

— AUTHENTIC —

— IRON PALM —

THE COMPLETE TRAINING MANUAL



PHILLIP STARR

*Author of *Developing Jin* and *Refining Jin**

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Authentic Iron Palm

The Complete Training Manual

Phillip Starr



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For Rachel

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Preface

More moons than I can count have passed since I undertook training in the Iron Palm under my teacher, the late sifu W. C. Chen. He had learned the art from his shaolinquan teacher, whose surname was Hou. In those days (1965), Iron Palm was virtually unknown in the West. When the first martial arts magazines came into existence, they made no mention of this arcane art. It was discovered in the West many years later, probably due to the numerous gong-fu B movies that inspired so many American youngsters.

Even so, much of the information that was disseminated by the celluloid heroes of those days and the up-and-coming martial arts media was grossly incorrect. But nobody knew any better, and many young martial arts devotees threw themselves into what they thought was genuine Iron Palm training. And they paid for it with their hard-earned cash as well as numerous injuries, some of which were permanent.

Today, there are a few teachers of the genuine Iron Palm, but their numbers are quite small; even many Chinese martial arts enthusiasts were taken in by the popular martial arts films of yesteryear, and they began training in what they erroneously believed was Iron Palm. One of my students suggested that I write a book on the subject.

What I know about the subject is what I learned from my teacher, Master W. C. Chen. This book is a presentation of that material.

A BEGINNING: THE FIRST HUNDRED DAYS



1

What Is the Iron Palm?

The Iron Palm (铁掌功) is one of the most misunderstood facets of contemporary Chinese martial arts. Many enthusiasts who are eager to develop this special skill believe that it primarily involves toughening the hands and developing thick callouses on them. This is both true and untrue. Many contemporary Iron Palm devotees demonstrate their prowess by striking and breaking a variety of solid, strong objects such as bricks, concrete slabs, and even coconuts. While such exhibitions are impressive, they are not automatically indicative of high-level proficiency in this unique art.

The Iron Palm is not, by itself, representative of any particular style of Chinese martial arts; it can be, and often is, utilized by practitioners of all forms of gong-fu, including the so-called “internal” schools.

The Authentic Iron Palm

A true Iron Palm need not be heavily calloused (fig. 1.1). Certainly, being struck with such a weapon is akin to being hit with a ball-peen hammer, but the authentic Iron Palm goes beyond that. A blow delivered by one who is skilled in this arcane art will not necessarily cause any apparent damage to the outer surface of the target. The power of this kind of blow penetrates through the surface (usually causing minimal, if any, damage) and explodes *inside* the victim, causing devastating, and often lethal, damage to the viscera and other internal tissues.

There is a popular photo of Master Gu Yu-Cheong, a practitioner of a form of northern shaolinquan, splitting a large stack of bricks with a slap. During the years I lived in China, I had several opportunities to try my hand at breaking their bricks. At that time, Chinese bricks didn’t contain much in the way of “fillers” as do our bricks in the United States, and they were consequently much easier to break. Even so, breaking a stack such as the one shown in the photo borders on the supernatural. What is not generally

known is that Master Gu could also selectively break any brick in the stack, leaving the others intact. *That* is genuine Iron Palm skill (fig. 1.2).

Strengthening and toughening the hands and arms is not all there is to it. Iron Palm training is divided into several phases, each of which must be thoroughly completed before proceeding to the next. Initially, emphasis is placed on strengthening the hands, wrists, and arms, and to a lesser degree, toughening the main striking surfaces. Later, training will involve special forms of qigong and some very unique training routines.



Don't Sacrifice Your Regular Training

I cannot recommend engaging in Iron Palm training for those who have practiced their chosen martial discipline for less than five years. You need to establish a firm foundation and build a solid infrastructure from which you will eventually be able to apply your Iron Palm. Developing the Iron Palm can be likened to tempering and sharpening a fine sword. Although

you may hone it to a razor's edge, it will be of little use to you if you are unable to wield it effectively.

Moreover, I do not recommend Iron Palm training for young people (under the age of twenty) because the growth plates in their bones are still developing, and injury to them can result in permanent damage.

Getting Ready

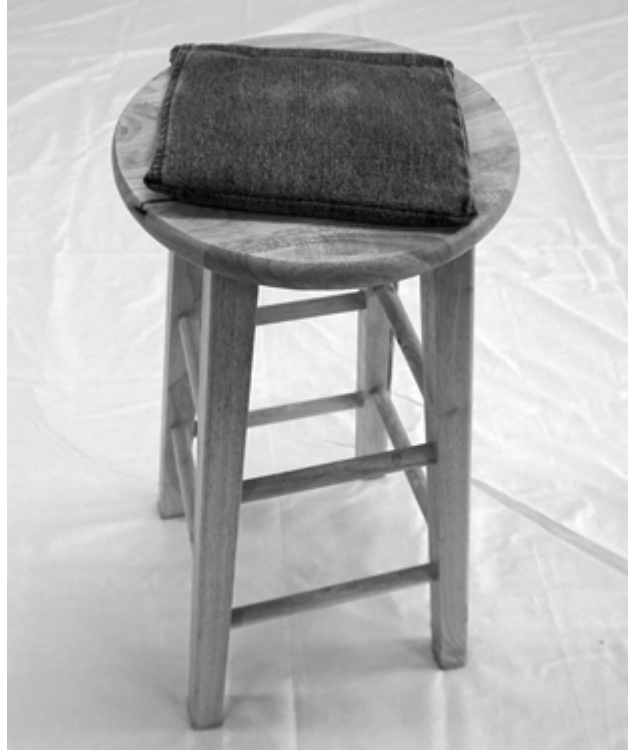
It is important that you practice the training routines at least six days a week. Intermittent practice often results in unnecessary injuries and leads nowhere. If you are unable to do this, I suggest that you discard this book altogether. You must be absolutely determined to complete the training cycles, regardless of any obstacles that may suddenly appear. Therefore, it is critical that you maintain a constant state of good health and avoid injuries; such things will interrupt your training.

Before you start salivating at the thought of training the Iron Palm, there are several items you'll need to procure for the first stage of training. So make a list and prepare your wallet for a bit of weight loss:

- The first thing to obtain is a small table that reaches approximately to the height of your hips. If you are unable to find one, or if your wallet screams too loud, stacking up cinderblocks will suffice (fig. 1.3). The main thing is to have a solid base to work with: one that can't easily be broken and is the proper height.

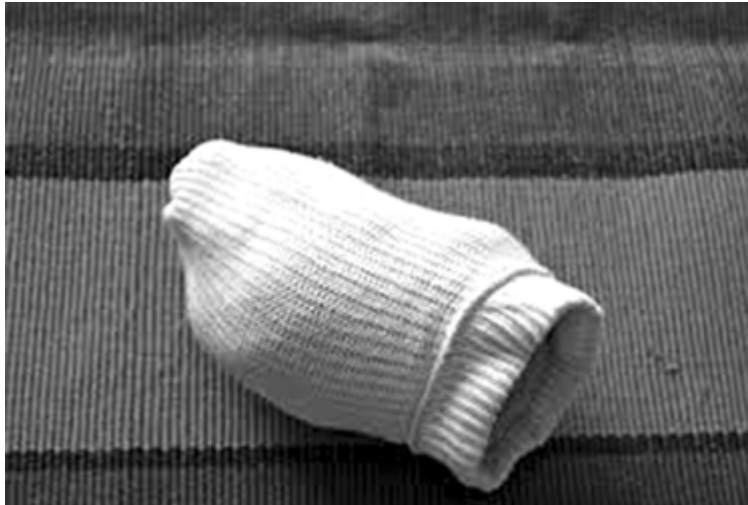


- You're going to need a small bag that you'll fill with beans or corn (I'm a Midwestern boy, and corn is readily available). There's no need to bleed your bank account too much by purchasing a bag; if you have any skill with a needle and thread, you can easily make one. Cut off the lower leg of a pair of denim jeans about eight to ten inches long and sew one end shut. Make sure the stitches are tight and strong. Fill the pouch that you've created with corn or mung beans and stitch the other end shut. If you wish, you may place this homemade bag inside another one, just in case the stitches break. See figure 1.4.
- You're going to need a five-gallon bucket of corn or mung beans (fig. 1.5).



- Do you have a pair of old socks? Good. Roll them into a ball (even one sock will do) as shown in figure 1.6.

- You'll need a "stone lever." In Chinese this is called *jiazhong gan*; in Japanese, *chishi*. It should weigh no more than five to ten pounds. The handle should be at least fourteen inches in length (fig. 1.7). There are any number of ways to make one; I pounded a dowel into the mounting hole in a five-pound weight, and it served me well for many years. Other folks have poured concrete into a small container and then set the dowel into it. This also works very well.



- Next is a foot-long dowel with a hole drilled through the center. Slip a length of rope (about three feet in length) through the hole and knot one end. Tie the other end to a five-pound weight (fig. 1.8). Now you have a device that will provide you with a beautiful religious experience: you'll see God!



- You'll need to construct a proper, traditional striking post (fig. 1.9). Instructions for this are found in chapter 17.
- Obtain some Iron Palm medicine (fig. 1.10). Don't buy the "hit medicines" that are often advertised in martial arts supply stores; such "medicines" are often good for little more than light bruises. You need the real stuff. I recommend contacting Black Belt Herbs at www.blackbeltherbs.com.



Remember that *there are no shortcuts in this training*; every exercise must be practiced at least six days each week. If you cut corners or try to hurry, the odds are that you'll only succeed in injuring yourself. This leads

to setbacks and may be so discouraging that you'll give up altogether. Take your time and do it right.

2

The First Hundred Days (Part One)

Now we'll begin the process. Take your time! Each phase is divided into segments to make it easier for you to understand exactly what to do and how to do it. Don't gloss over any of it; each and every exercise is a must.

The main objectives of the first hundred-day phase are to develop the right kinds of strength in the hands, wrists, arms, other areas of the body, which are mentioned later, and to toughen the hands to a small degree. It is intended to prepare your body for the second hundred-day phase. It is not intended to promote callousing of the hands or anything of that sort.

It is essential that you maintain your regular training regimen in your chosen discipline, and I don't recommend engaging in Iron Palm training unless you already have a minimum of five years' previous experience in your particular art. Iron Palm training must not impinge upon your customary practice. If you don't have time to do both, don't attempt to take up Iron Palm training.

Let's Hit It!

Stand in front of your table in a stable Horse-Riding Stance. Lift your palm about head high and let it drop by its own weight to strike the bag with your palm. Also strike with the edge of your palm and the back of your hand. When striking with the edge of the hand, aim to strike with the seven-star point, which is actually the hypothenar eminence (figs. 2.1–2.4).





It's important that you refrain from tensing your hand as if to turn it into a block of wood. Keep it relaxed. Don't *strike* the bag, per se; allow your

hand to simply fall. Exhale when you hit the bag, but not forcefully; just let your breath escape naturally. Don't tense any part of your body.

Do it successively and rhythmically. With your hand, strike with the palm, hand edge (seven-star point), and then the back of the hand in a nice three-beat rhythm. Then repeat it. Begin with just twenty-five repetitions per hand. After a week, go to fifty ... do this until you reach three hundred strikes per hand.

As you practice, be sure to keep your stance stable. Don't stand too high or too low, and avoid shifting around.

Get Corny!

Stand in front your bucket of corn or beans in a stable Bow-and-Arrow Stance. With each hand, thrust into it with your Spear Hand: first, palm down, then vertically, and then palm up. The objective is to touch the bottom of the bucket. Finally, thrust in with a Tiger's Claw. Once the hand penetrates as far as possible, make a fist (which will then be full of corn) and withdraw it before releasing the corn. See figures 2.5 to 2.9.







Yes, it's going to make a mess and spill corn or beans everywhere. Keep a small broom handy. Also be sure to cover the top of the bucket; small critters like mice are quickly attracted to free meals.

Begin as you did with the bag, doing twenty-five repetitions of each thrust with one hand and then the other. After a week, increase the number to fifty, and so on, until you reach one hundred thrusts per hand.

The Silent Teacher

The striking post was, at one time, a common piece of training equipment found in most martial arts schools. Unfortunately, many contemporary schools eschew the use of this device because using it is initially rather uncomfortable. But trust me, if you want to know whether you can really knock an opponent down with your thrust or strike, try it out on a striking post. The odds are good that you'll find a flaw in there somewhere, and that you're not really hitting as hard as you thought. When you start out, don't go for a home run and hit it full power. If you do, you won't do it a second time. Start off gently with, say, twenty-five good punches and strikes. Gradually increase the power and number of blows as you're able. Take

your time. When I train with my post, I perform five hundred thrusts with each hand every day; I used to practice one thousand thrusts daily. I also practice fifty to one hundred other types of strikes, which include the Sword Hand and Back Fist. By the time you've worked up to one hundred strong thrusts per day, your punch will be stronger than you might think. When you hit an opponent, he'll stay hit, believe me.

