



TRAINING AND CONDITIONING METHODS OF THE ANCIENT CHINESE

by Gordon F. Richiusa

Poison hand, iron palm, tiger acting — familiar names to martial artists who have trained in or studied the Chinese systems. In the United States, one of the undisputed authorities on northern styles of kung fu is 87-year-old Ark Wong, who learned his vast knowledge directly from Chinese monks in pre-revolution China.

Throughout his more than three decades of operating kung fu schools in the U.S., Wong continued to use very traditional methods to teach his students. He reserved some of the more

mysterious training methods for his most adept and dedicated pupils, teaching them the finer aspects of the arts.

His methods seemed, at times, pointless and unreasonable to his students. He often made them wait for six months before he would teach them even a new stance. As a result, the number of students who were able to endure the tedious training was small. One student who did is Richard Vera, a ten-year veteran of Wong's unique style of teaching.

The fruits of Vera's dedication are a rich inheritance of information, passed directly from one of the greatest, living, traditional kung fu instructors. A symbol of Vera's deep student-teacher relationship with Wong is the fact Richard has had complete control in running his now-retired instructor's schools in Los Angeles for the past six years. And, he has been doing this service, without pay, simply to show his respect for the renowned Wong.

In the following descriptions, Vera reveals the method and purpose of

several of the more exotic training regimens of the kung fu masters of pre-revolution China. All of these techniques require acceptance of two basic premises by the student: first, that one can develop inner power as well as external power; and second, that the training procedures will yield benefits only after years of perpetual practice. There are no short cuts.

Iron Palm

One of the first, unique procedures Vera was taught consisted of rolling a small bundle of wooden chopsticks between rigid palms. This exercise was practiced while meditating and concentrating on applying pressure to the sticks on the inside of the bundle. The tied sticks are rolled slowly, keeping constant tension from the wrists to the fingertips. The muscles in the arms should remain relaxed, and this exercise should be repeated, every day, for 15 minutes to an hour. If this is done for ten years, or until the sticks have been worn to nothing from constant rolling, the result, according to Vera, is that whatever surface the student then slaps, the power of the blow should travel beneath the striking point. In other words, if someone was highly trained in this technique, the force of his slap would be sent downward through an opponent's body, just as it was projected into the bundle of sticks.



Richard Vera (above) studied kung fu ten years under the renowned Ark Wong.



Iron Grip

Those martial artists who delve deeply into open-hand techniques know that the "tiger claw" can be utilized in many different ways. For instance, the fingertips could be used separately to strike soft tissue or the eyes, or in conjunction with the thumb for grabbing. The thumb alone is used for tearing. There are two techniques that were taught to Vera to produce what is known as the "iron grip," which is the essential aspect of tiger acting. If these two exercises are practiced ritually, the result should be a hand that is strong both in the fingers and the thumb.

The first exercise involves filling a bag with iron shot. The bag should have stitching that can be opened periodically, and must be made of a material that is durable. For starters,

To develop the iron palm, students can roll a bundle of chopsticks between their hands, concentrating on applying pressure to the sticks on the inside.



