

Notes on the Swimming Dragon exercises

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Based on demonstrations by Wolfe Lowenthal and Jimmy Ilson

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Background

The Swimming Dragon exercises are a set of movements developed by Liu Hsi-heng after he saw Cheng Man-Ching perform them. Cheng Man-Ching winked at Liu Hsi-heng, suggesting that this was a “secret” to furthering one’s gung fu.

Cheat sheet

- 3 half forms
- Raising and lowering hands
- Left leg back/right leg back
 - Cross the torso
 - Swinging arms
 - Crease the kua
 - Brush knee
 - Bend bow, shoot tiger
 - Sculling
 - Holding postures
 - The Liu Hsi-heng shuffle

The Exercises

- Raising and lowering hands
 - Identical to the beginning of the form.
 - Ideally there would be 1 breath per repetition.
 - Using only 1 breath, however, would entail a deep level of relaxation. Generally we use two complete breaths: Inhale to raise the hands; exhale as they return to the arm pit; inhale to bend the wrists and raise the fingers; and exhale to lower the palms.
 - The breath is leading the chi, but do not force the breath-- holding or rushing it -- to accommodate the movement. Don’t ever force the breath.
 - Potential focus: The chi is creating and mobilizing the movement.
- Cross the torso
 - Start with the hand on the side of the weighted leg on the lower buttocks, and the hand opposite the weighted leg resting gently on the abdomen.
 - For example, with the left leg forward in a 70/30 stance, the left hand rests on the left buttocks and the right hand rests on the left side of the abdomen.
 - As you shift weight to the other foot, the hands slide across the body and come to rest in the same position, on the opposite side of the body.
 - Potential focus: The upper and lower body move together.
 - Notes: At the beginning of the movement, it might help to think about the hands guiding the body. The lower hand turns the waist and the upper hand turns the upper body, which can create a very strong feeling of unity. You can also think about the lower hand relaxing the tail bone. Another suggestion is to allow the lower hand to gently slide down the hamstring which emphasizes relaxing and emptying out that leg.

- Swinging arms
 - The hand opposite the weighted leg is raised, in the direction of the weighted foot, with a bent, weighted elbow. The thumb side of the hand is towards the ceiling.
 - The other hand rests next to the thigh of the weighted leg, similar to the lower hand in *ward off left*.
 - Potential focus: Sinking the elbow.
 - Notes: Try not to let the elbows go behind your body.
- Crease the kua
 - The blade of each hand (pinky side) rests in the kua (or qua or kwa).
 - The kua is the fold next to the groin where the pelvis meets the inner thigh.
 - When in the forward or rear position, one kua will be open (uncreased) and one will be closed (creased).
 - For example, with the left leg forward in a 70/30 stance, the left kua is closed and the right kua is open.
 - The hand opposite the weighted leg (the open kua) will be lower than the hand on the weighted leg side (the closed kua).
 - For example, with the left leg forward in a 70/30 stance, the left hand will be somewhat higher than the right hand which will be oriented towards the left foot.
 - Potential focus: Turning the waist by creasing the kua. To facilitate folding at this joint, one suggestion is to focus on the hand of the closed qua.
 - Notes: If the waist is turned by creasing the kua, the upper legs will move as popsicle sticks (see below). If there is no twisting, the hands will naturally move in the correct direction.
- Brush knee
 - Similar to swinging arms, but using the *brush knee* hand position.
 - Potential focus: Connecting the raised hand to the ground through the weighted leg.
 - Notes: One suggestion is to let the raised hand to drop down the centerline which then allows that hand to brush the knee. You can also think about leading with the elbows (rather than the hands).
- Bend bow, shoot tiger
 - Start in the *bend bow, shoot tiger* position. The lower hand is opposite the weighted leg.
 - As you shift weight, the hands move together across the body and end up in a *bend bow, shoot tiger* position, but with the hands reversed.
 - Potential focus: The connection both between the hands and between the hand and waist movements.
- Sculling
 - Similar to, but not identical to, *push*.
 - The motion is also similar to using the Chinese yuloh or Japanese ro.
 - Picture a single oar off the stern of a small boat. The oar pivots on the stern and is in line with the boat like a tail. You stand facing one side of the boat holding the oar in two hands. By moving the oar side to side, the boat is propelled forward.
 - A video is worth 10,000 words: https://youtu.be/aJHIor_Ozlc.
 - Start in *push*.
 - Weight shift: Start in a standard 70/30. Shift 100% into the rear foot. Then back to the 70/30. Like going from *press* to *push*.
 - Hands: As you shift back, you move away from your hands and the hands drop slightly (as in the transition from push to single whip). When the hands are about parallel to the ground, they then move with the body as you continue to shift back. As you sink more weight into the rear foot, momentum brings the hands towards the body. The hands then move with the body as you shift forward.
 - Waist: Unlike most other movements in these exercises, the waist always faces the front foot.
 - Potential focus: No hollows or projections – Maintain a smooth, connected motion with the ability to access the ground at any time.

- Notes: It might be helpful to imagine sticking to another person during this exercise.
- Holding postures
 - Identical to *lift hand* or *play guitar* in the form.
 - Hold for 13 relaxed breaths.
 - Potential focus: Sink and relax into the weighted leg.

Shifting weight

From cross the torso to bend bow, shoot tiger the movement is identical from the waist down.

- Start in a standard 70/30 posture. Make sure to start with enough width. This posture defines the front leg. When in your front leg, the weight distribution is 70/30 (at least 51% in the front leg).
- Shift your weight into the rear leg. Ideally, you would shift 100% of your weight into the rear leg, but work up to 100%. Put at least 51% into the rear leg and as much weight as you can while remaining in principle.
- Shift the weight back into the front leg and repeat.
- As you shift your weight in either direction, you turn so that your waist is facing the direction of the weighted leg.
 - A common misstep is to shift into the rear leg without turning the waist. Turn from the waist - Do not twist the torso.
 - Liu Hsi-heng suggested that one way to encourage turning from the waist is to think of the upper legs as double/twin popsicle sticks (the kind with two sticks that you break apart to get two popsicles). Do not break the popsicle sticks. That is, the legs move together (see the crease the kua exercise). The legs are not rigid, indeed they will “slide” past each other. Do not force the legs into this position. Remain relaxed and let this happen naturally.
 - As always, as you turn, maintain an upright posture – head-top suspended from heaven, tail bone relaxed, weight in the center of the foot.



As mentioned above, for sculling, you shift weight, but do not turn waist, similar to the transition from *press* to *push*.

Repetitions

A single repetition is complete when you return to the starting point. For example, consider brush knee with the left leg back. You start with more weight in the right leg with the left hand up and the right hand down. You then shift your weight to the left leg with the right hand up and the left hand down. Then go back to the start. That is one repetition.

If done in principle, the repetitive nature of these exercises can lead to a deepening of one’s practice. If done out of principle, it can lead to bad habits or injury. Relax. Don’t force.

Order

It is customary to do three half-rounds of the form before performing these exercises in the order provided.

After raising and lowering hands is performed 13 times, all remaining exercises are performed 13 times each with one leg back, then with the other leg back. So, you would perform, cross the torso 13 times with the left leg back, swinging arms 13 times with the left leg back, all the way to the holding posture with the left leg back. Then you would perform cross the torso 13 times with the right leg back, swinging arms 13 times with the right leg back, all the way to the holding posture with the right leg back.

After finishing all exercises on one leg, you can perform the Liu Hsi-heng shuffle, which is a relaxed marching in place.