

SLICE

BAGUA'S "CHOPPING PALM" TRAINS THE POWERS OF "CLOSING AND OPENING" OR "WRAPPING UP AND UNWINDING" ENERGIES

By Lewis Paleias

"The most deadly hands in the world are useless if your feet can't get them to the target."

The last article I wrote involved the basic movements of "piercing palm," a fundamental mind/hand/body exercise inherent in the various Chinese "internal martial art" styles and one that beautifully illustrates the energies of "rise and drill, overturn (or twist) and fall."

The second basic hand movement is a version of "chopping palm." I must first mention that the word "palm" in baguazhang means more than just the open hand; it refers to the whole limb: hand (open or closed), forearm, elbow and shoulder. In fact, all the various internal martial arts strike with the entire body, regardless of which part may make initial contact with the opponent.

As my teacher used to say, "It's not the arrowhead that kills, it is the shaft. The arrowhead just creates the opening for the power of the shaft to go through." This "chopping palm" trains the powers of "closing and opening" or



AND DICE POWER



The author pivots and blocks Ken Blue's attack with his left chop (1). Cross-stepping closer, the author pulls Ken's arm down while striking his face with a right (2). Whether or not Ken blocks, the author throws him down while stomping on his ACL knee ligaments (3-4).

"wrapping up and unwinding" energies. Think of this as the coiling up then springing open of a spring under tension.

Not Always a Palm

A "palm strike" does not always mean striking with the palm of the hand. The "piercing palm" strikes with the fingertips, index finger knuckle (phoenix eye), middle finger knuckle (dragon fist) or the second knuckle of all four fingers (leopard fist). The "throwing palm" uses the back of the hand or forearm, while the "shaking palm" is a forward true palm or heel palm strike. The "slapping palm" is a palm strike delivered downward or behind and its opposite, the "lifting palm," strikes upward, pulsing in a wave. The "chopping palm" actually uses the knife edge of the hand or the radius bone of the forearm and attacks at a horizontal or diagonal angle.

I can already hear practitioners saying, "We call these strikes differently in our school." Remember, a name is just a label, a verbal description of a complex energy movement pattern. Plus, there are many more energy manifestations, or "strikes," than just these few. Filing, drawing, rapping, percussion; I have tasted these and many more under the hands of my teacher, Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming. Each is different, but all are miserable.

Stationary One-Person Drill

A good way to get the feel of this palm/arm strike is by first practicing it with the following stationary exercise:

1. Stand in a horse stance with your hands out in front of your chest (embrace the moon).
2. Using your whole body, carve or wrap your right arm (palm-up) to the left side, passing over your stationary left arm, which also twists palm-up. Your arms are now crossed; both palm-up and (though you haven't shifted your weight yet) your body should feel coiled or twisted.
3. As you shift your weight to the left, spring your arms open, right forward and left back, with both palms facing down and the arms slightly rounded. The striking areas are the edge of the palm, the ulna bone and the elbow. Remember to use your whole body in this exercise and perform it in one motion.
4. Turn back to the beginning posture and repeat this exercise to the right.

Some of my students, in trying to set up the "mental focus" of the exercise, usually ask which part of the drill is the block or parry and which part is the attack. I usually say, "Just do each part of the exercise smoothly with equal power and intent: forget about applying tags to the movements."

Labeling motions as defense or offense merely inhibit



Partner Drill. The author blocks the attacker's right strike with a right chop (1) and strikes while pulling his enemy's arm with his left. He blocks with his left (2) and pivots off angle and clear his left (3). He chops again with his right. If blocked (4), he pulls his right arm to his right while striking his neck with his left (5).

your actions. The eminent master Liang Shou-Yu once told us, "A block is a strike and a strike is a block." For example, the palm-up wrapping of the right hand could be a soft deflection or parry (yin), all the way to a hard block/break or an offensive killing "chop" (yang). It could also have been used to catch an arm or leg. Or my left hand could grab my opponent's arm and pull back as my right palm-down hand becomes the attack. Maybe it was my left hand (that pulled back behind me) that was the palm-down destructive stroke to an opponent on that side of me.

Power Dynamics

The palm-up strike gets its power by swinging across the body from the outside toward the inside, while the palm-down strike swings away from your torso, its power multiplying from the twisting of the whole body from the ground up through the legs, the torque of the waist and shoulders and the velocity of the swinging arm. It should be noted that, besides using the whole body as one interlocking unit, these movements must contain spiraling, not just straight back and forth. The arm is actually rotating as it strikes through the target.

Easier to master than the true open palm strike (think of master Brian Gray's nonchalant breaking of cement blocks with an easy-looking slap), the "chop" is more forgiving, is a stronger surface and allows you to "cheat" by lunging or jump-stepping forward with your entire body weight into the blow. Even when your opponent blocks, there's usually enough momentum flying forward to create, what master John Painter calls, a "brain blink." At that instant before he recovers, we strike again. The easiest way to make this

strike "heavy" and have, as master Liang Shou-Yu calls "bone shaking power," is to practice these strikes on a heavy bag.

