

The best moments of our lives are not passive, receptive, relaxing times. The best a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. In the long in determining the content of life.

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A SENSE OF MASTERY by Ellen Shankin

I began at age fifty-four. It came about because my back had been hurting for many years and the doctor of Chinese medicine whom I was seeing suggested I start. For months, I had no idea that Ba Gua was a martial art. I thought it was something more akin to yoga – until I watched the movements we had just learned executed with a sword in hand.

Basically a gentle person, I resisted the idea of learning something that was meant to be used against another human being. But by the time I became aware of that aspect, I had walked Ding Shir (an introductory practice in the study of this martial art) for two or three months, and its power to move energy through my body, focus my mind, and send me home high as a kite had already taken root. Its effect was undeniable; I had never experienced anything like it. So I committed to the practice.

Ba Gua is an "internal" martial art. That means that what is cultivated is not muscle strength, speed, or athletic prowess, but an awareness of vital energy inside the body and an alignment of yourself to access that energy. The practice has to do with posture and breathing, intention, and a relaxed movement of the body in order to express, in the end, power. While I am eager to experience and cultivate this core of vitality in me and to know how to use it if I choose to, I will never spar and I will probably never need to save myself from a dangerous situation in this tiny rural place where I live. But Ba Gua has health benefits that are deep and real, completely apart from its martial applications. It moves every joint in the body, in all the ways they are meant to move. It cultivates postures that have direct connections to organs so as to promote the health of these organs. It develops willpower. It teaches me how to move through daily tasks with less injury, less wear and tear. Before I started Ba Gua I spent weeks at a time on the floor with incapacitating back pain. Those days are gone.

A Ba Gua practitioner learns many different forms. By forms I mean a set of movements, linked together into a pattern, that you practice repeatedly. There are three circular walking forms with eight varied shapes or patterns in each; sixty linear forms (gestures executed in a line across the floor, each one using a different body mechanic to open the rib cage, the lower back, the hips, the shoulders; all the moving parts of the body), and five weapon forms (duck knives, cane, double-ended spear, broad sword, and straight sword). We also learn ways to use each and every form in relationship to another person.

I have an extraordinary teacher. I watch him demonstrate a form and the beauty of the movement is compelling. I feel a strong yearning to develop the ability to do what he does. I try so hard to take in the hundred aspects of the forms, both external and internal, the dynamics of the tensions and extensions involved in those simple gestures, and I feel what some of my own pottery students might feel: "I will never get it." Some students may watch me throw and long to make the clay move just where they want it; some may wish that they could just clearly see everything needed to make the form sing. They watch with great longing and, unfortunately sometimes, little real hope of achieving their goal. Usually they simply do not have the time and commitment to put into the practice in order to gain the necessary skill. So this "hobby" I am undertaking links me to my students and gives me greater empathy and understanding,

moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery...a sense of participation

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi "Happiness Revisited," from *The Sun*, #438, June 2012.





for I share the strong desire for excellence and also know that I do not have the time to attain all that I yearn for in that practice. Although I won't ever experience the joy of fully expressing "swallow" – a repeated gesture in the circular form that curls inward, sweeps down, and sinks to the ground with grace and fluidity, then follows the hand as it extends out, rises, and gathers – I am working at it daily and glad for any step closer that I can get.

In both disciplines, seeing is key. It takes a long time for new potters even to begin to see where their pieces fall short of resolution. It takes years – well, really, a lifetime – to see more clearly what is there and what is needed to bring the form to life. In Ba Gua, there is what is called a Martial Eye. You watch a form being demonstrated, and after time you begin to see within the shell of the movement. It's like getting beyond the size or the gross contour of a vase and seeing the swell of the curve and the feelings associated with the height and breadth of that swelling. At some point in martial arts, you see beyond which foot comes first and how the hand is held; you see down into the coil inside the chest and the deep connection to the core of your body that each gesture springs from, giving the gesture its true life.

In Ba Gua, the body must learn to take a shape. There are principles involved. Find your footing, sink your weight onto the center of your feet, breathe into the belly, drop the stomach into the bowl of the pelvis, feel the pressure in four directions, tongue on the roof of the mouth, tuck the tail bone, lift the head, tuck the chin, hollow the chest. Inside that shape, when it is done well, energy can flow freely. When potters throw, our bodies also take a shape. We have all had the experience of learning to center and watching our hands flap loosely as they try to hug the shape of the clay. And then that moment happens when you understand that you need to provide the structure. You hold steady, connected to your core, and the clay begins to move within that framework ... and the clay centers. Clay is the energy. It is what moves and lives within the frame of the potter's hands, as energy moves within the framework of the correct posture.

There are so many things I love about this "hobby:"

My brain is on fire with the level of learning involved.

I train hard with fifteen other people, who have become a kind of family to me.

Each week I see aspects of my instructor that inspire me as a teacher.

I am slowly being opened to another realm of sensibility that broadens my world and gives me concrete experiences of something unseen.

My body is stronger and healthier for the effort.

I often wake up in the morning imagining doing the latest forms I have been trying to learn. Ba Gua has taken hold inside me in the very same way that pottery did when I was younger. When I first learned to throw, I would go to sleep spinning on a wheel. I would wake up thinking how I could move clay into shapes not before imagined. I was driven, then and now, to master a skill and thereby to have the ability to express something meaningful. How amazing to have found a practice that offers me, again, this chance for passion and challenge.



ABOVE: Cocoon Vase, 2011.

Stoneware, thrown and altered,
9 x 4.5 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Pitcher, 2011.

Thrown and altered stoneware,
iron crystal matt glaze, reduction
fired. 11 X 6 in.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Nested Soy

Bottle, 2011. Iron red glaze,
thrown and altered stoneware,
reduction fired. 4 x 4 in.

Photographs by Tim Barnwell.