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## History of Qigong: The 18 Luohan Hands

Written by [Sifu Anthony Korahais](#) on September 26, 2012



When the great [Bodhidharma](#) arrived at the [Shaolin Temple](#) in the 6th Century AD, he taught 3 sets of Qigong exercises to the monks:

- 1) The 18 Luohan Hands
- 2) [The Classic of Sinew Metamorphosis](#)
- 3) [The Classic of Bone Marrow Cleansing](#)

### History and Translation

This article will discuss the history, philosophy, and practice of *The 18 Luohan Hands*. Click on the links above for information about the other two sets.

In romanized Chinese, the 18 Luohan Hands is written *Shiba Luohan Shou* (十八羅漢手), which is pronounced as follows:

- Shi (like the word “ship” but without the “p”)
- Ba (rhymes with “La”,)
- Luo (rhymes with “claw”)
- Han (rhymes with “con”)
- Shou (sounds like “show”)

a person who has cultivated a high level of spirituality, somewhat like a Christian Saint.

After the Buddha passed away roughly 2500 years ago, 500 of his top disciples gathered together in a grand council. Together, they reviewed and discussed his teachings word by word. These disciples became known as the 500 Arhats.

When Buddhism spread from India to China, there were some cultural adjustments. For example, the Chinese paid special homage to 18 of the 500 Arhats. Statues of these 18 Luohan are often found in Buddhist temples today.

When Bodhidharma taught at the Shaolin Temple (roughly 1000 years after the passing of the Buddha), he chose to pay homage to these 18 Luohan, perhaps in an effort to reach across the cultural divide. So he named a set of Qigong techniques after them. (As an aside, I feel that [my teacher](#) did something similar by not only writing his [books](#) in English, but by translating these arts into Western culture.)

The word *Shou* means “hands”, but refers to the 18 techniques. So a figurative translation would be the 18 Techniques of the Enlightened Ones.

Over time, the *18 Luohan Hands* evolved into the *18 Luohan Fists*. Here, “fists” also refers to the techniques, but implies that they are not just for health. In other words, it was a form of Kung Fu. This was the birth of Shaolin Kung Fu, a martial art that would become [legendary](#).

## Internal and External

The *18 Luohan Hands* are the fundamental Qigong exercises that I teach. The first exercise, [Lifting The Sky](#), is the very first exercise I teach to new students. (Click on that link if you want to start learning it.) Over the years, I’ve used selections from the *18 Luohan Hands* to help my students do some [powerful healing](#).

If you practice these exercises on a physical level (which is the norm today), then you won’t get the same results that my students get. If you’ve read my [free eBook](#), then you know that the visible form is the least important aspect in Qigong. It’s what happens on the inside that matters most (and that kind of thing really needs to be learned [face-to-face](#)).

The secrets lie not in the visible form, but in the internal dimensions of energy and mind. All over the world, students practice the visible form correctly, often for years, but they don’t get the results they deserve because they don’t understand this important point. Don’t be one of them. If you want to learn these techniques, it’s okay to start with a book, but do yourself a favor and [find a teacher](#) as soon as you can.

## The Benefits of Luohan Qigong

In theory, the benefits of *The 18 Luohan Hands* are limitless. Most of my students spend most of their time practicing these techniques. So most of their [results](#) also come from these techniques. This is why we say that *The 18 Luohan Hands* can heal “1000” diseases. I’m not sure if we’ve healed 1000 different diseases yet, but in Chinese medical theory, each person is unique, so in that sense, we definitely have!

Here are some general benefits of this type of Qigong:

- ✓ Open the energy meridians.
- ✓ Get the energy flowing.
- ✓ Heal 1000 diseases
- ✓ Loosen the joints.
- ✓ Loosen the muscles.
- ✓ Relax the nervous system.
- ✓ Flowing meditation.

To heal “1000” diseases, you need to know the secrets of the [15-Minute Routine](#), including [Flowing Breeze Swaying Willow](#).

