

The 13 Basic Movements of Taijiquan

Usually, the beginner first learns the slow form of Taijiquan. Anyone who at this stage is interested in the classic texts of Taijiquan will find time and time again the notion of the 13 basic movements. So what are these 13 basic movements? In Chinese they are called *shisanshi*.

十三势
shí sān shì

Shisan is the number 13 and the second *shi* means basic movement. In a direct translation *shi* is given as "posture", "position", "gesture" or, as in Sunzi, "strategic advantage". When talking about *Taijiquan* it is best to use the word "movement" to express the dynamic character of *shi*. The 13 basic movements are subdivided into eight hand techniques (*bamen*, literally: eight gates) and five steps (*wubu*). The eight hand techniques are allocated to the compass points respectively to the eight trigrams.

The five steps are allocated to the five phases (*wuxing*). The eight directions are in China traditionally the four sides North, South, East and West and the four corners, NE, SE, SW, NW. Together, these make up the 13 basic movements of Taijiquan. They are explained in the "Explanation of the method of Taijiquan (*Taiji fashuo*)" in text 1:

The eight hand techniques and the five steps (Bamen wubu)

	Direction	Eight Gates
<i>peng</i>	South	<i>kan</i>
<i>lǚ</i>	West	<i>li</i>
<i>ji</i>	East	<i>dui</i>
<i>an</i>	North	<i>zhen</i>
<i>cai</i>	Northwest	<i>xun</i>
<i>lie</i>	Southeast	<i>qian</i>
<i>zhou</i>	Northeast	<i>kun</i>
<i>kao</i>	Southwest	<i>gen</i>

"The compass points and the eight hand techniques demonstrate the law of the cyclic change between *yin* and *yang*, which changes eternally. In brief, one has to learn the four sides and the four corners. *Peng, lǚ, ji* and *an* are the hand techniques of the four sides. *Cai, lie, zhou* and *kao* are the four hand techniques of the four corners. Combining the hand techniques of the four sides and the four corners we achieve the allocation of the gates to the trigrams.

The differentiation between five steps (*wubu*) is based on the idea of the five phases (*wuxing*) and supports the eight directions. The five phases are: *jinbu* (to advance)/fire, *tuibu* (to retreat)/water; *zuogu* (to look left)/wood, *youpan* (to look right)/metal; *zhongding* (central equilibrium), the centre of the directions/earth. Advancing and retreating are the steps of water and fire and to look left and right are the steps of metal

and wood. The central equilibrium of the earth is the central point of the axis. The eight trigrams are hidden in the body, and the feet step the five phases. The eight hand techniques and five steps make 13. This is how the 13 basic movements are created naturally and are called the eight gates and the five steps." (Wu, p. 16).

The 13 movements are the basis of Taijiquan. By combining the hand techniques with the different steps, one can achieve a large variety of movements. The execution of the 13 movements is discussed in the "Explanation of the method of Taijiquan (*Taiji fashuo*)" in text 2:

The method of application of the eight hand techniques and five steps (Bamen wubu yonggongfa)

"The eight trigrams and the five phases are part of man's natural endowment. First one has to understand the meaning of the notion of conscious movement (*zhijue yundong*). Once one has understood it, one has mastered the understanding of *jin*-power (*dongjin*). Following the understanding of *jin*-power (*dongjin*) one can achieve enlightenment (*shenming*). So at the beginning of one's studies one has to achieve knowledge about the conscious movement (*zhijue yundong*), which although it is part of our natural endowment, is difficult to grasp." (Wu, pp. 16)

The meaning and function of the 13 basic movements is again explained in the "Song of the 13 basic movements (*Shisanshi geju*)" (see this issue, p. 7). Because of the importance of the 13 basic movements for Taijiquan, the next issues of Taijiquan-Lilun, beginning with this one, will present in detail first the eight hand movements and then the five steps. We will begin in this issue with the hand technique called *lǚ*:

攬
lǚ

In Issue 1 *lǚ* was used as an example to demonstrate the difficulty of translating technical

Taijiquan vocabulary. It was shown that no direct translation exists, but that there are only explanations of the quality of *lǚ*. This is why it is so important to engage with these explanations.

Ma Jiangbao says that *lǚ* is the hand technique which needs to be learned first. It is the first, because it is meant to introduce the student to one of the essential abilities of Taijiquan: In using *lǚ* the power of the other is diverted and neutralised. Chinese texts often use for an explanation of *lǚ* the words *yin* or *yindao*, which means "to lead" or "to guide". This is how it is for example used in the "Secret song of the eight methods (*Bafa mijue*)", where one finds about *lǚ*:

"How to explain the meaning of *lǚ*?
To lead the other (*yindao*)
and let him come forward.
Following the other's incoming force.
Light and subtle, without losing
contact or resisting.
The power ebbs out naturally (*ziran*)
into the emptiness.
Throw or attack follows naturally (*ziran*).
Maintain your own centre.
This can not be exploited by the other."
(Wu, p. 102)

Ma Yueliang explains:

"*Lǚ* is an overt power (*mingjin*). If the other attacks, this is the moment to familiarise oneself through *peng* with his direction. Then, one leads him on – without even noticing – to continue the advance. Thus one can divert the attack to the right or to the left. The power and speed of the diverting depends on the power and speed of the attack. One waits until the other's power is waning (*shishi*), which is when one lets go and starts the counter-attack. Mechanically, *lǚ* works like an axis, going either to the right or the left."
(Ma, Xu, S. 10)

Ma Jiangbao points to the explanation of *lǚ* also in the "Song of striking hands (*Dashouge*)" (see Issue 1), where it says: "Divert (*yin*) the attack (*jin*) into emptiness (*luokong*)". In doing so he concentrates on the quality of a good *lǚ*, which should give the attacker the feeling of falling into an abyss.



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Ma Hailong comments on *lǚ*: "*Lǚ* is the diverting (*yin*) power. It has a circular effect, follows the power of motion and retains control. If doing *lǚ*, one has to keep one's centre." (Wu, Ma, p. 169)

Lǚ is therefore a technique that leads the attacking power into a circle, so that it misses one's body and head into emptiness. It is important to note that the diverting is based on a minimum of power and one's centre is not in danger. If one can achieve this, one can also realise the principle

of lightness (*qing*) and one can easily deflect the power of a thousand pounds with the use of four ounces.

· Ma, Yueliang, Xu, Wen, *Wushi Taijiquan Tuishou*, Xianggang Shanghai Shuju Chuban, Hongkong, 1986.

· Wu, Gongzhao, *Wujia Taijiquan*, Xianggang Jianquan Taijiquanshi Chubansha, Hongkong, 1981.

· Wu, Yinghua, Ma, Yueliang, *Wushi Taijiquan*, Renmin Tiyu Chubanshe, Peking, 2001.