



## Interview with Master Di Guoyong, March 2009

Conducted by Nick Scrima and translated by Andrea Falk

**Di Laoshi, I know that you are proficient in different styles of Chinese martial arts. If it is all right with you, I would like to focus this interview on your Xing Yi Quan background and training.**

**Q: I understand that you learned Xing Yi Quan from your Shaolin Chang Quan teacher, Zhao Zhong. When did you begin your Xing Yi training with him?**

A: I started when I moved to Beijing in 1961 or 1962. Four men started a Wushu academy that was allowed by the Beijing city government, in the Haidian neighborhood. There were not many Wushu academies at the time, just before the Cultural Revolution. In about 1962 I started training Shaolin basics with Zhao Zhong. During the Cultural Revolution, so about 1966, I started Xing Yi Quan training with him, because a martial elder brother wanted to do it.

Before I started martial arts training I was a mess – arthritic in all my joints. In the years of the 1950s there was so little food that most of us were starving. I was the worst student in the Wushu class. My nickname was “old joints.” My classmates would feel my knees to know if it was going to rain or be windy. In physical education class at school, even the girls ran faster than I did.

**Q: Can you tell us something of your teacher’s demeanor and teaching methods?**

A: Very traditional. He was not educated, and he taught in a very strict traditional manner. That means standing three months in **Santishi** (Trinity Posture). He said that in his own training he had done the traditional three years, but he cut it down to three months for his students. That was tiring enough, but we were no match for him.

My father had to go to him to request that I be allowed to become his student; my father had to take him some cake and liquor. That was very expensive at that time, but you couldn't just show up and start. I was still walking every day to school and to the Wushu club because my family could not afford the few pennies for bus fare.

We trained in a huge courtyard, so we trained every evening as long as it wasn't raining. My teacher had a huge courtyard because it used to belong to a landlord, and his family grew vegetables on it for him. But that man had not acknowledged that he owned the property after Liberation, to avoid being put in a landlord class. So they basically were able to live there.

My teacher would see us making a mistake and pick up a stick. Then he'd tell us to repeat the move. We knew we'd made a mistake but didn't know where. When we got to the bad move he'd strike us. We'd never make a mistake on that move again!

Our first task of the class was to go with buckets to collect water from the well. Some of the water was for him, some was to sprinkle on the dirt of the courtyard, and then we'd do another trip for drinking water for the class.

**Q: Santishi is considered essential for building a sound foundation in Xing Yi Quan. Can you please elaborate on the importance of this practice and provide an explanation of its key points?**

A: This is the foundation of the foundation of Xing Yi Quan. It sets all of the stances, body shapes and arm positions of the style. So when you start moving, your body will naturally take the correct posture and have the correct power on the landing. It represents the style. If you see someone in Santishi you can tell right away if he or she really does Xing Yi Quan. My book goes into a lot of detail about the requirements of Santishi.

**Q: Can you give an explanation of the Six Directional Powers we need to be aware of during Santishi practice?**

A: These are front-back, left-right, and up-down. Press the head up as if it is holding up the sky. Grab the ground with the feet. Press the hands forward as if they are pushing a mountain. Press the back backwards. Feel expanding pressure to the left and right side. The body is kept slightly angled.

**Q: If a trainee is practicing Santishi regularly, why are other methods of Zhan Zhuang (Post Standing) training necessary?**

A: After you have a good foundation you still should train the basics of the internal styles. The different **Zhan Zhuang** methods further emphasize the key elements of the art that should be developed and refined, such as proper breathing.

**Q: Xing Yi Quan emphasizes reverse breathing. Can you give us an explanation of its significance and why it is preferred over natural breathing?**

A: Reverse breathing is more practical for issuing power. In Xing Yi Quan, **Fa Li** (Explosive Power) is released suddenly in launching an attack, so it is important to always use reverse breathing. With natural breathing you can't hit as hard. Reverse breathing tightens up the abdomen and firms up the posture, which enables you to use whole body power and hit much harder.

**Q: It is common for people who have gained some Xing Yi Quan experience to ignore Santishi practice. Can one hope to make any progress by doing so?**

A: No! Sometimes you don't have time to train techniques or routines, but you should still make the time to stand Santishi. My teacher used to say: "You can miss one day of practice but you cannot miss standing in Santishi."

**Q: If you are only standing Santishi, what is the minimum length of time that you should stand?**

A: Five minutes on each side is the minimum requirement in order to keep from regressing in one's training.