Some people fear that they will permanently damage their hands if they train with this piece of equipment. Stories abound about well-known martial arts teachers whose hands were supposedly rendered into little more than bludgeons on the ends of their wrists. Certainly, I have known people who injured their hands on the post, but it was because they were training improperly. You can easily injure yourself lifting light weights, using a heavy bag, or even using a toilet the wrong way. If you're going to use a piece of equipment, learn to do it right or leave it alone.

There's a story about a famous xingyiquan master who, when he was yet a student, practiced hitting a post until he could break a tombstone with his piquan (literally, "splitting hand," which strikes with the little-finger edge of the palm). Mind you, this is a Chinese tombstone we're talking about, and they are considerably smaller than the huge, heavy Western tombstones, but still, it was no mean feat. His teachers wouldn't teach him another technique until he could successfully perform this feat. Talk about being picky!

So, if you can, set up a striking post, but be sure to build it correctly. You must never, ever practice hitting something that doesn't "give." Your force will simply be returned to you, and you may injure not only your hands but your internal environment as well. Don't go out and start whacking the nearest tree. Build a proper post and do it right.

I've seen world-famous martial arts masters demonstrating how they beat their hands on huge stones, trees, and similar immovable objects. There is a technical term used in physics that describes such practice. It is *asinine*. I don't care who it is that engages in this kind of thing, how famous he is, what rank he holds, or anything else. It is a reckless, harmful way to practice. Do it right and do it regularly. You'll discover that the striking post is a wonderful, albeit a sometimes harsh, teacher (figs. 2.10–2.14). Instructions for constructing a striking post are found in chapter 17.







3

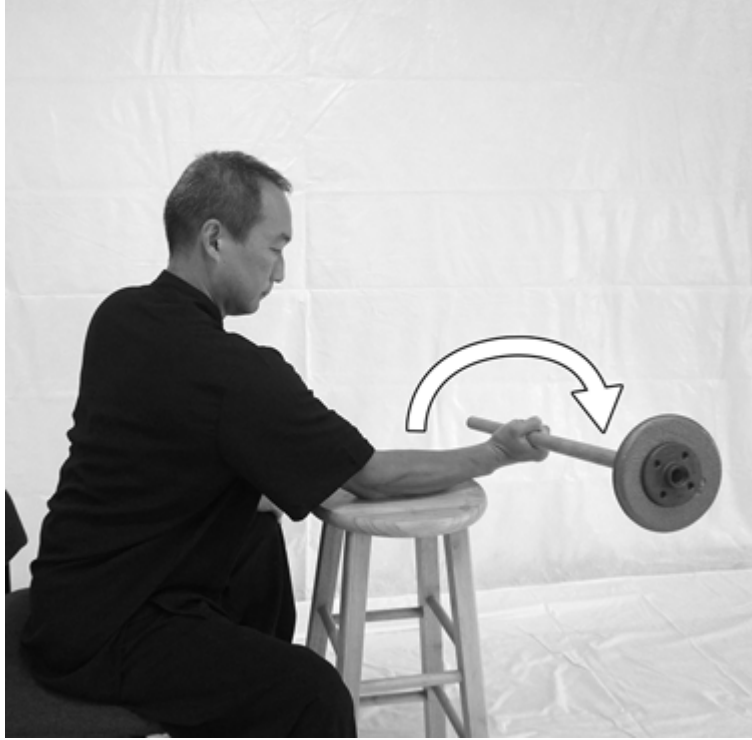
The First Hundred Days (Part Two)

These exercises are to be done in conjunction with those shown in chapter 2, every day. When you've finished playing in the corn, practice with the following exercises. They needn't be done in any particular order, so long as you complete all of them in each training session.

The Weighted Rod

Sit with your forearm resting on a table and hold the weighted rod. Hold the end of the rod vertically. Perform the exercises shown in the figures 3.1 to 3.4. Do at least five repetitions of each exercise, and gradually increase the number to ten.









The Rolling Stick

Hold the stick with both hands as shown. Alternating hands, roll the stick until the weight is brought up and touches it. Then reverse the process until the rope is full extended. Do at least two or three repetitions (figs. 3.5–3.7). Work your way up to ten. Yes, it's going to make your arms *burn*!





Put a Sock in It!



Grasp your rolled-up sock and squeeze it at least fifty times, gradually increasing the number to one hundred per hand. This will help increase gripping strength (fig. 3.8).

Auxiliary Exercises

In addition to the training routines that utilize special types of equipment, there are a few auxiliary exercises that require no special devices and which must be practiced daily.

Fingertip Push-Ups

No, they won't break. Begin by doing push-ups on all five fingers. Just start off doing what you can; work your way to twenty-five reps. When that becomes fairly easy, do the push-ups on only three fingers (the forefinger, middle finger, and thumb). See figures 3.9 and 3.10.





The Quin-Na Stick

You will need a stick about eight to twelve inches long, with a two- to three-inch diameter. Bamboo is best, if you can get it. This exercise helps develop great gripping strength.

There is a story about an older man in China who maintained a fine garden of various vegetables. Renowned as a gong-fu master, he was occasionally challenged by other practitioners. One day, he was tending to his garden when a young man approached him and challenged him to a match. The older man had no interest in this confrontation and simply told the youngster to go away. Not to be easily dissuaded, the younger man returned almost daily for a time and repeated his request. Each time, the old master ignored him.

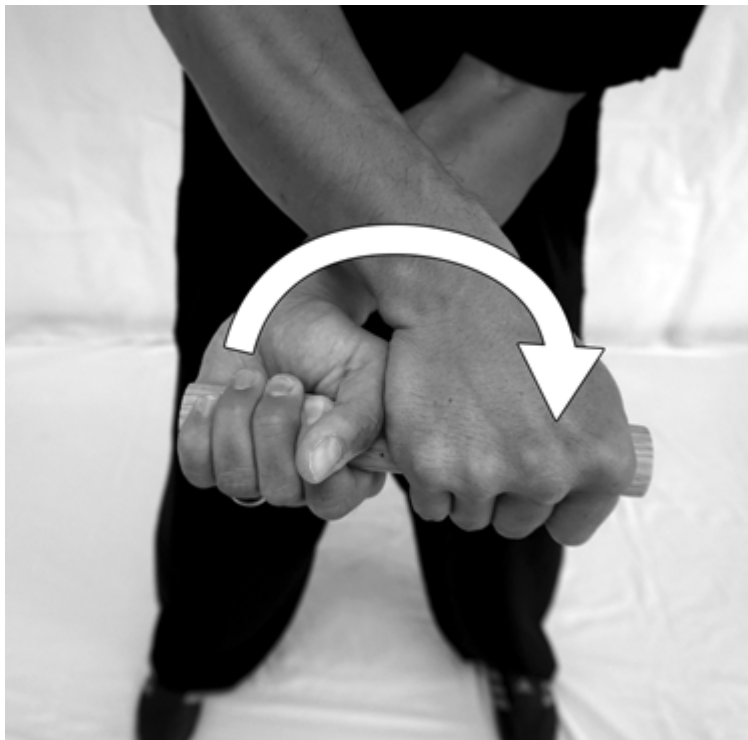
Exasperated, the challenger returned one day and began kicking the vegetables in the garden. The old man rushed out to find that many of his plants had been uprooted and he asked the young fellow why he was being so disrespectful. Thinking that this oldster has outlived his martial skill, the young contender laughed at him and said that he believed the “master” actually feared losing to him.

The old man walked over to his house and brought back a large broom. The handle was made of bamboo, about three inches thick. Holding it in his

hands, he twisted the broom handle and tore it in half! Needless to say, the young contender quickly departed with his tail between his legs.



The exercise is quite simple; begin by holding the stick as shown in figure 3.11. Grip it firmly, and slowly twist it as you turn it over. Using the strength of your grip, try to tear it in half. Then do it again to return to the original position. Avoid raising your shoulders or arching your chest. Do this for about five repetitions, and then switch the hand positions and repeat it. Ultimately, you should perform an even dozen repetitions on each side (figs. 3.11–3.13).



After one hundred days of this daily practice, you're ready to proceed to the exercises shown in the second one-hundred-day cycle.

4

Developing Slapping Power

In so far as slapping the bag is concerned, there's much more to it than just giving it a good thwack. Most Iron Palm texts that I have perused place too much emphasis on simply slapping the bag while providing minimal, if any, instruction on exactly how it is to be done. Incorrect technique can easily lead to injuries and always comes to naught. So, listen up.

Put in Some Elbow Grease!

To develop real power in slapping—and hence, your Iron Palm technique—you must learn to use your elbows properly. This is going to require considerable practice over time. It is best to initially practice these movements without striking the bag. Focus on *feeling* what's happening in your body, not just your elbow, as you practice.

Dropping the Elbow

We'll begin with the most fundamental movement: slapping in a downward fashion. As you raise your hand, be sure that you don't lift your shoulder. The hand and wrist are relaxed. As you begin the movement, *drop the elbow in a straight line*. Neither the shoulder nor the elbow should extend forward. It is only after the elbow has dropped to its lowest point that you allow the forearm to fall and the hand to slap the bag. In this way, the arm acts like a whip (see figs. 4.1–4.3). Exhale powerfully with a reverse breath.*

* Reverse breathing is described in “The Microcosmic Orbit Breath” in chapter 9, and discussed fully in my previous books *Martial Mechanics and Developing Jin*.



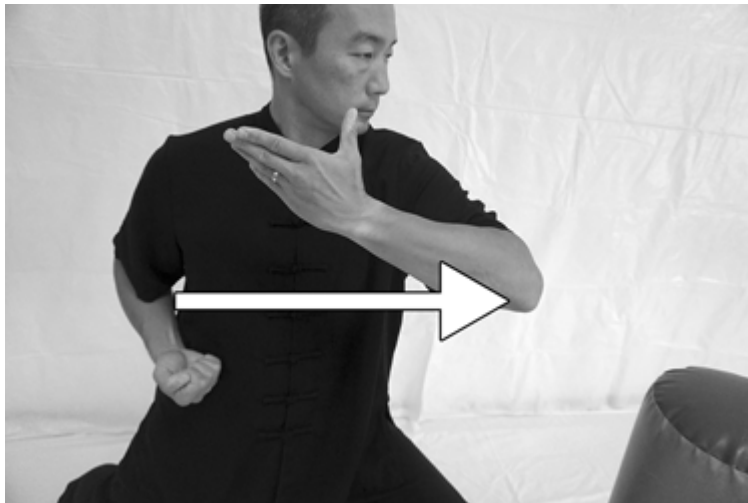


Stick It Out!

In striking from the inside outward, it is necessary to begin by thrusting the elbow to the side in a straight line. The shoulders are kept down and relaxed. The elbow should not swing around in an arcing manner.

Once the elbow has been fully thrust to the side, the forearm is allowed to swing and the bag (a hanging bag) may be struck. Be sure that you maintain a solid, stable stance (figs. 4.4–4.8).







Strike Like a Human Tiger

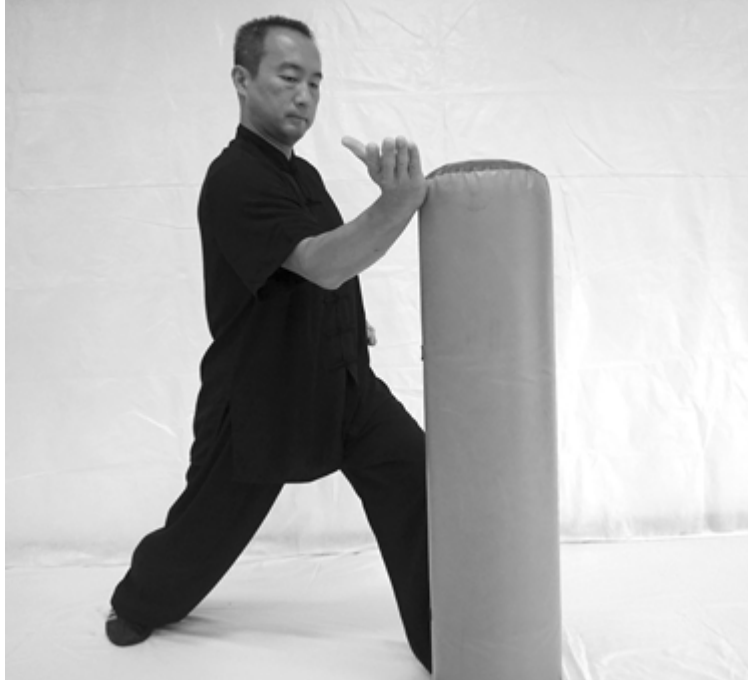


Strikes made from the outside inward can be very powerful. This is how tigers kill their prey; they break its neck with a fast, tremendous blow. But you must understand that no matter how hard you may try, you'll never strike with the same amount of force. Unlike humans, tigers have free-floating clavicles that don't articulate with the other bones. Strikes made from the outside inward are largely unimpeded, which allows them to

generate enormous power. However, they are all but incapable of striking from the inside outward or lifting heavy objects with their forepaws.

