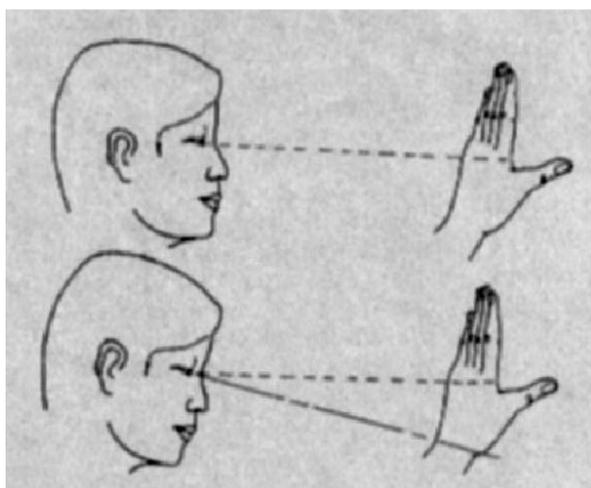
by visualizing inner energy flow or by visualizing an imaginary opponent.

WALKING WITH THE DRAGON

Walking the circle is a very powerful form of inner energy cultivation or Qi Gong. As always, you want to achieve the most benefit from this exercise for the amount of time you invest in it. By following these simple guidelines you will reap a host of benefits in a very short time.

WHEN WALKING THE CIRCLE, THE ORIENTATION OF YOUR HEAD IS VERY IMPORTANT.

As shown in the illustration, the hand should be level with the physical location of your eyes. Your head should be level and the line of vision between your eyes and hand should be parallel to the ground. Your head should also be centered over the trunk of your body as much as possible.



For the Qi to sink, the eyes must be level as in the upper figure.

With the head down, as in the lower figure, the eyes have to look upward, which is undesirable and causes the Qi to rise.

If you do not maintain this orientation while walking the circle, the dragon may take a bite. The reasoning behind this statement is twofold:

First, if your head is not kept centered over your trunk, you will subconsciously tense your muscles in an attempt to hold the head up against gravity's pull. This wastes energy, making you tire more quickly, thereby limiting your time for energy cultivation. Tension in your muscles will also hamper the flow of blood, lymph, and inner energy.

Second, the Chinese say that qi (inner energy) follows the eyes. When your head is declined forward, your eyes must look up to maintain the proper line of vision between your eyes and hand. Looking up can cause the qi to rise and become stagnant in your head, instead of continuing to circulate or move to the hands for martial or healing application. When the qi stagnates, it can cause severe headache and vision problems.

RELAX, AND LOWER YOUR SHOULDERS, THEREBY MOVING YOUR LUNGS TO YOUR BACK.

This is indeed a large order, but it is all necessary to ensure the best qi cultivation benefits possible. By lowering your shoulders and relaxing, you will certainly save a lot of energy - energy that is wasted by carrying tension and stress around with you. Eliminating this tension allows you to walk longer, again increasing your benefits from the circle exercise. Being relaxed will also allow your inner energy, blood, and lymph to flow more freely, making the work of your internal organs easier. Placing the lungs in the back by lowering and slightly rounding the shoulders will safeguard your lungs from attack, and help to lower the center gravity to the psychic-center (Dan Tien). This will help balance and proliferate lightness in your body.

Try the following experiment. Breathe in and expand your chest while holding in your stomach muscles and standing erect. Have a partner push against your chest. Notice what happens. You should find it hard to keep your balance. Now, do the same thing again, except breathe to the Dan Tien and do not expand your chest. This will allow your lungs to move to your back. Again, notice what happens. Your balance should be better.

Following this principle is easier said than done, but it is the correct way to awaken the dragon.

BREATHING IS A KEY FACTOR IN BEING RELAXED, AND KEEPING THE CENTER OF GRAVITY LOW.

It also helps to lighten the body, and the step. With so much to remember about proper technique for walking the circle, it is better not to complicate things further by discussing intricate breathing patterns. Just be aware that they do exist and as you progress, so will your breathing. For now, breathe naturally -- in through the nose and out through the nose. Do not strain by holding your breath or by trying to take in too much air as this will be counter-productive. Also, remember to keep your tongue on the roof of the mouth so that the qi will have a path through which to complete its circulation.

CULTIVATING A LIGHT BODY WITH A LIGHT STEP IS A PRIME PRE-REQUISITE TO THOROUGHLY AWAKENING THE DRAGON.

Have you ever gone to the zoo and watched the big cats as they meander about their enclosures? Even though they are large animals, they do not plod along. When they walk, their step is soft and quiet. In fact, they seem to almost glide along. This is the way you must become. Imagine yourself walking on a frozen lake covered with very thin ice. As you place each foot down gently to avoid breaking the ice, you will cultivate a gentle step. This soft step and a soft body are very important parts of Ba Gua Zhang. The next time you practice the circle exercise, use the frozen lake as a visualization technique and walk softly as you approach the dragon

VISUALIZATION PLAYS A BIG ROLE IN THE CIRCLE WALKING EXERCISE.

When you walk the circle, each move you make plays a role in qi cultivation and in martial application. There are intricate patterns of energy movement that you must visualize in order to progress at a rapid rate. (These are too numerous to discuss within the scope of this article; just remember that your qi must sink to the Dan Tien.) To progress toward the martial way, you must also be able to visualize an opponent and apply your technique in harmony with his input to your environment.

WHEN PRACTICING THE CIRCLE, WALK AS LOW AS POSSIBLE WITHOUT BECOMING FATIGUED TOO QUICKLY.

The large muscles of the thigh (the quadriceps) are very important for a number of reasons. One is that the stronger these muscles are, the longer you will be able to walk the circle and the more inner energy you will be able to cultivate. Also, these muscles act as a power base for many techniques or movements. Probably, however, their most important function is to act as a secondary pump for the blood. In fact, the Chinese refer to them as the "second heart." By helping to bring the blood back to the heart, the thigh muscles make the heart's job easier and contribute to the health of the body.

WHEN YOU ARE WALKING, YOU MUST CONSTANTLY MONITOR YOURSELF FOR NEW AND DIFFERENT FEELINGS.

When you finish walking the circle, be sure to convey what you have felt to your instructor. He can explain what you are feeling and can use this information in designing your program to ensure safe and speedy progress.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF THE DRAGON

How we finish the circle is of utmost importance. During the time that you perform the exercise, you build inner energy (qi). When completing the circle, you gather all this energy into the psychic-center (Dan Tien). By doing this, you will ensure good health. If you do not finish correctly, you may stop the energy in the wrong place and create health problems for yourself. Discussing how we finish the circle could be a complete article in itself, so I will not attempt to elaborate at this time; suffice it to say that this would be a good topic to discuss with your instructor.

HOLDING ONTO THE DRAGON

After completing the circle, it is very important that you refrain from doing any heavy work or exercise for at least thirty minutes. If you do not do this, your progress will be hampered. It is acceptable, however, to do energy cultivation exercises (Qi Gong) at this time if you wish to continue your workout.

THE DRAGON CAN BE A WONDEROUS FRIEND OR A TERRIBLE FOE

If you follow the suggestions I have shared in this article, you should awaken the dragon in the correct fashion and gain some of its precious gifts. It is my sincere hope that you will use these gifts for the betterment of your fellow man and to further the expansion of Ba Gua Zhang throughout the world ... for it is truly an art that belongs to all mankind. Remember, however, to beware if you misuse or abuse this art -- "the dragon is never far away" and you will get bit!