**Q: Wu Xing Quan (the Five Fists) originate from Santishi. What is their importance in developing sound Xing Yi Quan skill?**

A: They are the Mother Fists (**Mu Quan**). Like a mother, they can give birth to many children. They are the most basic of the Xing Yi Quan techniques. It is like learning mathematics; you must learn to add and subtract before you can even think of doing calculus.

**Q: What is the significance of Wu Xing Lian Huan Quan (Five Element Linking Form)?**

A: It is a short but important routine usually learned after doing the Five Fists, with a few additional moves in it. You practice it to link the fist forms, to get used to

combining techniques, to develop the ability to change smoothly from one technique to another, and to train different footwork. It also adds a bit of interest to the training for beginners.

**Q: Many martial artists in ancient times were not literate and yet there seems to be a great correlation between some Daoist classical texts and Xing Yi Quan theory. What is your point of view regarding this matter?**

A: Chinese culture permeates the whole society. You do not need to read to know and deeply understand the principles of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. The thinking has been passed on from generation to generation. It's the same for the rules and regulations of proper behavior at the Wushu academy; they were all memorized. All of the old masters could quote by heart not just the methods and routines of the system, but also the guiding principles and deeper theories of the art as well as the rules and regulations. Traditionally these have always been a part of the oral transmission.

**Q: At what stage in Xing Yi Quan training should a student advance to the practice of the Twelve Animal Forms?**

A: After students have developed a good foundation in the five fists; that is, once they have the correct structure with the proper whole body power and can perform the movements smoothly. Much depends on the individual student's talent and commitment to training. In general, the average time is about three years.

**Q: Besides providing a greater variety of fighting techniques, what other benefits can we derive from practicing the Twelve Animal Forms?**

A: They train the spirit and attitude of these twelve animals: for example, the courage of the tiger, the quick and agile spirit of the monkey, the fearless gallop of the wild horse. The practice of the Twelve Animals greatly expands the technical and theoretical understanding of Xing Yi Quan.

**Q: Nowadays there are numerous empty hands and weapons routines. What is your view regarding this matter?**

A: Xing Yi Quan always had a lot of empty hands and weapons routines. It is a complete and extensive system. Some people don't have a lot of routines because for some reason they weren't able to learn them all.

**Q: Since there are so many routines in Xing Yi Quan, what is your advice to the student about learning them?**

A: Learn the Five Element Linking Routine (**Wu Xing Lian Huan Quan**), the modern Combined Moves Routine (**Zong He Quan**) because it has almost all of the skills in it and less repetition than **Zashichui (Mixture of Moves)**, and the Eight Skills Linking Routine (**Bazi Gong Lian Huan**).

As far as training is concerned: Practicing a routine for a set number of repetitions or for a fixed period of time will not necessarily produce positive results. A better measure is the amount of the effort put forth in both the practice and the understanding of the routine. Based on these criteria, some people will master the routines more quickly than others and some may never go behind the superficial structure of the forms.

You must learn to apply whole body power in the Five Element routine. You should do the Five Element linking routine until it is correct and smooth and you have accomplished the power application within it. Then you should train the Twelve Animals before learning the Combined Moves routine, practicing until the form is correct, smooth, and uses whole body power. Afterwards you should learn the Eight Skills individually before progressing to the linking routine.

**Q: What are some other important routines?**

A: All are important. You must train the three routines mentioned earlier, but all are important. Perhaps the Mixture of Movements routine should also be learned (**Zashichui**), as it is a well-known traditional form. What is more important is to develop quality and not simply add new routines.

**Q: An Shen Pao is considered an essential partner form for understanding and developing Xing Yi Quan fighting strategy. Can you please elaborate on this?**

A: Two people are able to practice the Xing Yi Quan footwork, get used to judging distances, and learn how to move in and out, back and forth, using the techniques smoothly. All the characteristic footwork and hand techniques are contained in this partner routine. You should practice with different partners with different body types, speed and strength in order to be able to adapt and apply your footwork and hand techniques.

**Q: People have given varying translations for An Shen Pao. Some translate it as “Protect the Body Cannon,” others as “Secure the Body Cannon.” What is the reason for these different interpretations and what is the proper translation?**

A: An Shen Pao means to protect the body, to keep it safe. As long as the translation means something like this, it is fine. In Shanxi province they call it Ai Shen Pao (the bodies are close together), probably because of their accent, since everything was passed on orally.