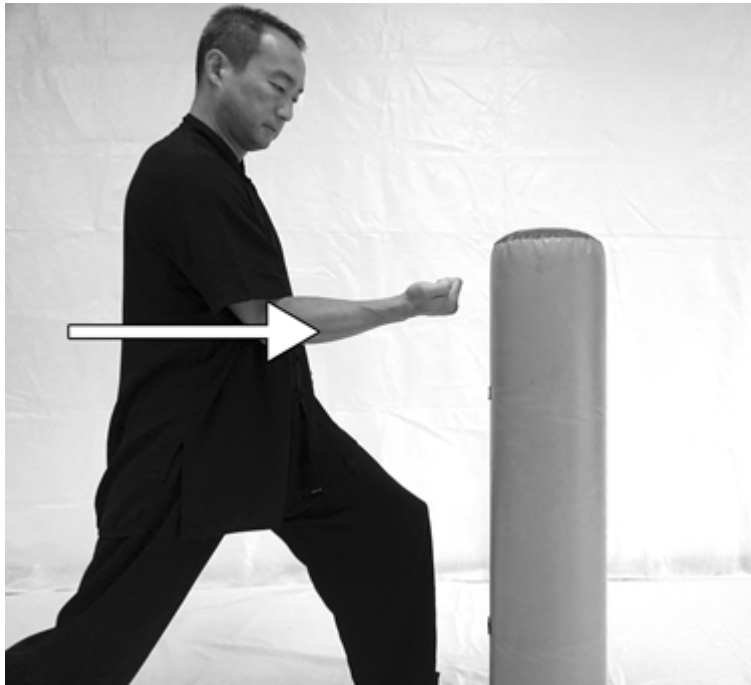
Both before and upon execution of this strike, be sure that you don't lift your shoulder. The motion is made first with movement of the elbow, after which the forearm and hand follow. It's very much like using a lash (figs. 4.9–4.11).





The Thrust

Movement of the elbow is critical in the execution of a proper thrust. Exercises for proper elbow movement are discussed in my book *Refining Jin*. The thrust is actually to be made with the elbow, rather than the shoulder. The elbow must be thrust forward in a straight line; don't let it arc at all. The shoulder must not be lifted (see figs. 4.12–4.13).



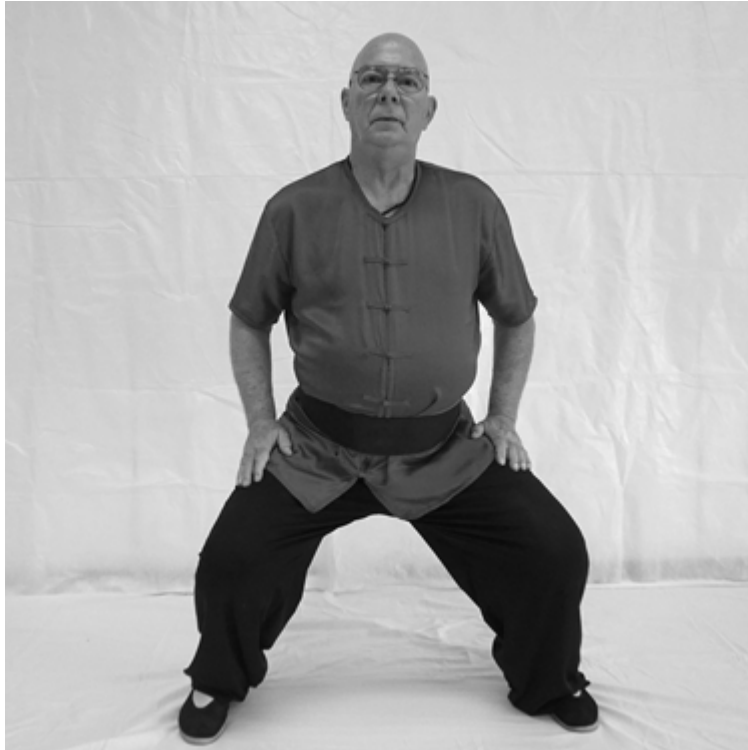
5

Going Back to Your Roots

When you're practicing striking the bag and thrusting your fingertips into the bucket of beans, you may have noticed that your legs ache and you may have stopped for a time to allow the burning sensation to subside. Don't! Assuming that your stance is correct, you are slowly (and, yes, rather painfully) developing a strong root; a stable and strong platform from which you can deliver powerful blows. Bear in mind that the power and effectiveness of your Iron Palm strikes are only as strong as your root. If your root is too shallow or nonexistent, you have no hope of developing a true Iron Palm.

Riding the Horse

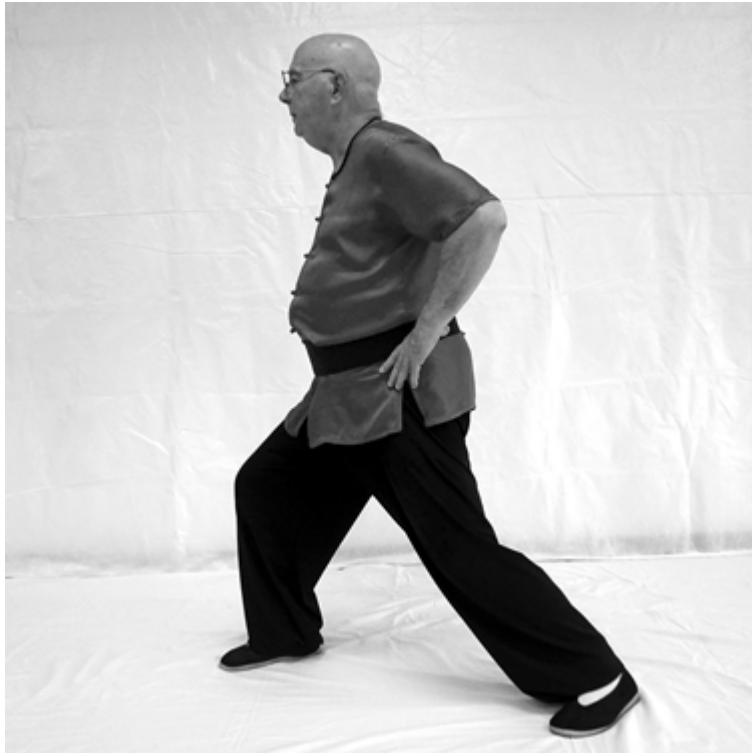
Let's ensure that your Horse-Riding Stance (*qi ma-bu*) is correct. The width should be about two hip widths. The knees and toes point straight ahead, and the knees are bent so that the buttocks are a bit higher than the knees (fig. 5.1). When striking, the knees must not move.



The Bow-and-Arrow Stance

The Bow-and-Arrow Stance, a.k.a. Mountain-Climbing Stance and Forward Stance, can be found by simply turning the feet angularly to one side or the other from a Horse-Riding Stance. Depending on the style of gong-fu that you practice, the angle of the feet and the width may vary. It should, however, never be wider than the width of your hips. If the stance is too wide, the smooth rotation of the hips is restricted. The same thing is true if the feet are aligned.

The front foot bears about 70 percent of your weight, and the knee is bent such that it aligns vertically with the *yongquan* point (the first acupoint of the Kidney Channel) on the bottom of the foot. The rear leg should be slightly flexed; it is never locked straight. Make sure that you do not lean, and when striking, the forward knee mustn't wobble lest your foundation becomes unstable (figs. 5.2–5.3).





One of the most important aspects of Iron Palm training is the development of a strong root, which is achieved by sinking the qi (vital energy) to the *dantian*, an area in the lower abdomen located about three finger-widths below the navel and two finger-widths inside. It is not located on the surface of the skin, nor is it a small point. It is like a ball inside the center of the body where qi accumulates (fig. 5.4).

It is believed that raising the shoulders, expanding the chest, or breathing high in the chest causes the qi to rise, making you “top heavy” and the foundation weak and unsteady.

Training to hold your stance for extended periods promotes the sinking of the qi to the dantian. Normally, this is a rather painful process as the legs, especially the quadriceps muscles, begin to ache and then burn. However, when you hold the stances during Iron Palm training, your mind is focused elsewhere—not on your legs. So, the pain is seemingly minimized. In time, your qi will sink, assuming that you don’t stand up periodically to “rest” your legs, and your root will become deep and secure.

6

Basic Body Actions

Developing a fine weapon is one thing, but using it effectively is another. Striking with an Iron Palm is only effective if you practice using it correctly. At the same time, simply walloping the bag with your arm isn't enough; in fact, doing so will only develop bad habits that can be fairly difficult to break. To strike with only the force of the arm is incorrect. You must to apply a few basic body actions when you practice. There are eight so-called body actions, and they are all presented in detail in my book *Martial Mechanics*. For Iron Palm training, only two are needed. However, to effectively apply this weapon once you've developed it, you're going to need all eight.

The Body Action of "Down"

The key is to drop your body's weight down *in a straight line*, without leaning. When striking or slapping in a descending manner, as in slapping the bag, it's best to utilize this fundamental body action.

Begin in a Horse-Riding Stance, standing a bit higher than normal. Yes, your knees must still be bent. When you strike, suddenly drop the stance to its normal depth. Do not drop any lower than that. Ensure that your spine is straight. To do this, begin by "pushing" your ears away from your shoulders. This will align the cervical vertebrae with the thoracic vertebrae. Slightly tighten the anal sphincter and squeeze the buttocks together to roll the hips marginally forward. Doing this aligns the lumbar vertebrae with the thoracic vertebrae (figs. 6.1–6.3).





The Body Action of “Rotation”

The body action of Rotation involves a 45-degree rotation of the hips when the blow is delivered with the rearmost hand. In striking or thrusting forward, as you do when thrusting into the buckets of beans or corn, or thrusting against a heavy bag, begin with the upper body turned 45 degrees inward. That is, your navel should point at a 45-degree angle from the intended target. As the strike is made, drive the rear foot against the ground to assist you in rotating your hips so that your navel points straight forward. If you are really pressing your rear foot against the ground, you’ll find that the buttock on that side tightens inward a bit. That’s fine; in fact, you should contract the anal sphincter and tighten both buttocks. See figures 6.4 and 6.5.



Reverse Rotation

Simple Body Rotation that moves the rear hip forward is utilized mainly for strikes and thrusts delivered with the rearmost hand or arm. However, there's more to Body Rotation than that; there are actually two forms of rotation. When employing the forward hand or arm, it's usually necessary to use what is known as Reverse Rotation.

Begin by facing the intended target directly, with the navel pointed straight ahead. As the strike or thrust is executed, rotate inward 45 degrees (see figs. 6.6–6.7). This rotates the front hip forward. You should still make sure that your ears are pushed away from your shoulders, the anal sphincter is tightened, and the buttocks are also squeezing together.





As you practice the various striking and thrusting routines, be sure that you apply the appropriate body action. There is a simple rule of thumb to bear in mind regarding body actions, and it is this:

The striking hip is always directed toward the target.

However, remember that you must not strike the bag with all of your power lest you injure your hand. The hand falls as if by its own weight.

7

Brewing Your Own Medicine

For those who are interested in preparing their own Iron Palm medicine, I will provide the necessary information here. As I mentioned earlier, in chapter 1, most of the commercial Iron Palm liniments are actually what we call “hit liniments” that are used to treat bruises. The authentic medicine can be purchased from Black Belt Herbs at www.blackbeltherbs.com. But if you’re determined to make your own batch, here’s how to do it.

Making Your Own Iron Palm Medicine

You will need 1½ ounces of each herb:

cinnamon bark (肉桂皮, *guei-bi*)

Rehmannia (地黄, *sheng di huang*)

lotus root (熟地, *lien zi*)

psuedo-ginseng (天齐, *tien-qi*)

skullcap root (黄芩, *huang sun*)

safflower (红花, *hong hua*)

frankincense (乳香, *ru xiang*)

myrrh (没药, *mo yao*)

hemlock parsley (川芎, *quan xiong*)

licorice (甘草, *kan cao*)

dong quai tails (当归尾, *dong kwai wei*)

white peony root (白芍, *bai shao*)

These herbs can be purchased from various Chinese herb supply shops.

- Bruise and crush up the herbs with a mortar and pestle. Don't crush them into a powder, but break them up.
- Place the herbs in a gallon container (not a metal container) with a top that will seal tight. Make sure the mouth of the jar is large enough that you can insert your hand into the container.
- Add three bottles (fifths, 26 ounces each) of Everclear or vodka. Do not use something like whisky or plum wine.
- Top it off with water.
- Seal the container and let it sit in a place out of direct sunlight. It should be ready in about three months. The older it gets, the stronger and more effective it becomes.

Applying the Medicine

Some teachers advocate soaking the hands in the medicine both before and after training, but I see no real reason to do so prior to practice. The medicine is intended to increase circulation, remove "dead blood," which causes bruising and may lead to the development of blood clots, and to heal any minor damage to the flesh that may result from rigorous practice.

Do not ingest this medicine internally. It's good for cuts, but don't ever drink it. For bad cuts, place some of the herbs on the wound, cover it with a bandage, and tape and leave it in place until dry. It heals cuts very quickly, usually with little or no scarring. It's also excellent for cracked bones, bruises, strawberries, and rashes.*

* If you suffer an injury, seek the services of a qualified physician. Do not rely solely on the healing properties of this medicine.