Moving Solo Drill

A skilled opponent is not going to stand there and allow you to keep hitting him from a vulnerable angle; he's going to move, block, evade and try to attack again. You'll probably need to employ several quick, repetitive movements before you can finally strike with enough impact (or enough hits) to finish him off. Here is the same exercise combined with some footwork and multiple strikes. When you're comfortable with this moving "store and release" of energy, try varying the steps and marrying the hand movements to the stepping patterns of whatever martial art you study.

1. Stand in a right guard position, right hand and leg forward, weight about 60/40.
2. Pivot on the ball of your right foot, sliding rear (left) leg to the right, winding up back in the rear weighted stance (some immediately slide the front right foot back into a cat as the rear foot lands). The right arm carves toward you palm-up.
3. Pushing off the back foot, spring forward while striking your left arm forward, palm down and simultaneously pull your left hand back.
4. At the instant that the back leg touches the ground, slide the front foot back into a cat and carve the front arm back toward you (palm-up), while bringing your left hand forward to re-grab (later on you can learn how to re-pivot or cross step the rear leg as part of the movement so that you've changed your angle again).
5. Immediately push off the back leg and repeat the



Regardless whether he's defending or attacking, the author uses (1) two consecutive "piercing palms" to climb up Ken Blue's left arm (monkey climbs the tree). Jerking his left elbow down with the left, the author follows with a right shaking palm strike, which is blocked by Ken's left hand (2). Pivoting off to a better angle, the author clears his left block with his left hand and attacks Ken's face with a right "chopping palm" while lunging forward (3). If this is blocked, the author grabs the right hand and, generating torque by his twisting stance, breaks Ken's floating rib into his liver (4-5).

strike. You can repeat this sequence forward as many times as you want or you can practice pivoting and changing angle or direction after each strike.

6. You can switch to the other side or change the attack by grabbing with the right forward hand, while turning right into a twisted stance and striking with your left palm (see "Piercing Palm Pointers" article, *IKF* June issue). Now spring forward off your (now) rear right foot while striking with your left palm-down chop.

Angle Change Instead of Retreat

I don't like to go backward or "retreat" when attacked; a skilled opponent will fill your retreated space and not let you advance. I'd rather pivot a little to just get off his line of attack: this swings my hand into the parry; a large pivot swings my hand into a pretty strong strike to my opponent's head (while swinging my body away from his attack). I don't parry, grab and strike: rather, I parry and lunge forward while striking with the same hand, checking, grabbing and pulling my opponent's arm with my rear hand while in motion. This makes for a faster movement and also allows me to strike with my total body weight; the momentum of my entire body springing forward powers my strike, not the local power of just a cocked arm. Even if he blocks, I usually have enough momentum to crash through his defenses (while he hits his head with his own hand). If his block is successful, you clear his arm with your rear hand and repeat the chop again or change to a different attack. Make sure that your chop is executed by springing off your opponent's blocking hand. This (along with my rear leg launch) insures that all my weight is behind the strike; the backward pull of my rear hand on his arm insures that his weight is coming forward to meet my blow: a perfect train wreck.

Partner Drill

1. Stand opposite your partner, both assuming a fighting stance.
2. As your partner strikes you with his right hand, pivot or cross-step slightly off his line as you parry his attack with a right palm-up carve.
3. Spring forward off your back leg while chopping his face/neck with your right palm-down hand, simultaneously grabbing his right arm and pulling it back with your left hand.
4. If he blocks your attack with his left hand, repeat the

bridge by clearing his arm with your rear left hand and attacking with your right chop as you spring forward again while pulling his left arm toward you with your left.

5. If he manages to block again with his right hand, grab his right arm with your right hand and strike the right side of his face/neck with a left palm-up chop. You generate power through a twisting stance. You could also slide your left arm down above his elbow to execute an elbow break.

Don't think that only a large motion can bring the power needed for this strike. My teacher and friend, Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming, once demonstrated an extremely short-range version of this "chop." When I blocked his tai chi "diagonal flying" attack to my neck, he twisted his hand palm-up to palm-down while driving his forearm forward about two inches. This was enough to bounce me back (through my own arm) at least a foot or two. He could easily have crushed my trachea with that short blow.

"Monkey Climb the Tree" Flow

Once you perfect this energy in motion, start mixing it up with other palm strikes, switching from piercing palm to chopping palm and shaking palm at will and changing from one to the other as you move around with various stepping patterns, until you can both attack and defend smoothly. Start slowly, then add speed and, only in the end, work in "fajing" (explosive power); that's the way you make progress. But don't get complacent. Around 20 years ago (when I was in my late 30s), I remember bragging a little to master Chan Ching Kai that I was finally making progress in my iron palm training. He laughed, put his hands behind his back and said he'd only believe it if I could touch him with my palms (he was in his 60s).

So there I was, chasing him all around his store while he continuously taunted me and dazzled me with footwork. Exhausted, I never could touch him. He chuckled and said, "The most deadly hands in the world are useless if your feet can't get them to the target." ☹

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