

Taiji 13 Postures - Ba Men Wu Bu 太极十三势

Taiji (Tai Chi) Thirteen Postures is the essence of Taijiquan (Tai Chi Quan - The First of Tai Chi), the key that unlocks the secret of all Taijiquan. It is believed by many that the original name of Taijiquan was Shi San Shi - Thirteen Postures. Contrary to what the name may seem to be suggesting, Taiji Thirteen Postures does not mean thirteen different postures or movements. It refers to thirteen basic skills that are the foundation of all Taijiquan skills. It is said all other skills of Taijiquan come from the different variation and combination of these thirteen skills.

Taiji Thirteen Postures is also commonly known as Ba Men Wu Bu (八门五步). Ba Men (八门) stands for Eight Doors or Eight Gates and Wu Bu (五步) stands for Five Steps. Ba Men is the theory of Bagua (Eight Trigrams 八卦) in Taijiquan. It refers to the eight positions of Bagua. Ba Men consists of four straight or primary directions which is called “Si Zheng” (四正) and four diagonal or secondary directions or four corners that is called “Si Yu” (四隅). According to Taijiquan Treatise by Zhang San Feng, who is said to be the creator of Taijiquan in the Song Dynasty, the four straight/primary directions are Peng (Ward-Off 棚), Lu (Rollback 捋), Ji (Press or Squeeze 挤), An (Press or Push 按); in Eight Trigrams, these four straight directions correspond to Qian (Heaven 乾), Kun (Earth 坤), Kan (Water 坎), and Li (Fire 离) respectively. The four diagonal directions are Cai (Pluck 採), Lie (Split 掇), Zhou (Elbow-Strike 肘), Kao (Body-Strike, Bump 靠); they correspond to Xun (Wind 巽), Zhen (Thunder 震), Dui (Lake 兑) and Gen (Mountain 艮). Furthermore, Peng, Lu, Ji, An, Cai, Lie, Zhou, and Kao are referred to as Ba Fa (Eight Methods 八法) as they represent eight different kinds of fighting techniques. These eight fighting techniques correspond to the eight positions of Bagua and equate to eight kinds of energy patterns or Jin (strength, energy/power manifestation, 劲). When speaking of these eight techniques, they are often referred to as Peng Jin, Lu Jin, Ji Jin, An Jin, Cai Jin, Lie Jin, Zhou Jin and Kao Jin in the Chinese language.

Wu Bu (五步) refers to the five skills revolving around footwork. Wu means five. Bu means step. The Five Steps corresponds to Wu Xing (Five Elements 五行). In reference to Zhang San Feng's Taijiquan Treatise, the Five Steps are Qian Jin (Advancing 前进), Hou Tui (Retreating 后退), Zuo Gu (Look to the left 左顾), You Pan (Glance the right 右盼), and Zhong Ding (Central Settling 中定); in Five Elements, they correspond to west, east, north, south, and central direction as well as Jin (Metal 金), Mu (Wood 木), Shui (Water 水), Huo (Fire 火), and Tu (Earth 土) respectively. These five footwork skills give way to the movement of body in all directions and in the most flexible way during fighting.

Ba Men (Eight Doors) and Wu Bu (Five Steps) together form the Thirteen Postures. This refers to the idea that each of the eight techniques is used in combination with one or more of the five

steps or can be applied in any of the five directions. These thirteen postures are the essence and fundamental structures of Taijiquan. Every traditional style of Taijiquan contains the thirteen postures and they are considered to be the source of all stylistic variations of Taijiquan. Each style of Taijiquan has its own unique training with the thirteen postures. When these thirteen postures are well coordinated, body movements will display a balance of the soft and the hard, the substantial and the insubstantial, and Taijiquan sequences can be performed gracefully like that of the floating clouds and the flowing water. Only when the eight techniques and five steps are combined in unison can Taiji pushing hands and free sparring applications be carried out in the most fluid manner and the body's Jin (power manifestation) be fully utilized. The harmonious interaction of these thirteen fundamental skills has resulted in the emergence of hundreds and thousands of application techniques with some of the notable ones such as "using the soft to defeat the hard", "lead the coming force into emptiness", and "use four ounces to neutralize one thousand pounds". To help practitioners better understand the eight techniques, let's take a look at each one of them individually .

Peng (Ward Off 棚) is the core skill of Taijiquan. It has a grounded and an outwardly expanding kind of Jin/energy pattern. Peng Jin is what gives the fundamental structure to all of the postures and movements in Taijiquan. All other Taijiquan skills derive from or grow out of Peng. Peng is not only limited to the rounding of two arms, but extends to the entire body including the two legs, the chest, and the lower and upper back. As Taiji classics say that every tiny movement must have Peng. Peng should feel like your entire body is filled with a very resilient energy like an inflated tire or basketball that any force that hits against it would rebound.

Lu (Roll Back 捋) is a downward and side ways pulling type of energy often used to redirect your opponent's attack. It involves using the hands to rollback and neutralize the coming force or make your opponent lose balance. However, when applying the technique of Lu, it is not enough to use only the Jin of your arms and hands. To make it fully effective, the movement of the waist and coordination of foot steps are of high importance.

Ji (Press or Squeeze 挤) is a squeezing or compressing type of Jin that requires both hands or arms to press or squeeze forward or sideways with power being generated by the legs pushing into the earth. It often closely follows the Lu energy and takes the opponent's energy and redirects it straight back at them in a forward direction and penetrative manner.

An (Press or Push 按) is a downward, upward, and forward type of energy. The energy of An is mainly in the palm of the hand but based on Dantian as the core. The legs are steady and the power is generated and transmitted by the legs, then directed by the waist and manifested through the arms and ultimately reaching the palm of the hand. Like every other technique, An is not a partial force of the palm, the execution requires the involvement of the entire body.

Cai (Pluck 採) is a downward Jin and it is the basis of grappling. It means to pluck downward. An is a force delivered by a quick grab and pull like picking fruit off a tree with a snap of

the wrist. Again, the power must come from the centre and not only from the arms and hands. As a Jin to assist the four primary skills, flexible footwork is required to make Cai an effective technique.

Lie(Split 捌) means to split. A split action will need two forces to be executed in opposite directions while maintaining a stable center. To make this technique effective, the coordination of footwork is the key.

Zhou(Elbow-Strike 肘) refers to the use of elbows for forward, upward, downward, sideways, or backward attacking. Zhou is most often used when one is in close contact with the opponent as the reaching range of Zhou is relatively short.

Kao (Body-Strike, Ram, Bump 靠) means to ram something. It means to use part of your own body such as shoulder, back, hip, or chest to ram the opponent's body. It requires that the whole body be lined up to deliver full body power from any part of your body. In another word, your entire body's energy can be focused to any part of the body.

The explanations presented so far have been kept simple and straight forward. However, the application of techniques in Taijiquan embodies countless variations. Very often when we are employing the eight basic techniques we are not employing it one at a time, but with the combination of a few techniques. This is also true when it comes to the use of the five steps; we do not rely on only one step, but a mix of several steps or even all of the five steps. Victory depends on many factors such as the level of experience we have in executing any techniques, the timing of the application of a certain technique, the proper lead into a certain direction, the difference in our overall strength and level of martial skills, and many other factors.

As a proficient Taijiquan practitioner, one must understand the concept and the usage of the thirteen fundamental postures and remain open and flexible to the countless variations of these thirteen skills. One also needs to practice as practice makes perfect. The Chinese saying of “ Body movements become natural when practicing the fist forms one thousand times, sacred rules and principles emerge when practicing the fist forms ten thousand times” may well be a regimen for our everyday training.