**Q: What are the other partner routines in the system?**

A: There are seven partner routines including Jiao Shou Pao, San Shou Pao, Jiu Huan Wu Hua Pao, Jiu Tao Lian Huan Pao, and Shi Shou Pao. There are also partner weapons routines.

**Q: What can you tell us about the function of weapons training in Xing Yi Quan?**

A: Xing Yi Quan emphasizes the spear. The four great weapons of China are sword, saber, staff and spear. The old masters say, “Taiji sword, Bagua saber, Shaolin staff, and Xing Yi spear.” A weapon is an extension of the body. So for Xing Yi Quan, the weapon should express whole body power.

**Q: Xing Yi Quan is famous for the Liuhe Daqiang (Six Harmonies Big Spear). What are the benefits of this training?**

A: It is a routine that is long, most difficult, and has the richest content. The Daqiang helps you considerably. It trains power and helps you to find the body work that is characteristic of Xing Yi Quan. It develops not only your skills with the spear but also your applicable strength.

**Q: Is the Daqiang essential to the development of Xing Yi Quan power?**

A: Many people do excellent Xing Yi Quan without having trained the Daqiang. But perhaps if they did train it they would be even better.

**Q: When should a trainee begin to practice applications?**

A: As soon as they are comfortable with the five fists.

**Q: Do you advocate the use of protective equipment during sparring?**

A: If they are just playing at practice then it isn't necessary. But if the intent is full contact, they should wear protective equipment. The people I train in **Sanda** wear equipment.

**Q: Is it important to train sparring, to engage in actual fighting practice?**

A: Yes! Especially if you are learning Xing Yi as a martial art that is useful in a real fighting situation. If you don't train sparring, then you don't really learn how to use the techniques. You are just training for your health. That is good too, and everyone can benefit greatly from its practice. However, Xing Yi Quan is a martial art and you should understand and be able to use the martial applications.

**Q: If students haven't practiced sparring, do you think they could fight?**

A: These students won't have experience in timing and distancing, so they would have difficulty in a fight, no matter how good their skill was. For real fighting, it's important to get used to contact and overcoming the fear of getting hit.

**Q: Usually during fighting practice trainees lose the characteristics of the style. Is this something that happens in fighting or can this be avoided?**

A: When you are under stress, you will always do what you do best. So if you have always trained Xing Yi Quan, then you will fight with Xing Yi Quan characteristics. The techniques aren't just the movements but the power that is used to do the techniques. You need to train how to apply them so you can exert the correct type of power without being bound by the model. As long as you do something that uses the right power, it is Xing Yi Quan. It doesn't have to look like the perfect form of a specific technique. It is like calligraphy; you first have to learn all the strokes, but then you must be able to free yourself to write well.

**Q: Traditionally, Xing Yi Quan is categorized by three branches: the Hebei, Shanxi, and Henan schools. What are the fundamental differences among these three branches?**

A: They have the same root, like three trees that are joined at the root. They have developed differently due to local characteristics. Shanxi style is compact. The culture in Shanxi has small courtyards and a more closed-in society. Beijing, in

Hebei province, is large and open, as is the land and the city. Henan uses big opening and closing movements and also uses sound. It was only taught to Muslims for many years and kept secret from all others. Nowadays we are accustomed to the different styles being taught everywhere, but for a very long time they were only taught in their localities, not to outsiders.

**Q: During the evolution of Xing Yi Quan various masters contributed to its growth and left many adages to guide our practice. What is the significance of the concept of Qi Quan (Seven Fists) and how does it apply to Xing Yi Quan practice?**

A: Xing Yi Quan uses all parts of the body: fists, elbows, shoulders, feet, knees, hips, and head. You must think of every part of your body as a weapon and not focus solely on the fists. So in every technique you should not think of just the punch. You have to be aware of all possible uses of the technique. If your opponent is far away, then you use fists and feet. If they are closer, use elbow or knee strikes, and when in actual contact use hip, shoulder or head.

**Q: What is the significance of Yong (Boldness) in Xing Yi Quan?**

A: First you must develop your self-confidence. You must not fear your opponent. If you do fear your opponent, then you have already lost the fight. In the book, *The Art of War*, it says that when two armies meet, it is the braver one that will win. I don't care if I lose a fight by being beaten, but I don't want to lose by running away in fear.

**Q: The saying, *Qi ru feng, luo ru jian* (Rise like a sweeping wind, strike like raining arrows), represents the intent that should be displayed in Xing Yi Quan practice and in fighting. Can you give us a further explanation?**

A: The whole saying is "Advance quickly, land fast and accurately, so that your opponent doesn't have time to react. Even when you have won, you still think you should have been faster." This applies to technique, footwork, spirit, but mostly to your whole attitude.