8

Basic Long-Breath Qigong Exercise

In the old schools of Iron Palm training, instructors used to—and many still do—tell their students that during the first hundred days of practice, they must abstain from having sex and the drinking of alcoholic beverages. I agree with this time-honored practice.

It is believed that both sex and alcohol temporarily interfere with the circulation of blood and qi, and this hampering of the free flow of blood and qi can have adverse effects on your training. According to the old teachings, sexual activity and imbibing alcohol may impact your overall health if done while you are engaged in the practice of Iron Palm. Additionally, it is important that you maintain a healthy diet and avoid fast foods. You'll understand this a little better as we move forward.

The Long Breath

The purpose of the Long Breath is to gather qi through the practice of a special breathing and visualization exercise. This exercise must be practiced for at least twenty minutes daily for sixty days. It is a popular exercise that is often used in China as a form of medical therapy, in conjunction with other remedial treatments, for a variety of ailments.

To begin this breathing exercise, sit comfortably and place your hands on your legs or in your lap. Your back must be straight—push your ears away from your shoulders—but not stiff. Half-close your eyes and focus on a point on the floor about ten feet in front of you. Avoid fidgeting or shifting around. Select a place where you will not be distracted by sudden loud noises, bright lights, or movement. If possible, practice in the same place at about the same time every day after your training.

- Inhale through the nose. Understand that when you inhale, you are not only taking in air but qi as well. If you like, you may visualize the qi as light. Mentally direct the air and qi down to the dantian.

- Hold the air and qi for a ten count. If this is difficult for you, just hold it until you begin to experience some mild discomfort.
- Slowly exhale the air out through your mouth but imagine that you are keeping the qi within your dantian. Many students like to visualize this qi as a little pearl of white light. Exhale very slowly, and when you think you have exhaled all of the air, try to exhale just a little more.
- Continue to practice the exercise until you are finished for the day. A minimum of fifteen to twenty minutes per session is best. After you are finished, sit quietly for perhaps thirty to sixty seconds before moving around.

Many students like to add to the visualization of the pearl of qi in the dantian. They imagine that with each succeeding breath (which draws in additional qi), the pearl becomes larger and larger, gradually filling the entire inside of the body. As they continue with the exercise, they imagine that this light becomes brighter and brighter and begins to seep through the pores of the skin.

They imagine themselves glowing with this light, which continues to grow until it surrounds them so that they are sitting inside a ball of light that originates from within themselves. As they continue to practice, they imagine this ball of light slowly expanding.

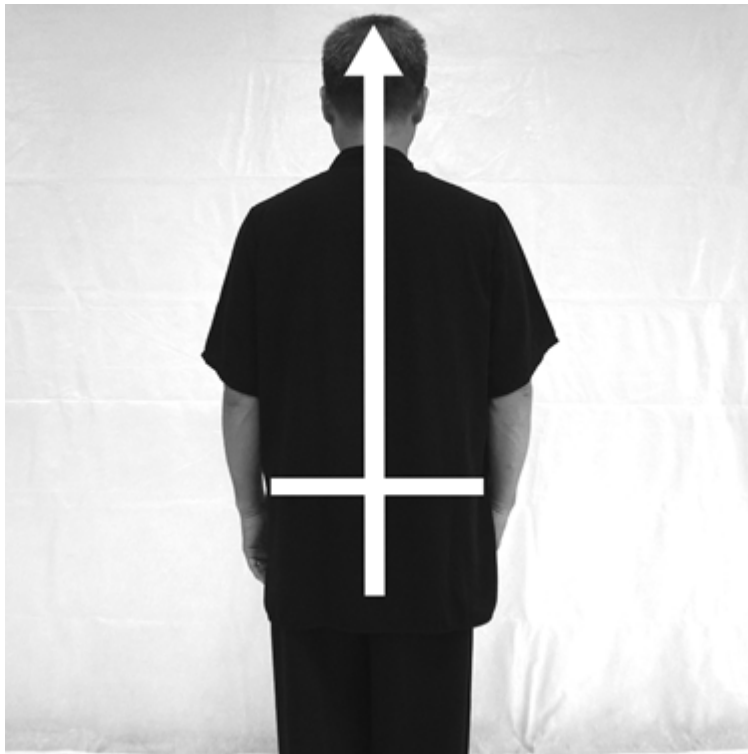
When they decide to end the exercise for the day, they imagine this huge ball of light slowly shrinking back through the pores of the skin and condensing into the original pearl of light in the dantian (fig. 8.1).

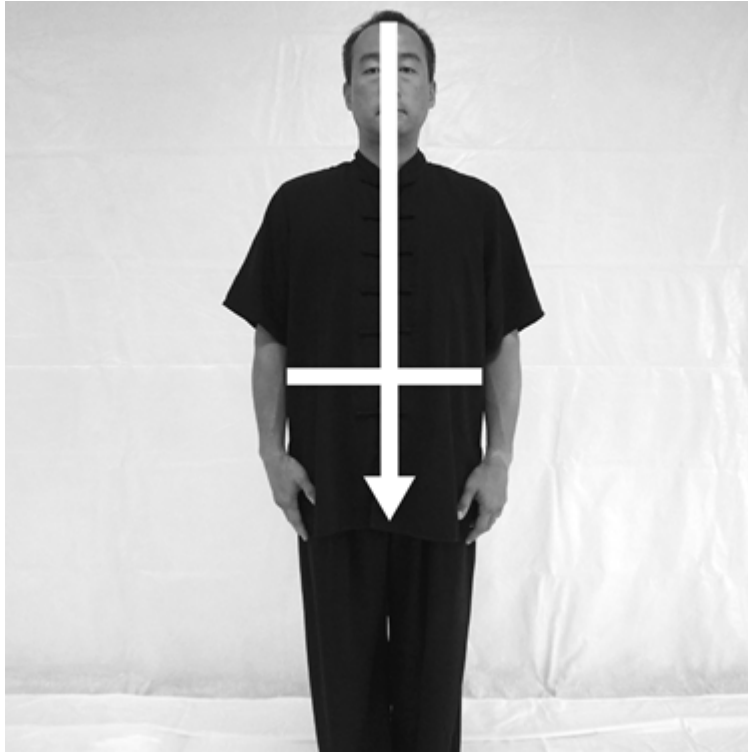


9

The Microcosmic Orbit Breathing Exercise

This breathing exercise should be started upon completion of the Long Breath. I recommend practicing it in the same manner that you did with the Long Breath, for one hundred days. It is intended to clear the three primary acupuncture channels—the Governing Channel, the Conception Channel, and the Belt Channel—and to put the qi that you have accumulated through the practice of the Long Breath into circulation (see figs. 9.1–9.2).





In time, the various acupuncture channels are cleared of any blockages, which results in improved overall health and vitality.

Beginning the Practice

For best results, you should begin by focusing your *yi* (imagination, will, intention) on each of the major energy centers, one at a time. Sit quietly as you did in the practice of the Long Breath and focus your mind as follows:

- Begin with the dantian point, imagining that energy is circling around the energy center thirty-six times clockwise and twenty-four times counterclockwise. Do this every day for at least three days. You may feel a sensation of heat or tingling when the point is cleared. Don't be disappointed if you experience no sensation; many people don't.
- Focus your *yi* on each point, going up the Conception Channel and then down the Governing Channel to the *huiyin* point (the perineum). The discerning student will ask how he or she will know when the energy has accumulated at a given point. The life force is gathered at each point by simply focusing your mind on that point.

Remember this basic principle of qigong: *Where your mind goes, your qi also goes.* When you concentrate your attention on a given point, your energy will accumulate there. The longer you concentrate on it, the more the qi tends to accumulate. The sensations produced by this phenomenon vary from person to person. Some describe it as heat, tingling, buzzing, or even a mild itching sensation, which seems to come from the inside of the body. However, some people experience no unusual sensations at all. It should be borne in mind that these sensations are not the qi itself; rather, they are sensations caused by the dilation of blood vessels and the increase of the flow of blood and other bodily fluids in and around the areas where qi gathers. Chinese medical theory teaches that qi and blood move together. The sensations you experience may be said to be symptomatic of the movement or accumulation of qi.

The time required to achieve this point-by-point circulation of energy varies from one person to another. Never judge your progress by measuring it against the progress of someone else. What some people require only a few days to accomplish may take others several weeks. This initial point-by-point practice is intended to clear any blockages of energy that may exist within the channels. People who experience no sensations at a particular point may well have no blockages there.

Once all of the points have been cleared, you are ready to begin the actual Microcosmic Orbit Breathing exercise. But first, let's get a complete picture of what we're doing. You'll begin with the Conception Channel and go from the dantian upward. Once you have completed clearing those centers, you'll move down the Governing Channel.

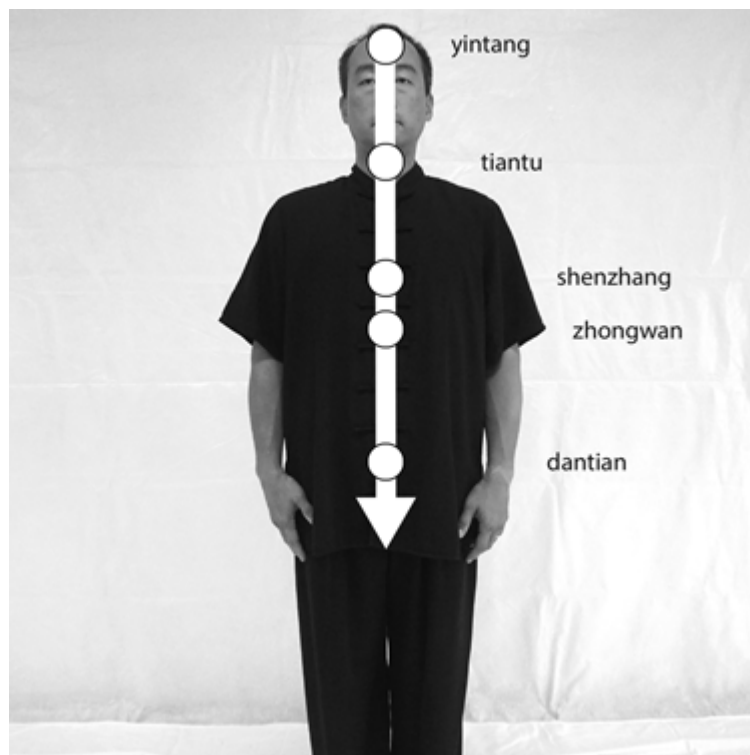
Getting the Point

Figures 9-3 and 9-4 show the energy centers along the Conception Channel with which you'll be working. We'll begin with the dantian, which is located about three finger-widths below the navel. It is the seat of your strength and vitality. Once it is stimulated, you will feel energized and very strong.

The second point, *zhongwan*, is located at the area of the solar plexus and helps maintain internal health of the lower organs such as the bowels, liver, spleen, and kidneys. When it is activated, your internal health will be enhanced.

The third point is located at the heart and is known as *shenzhang*. This is considered the midpoint between the lower and upper chakras. The lower energy centers are primarily concerned with strength, internal health, and vitality. The upper centers are associated with a person's emotional, mental, and spiritual development. When the heart center is activated, your capacity for compassion, love, and consideration is augmented.

The fourth point, *tiantu*, is found in the throat and corresponds to the thyroid gland. Once it is awakened, it is thought to have a very positive effect on speech and the ability to breathe smoothly and evenly, which has a direct effect on the qi.



