



Walking the Circle: Pa Kua's Eight Internal Palm Exercises

By Sifu Dan Farber and Sifu Valerie Lee

An old Chinese man walks slowly in a circle, eyes seemingly transfixed on a point far in the distance, arms spread out from his body like the wings of an eagle as it circles majestically high above the ground. Gradually his arms bend in toward his body, forearms touching with the palms facing upward, as if presenting an offering. Is this some strange kind of martial art training or health exercise?

If you gave either answer, you would be correct. Certainly, any martial art helps practitioners maintain strong, healthy bodies. Stance work, as well as forms and usage training, provide overall body conditioning. The forms and usage training, provide overall body conditioning. The pa kua nei shou chang (pa kua internal palm changes) from the pa kua chang system goes one step further, however. It functions not only as martial art training, emphasizing pa kua's trademark circle walking and postures, but as general body conditioner and health exercise designed to massage and stimulate specific part of the body.

PA KUA CHANG

Like Chinese medicine, pakua training concerns itself with balancing internal and external needs. Characterized by flowing circular, twisting movements, pakua is one of the most unique kung fu styles. The sophisticated movements indicate the fairly recent origins of the system, according to Adam Hsu, a respected authority on northern Chinese martial arts, including pa kua. The system's reputed founder, Tung hai Chuan (1796-180), distilled his knowledge of several kung fu styles to develop the pa kuas system. Tung claimed to have been influenced by Taoist monks during his training. Tung's interest in Taoist health and meditation practices most likely inspired him to balance the martial art training with the internal palm changes. Tung taught few students the pa kua chang style. Among these he did teach was Yin Fu, who in turn taught Kung Pao Tien, who subsequently passed on the art to Hsu's teacher, Liu Yun Chiao.

WALKING THE CIRCLE

The internal palm changes consist of eight postures performed while walking a circle of eight to twelve steps. Each posture corresponds to a specific part of the body. The method of walking is more demanding than ordinary walking. The feet should raise up as little as possible and the knees and ankles should touch as the legs cross. While you walk, the waist twists toward the center of the circle. Internally, you should feel your weight sinking into the ground. This type of walking is called "treading mud step", because you move as if your legs are deep in mud. The arms are never straight, so that the shoulder and elbow joints are relaxed, and should also have a heavy, sinking feeling.

The postures are designed to help you focus attention on the corresponding body part. The arms, no matter which palm change you are doing, should not be over extended, and are positioned according to the form so you can feel the particular body part associated with the posture. The head and eyes should be focused toward the center of the circle, coordinated with direction of the waist and body. The palm changes are performed on both sides, so you need to change directions periodically.

INNER TRAINING

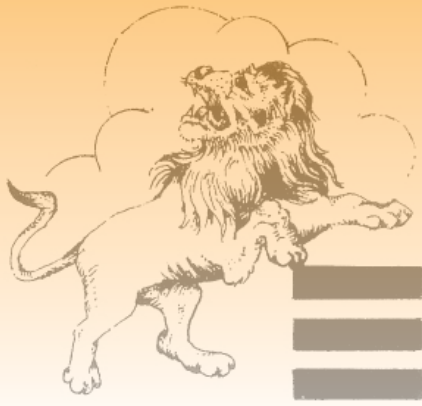
Each internal palm change consists of two parts, coordinated with the breath as you walk the circle. As you slowly inhale, you relax the posture. Upon exhaling slowly, you gradually contract the posture and twist the waist more toward the center of the circle (about 45 degrees). You should inhale through the nose and exhale out the nose or mouth, which should be slightly open. The alternating relaxing and contracting movements, coordinated with the breath, work to increase the stimulating and massaging effect of the exercise.

It should be kept in mind that this practice is more mind (internal) than muscle (external). Although the eyes are gazing outward in the direction of the arms and waist, you should have an inner focus, concentrating the yi (mind) on the tan tien (a point approximately two inches below the navel) and the appropriate area of the body.

An effort should be made to learn the correct postures for each exercise. It is the nature of the exercise, however, that will lead people to modify the form slightly. Each posture should be practiced so that the maximum effect is achieved, and sometimes that means experimenting with the position of the arms or angle of the elbow to reach that goal. The order or number of postures you practice depends on you need. And remember: although the different postures focus on specific areas of the body, you must coordinate all parts of the body to complete the movements. As a result, the entire body receives a general stimulation and massage.

THE EIGHT INTERNAL PALMS

Each posture takes its name from the animal or mythological creature that it represents. And the names, such as the "lion opens its mouth," quite literally describe the movements. These postures are not just designed for improving health—each one has a martial arts application. But this aspect is not emphasized in the internal palm changes.



THE LION OPENS ITS MOUTH. Imitating the lion's strong jaw, this posture stimulates and massages the neck area, and is general is beneficial for the nervous system. Extend your arms with the palms facing each other. One arm encircles the head, palm down, and the other extends outward from the shoulder, palm up. Focus your eyes in the same line as the arms. As you walk the circle, inhale slowly to the tan tien. During this cycle, the lion's mouth is open, expanded and relaxed. As you exhale, the lion's mouth gradually closes slightly, allowing the arms to press toward each other, and you should twist more at the waist. This contracting movement creates an effect similar to a turtle hiding its head in its shell.