## The 8 Pieces of Brocade

Yue Fei, a famous Shaolin master in the 12 Century AD, is famous for “inventing” a Qigong set called The 8 Pieces of Brocade (八段錦氣功, Ba Duan Jin Qigong). This is one of the most widely practiced Qigong sets in the world. Although practiced as a separate set, these 8 exercises correspond to the first 8 exercises in the *18 Luohan Hands*.



There are countless versions and interpretations of the 18 Luohan Hands. Because my teacher is an idealist, he worked hard researching classical texts in order to recreate the most traditional version. The set that I inherited from him is probably as close as we’ll ever get to the original without traveling back in time.

But whether or not the set is the same as the original is not as important. What matters is this: It works. The exercises that I teach in my school are amazingly effective. It’s possible that they’re even more effective than the ones that Bodhidharma taught. After all, they’ve had 1500 years to perfect them.

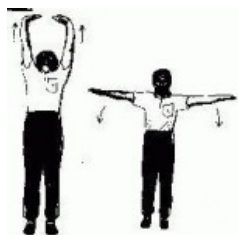
Where did Bodhidharma get these exercises? It's impossible to say, but a good guess is that he was originally taught some form of Yoga in India. Legend says that Bodhidharma meditated in the cave near the Shaolin Temple for 9 years. It's possible that, in his deep meditation, Bodhidharma modified the techniques he had learned as a prince into the three sets of techniques. In that sense, he may have plucked the exercises from the cosmos.

Does that sound woo woo to you? I admit that, 20 years ago, it might have sounded pretty weird to me too. But now I realize that all great art happens in a deep state of meditation and is essentially plucked from the cosmos. Mozart said that his music flowed to him from God. Da Vinci went into a deep state of meditation before creating his great works. When you look carefully at artists throughout history (and across all cultures), you find one thing in common — they all tapped into the power of meditation.

Wherever these exercises came from, they are a godsend. They have changed my life, and the lives of my students. If I had to teach only one set of exercises for the rest of my life, it would be an easy choice: *The 18 Lohan Hands*.

## The 18 Exercises

I've chosen to use old pictures of my Sifu from the 1980 for two reasons. One, because I think they look cool, almost like ancient drawings. And two, because if you're trying to learn the patterns from the pictures, you're going to have a very hard time. And that's a good thing. Let it be a reminder that the visible form is the least important aspect, and that it's important to learn face-to-face from a teacher.



### 1. Lifting the Sky

雙手托天

*shuang shou tuo tian*

*Both Hands Lift Sky*

**Useful for:** postural problems, back pain, neck pain, hemorrhoids, incontinence, stress relief.

This pattern is arguably [the best](#) single Qigong pattern in the world. Its forte is that it promotes a holistic [Qi flow](#) throughout the body. The exercise works on the Triple Warmer Meridian (San Jiao Mai) and thus harmonizes the upper, middle, and lower energies.



### 2. Shooting Arrows

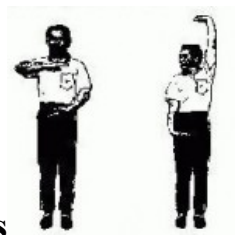
左右開弓

*zuo you kai gong*

*Shoot Arrows Left Right*

**Useful for:** skin problems, respiratory issues, excessive or inadequate grieving, high blood pressure (hypertension), depression, self confidence issues, memory issues.

This exercise uses the *One Finger Zen* hand form, which is a special Shaolin technique that must be learned from a master. Practicing *Shooting Arrows* is an excellent way to massage the Lung and Heart Meridians.



### 3. Plucking Stars

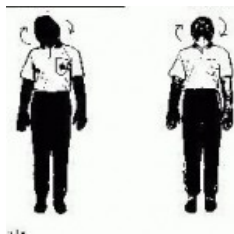
摘星換斗

*zhai xing huan dou*

*Pluck Stars Change Galaxies*

**Useful for:** indigestion, acid reflux, diarrhea, constipation, diabetes, liver and gallbladder problems, Crohn's disease, and diverticulosis, tennis elbow, Endometriosis, yeast infections, dysmenorrhea, vaginitis, and ovarian cysts.