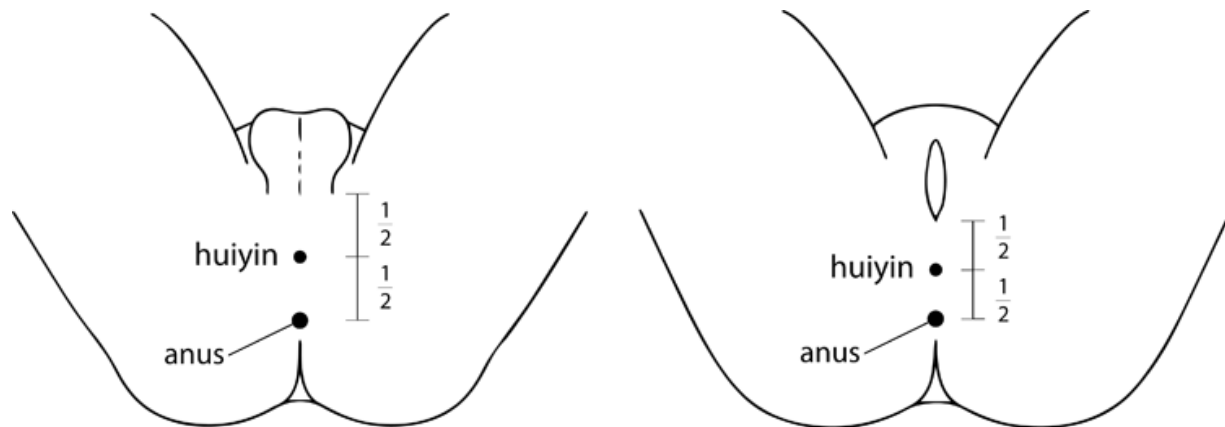
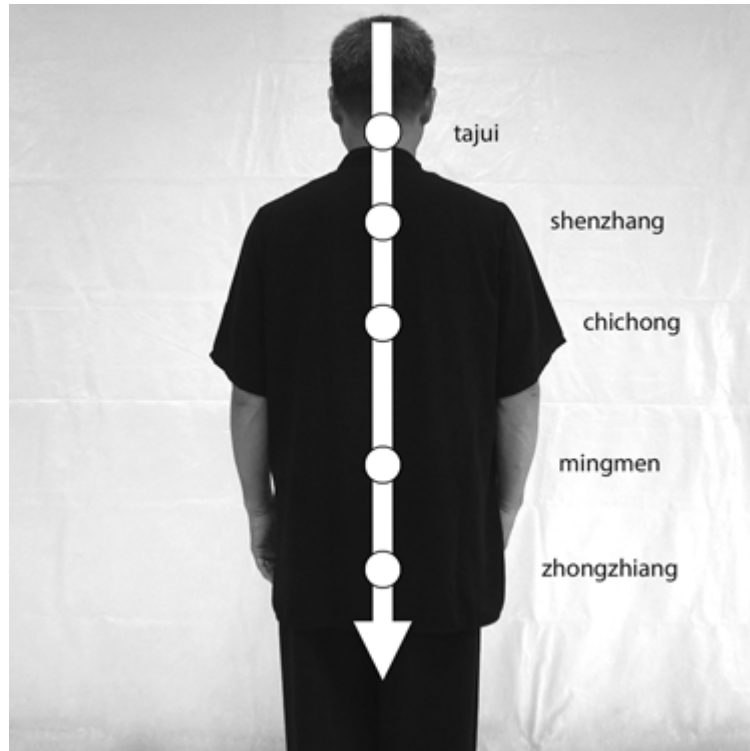
The fifth point is found between the eyebrows at the point known as *yintang*. It actually corresponds to the pituitary gland. This is the point popularly known as the “third eye” in Western mysticism. This center is also referred to as the “upper dantian.”

The sixth point is referred to as *baihui* (“one hundred meetings”), which is an acupuncture point near the crown.



Now let's examine the important points of the Governing Channel. They are, for the most part, located directly across from the points on the Conception Channel. The seventh point, *yuikun*, is found on the back of the skull. It is directly opposite the *yintang* point of the Governing Channel.

The eighth point is known as *tajui* and it is located on the back of the neck, directly opposite the *tiantu* point on the throat. The ninth point is known as *jiabe* and it lies on the spine, across from the *shenzhang* heart point. The tenth point is *chichong* and it is opposite the *zhongwan* point at the solar plexus. The eleventh point is *mingmen*, found across from the *dantian*. The twelfth point is *zhongzhiang* and is found in the center of the sacrum. The last point is *huiyin*, located at the perineum (see figs. 9.5–9.6).



The Microcosmic Orbit Breath

Once the energy centers have been cleared, you may start the true Microcosmic Orbit Breath. But first, consider that the Governing and Conception channels are connected at the huiyin point, but not at the baihui point. The acupuncture channel of the baihui point actually runs down into the roof of the palate, and the channel of tajui travels to the root of the tongue. This is where the Governing and Conception Channels can be joined; by touching the tongue to the upper palate, the circuit is figuratively closed (fig. 9.7).



Although the Long Breath uses normal breathing, you must use what is known as reverse breathing when practicing the Microcosmic Orbit Breath. This form of breathing is also used in the practice of numerous martial disciplines, especially the so-called internal schools. In performing reverse breathing, draw the abdomen inward as you inhale through your nose. Don't expand your chest or raise your shoulders. Upon exhalation, expand the abdomen outward as you also expand the flanks and lumbar area. It should feel as though you are pushing down into the lower part of your torso.

- Begin with three Long Breaths using normal breathing to help you relax and prepare for practice.
- Touch your tongue to the roof of the mouth to “form a bridge” (*dajiao*). You will now begin using reverse breathing. When you inhale, imagine breathing qi down into the dantian and filling it. When you exhale, imagine compressing the energy into this point and energizing it. Do this in nine breaths.
- When you inhale, the energy is brought from the huiyin point up the Governing Channel, over the baihui point, and to the palate. When

you slowly exhale, the qi travels down the Conception Channel and back to the huiyin point.

- Upon completion of each practice session, men should circle the energy around the dantian thirty-six times clockwise, and then twenty-four times counterclockwise. Women should circle it thirty-six times counterclockwise, and then twenty-four times clockwise. This helps to gather the qi back to the dantian.

10

Standing Qigong Practice

In addition to daily practice of qigong breathing, it is also necessary to practice standing qigong postures. These are intended to draw qi to the hands, which promotes circulation and helps prevent bruising and soreness, and to assist you in learning to emit it. It's not imperative that you practice all of them each day; you can simply select one and practice it for fifteen minutes or so. If you decide to practice all of them, perform each one for just five minutes.

Push to the Front

You should stand in a Horse-Riding Stance, but not too deeply. Begin with your hands at your hips, palms upward (fig. 10.1). Using a reverse breath, inhale without arching the chest or raising the shoulders. As you exhale slowly, push the palms out in front of you, as shown in figure 10.2. Don't fully straighten the arms. The elbows should be held downward and the wrists should not be sharply angled (fig. 10.3). Hold the palms out for at least one minute. With some practice, you can work your way up to five minutes.





It is a good idea to focus your yi on accomplishing a certain task as you do this exercise. It really helps to strengthen the yi, which consequently assists in developing the ability to emit qi powerfully. Placing a lit candle several feet away and imagining that you're going to extinguish it is most helpful. Of course, you won't actually succeed, but imagining that you can do it is beneficial.

Push to the Sides

This is identical to the previous exercise except that you will push out to both sides (fig. 10.4).



Be sure that you don't expand your chest or lift your shoulders. Additionally, *don't look down*. Many students, especially when they are experiencing considerable discomfort, look down. This destroys proper spinal alignment (remember the principle of pushing your ears away from your shoulders?) and weakens your root. If your shoulders or arms begin to ache, it's often an indication that you have residual tension there. You must learn to relax as you perform these exercises.

Push Palms Down

Stand as before and push the palms straight down, as shown in figure 10.5. Imagine crushing a large stone or several blocks of concrete.



Again, do not lock the elbows straight, don't bend your neck to look down (you can look down without having to bend your neck), and don't lean. Stay relaxed; avoid stiffening the muscles of your arms, hands, shoulders, or chest.

ON THE PATH: THE SECOND HUNDRED DAYS

11

The Second Hundred Days

That's right—all the material up to this point has been for the *first* hundred days, and now there's more. But it's not as bad as you might imagine.

Changing the Bag

Now that you've developed some striking power, it's time to change the contents of your striking bag. This time, fill it with rice. This will make for a denser striking surface than corn or beans. You may need to decrease the number of repetitions of strikes and gradually work your way back up to striking three hundred times per hand.

One older man who trained at a Shaolin temple in Fujian Province many years ago talked about using rice as a filler for his bag. Over time, the bag became stained with his sweat and the medicine in which he soaked his hands. Eventually, the rice was pounded into powder. This powder was collected by the other monks, who made it into rice cakes and cooked them. The younger novices greedily consumed them. I can barely imagine how they must have tasted.

At this stage, it is well to stand in a Bow-and-Arrow Stance alongside your table and strike from that position. Begin by turning your waist toward the table, then apply Body Rotation as you strike. But remember, don't strike with the strength of your arm or shoulder; allow the hand to fall by its own weight (figs. 11.1–11.2).



A Bucketful of ...

That's right—it's time to empty the corn or beans from your faithful five-gallon bucket and fill it with rice. The rice will pack more solidly than corn or beans, making your thrusts more difficult—and messy. Rice will be flying everywhere, so make sure that you practice in an area that is easy to sweep, or where it just doesn't matter.

Thy Rod and Thy Stick

It's also time to increase the amount of weight used on your rolling stick and weighted rod. Don't increase the weight too much, perhaps just two or three pounds more. As you progress and the exercises with these devices become easier, you can gradually increase the amount of weight you use, but only in small increments.

Auxiliary Exercises

These exercises won't change much, save for a couple of push-up routines. Continue practicing the exercises from the first hundred days and simply add these to your repertoire.

Fingertip Push-Ups

Rather than doing push-ups on five or even three fingers, you'll now practice doing push-ups on the forefinger and thumb of each hand. Begin slowly, doing only as many as you can. Slowly increase the number of repetitions to twenty (fig. 11.3).



Wrist Push-Ups

With the wrists bent as shown in figure 11.4, practice doing push-ups. It may be a bit uncomfortable at first, but the pain will eventually subside as you work your way up to twenty-five repetitions.



Brick Catching

Hold a brick at shoulder height and drop it. Using the same hand, catch it with your fingertips before it hits the ground (figs. 11.5–11.6). Practice for twenty repetitions.



12

Whip It

Now that you have acquired a fair measure of skill with the basic body actions described in chapter 6, you will add the movement of Body Whip to the mix. The first phase of learning this body action involves learning to properly raise and lower an area located on the lower part of the sternum, just above the xiphoid process, which is the sixteenth point of the Conception Channel known as *zhongting* (“center palace”). See figure 12.1.



The Basic Exercise

While the basic body actions of Body Rotation, Reverse Rotation, and Body Down make use of the pelvic girdle and waist to increase striking power, learning to use *zhongting* properly enables you to utilize the powerful muscles of the spine. You will be able to strike with the full force of your entire body.

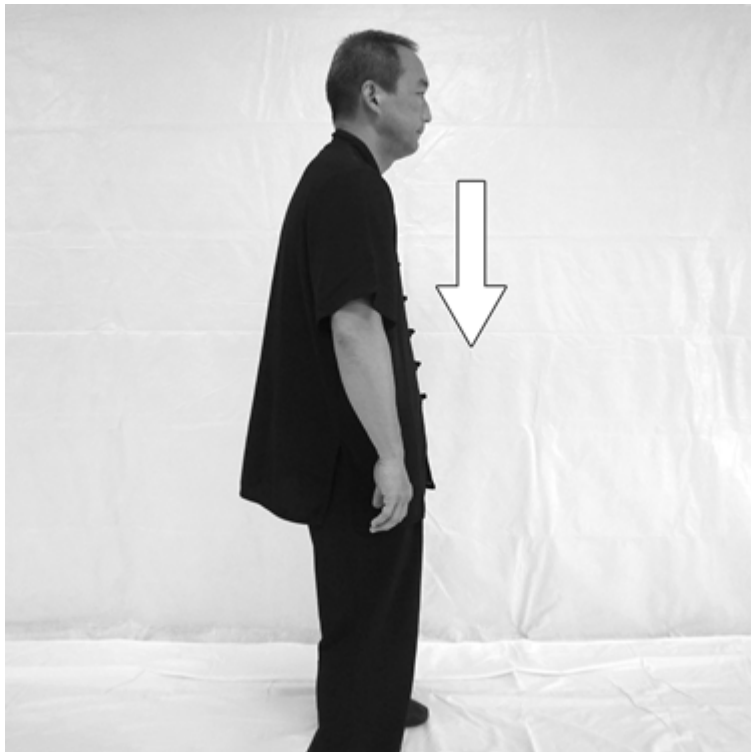
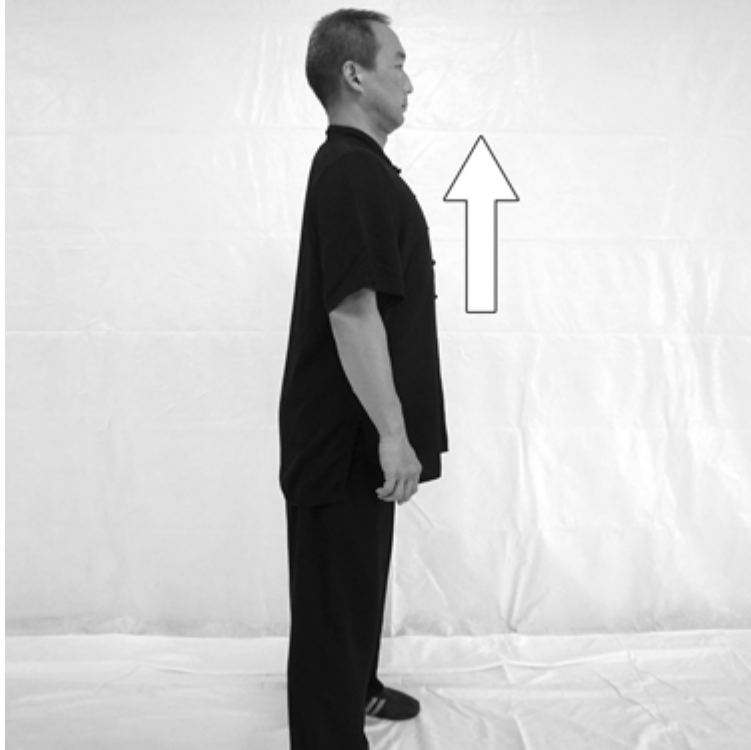
Learning to raise and drop the zhongting sounds easy enough to do, but it will require some considerable practice.