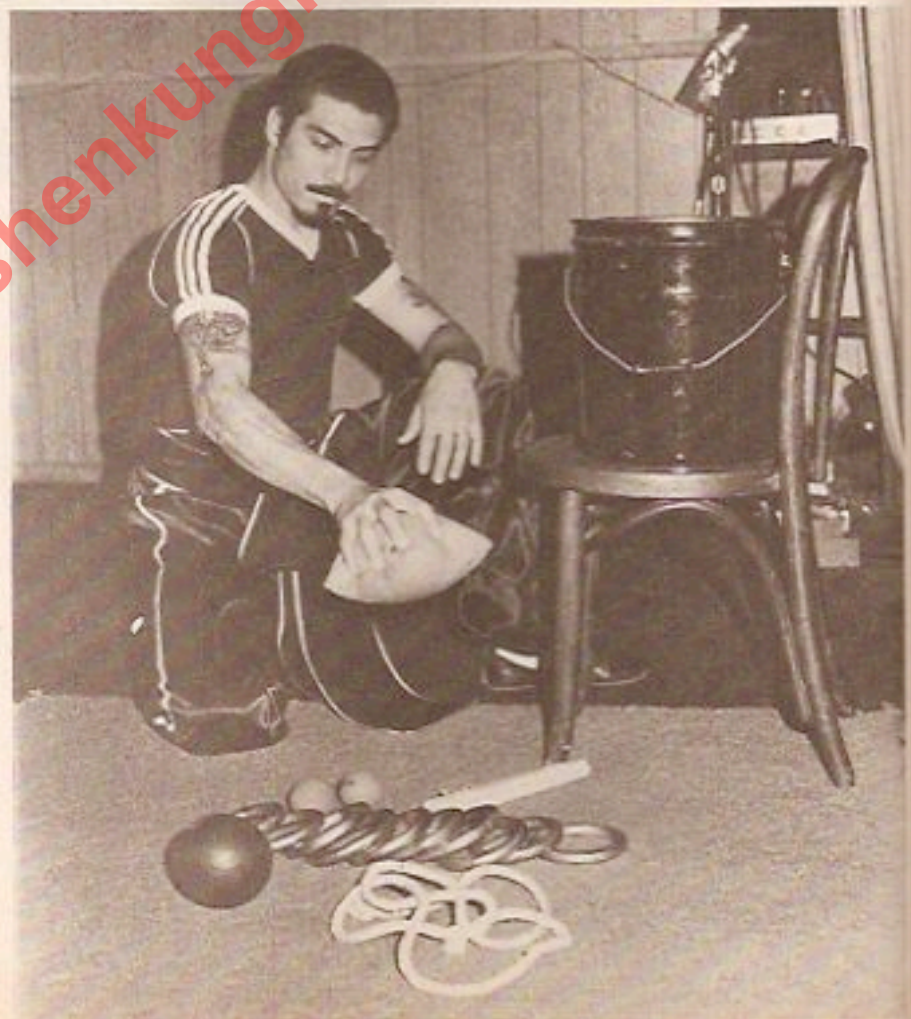
Vera demonstrates (above) how to develop iron grip. A bag filled with lead pellets (top right) is used initially, and later, a lead-filled ball (right).



fill the bag with about five pounds of the tiny iron pellets. The idea is to be able to toss the bag straight up in front of the body with one hand and catch it with the other hand. This sounds fairly simple until it is emphasized that this training technique is only valuable if the wrists and fingers are doing *all* of the work. The shoulders and arms should remain motionless and relaxed.

When you are able to accomplish this with perfect ease, you are ready for the second stage of this exercise. The object now is to slowly increase the weight of shot within the bag until a maximum of about 40 pounds is reached. As the bag becomes heavier, you should also be experimenting with fewer fingers as you exercise. The ultimate objective is to be able to toss and catch the 40-pound bag with just the thumb and index finger as easily as with all five fingers.

After several years of practice, you should be able to perform this task to perfection. Now comes the hard part. The shot-filled bag is replaced with a large, lead-filled ball, like those used at track meets for the shot put event. Instead of tossing the ball, however, the practitioner begins to develop his "inner" strength by exercising in slow, circular motions. The ball is swung in a large arc from one side of the body to



Most of the equipment necessary for Vera's exercises is relatively simple.

the other, where it changes hands. Again, the serious student should attempt to perform this technique as easily with only the thumb and index finger as he does with the entire hand.

When you are able to remain fluid with your movements while holding this heavy ball, you are ready for the final stage of this training method. This step consists of relearning the motions just described, but this time with a greased iron ball. The entire ball is covered with any kind of slippery substance. When you can smoothly sweep the ball across your body with four, three or only two fingers, you will have achieved a grip that is truly as strong as a iron—a grip worthy of the claws of a tiger.

Testing Foundations

As all martial artists are aware, a strong stance is of fundamental importance in developing technique. Often the image of a pyramid is used as an example of a student learning karate. The broad, flat base of the structure must be put into place before the rest of the pyramid will be able to stand. So it is in the martial arts. If your stances are weak, the rest of your techniques cannot be strong.

A simple but effective method Vera



Vera uses rope attached to a post (above) to develop strong stances.

learned for improving stances utilizes nothing more than a stout piece of rope and a sturdy place to tie it to. This exercise is particularly practical, says Vera, because it requires no special equipment. The object is to strengthen stances by use of isometric pressures. One end of the rope is tied to a post, fingers can be strengthened by thrusting them into buckets of sand.





The fingertips of the tiger claw can become deadly weapons (above).

pole, or any other secure place, and the practitioner holds the other end in his hands. It doesn't matter what stance is used; any stance can be strengthened with this technique. After the desired stance is achieved, the rope is pulled taut. Now the practitioner tries to break the rope by pushing on it with his legs while remaining in a proper stance. Vera emphasizes that the arms should do as little of the work as possible.