This exercise nourishes the Spleen and Stomach Meridians, which relate to the Western concept of the digestive system. According to Chinese medical theory, good digestion is a prime ingredient for good health and vitality. This exercise can help with virtually any digestive or gastrointestinal problem. It also opens up the 8 Extraordinary Meridians along the sides of the body, which are important energy reservoirs.

**4. Turning Head**

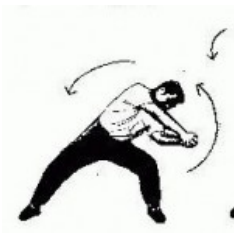
轉轉旋轉

lu lu xuan zhuan

*Rotating Winch*

**Useful for:** tension in their neck and shoulders, headaches, migraines, neuralgia, thyroid issues, Parkinson's disease, stroke recovery, preventing colds and flus.

This exercise isn't just for loosening your neck. Energetically, *Turning Head* is used to powerfully cleanse the Chinese concept of the *Sea of Marrow*, which loosely translates to the head, spine, and nervous system. The exercise brings energy to the entire spine, the brain, as well as the throat, ears, and eyes.

**5. Merry-Go-Round**

大轉乾坤

da zhuan qian kun

*Big Turning of the Cosmos*

**Useful for:** anxiety, acid reflux, diarrhea, constipation, diabetes, liver and gallbladder problems, Crohn's disease, diverticulosis, back pain, tinnitus, rheumatism, indigestion.

This exercise stimulates *Water* energy at the vital point known as the "gate of life" (*mingmen*) thereby giving an energy boost that is far superior to coffee. This exercise is a great pick-me-up. It is also nourishing for the Stomach, Liver, Spleen, and Kidney Meridians.

**6. Punching with Eyes Wide**

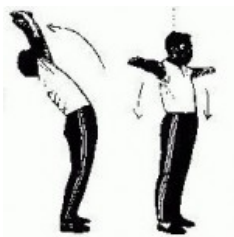
怒目衝拳

nu mu chong quan

*Punch with Eyes Wide*

**Useful for:** excess or insufficient anger, hemorrhoids, myopia and other eye problems, liver disease, stress relief, lack of self confidence.

This pattern helps to develop powerful punches for martial artists. But the power comes from the Qi, not from the muscles. If the muscles are tensed, then the Qi has trouble flowing to the end of the punch. Besides developing internal force for martial arts, this exercise massages and strengthens the Heart and Small Intestine Meridians. In order to obtain the benefits listed above, it's critical to make the appropriate sounds and use correct breathing, both of which should be learned face-to-face from a master.



## 7. Carrying the Moon

回頭抱月

*hui tou bao yue*

*Look Back Carry Moon*

**Useful for:** back pain, neck pain, emotional cleansing, herniated discs, bulging discs, neuralgia, sciatica, Parkinson's disease, stroke recovery, scoliosis, youthfulness.

Students love this exercise because it makes them look and feel young. It cleanses away negative energy in the body, especially the nervous system, by stimulating an internal shower of energy. According to a Chinese proverb, you need not worry about getting old as long as your spine stays healthy and erect. This exercise is a great way to do that.



## 8. Nourishing Kidneys

攀足固腰

*pan zu gu yao*

*Touch Toes Nourish Kidneys*

**Useful for:** sexual dysfunction, memory problems, sciatica, low back pain, incontinence, phobias, fertility, impotence, low libido, self discipline.

A Western doctor will tell you that your kidneys have nothing to do with sex. A Chinese physician will tell you that your kidneys have everything to do with sex. This exercise, as the name implies, powerfully nourishes the Kidney Meridian.



## 9. Three Levels to Ground

三盆落地

*san pan luo di*

*Three Levels Down Ground*

**Useful for:** knee pain, palpitations, cardiovascular health, hypertension, flexibility, strength, weight loss.

On a physical level, *Three Levels to Ground* will make your legs strong and flexible. As a Qigong exercise, it can strengthen your Heart system, generate better energy flow, and increase your vitality. It's also useful for opening the Small Universe Circulation. (Note: if you have serious heart problems, then don't try this on your own. You must learn it face-to-face from a master.)