Lifting and Dropping the Zhongting

Begin by standing normally. Touch the zhongting point to feel it and identify it if you wish. As you inhale, raise the zhongting straight upward, but be sure not to arch your chest or raise your shoulders. As you exhale, lower the zhongting downward. This will cause your chest to become slightly concave as your lower abdomen expands somewhat. You'll be using reverse breathing. See figures 12.2–12.4.

Only after you have learned to do this exercise with ease should you move on to the next exercise, which is known as the Spinal Wave.





The Body Action of “Whip”

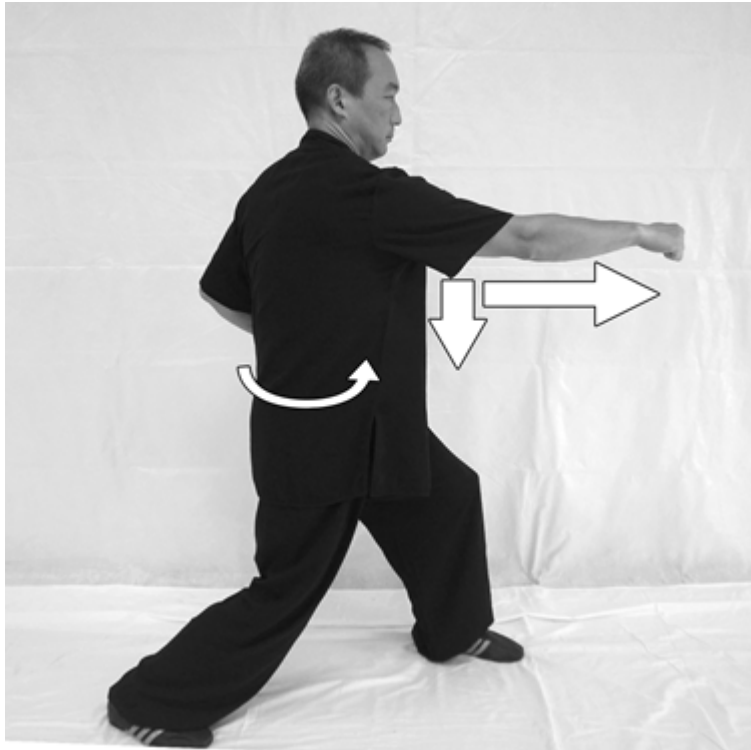
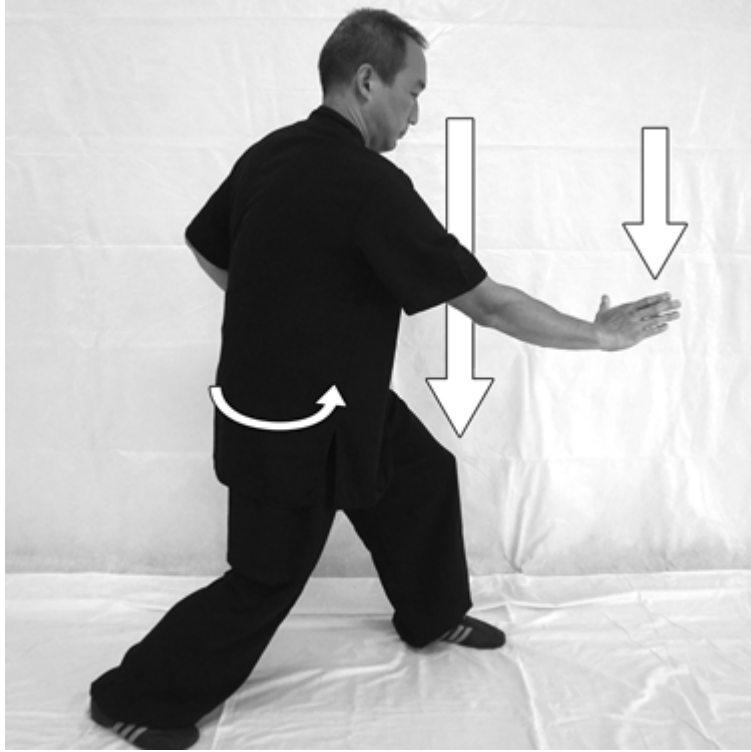
As you inhale and raise the zhongting, arch your lower back slightly. Then, upon exhalation and the dropping of the zhongting, the anal sphincter is contracted and the lower back becomes somewhat convex as the hips roll forward a bit (figs. 12.5–12.6). To learn to do this easily and smoothly will require some time.

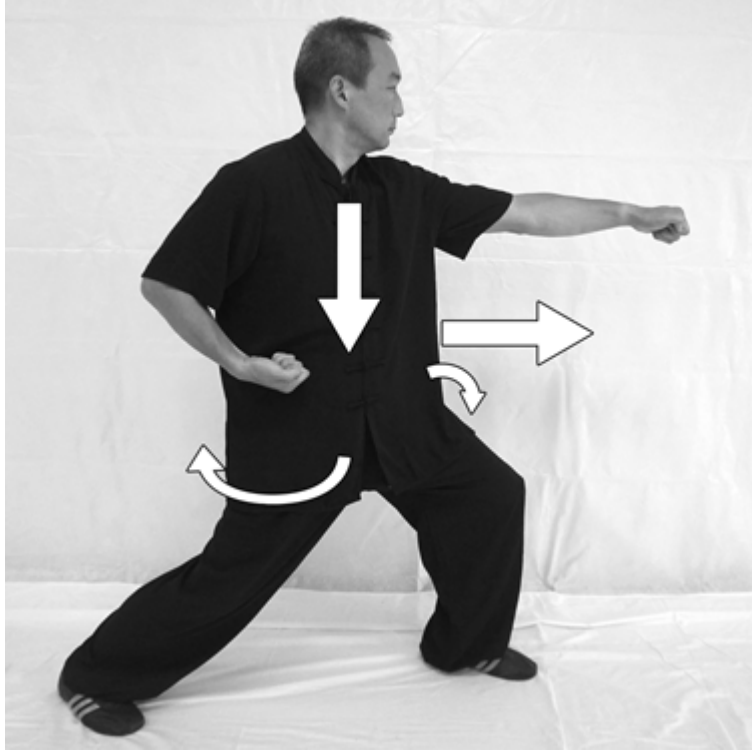




Integration

Once you have learned to perform Body Whip reasonably well, you must learn to integrate it with the actions of Body Down, Body Rotation, and Reverse Rotation. This is going require patience and time as well as regular practice (figs. 12.7–12.9).





13

Preliminary Tests

As you approach the end of your second hundred-day cycle, you should assess your skills with some very basic tests. These tests aren't necessarily indicative of genuine Iron Palm skill, but they will act as barometers to let you know if and where you need more practice. The truth is that most Iron Palm aficionados who do well with the following basic tests rarely complete the second hundred-day cycle because they feel, after a time, that they've reached the zenith of the art.

Once you've passed all of the following tests, you must be determined to continue with your training and go well beyond the second hundred-day cycle.

A Couple of Times Around the Block

You'll need to purchase several concrete or Haydite blocks. These should measure about 15½ inches in length, 7½ inches in width, and 1½ or 2 inches in thickness. They are usually given the size designation of 2 by 8 by 16. Haydite is preferable to concrete; it isn't quite as dense as concrete, and it's lighter.

Set a single block atop two or more cinderblocks. If possible, make your cinderblock base as high as your waist. Fold up a small towel and place it in the center of the block. This will help prevent your hand from being directly exposed to the sharp edges of the concrete or Haydite when it breaks (fig. 13.1).



Using a palm slap, strike the block in the center. Imagine directing your power (and hand) at a target beneath the surface of the block. If you direct your *yi* at the surface, you can be assured that your palm will bounce off and you may experience some considerable pain. Remember, *where your yi goes, your qi goes*. Direct your *yi* beneath the surface of the block, and your hand will pass through easily (fig. 13.2).



You may also break a single block with the seven-star point of your palm and the back of your hand. If you injure yourself, be sure that you take appropriate measures and allow the injury to heal before trying again.

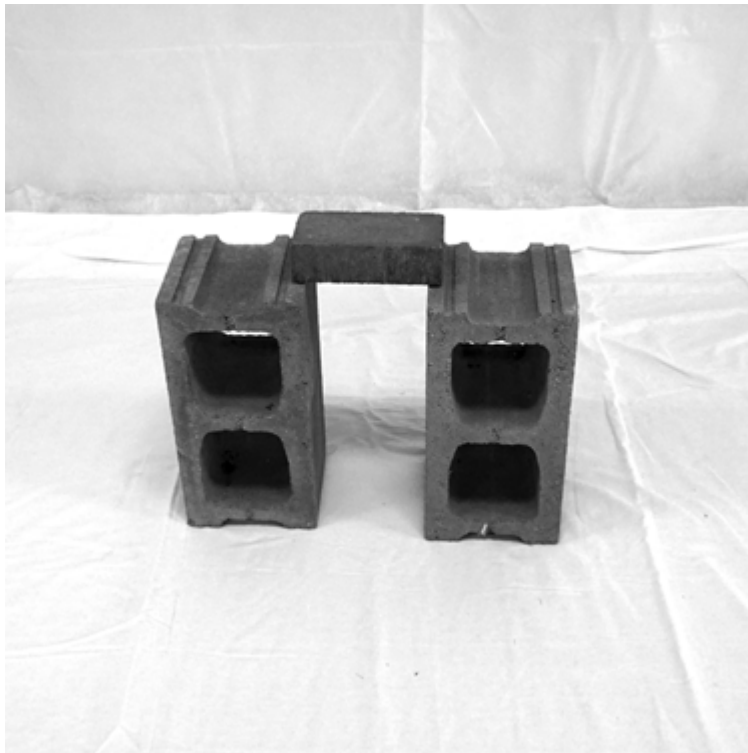
If you can easily cut a single block, try cutting through two of them. Never use “spacers” (small items placed between the blocks to separate them). This is not an accurate measurement of skill; if a single block has the resistance of $1x$, two blocks (laid directly atop each other) have the resistance of $2x$. However, if spacers are used, you are simply breaking $1x$ twice. This trick was created many years ago to enthrall audiences and fool them into thinking that the star of the show was capable of breaking huge amounts of masonry, but it is a false demonstration of skill. Remove the spacers, and their “enormous power” suddenly vaporizes.

When you can cut through three blocks with ease, you can be sure that your skill is increasing. If you strike and break the bottom slab, don't get too excited. This is not an indication of real Iron Palm skill. In breaking more than one block, the break occurs from the bottom up; that is, if you could watch it in slow motion, you'd see the bottom block break first, and so on. Breaking the bottom block while leaving the top ones intact simply

indicates that you may have learned to strike with just enough force to successfully break the bottom slab without damaging the upper blocks.

The Brick

You've probably already guessed that breaking a brick would be a part of this assessment of skill. If so, you're right! I recommend using common red bricks. These measure approximately 8 inches in length, 3½ inches in width, and just over 2 inches in thickness. There are many types of bricks, but common red bricks are best. Mount the brick on your cinderblock base, place your folded towel over the center of it, and strike with your palm or the seven-star point on the ulnar edge of your hand (fig. 13.3).



Breaking a brick is considerably more difficult than a concrete or Haydite slab. If you fail to break it on your first try, don't be discouraged, but if and when you experience discomfort in your attempts to cut the brick, discontinue this exercise until the pain dissipates. Be careful that you don't injure yourself; if you do, you must halt all training and seek medical attention. You must not begin training again until the injury is fully healed.

Many years ago, one of my students practiced for about a year before he succeeded in cutting a brick. As an interesting diversion from this difficult task, I'll tell you a story. The first time I visited China was in 1982, and one afternoon we were walking through an area in Beijing where bricks were being used in the construction of several buildings. This is still a very common sight in China, and there were stacks of bricks everywhere. The hour was late and all of the workers had left the site for the day. Being both curious and adventurous, I picked up a brick and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

The coast looked clear enough, and I noticed that the brick was very light—not at all as heavy as those found in the United States—it felt as light as a pencil. Holding it by one end, I quickly punched the lower half of the brick, and it virtually exploded. Then cheers erupted from the windows of several apartments, from which local residents were watching the group of foreigners. To say that I was terribly embarrassed would be a serious understatement, but I discovered that the bricks were little more than baked clay, which didn't do much to boost my confidence when we visited various brick hotels and government buildings; these bricks had very little filler in them, which is common in bricks from Europe and the U.S. Thus, the stories of past masters breaking several bricks or tiles became much clearer to me.

In 2012 I moved to China and lived there. I found that they were now using fillers in their bricks, making them much stronger and more difficult to break. And of course, it dramatically increased the stability of their new brick structures.