WHITE SNAKE HIDING IN GRASS. Mimicking the subtle, sinuous movements of the snake, this posture is designed to stimulate and massage the kidneys. Hold both arms out toward the center of the circle about waist level, palms facing down. The elbows should be bent slightly, and the rear hand is near the front elbow on the same imaginary line. Upon inhaling, keep your arms relaxed, and as you exhale, press your arms downward slightly and twist your body more toward the center of the circle. The sinking, twisting, and pressing feeling should help to focus attention on the kidney area. When you inhale, you can imagine the kidney expanding, filling with chi (internal energy) and becoming more circular shaped. Upon exhaling, imagine the organ being compressed, and toxins being expelled out the mouth or nose.



BLACK BEAR TURNS IT BACK. The bear is a heavy, lumbering creature, and the movement should capture some of that flavor, stimulating the entire back and spine, and “sinking” the chi. As you inhale, relax your arms at the sides about waist level. As you exhale, turn toward the center of the circle and push your arms and the heels of your palms downward and toward your body. You should feel your lower back stimulated and your chi sinking deep into the ground.

BLUE LUNG FLIES UPWARD. The lung, a mythical creature similar to a dragon, corresponds to the liver in the internal palm changes. As you inhale, extend your arms with the elbows bent and palms facing up at shoulder height as if holding a tray in each arm. Upon exhaling, draw in the elbows slightly toward the torso and twist more toward the center of the circle. Imagine weights on your fingers, pulling them down, and a pull on the wrists bringing them up slightly. The overall effect of this contracting movement focuses attention on the liver area. You can imagine, as in the “white snake hiding in the grass,” that toxins are being expelled as you exhale.



BIG EAGLE EXTENDS IT WINGS. Imitating the great wing span of the eagle, this movement massages and stimulates the waist area. Emphasizing the waist area is beneficial because it is the center of the body and contains several important clusters of nerves and the base of the spine. As you inhale, keep your arms relaxed and extended at shoulder level with the palms up. As you exhale, twist your waist (not the upper body) as much as possible. Extend your arms, keeping the elbows bent slightly, and feel as if weights are attached to their entire length to help sink the shi downward.



HAWK SPIRALS HEAVENWARD. The hawk spiraling upward in the sky is an apt description of this movement, which is designed to stimulate and massage the heart. During inhalation, your front arm (closest to the center of the circle) points upward, with the elbow at nose level and the palm facing toward your body. Point your other arm downward, below the elbow, with the palm facing your body. As you exhale, extend the arms- one upward and the downward and twist them as if you were trying to make the elbows touch each other. This action squeezes the upper chest. Combining the physical stimulus with a mental focus on the organ gives you the maximum benefit.



CHI LIN SPITS ITS TONGUE. The chi lin (an unusual creature of Chinese mythology) spitting its tongue is beneficial primarily for the organs and muscles in the abdomen, in the relaxed posture, extend the arm closest to the center of the circle out from your lower ribs, with the palm facing up. The rear arm is on the same imaginary line as the front arm, with the fingers close to the front elbow, the palm facing the body. As you exhale, twist more toward the center of the circle and press your front palm heel upward and your fingers downward. This action causes the front elbow to draw in toward the body, and isolates the abdomen. Press the rear arm slightly inward, again focusing attention on the abdomen.

WHITE APE PRESENTS FRUIT. The ape presenting fruit benefits the lungs. As in hale, position both arms at shoulder height and shoulder-width apart, with the palms facing up as if you were carrying fruit. Upon exhaling, twist more toward the center of the circle and bring your arms in so they touch from the wrists to the elbows. The palms appear to cup the face below the chin-presenting the fruit. Bringing the arms together squeezes the lungs like a bellows, forcing out the air.

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

According to a Chinese expression, "Do a hundred steps after a meal, and you'll live until 99." Extensive studies by scientists in China have shown that you might live even longer by walking the pa kua circle as opposed to normal walking. Twisting and lowering the body develops strength in the legs and waist, and helps chi flow smoothly. In addition, pa kua has a beneficial effect on the heart, lungs, and kidneys. It also improves muscle strength, endurance, and response time, as well as joint flexibility and overall agility. Weight reduction is another benefit; normal walking burns 300-400 calories in one hour, whereas pa kua walking burns 600-1000 calories per hour.

Given these scientific facts, it's obvious the pa kua internal palm changes, or simply walking the pa kua circle, offer substantial health benefits. You don't need a large space to exercise, and less time than ordinary walking because the twisting and special walking method of pa kua is much more concentrated and stimulating. An with today's busy urban life-styles, those are important considerations. For students of pakua chang, the internal palm changes provide a strong foundation in the basics of the style and form that can be practiced throughout one's lifetime.

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In every culture, the circle is symbol of unity. In China it represents the wu chi the primordial nothingness form which yin and yang (life's complementary opposites) were born. Pa kua circle walking stresses the importance of balancing yin and yang, both internally and externally. It is that concept which makes pa kua a rare kungfu style. One that excels in the art of self defense. It has potential to destroy like as well as prolong it. ☺



Valerie Lee and Dan Farber are both Sifu Adam Hsu students currently teaching in San Francisco.