## 10. Dancing Crane

仙鶴起舞  
*xian he qi wu*  
*Divine Crane Begins Dancing*

**Useful for:** knee pain, kidney stones, strength, flexibility, longevity, weight loss.

This exercise helps to channel energy down the legs. Because everything is interconnected via our energy matrix, channeling energy to the legs sometimes helps to solve problems in other parts of the body. Of course, this exercise also helps build strength and flexibility.



## 11. Carrying Mountains

二郎擔山  
*er lang dan shan*  
*Second Son Carries Mountains*

**Useful for:** back pain, neurological disorders, bulging discs, herniated discs.

This exercise opens up the spine energetically (but in a different way than Carrying the Moon). It also channels energy down the arms, which is useful for martial artists.



## 12. Drawing Sword

羅漢發刀  
*luo han fa dao*  
*Luohan Draws Saber*

**Useful for:** neck and shoulder problems, headaches, migraines, tennis elbow.

The The Eight Wondrous Meridians (*Qi Jing Ba Mai*) are often mentioned in Qigong texts, but seldom understood. *Drawing Sword* is an effective way to generate energy flow to these eight meridians.



## 13. Pushing Mountains

猛虎推山  
*meng hu tui shan*  
*Fierce Tiger Pushes Mountains*

**Useful for:** arthritis, tendonitis, impotence, low back pain, chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, grief, memory problems.

This is one of the best exercises for channeling Qi to the hands. Because of this, it's part of the method for an advanced Kung Fu art called Cosmos Palm. In combination with other exercises, it's also excellent for stimulating the [Five Animal Play](#).



## 14. Separating Water

青龍分水

*qing long fen shui*

*Green Dragon Separates Water*

**Useful for:** depression, anxiety, COPD, lung disorders, excessive or insufficient grieving, fibrocystic breast disease, general breast health, self confidence issues.

This is an excellent exercise to open and nourish the Heart and the Lung systems. It is especially useful to cure clinical Depression. Interestingly, it will also give you powerful arms for martial arts.



## 15. Presenting Claws

青龍現爪

*qing long xian xhua*

*Green Dragon Presents Claws*

**Useful for:** kidney stones, diabetes, anxiety, arthritis,

This exercise channels energy to the Spleen, Pancreas, and Kidney Meridians, as well as all ten fingers (and the Meridians associated with them). It is also used to develop the *Art of the Dragon Claw* in Shaolin Kung Fu, which is a compassionate way to disable an opponent without doing serious damage.



## 16. Big Windmill

大風車手

*da feng che shou*

*Big Windmill Hand*

**Useful for:** diabetes, arthritis, tendonitis, tennis elbow, shoulder pain.

Do you want to break a brick with your palm? This exercise, when done correctly, will give you the internal power to do that, without any other conditioning. Those problems related to the Liver and Spleen Meridians will also find this exercise useful.



## 17. Lifting Heels

提踵彎膝

*qi zheng wan zuo*

*Lift Heels Bend Knees*

**Useful for:** arthritis, knee pain, edema, varicose veins, sacroiliac pain, long leg disorder.

This is another excellent exercise for the lower body. It opens up the meridians in the legs so that negative energy from other parts of the body can be efficiently drained out into the ground. It's also useful for opening the Small Universe Circulation.



## 18. Rotating Knees

仙鶴轉膝

*xian he zhuan xi*

*Divine Crane Rotates Knees*

**Useful for:** knee pain, sexual dysfunction, edema, varicose veins, incontinence, impotence.

You may be surprised, but Rotating Knees can help to overcome sexual problems, and it can enhance sexual performance and enjoyment. Like *Lifting Heels*, it also helps to drain negative energy down the legs. Since this energy often gets stuck in the knees, this exercise is extremely useful.

**Note:** If you have ever learned from me in person, even if it was just once, make sure to check out [the new Online Academy](#).

