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What Is Pa-kua?

*She moved in circles,
and those circles moved. . . .*

—T. Roethke
"I Knew a Woman"

PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

Pa-kua, pronounced "ba-gwa," is one of the three martial arts that comprise the internal system (*nei-chia*) of Chinese boxing. The theory of Pa-kua, based on the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), is difficult, but actualized as *Pa-kua chang* (Pa-kua Palm), a boxing-meditational exercise, it is even more difficult. Done to cultivate the *tao* (the way), the circling movements of Pa-kua both manifest Heaven and Earth and order and organize *yin* and *yang*. They follow the seasons and benefit man. When practicing Pa-kua, you walk the circle as though macrocosmically walking in the universe, affecting and being affected microcosmically by the changes inside your body.

The name as well as the rationale of Pa-kua derive from the system of philosophy that gave rise to the *Book of Changes*—an ancient metaphysical treatise over three thousand years old but timeless in its wisdom. Originally a manual of oracles, the *Book of Changes* evolved into a compilation of ethical enumerations, eventually becoming such a compendium of knowledge that it was chosen as one of the Five

Classics of Confucianism. It became a common source for both Confucian and Taoist philosophy. The central theme of the book, as well as of the system of boxing, is that everything is in flux. While the book's basic idea is the continuous process of change underlying all existence, Pa-kua has absorbed these ideas and transmuted them into a system of exercise and self-defense.

Originally, the *Book of Changes* contained a collection of linear signs meant to be used as oracles. In the most rudimentary sense, these oracles confined themselves to the answers "yes" and "no." Thus, "yes" was symbolized by a single unbroken *yang* line (—), and "no" by a single broken *yin* line (- -). Time brought a need for differentiation and amplification, which required additional lines. Thus, the eight trigrams (or units of three lines ≡) evolved, and at a later date these were further expanded to create the sixty-four hexagrams (or units of six lines ≡≡≡). The Chinese word for such a combination of lines is *kua* (diagram). This, then, is the origin of the word Pa-kua—the eight trigrams.

The eight trigrams that form the basis of the *Book of Changes* are as follows:

Name	Attribute	Image	Part of Body
Ch'ien , Creative	Strong	Heaven	Head, heart
K'un , Receptive	Yielding	Earth	Spleen, stomach
Chen , Arousing	Movement	Thunder	Liver, throat
K'an , Abysmal	Dangerous	Water	Kidneys, ears
Ken , Stillness	Resting	Mountain	Back, hands/feet
Sun , Gentle	Penetrating	Wind	Intestines
Li , Clinging	Brilliance	Fire	Heart, spirit
Tui , Joyous	Joyful	Lake	Lungs, chest

In turn, these trigrams are often arranged in a circle around a T'ai-chi (Great Ultimate) symbol, the familiar diagram divided *into yin and yang* (Fig. 1). As the two *yin* and *yang* lines combine into groups of three, they gather at the eight directions to form the eight trigrams.



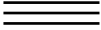
1. The Pa-kua Diagram

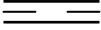
The sixty-four hexagrams evolved from the combinations of the eight trigrams being paired with one another. The theory behind this is explained in the *Book of Changes*, where the trigrams are also identified with the human body.

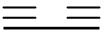
The diagram of the eight trigrams shown in Figure 1 is based upon the philosophy of the *Book of Changes*. The symbology is broad enough


to embrace all things in Heaven and Earth, and narrow enough to represent the workings of the human body. It forms a path that can be followed both in cultivating the *tao* and in studying Pa-kua boxing. It also forms the essence of Pa-kua: "If you do not understand the philosophical theory expounded by the diagram, but only perform the movements of Pa-kua," Wang Shu-chin writes, "you will merely be doing calisthenics."

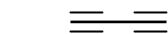
The basic eight trigrams from the *Book of Changes* are correlated with the fundamental eight Pa-kua forms as follows:

1.  **Ch'ien**, the Creative principle, is associated with strength and the image of Heaven. We learn from Nature: Heaven is great because it moves without stopping. The SINGLE CHANGE OF PALM, similarly, is continuous and smooth and promotes blood circulation. Practiced incorrectly, it can hurt the heart.

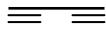
2.  **Li**, the Clinging principle, is brilliant and is associated with fire, which adheres to whatever it burns. To do the DOUBLE CHANGE OF PALM correctly, you should be internally soft and externally hard, like a snake wriggling into its hole. If done correctly, this form will help you to feel united with the universe.

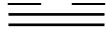
3.  **Chen**, the Arousing principle, incites movement and vibration and is associated with thunder. When practicing HAWK SOARS UP TO HEAVEN, keep your upper body soft and lower body hard, externally quiet yet internally moving. Though still, you have the potential to move, and your enemy will be misled by your seeming lack of movement. Physically, the *Ch'i* of your liver will be harmonized rather than agitated if you perform this form correctly.

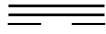
4.  **K'un**, the Receptive principle, is associated with yielding and with the Earth. YELLOW DRAGON ROLLS OVER stresses the unity of the upper and lower body, of the internal and the external. Practiced correctly, this form will make your body feel as light and agile as that of a fine horse.



5. **K'an**, the Abysmal principle, is associated with danger and with water. It indicates that in the midst of trouble you must persevere with self-confidence, which will lead to success. WHITE SNAKE STICKS OUT TONGUE stresses an appearance of softness but with a strong inner core: a strong mind and a soft hand movement. Practiced correctly, the form will help you to feel calm and centered, and will keep you from becoming dizzy.

6.  **Ken**, the Stillness principle, represents the state of rest and is associated with mountains. When a bowl rests upside down, you cannot see what is in it. GIANT ROC SPREADS WINGS shows a tendency to be motionless. Practiced correctly, it will reduce the fire in your heart and enable your *ch'i* to reach the four extremities.

7.  **Tui**, the Joyous principle, is associated with lowness and with lakes. In doing WHITE MONKEY PRESENTS A PEACH, keep your upper body soft and your middle and lower parts hard. Lower your body like a tiger squatting, prepared to pounce. Practiced correctly, this form will help your lungs to feel clear and will keep you from panting.

8.  **Sun**, the Gentle principle, is associated with penetrating and with the wind, which can penetrate any opening. WHIRL WIND PALMS is characterized by a strong top and a soft bottom, and the body turns like a wheel. Done correctly, this form will help your *ch'i* penetrate every part of your body and make your movements as fast as the wind.

HISTORY AND MASTERS

The origin of Pa-kua is unknown. The first specific reference to it is 1796, when it was recorded that a boxer in Shantung named Wang Hsiang taught the art to a certain Feng Ke-shan. In 1810 Feng met a