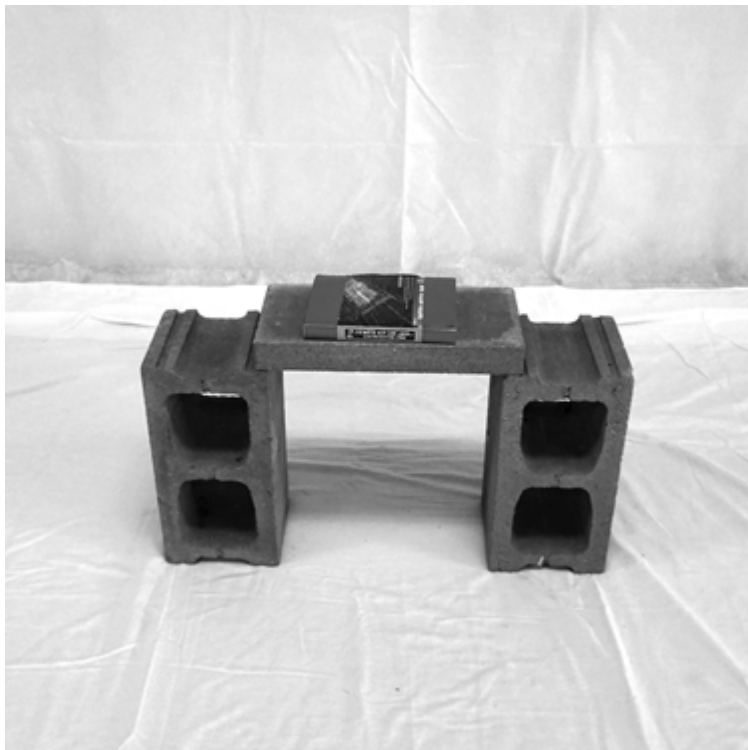
Knock on Wood

Once you can cut two or three concrete blocks with ease, try placing a pine board on top of the blocks. The board should measure 12 inches in length and width, and 1 inch in thickness. Wood, when struck, doesn't break in the same manner as brittle concrete; the fibers of the wood actually tear.

The object is to cut the blocks with a sharp blow, causing no damage to the board. This is not at all difficult to do, and it will teach you to strike sharply without necessarily trying to physically penetrate the target (fig. 13.4).



You may try the same thing with a thick pad set on top of the concrete block. In striking, your power must penetrate through the protective padded surface to damage the target that lies beneath it (fig. 13.5).



Bear in mind that breaking concrete or any other substance is not the goal of Iron Palm training; these breaking exercises are simply used as ways by which you can gauge how much striking power you are effectively generating and, to a lesser degree, how well you can control it. The technique of controlling your striking force will become much more important in the next phase of training.

14

The Macrocosmic Orbit Breath

Of the four types of Taoist breathing techniques, only this one has direct martial applications. It is necessary to practice the Microcosmic Orbit technique until all of the acuchannels are cleared and free of any blockages. For the first sixty days, the Macrocosmic Orbit Breath is practiced in two stages. After that, it should be practiced in stage 3 only (there is no need to repeat the first two stages).

Stage 1

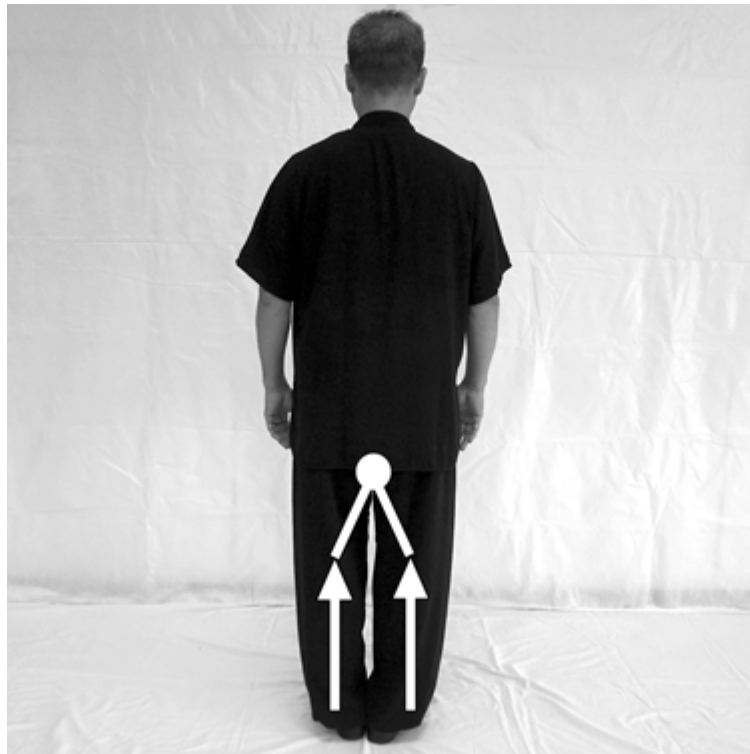
Sit in a chair or stand with the feet separated at shoulder width and the knees slightly bent. You may begin with three Microcosmic Breaths. You will imagine, and try to feel, that you are inhaling and exhaling through the yongquan points on the soles of your feet. Inhale from the two yongquan points and imagine drawing qi up from a depth of about three to four feet below the ground to the backs of your knees. Then exhale and let the qi pass through the yongquan points back into the earth to the same depth. Do this three times. Practice this exercise daily, for at least fifteen to twenty minutes, for thirty days (figs. 14.1–14.3).





Stage 2

Begin by repeating stage 1. After three breaths, inhale, using reverse breathing, and imagine drawing the qi up through the backs of the legs. The two paths will join together at the huiyin point. Then exhale and allow qi to separate to the legs and return below the earth from the yongquan points (figs. 14.4–14.5). You will spend another thirty days practicing this exercise.

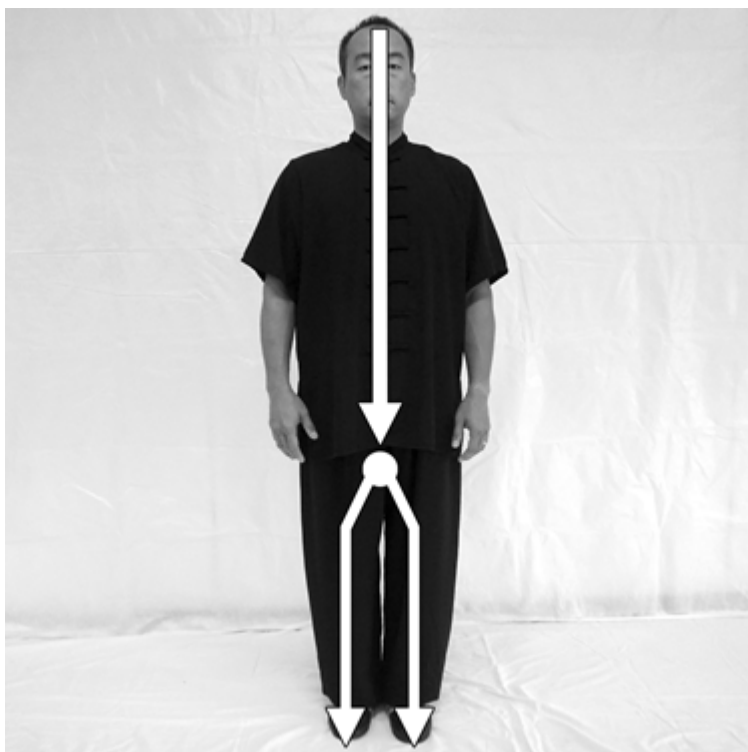
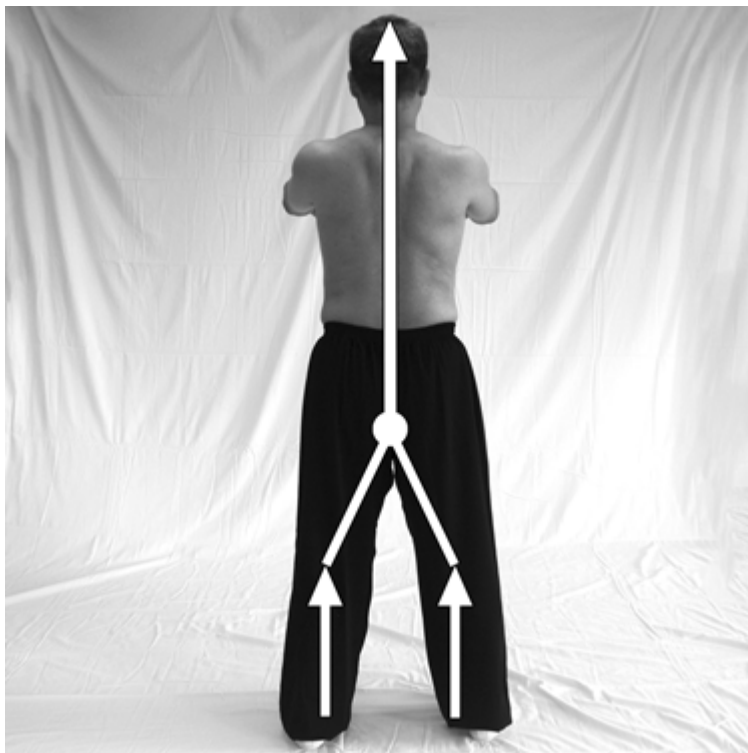




Stage 3

This is the final stage. Once reached, there is no need to repeat stages 1 or 2. You should begin by standing normally with hands and arms relaxed. As you inhale, using a reverse breath, draw qi from below the earth up through the backs of the legs to the huiyin point, up the spine (Governing Channel), over the top of the head to the baihui point (this is one-third of the distance from the front to the rear hairline), and to the roof of the mouth.

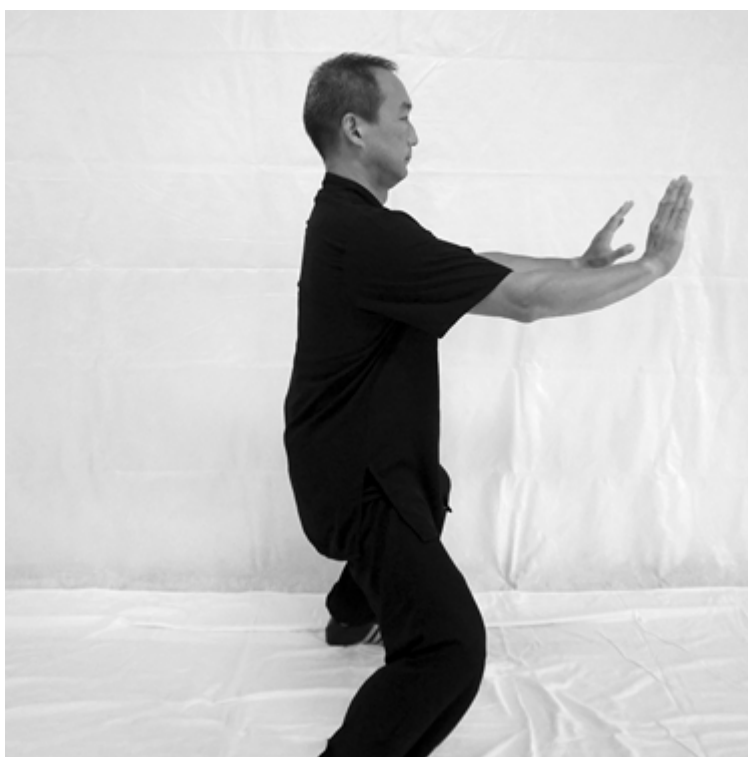
As you exhale, lower qi down through the centerline (Conception Channel) to the huiyin point, down through the fronts of the legs, then around the outsides of the ankles to the yongquan points, and down into the earth (figs. 14.6–14.7).



Practice with the Postures

After you are able to perform the Macrocosmic Orbit Breathing and you can feel the qi moving up through your feet and legs, up your spine, over the crown, and back through the soles of your feet, you should practice while using the standing qigong postures of chapter 9. With each posture, draw the qi up from the soles of your feet, up the Governing Channel, down the Conception Channel, and back through the soles of your feet. However, as the breath is slowly exhaled and the qi drops down the front of your body, focus part of your attention on your hands. This will draw qi to your hands as it is lowered, and you will feel it in your palms and even your fingertips. See figure 14.8.

You should practice executing your striking and thrusting techniques slowly—inhaling up through the soles of your feet prior to delivering your blow, and then exhaling down into the ground as you make your strike. This must become an unconscious habit: one that no longer requires you to think about how and when to do it. This is going to require daily practice, time, and lots of patience. Eventually, you’ll notice a considerable increase in your striking power.



THE FINAL PHASE

15

The Final Frontier

After you have completed the second phase, you will begin the final phase of Iron Palm training. Unlike the first two phases, there is no fixed, minimal time that you must spend training in it, but be assured that it will last more than a hundred days. It ends only when you have finally reached a level of skill with which you are comfortable—the level that you had intended to reach. There is less new material in this phase than in the first two, so it is well to continue practicing the training routines outlined in the second phase.

Trainees often ask, “If I discontinue my training after completing it, will my skill disappear?” The answer is a little more complicated than a simple yes or no. Yes, some skills will rust and become dulled, but your ability to generate great power will diminish only slightly.

Additional Routines

Don’t worry: you don’t necessarily have to run out and purchase any new expensive pieces of equipment.

Time to Refill

Now you’ll need to fill your striking bag and five-gallon bucket with sand. When you can thrust your spear-hand into the bucket of sand and touch the bottom, or even just go wrist-deep, you will have developed a truly formidable weapon.