Zenfully yours,  
Sifu Anthony



*[I'm Sifu Anthony Korahais](#) and I help people young and old to discover the healing powers of Qigong and Tai Chi. My mission is to bring the secrets of these amazing arts out into the open, giving people the tools to heal themselves without drugs or surgery. I love sharing these amazing arts, especially with people who are fed up with conventional treatments that just aren't working.*

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### 13 Responses to “History of Qigong: The 18 Luohan Hands”

1. Mary October 4, 2012 at 8:18 am <#>  
Many thanks ~ I appreciate all you share ..

[Reply](#)



o

[Sifu Anthony](#) October 4, 2012 at 9:43 am <#>

You're welcome, Mary!

[Reply](#)

2.

JoAnn Saunders October 11, 2012 at 1:41 pm <#>

I appreciate all reminders and review demo's. Using many, great to review those I was missing. Best Wishes & gratitude for and in All that you do for us! JoAnn Saunders now residing in Ecuador.

[Reply](#)

3.

Sandra Pineault November 5, 2012 at 7:32 am <#>

Thank you so much for sharing. I know a bit about this from a great tai chi teacher who incorporates these into his classes but this is a wonderful review and reminder for me.

[Reply](#)

o

[Sifu Anthony](#) November 5, 2012 at 10:16 am <#>

You're welcome!

[Reply](#)

4.

Tommy August 24, 2013 at 10:35 am <#>

Thank you for the translation. I can read Mandarin and it's interesting to see how English translation is more literal. And the Mandarin names of the 十八羅漢手 are all in 4 character phrases. They sound so cool (and somewhat more powerful) if one can understand Mandarin.

This is very helpful! Thank you.

[Reply](#)

5.

Kenshin August 31, 2013 at 4:24 pm <#>

I appreciate for ur sharing about sir.Bodidharma. I was looking his exercise for a long time. I know a little bit about this man and his exercise. It was so powerful exercise. Ur blog is awesome. Thanks for sharing sir.sifu anthony.

[Reply](#)

o

[Sifu Anthony Korahais](#) September 4, 2013 at 3:03 pm <#>

You're very welcome, Kenshin.

[Reply](#)

6.

jagan August 3, 2014 at 8:23 am <#>

Wonderful piece

[Reply](#)

7.

Peter August 17, 2014 at 1:14 am <#>

Hello Sifu I am a fan of qi-gongs peace and growth,

Will performing these exercises without being aware of the mechanics and meridians allow one to achieve growth from the practice? or must all be memorized and concentrated on acknowledging the life force during the intake of the sea of energy through to the outflow of bad to gain the most pure results?

Is chanting the vibration phrases absolutely necessary to loosen and allow flow or will blockages be removed simply from breathing exercises and tai chi?

Thanks, Peter.

[Reply](#)

o

[Sifu Anthony Korahais](#) August 17, 2014 at 10:30 am <#>

Hi Peter. You don't need to be aware of the mechanics or the meridians to get results. That's intellectualization, which is fine when you're not practicing Qigong, but a big mistake while you're practicing. Read this article for more on this subject:

<http://flowingzen.com/4645/the-3-golden-rules/>

I'm sorry, but I don't know what you mean by "chanting the vibration phrases".

All the best,  
Sifu Anthony

[Reply](#)

8.

Joel October 29, 2014 at 5:23 pm <#>

Hi Sifu,

I'm a high school student from Idaho, and I was wondering if you could give me some information on how the Shaolin Monks used these exercises in their Martial Arts?

Thank you,

Joel

[Reply](#)

o

[Sifu Anthony Korahais](#) November 7, 2014 at 11:02 am <#>

Hi Joel. If you want to explore the history of this stuff, then my teacher's books are a good place to start. There's no simple answer to your question because the history of the Shaolin Monks is a long one. The answer depends on what era we're talking about.

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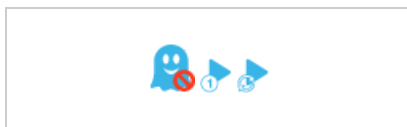
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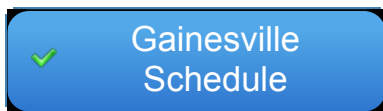
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