

## CIRCLE-WALKING IN BAGUAZHANG

I once had a seminar participant who proudly announced that he knew bagua, but that his teacher hadn't made him circle walk. I was so astounded that I had nothing to say. I just couldn't imagine it. But why? Can't you train the techniques of bagua without wasting time wandering around in circles? The short answer is no. This article is the 'three page' answer. My bagua website has the sixteen page answer, and that is just an introduction.



Circle-walking is not about walking in circles, whether for meditation or for circling around your opponent. It is about building yourself up so that the techniques of bagua come from the healthiest, strongest, most connected body that you can develop. And a body that is used to making its connections, whether to itself or to an opponent, on the go. Its primary effect is to bring full circulation of blood and qi to all parts of the body and strengthen and connect the tendons and ligaments throughout the body. Those interested in fascial meridians can see that all the tendons, ligaments, and soft tissue of the body are connected in a smooth line, like sausage links, from the bottom of the feet through to where they connect to the skull. Circle-walking is designed to develop and strengthen this connection. You can fight without strong tendons and connections, but you will eventually get injured. Health training cannot be separated from martial training.

Most internal styles follow the same rules of body structure, and try to perfect this through movement or static postures. Bagua perfects it through circle-walking, xingyi through stake standing and five element drills, taiji through standing and coiling drills. The torso, for example, is kept upright, balanced, and centered, like a bag of rice dropped into the pelvis, and the pelvis naturally adjusted to hold the bag. Bagua puts more emphasis on the turning of the torso – what is called the 'dragon's body' in xingyi – using the folding of the body to gain power. The techniques grow out of the walking and come from the centre of your body. Circle-walking is always torqued into the centre, so the application of torqueing power is trained not just in standing, and not just in the techniques, but in a controlled environment that requires constant adjustment.

Given the settled upper body, bagua circle-walking focuses more on the lower legs, from the knees on down, than many styles. The knees stay essentially together when the front foot reaches out, and then the landing depends on the type of walking. The feet are always firmly rooted, grabbing the ground with the whole foot, ankle, and lower leg, up to and including the knee. If you just relax and settle this can benefit you, but not as much as when you really grab the ground. In addition, an important phase of most types of circle-walking is to 'kick the doorstep' – to extend the knee and the ankle fully as if kicking forward to break through a Chinese doorstep. This kick is low and reaches through the whole leg. Fully extending the reaching leg strengthens all the structure around the knees, smooths out the tendons of the ankle and feet, and sends the qi firmly to the feet. The point of the kick is not the kick itself (though it does develop a very strong kick that can break the shin of an opponent) but to make the body more stable and connected.



## DIFFERENT METHODS OF CIRCLE-WALKING

There are quite a few ways to circle-walk that are effective in changing the body and preparing one to fight. Not all schools use all types of circle walking. Most specialize in one or two types – those that help their particular type of power. (Schools of bagua tend to differ because the originator, Dong Haichuan, apparently felt it only necessary to teach the circle-walking and perhaps a few palm changes to his students. He then helped each of them to develop their unique skills on this foundation.)

Here are some types of circle-walking:

**Toad walk:** a very careful, very slow, controlled stepping, being careful to stay completely level with no rise or fall. This very slow circle-walking works particularly to move the qi and blood to allow the tendons to change. The body moves forward evenly with no jerkiness or driving forward. There is an acceleration at the kick phase, which forces the qi to the extremities and also ensures that this walk remains focused and does not become a creeping around the circle. This is used in Ma Gui style, and builds heavy, whole body, power.

**Contained walk:** a careful, controlled stepping, taking one step at a time, slowly and carefully, but not deliberately going as slow as possible. This trains the grabbing without working the support leg quite so much as the toad walk.

**Continuous walk:** still mindful, but not pausing in the grabbing phase, continuing immediately, though not rushing, to the forward leg and keep moving. This walk contains three powers – contained, stable, and mobile. This walk is a relatively standard walking speed, neither fast nor slow. It can be done without emphasizing the kick. Jiang style tends to use this walk.

**Controlled walk:** a careful, controlled stepping, counting two to five seconds at the held kick. The kick is held out, not up, to extend power through the leg. This walk develops leg strength, balance, and connections. You may also pause at the foot grab to develop the habit of grabbing with the leg instead of gradually shifting to the leg, and to focus the qi to the knees if you have problems with your knees. This is used in Liang and Ma Gui style.

**Natural walk:** small steps, with sunken qi, and naturally comfortable, allowing the feet to lift and lower more naturally, not worrying about keeping the heels down. This walk tends to be used when doing changes that involve circle-walking in between the changes, when we are focused more on mobility. Some Yin styles use this as the standard walk, as it develops quickness. Jiang style also uses this walk, with particular emphasis in releasing all extra tension in the body.

**Mud Wading:** still lifting and landing the feet relatively flat, but allowing or pushing the raised foot to move forward before landing, gripping the ground firmly, as if walking in a muddy stream. The push off to drive forward differs within styles. Liang style pushes the supporting knee forward and down, so that the drive forward comes from the rear ankle. The raised foot does a solid kick, then wades forward before landing, with only a slight slide. This is also called scholar-tree insect stepping. Cheng style pushes forward from the whole leg. The raised foot is stepping forward so does not emphasize the kick, and it wades forward on the ground. The momentum in Cheng style can be such that the body actually leans into the circle. Mud wading accelerates into the landing foot so demands a great deal of control to keep balance. It should keep all movement moving forward, with nothing wasted up and down, to develop a driving attack.



## THE EIGHT MODELS OF CIRCLE-WALKING

Each style has eight models that give eight different postures that can be taken in the circle-walk. They are not necessarily the same eight. The circle is walked in each of these shapes, with their special feeling. It doesn't really matter what the eight postures are. If you are training a legitimate lineage, its eight models will make sense and develop the attributes necessary for that lineage. If a model makes you uncomfortable when you circle-walk in it, it is informing you of some problem in your body. You do not need to work out what the problem is – you just need to allow the posture to change your body. Once the posture feels as comfortable as the others, the problem has been worked out. One should never simply walk in the circle either forcing or just thoughtlessly holding a posture, but should walk considering that the goal of circle-walking is to change the body. The models facilitate this – doing them as perfectly as you can with full focus and spirit gives them a chance to change you.



All of bagua's movement types and all movement principles are present within circle-walking. This is why circle-walking, even quick circle-walking, is done always with full intent. Careful circle-walking is not a 'beginner basic' that you stop doing as you get better. If you have an error in technique, you will find that this error occurs in your body mechanics during circle-walking, and that it will self-correct once you have fixed your circle-walking. Once you get the circle-walk connection, other moves express the circle-walk, and all becomes one.

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