Do not use stones or metal balls or pellets to fill your bag or bucket. This is a fine example of the Western “more is better” way of thinking. Stones and iron pellets have no “give,” and you’ll only succeed in injuring yourself. Several supply companies sell such items, but don’t be fooled into buying what they’re trying to sell.

Pressing

Practice pressing with your fist, palm, and spear-hand against the striking post as well as a padded concrete block. Hold each press for one full exhalation (remember to use reverse breathing). Begin slowly at first and make your breath long and smooth. Hold the press until your exhalation is complete. Practice for twenty repetitions per hand. You may also use an inch-thick pine board.

After practicing this for a couple of months, do the press in one quick, forceful breath. Remember to begin with your hand set firmly on the block; don't pull back and strike. See if you can break the block or board (figs. 15.1–15.2).





Short Thrusting

Extend your arm and hand (with fingers stretched out) so that your fingertips just touch the striking post. Don't forget to withdraw your hip 45 degrees. Then with a quick and strong exhalation, snap your hip forward and strike the post with your palm or fist. If you're feeling a bit gutsy, you can also use your Phoenix-Eye Fist. Practice for just twenty repetitions to start and slowly work your way up to fifty.

Of course, this is also to be practiced on the concrete slab (I don't recommend using a Phoenix-Eye Fist for this). Strike with the intention of cutting it in half. Use a folded hand towel to protect your hand. However, you should also practice with thick pads set atop the block. If you are able to split the block with ease, increase the thickness of the padding. In this way, you learn to transmit the force of your blow through a softer, absorbent surface to damage an underlying target (figs. 15.3–15.6).





16

Advanced Assessments

The following “tests” should also be used as training routines, although they needn’t be exercised every day; just check your progress from time to time. When you are able to perform them successfully, you can be said to have developed a high level of Iron Palm skill. It’s going to get a little messy, however.

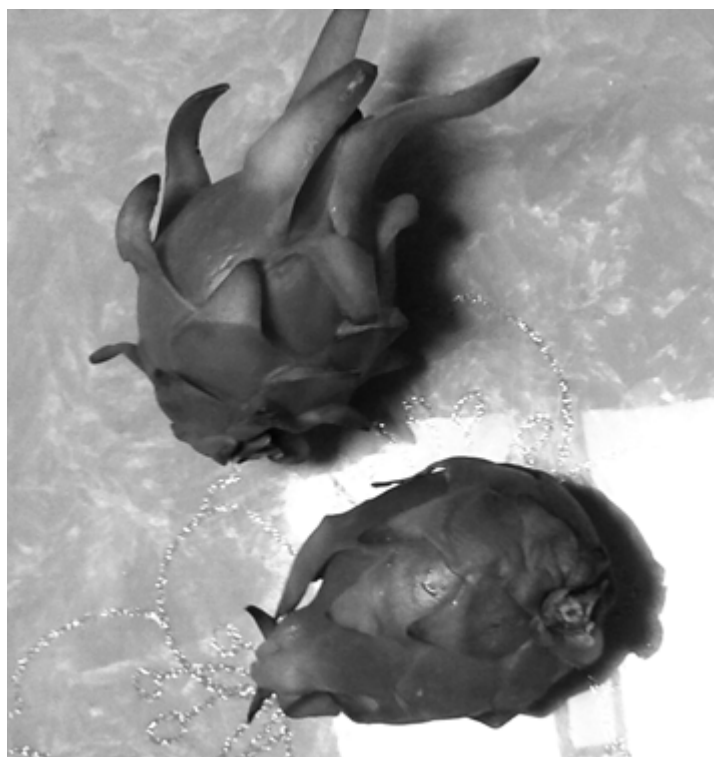
Strike the Hard Through the Soft

This is the easiest of the following tests and training routines. You’ll set a thin-skinned melon (the skin should be no thicker than half an inch) on top of a cement block. Using a slap, the objective is to break the block while leaving the melon intact (fig. 16.1). I *told* you this was going to be messy! Genuine Iron Palm skill is determined not by simply breaking pieces of masonry; it is measured by the ability to transmit the energy and force of a blow through an outer surface and into an internal structure.



Strike the Soft Through the Hard

This one will require considerable practice and lots of fruit. You might consider wearing an apron. Begin with a tasty dragon fruit melon (fig. 16.2). They're available at most Chinese and other Asian grocery stores. You may slice it in half to start and place the open side down on a concrete block. The object is to slap the outer skin of the melon and use your yi to direct your force to the inside of the fruit, turning it into a rather mushy substance without damaging the skin. When you can do that, use a whole melon.



I told you this wasn't going to be easy! When you can turn the inside of the dragon fruit, which has a rather thin outer skin, to mush, have a go with a thin-skinned watermelon. Its skin is a bit thicker than that of dragon fruit.

When you can do this, you can strike an assailant and, without damaging his flesh or bones, cause massive internal damage. If you hark back to chapter 1 and the photo of the legendary master, Gu-Yu Cheong, there is a lesser-known story about him that is very illustrative of this skill. The Russians did a lot of trading with China in those days, and they frequently pitted their best boxers and wrestlers against local gong-fu practitioners. The Chinese participants often lost such bouts, and the Russians began making jokes about how ineffective their gong-fu was.

Word of this taunting reached the famous master, and he visited one of the Russian ships at the port in Shanghai. He approached one ship's captain and asked if they had, in fact, been making disparaging remarks about the effectiveness of gong-fu. The Russian captain laughed at the question. He offered Gu a chance at having a bout with the ship's best boxer. Gu told the captain that real gong-fu was much too dangerous for such a contest. This caused the Russian to break into peals of laughter.

However, Gu knew that the Russians often brought their best racehorses with them to compete against the Chinese horses. He thereupon asked the captain to bring out his best horse and he would provide a demonstration. A bit confused, the captain obliged and brought out a rather large, beautiful horse. Gu approached the animal and placed one palm on its back. He slapped it on its spine and the prize-winning steed collapsed, dead on the spot. The captain was taken aback at such skill, and understanding that discretion is the better part of valor, he readily agreed that authentic gong-fu was much too dangerous for competitive events.

Later, the ship's surgeon performed an autopsy on the animal and found that, although no damage had been done to its spine, its viscera had been ruptured.

17

Myth Busting

There are numerous stories regarding the Iron Palm and some of its senior practitioners. Some are so incredible that they are laughable. Let's look at a few, just for fun.

An Iron Palm master can punch through walls.

Generally, no. Maybe in old China this could have been done, but not in modern China, and certainly not in any Western country. The first time I visited China, in 1982, I found that their bricks were little more than baked clay, without any of the fillers typically used in the West. They were very lightweight and could be shattered very easily. It may well have been possible to punch through a wall made of this kind of material back then, but certainly not now.

Iron Palm practitioners have heavily calloused hands.

Not true at all. The hands of someone who possesses real Iron Palm skills will appear relatively normal; there might be some toughened flesh on the first two knuckles (which are used for punching), but rarely is it seen on any other area of the hand.

Iron Palm training will eventually cause arthritis.

This might be true for those whose training routines are incorrect, but those who follow the training regimen correctly aren't more likely than anyone else to develop arthritis in their hands or wrists.

Manual dexterity can be lost if you practice Iron Palm.

This isn't true at all. If training is done correctly, the hands remain fully functional. I have yet to meet an Iron Palm adept who trained correctly and lost manual dexterity.

Iron Palm medicine should be applied after every training session.

Iron Palm medicine need be applied only if you have engaged in a rigorous training session that involved a lot of bag-slapping and the like. If your hands feel a bit sore after training, using the medicine may well be a good idea. But remember, the medicine isn't some kind of magical formula that heals all injuries or cures all ills.

Training with a bag filled with gravel or iron balls is much better than using rice or sand.

Absolute absurdity! You need to strike a surface that has some “give” to it. Otherwise, you're guaranteed to rack up numerous injuries, and your training will amount to nothing more than a pile of little rocks and physician's fees. Certainly, hitting a bag that's filled with gravel or iron balls *sounds* impressive, but the results are much less impressive. It's a fine example of the typical Western “more is better” mind-set.

I've heard of some practitioners who hit pads that are mounted to trees.

Yes, I've both heard of it and actually seen it. Once again, let me emphasize that you must never engage in practice by striking something that doesn't yield when struck. Otherwise, the shock of your own blow is fully returned to and through you! Again, this is a prime example of the “more is better” mind-set and it is detrimental to both training and overall health.

18

Instructions for Building a Striking Post

For those who wish to construct a proper striking post, these instructions will be helpful.

What You'll Need

1. Obtain a piece of inch-thick plywood, measuring 4 by 4 feet.
2. You're going to need six 2-by-4 pieces (pine is good) that are 4 feet long, and four pieces that measure 40 inches in length.
3. You will need a hardwood plank, 4 feet tall (or as high as your solar plexus) and 1 inch thick. This will be the main post.
4. You will also need another plank, 2 feet tall and 1 inch thick. This is the bracing post.
5. The steel or iron base consists of a rectangular tube measuring 2 by 4 inches. The post and the shorter bracing post should fit neatly into this tube. This tube is welded onto a steel or iron base plate. Holes for screws should be drilled into its four corners.

Constructing the Base

1. Screw the two 4-foot pieces to either side of the plywood base. This will be the bottom.
2. Screw in two 40-inch pieces to form a frame along the edge of the plywood base. When you purchase these pieces, remember that a 2-by-4 is not usually truly 2 by 4 inches. In the United States, they measure $1\frac{3}{4}$ by $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Allow for this in framing the edges of the base.

3. Turn the base over and determine exactly where the metal base will be set; it should be about six inches from one end of the base. Then mark the screw holes and drill them through the plywood.
4. On the underside of the plywood base, screw in a 2-by-4 crosspiece where the two pairs of holes are located.
5. Screw in two more 2-by-4 crosspieces to act as support for the base, upon which you'll be standing.
6. Attach the metal base to the plywood platform with strong screws or bolts; these will have to be countersunk. See figure 18.1.



The Post

1. Slide the longer post into the rectangular tube.
2. Slide the shorter piece behind it. This will allow the longer post to flex slightly when struck. The fit should be tight. If there is any play, you may need to use small shims to tighten the fit.

Making a Pad

1. First, you must obtain a pad that is about 8 inches long and 4 inches wide. It should be firm rather than mushy. At the same time, it should not be too hard. Fit it to the top of the post and duct-tape it around the post on the top and bottom of the pad to hold it in place.

2. Next, assuming that you don't have access to Japanese rope made of rice straw, purchase a 15-foot length of sisal rope about $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick. Soak it in a bucket of water for at least four hours. Then remove it, lay it on a concrete surface, and pound it out flat. This removes impurities in the rope and also softens it a bit.
3. Wrap the rope firmly (but not so tight that it constricts the pad underneath) around the pad and tie it off in the back. From time to time, it may become a little too loose, and you'll have to rewrap it.

Do not use other types of rope. Sisal is the only type that I recommend, other than rice-straw rope. Nylon rope is coated, and the coating breaks when you strike it. The tiny jagged edges of this coating can cause some serious irritation to the skin. Cotton rope is too soft, and other types of rope are simply too abrasive.

The post should never cause very much discomfort when you strike it. If it does, you may have wrapped the rope too tight, or the pad may not be adequate. At first, it will feel rather stiff; after a few hundred strikes and punches, the rope will become very soft (fig. 18.2).



Conclusion

Acquiring the genuine Iron Palm isn't easy. As you've seen, the training is very demanding and only those who are committed will succeed. A strong spirit and indomitable will are essential. Many begin the training with great enthusiasm but less than three of every thousand trainees will complete it. I'm certain that this is how it has always been, and this is why the true Iron Palm is a dying art. I hope that this manual has been helpful to you, that you'll make the necessary sacrifices, and that you'll persevere to the end.

About The Author



Photo by Duane Garrison

Phillip “Pete” Starr began his training in the martial arts in 1956, beginning with judo. Within a year, he received instruction in traditional kung fu in the basement of a small Chinese grocery store. He continued his training, also earning black-belt grades in two styles of Japanese karate (third dan in Kyokushin, first dan in Shito-ryu). His primary kung fu teacher was W. C. Chen, a direct disciple of one of China’s best-known masters, Zhang Zhaodong. From Master Chen, Starr learned taijiquan (tai-chi chuan), xingyiquan, baguazhang, and a form of shaolinquan. He began teaching Chinese martial arts in 1967 at Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa. After spending several years in law enforcement, he opened his first full-time martial arts school in Ottumwa, Iowa. He entered competition and earned the title of U.S. National Champion five times, the last time when he was sixty-three years old. He was named to the National Rules Committee of the United States Karate Association and became the kung fu chairman. Later, he was named to the list of the Rocky Mountain top ten competitors. Starr went on to train in Arnis, becoming a certified instructor under Tuhon Leo Gaje and Jeet Kune Do.

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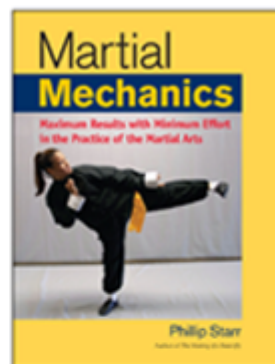
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