**Q: Please elaborate on the saying, "Practice as if fighting an enemy and in combat strike as if practicing alone."**

A: This means that when you train, you must have the spirit of actual fighting. And when you are fighting, then you have to be calm and unafraid. Be like a tiger; it doesn't care what comes along, it can take on anyone and anything.

**Q: You were instrumental in helping to establish the Beijing Xing Yi Quan Research Association and eventually served as its President. What led to its development and what are some of its achievements?**

A: Bao Yuzao and I established it in 1982, and it became official in 1983. He has already passed away. We rode our bikes all over the city to sound out the Xing Yi masters about the association. A lot of the famous masters at the time were members. I was secretary at first, and I have records of all the meetings and of what we accomplished. I was vice-president for two periods, then the sixth president, serving from 1996 to 2006.

Xing Yi Quan, Bagua Zhang and Taiji Quan are big styles in Beijing. A lot of people practice them. The Taiji associations are smaller because they are broken up among the different styles. Bagua and Xing Yi are two big associations with many members. The association serves to bring the Xing Yi practitioners together, to compare styles, set up seminars with masters, and organize internal competitions and larger, even national, Xing Yi competitions.

**Q: What have been some of the significant contributions of the Beijing Xing Yi Quan Research Association to the general public and to the Wushu community?**

A: It is a people's association, under the umbrella of the Wushu Federation. So it brought together all the people who practice Xing Yi Quan so they could share with and learn from each other. As for the general public, if you are interested in finding out about Xing Yi Quan, you can easily do so. The association serves to market and organize classes. If the association did not exist, the situation would be like a plate of loose sand. Now people can more easily find each other, make friends, and locate a teacher.

**Q: How were you personally affected by being part of this association?**

A: I feel that I learned a lot, made friends, saw different Xing Yi practices, and met many teachers. I got a better understanding of the different branches of Xing Yi. I enjoy meeting people and learning from them.

**Q: What advice can you give Xing Yi Quan practitioners regarding their training?**

A: First, you must stand Santishi. Traditionally this was done for three years. At first, you shouldn't seek to learn too much or too quickly. Learn one thing at a time, and only go on when you have got it right.

Xing Yi Quan is based on a very specific structure, so if you haven't got the fundamental postures correctly, it will wreck all the moves. You must learn the proper structure, and you must get corrected very carefully and in much detail by your teacher. If you allow a bad habit to creep in, it will be very difficult to change later.

**Q: Nowadays it seems that people are not willing to commit to or stick with training long enough to make serious headway or achieve real skill in the art. What is your feeling about this and what do you hope for the future of Xing Yi Quan?**

A: Training any traditional system is the work of a lifetime. In other sports, you eventually reach a point where you cannot do it anymore. In traditional martial arts you train your whole life and you continue to get something out of it. Nowadays there is so much choice for young people, it would be best for them if they would chose something that would bring them good health for their whole life.

Traditional martial arts are like fine wine; the older it is the more depth and flavor it has. Other sports may be fun, but you don't develop your internal organs, your spirit, and your character as much as you do in the martial arts. By training the traditional martial arts you heal yourself, while in other sports you hurt your body in trying to achieve your goals. As an added benefit, with martial arts training you learn to defend yourself.

**Q. Your Xing Yi Quan books have been translated into English and are giving access to many aspects of the art that were not easily available to students in the West. Do you have plans to publish other works?**

A: The books have been very well received. The 3-volume set, *Di Guoyong on Xing Yi Quan*, covers many fundamental aspects and theories of Xing Yi training. They are available through TGL Books. I want to share my knowledge with all

enthusiasts of martial arts who are eager to learn and I hope to publish additional works on Hebei Xing Yi and on Liang style Bagua Zhang in the near future.

**Di Laoshi, thank you for your time and for sharing with us your vast knowledge and experience in Xing Yi Quan.**

A: I have trained all this time and learned so much, I am more than willing to pass my learning on to those who are willing to learn. If you are willing to learn then I am willing to teach you. I don't hold back, I don't keep secrets.

**Comment:** Di Guoyong visits the USA two to three times each year to conduct intensive training in Hebei style Xing Yi Quan and Liang style Bagua Zhang. Anyone interested in participating in these sessions or in hosting Di Guoyong for a workshop can contact me:

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