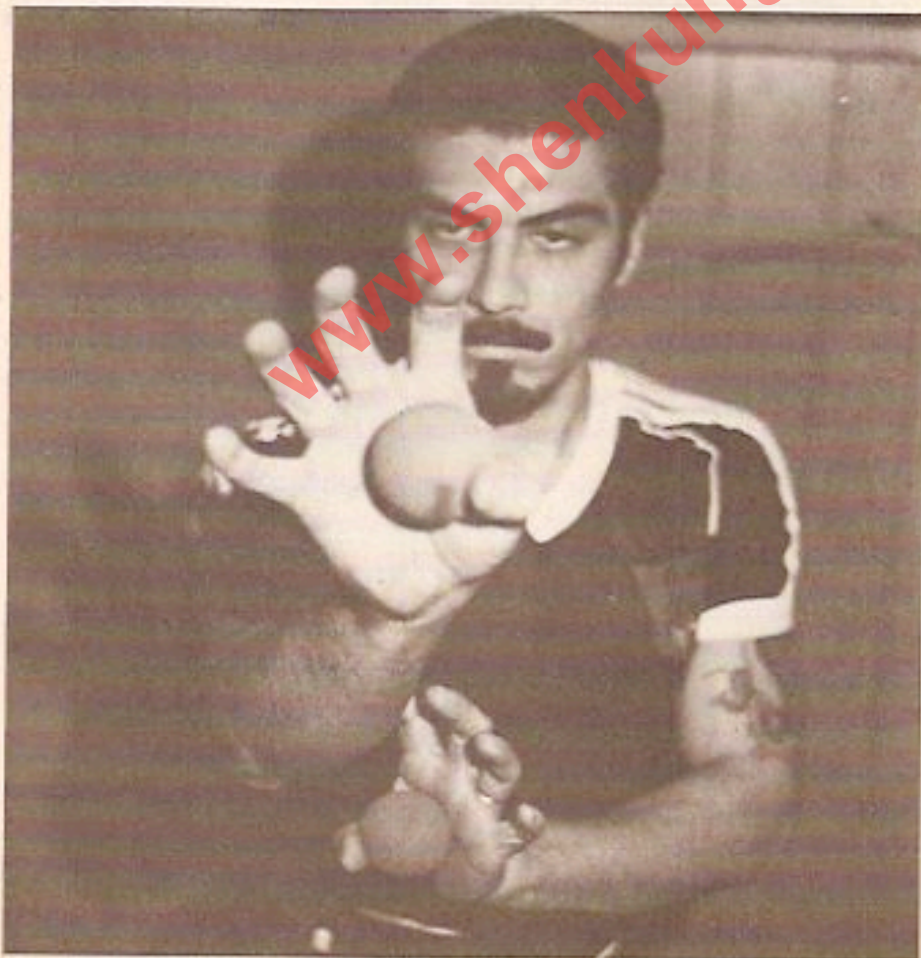
If this exercise is practiced for many years, until the rope actually does break, the result should be that the martial artist's stances will have strength in every direction. It will be as if you are tied to the post by an invisible rope.

Har Gar Arm Exercise

Since this training method requires special equipment and has no specific time limit, some people might choose to substitute easily obtained equipment and exact goals for the elements they want to change.

This technique requires the use of a set of equally weighted metal rings. The rings each weigh three pounds, and as far as Vera knows, the only

Small rubber balls can be used to develop strength in the thumbs.



place to obtain such a set is in China, or through a company that deals directly with Chinese imports. The rings are also very expensive. One might use any sort of circular weights in a similar fashion and get equal results. But, Vera emphasizes that part of the beauty of this particular exercise comes from its strict adherence to tradition. He wouldn't want to attempt this exercise without the Chinese rings.

The exercise is used, specifically, to aid the practitioner in developing his skills through repetitions of the kata or *kuen*. In the strictly traditional styles of teaching, a student learned the martial arts *only* by means of repetitive movements. There was never any self-defense training with partners, no sparring. How then did the ancient martial artists acquire strong blocks or penetrating punching power if they had no one to resist their movements? The answer, in the *har gar* southern style of kung fu, lies in the use of these metal rings.

The student puts the rings around his arms and goes through certain sets of movements that have extremely aggressive, sharp motions. For instance, sweeping outside forearm blocks that include the movement of the entire

body. The object is to be able to perform these movements with the same precision as when the rings are not in place. The student tries to get his arms to stop where he wants them to, whether punching or blocking as if striking something solid. The rings have the added benefit of being a visual aid in achieving this goal. One can see if the arm is moving uniformly and with even power throughout its length by watching to see if the rings are all stopping at exactly the same time and in a direction that is in right angles to the imagined force of attack.

As in the other training methods described in this article, there is a progression with the use of these rings. Usually, the practitioner begins with only one ring per arm until he can stop the block or punch the way he wants to. Additional rings are then included in the exercise until a maximum of ten rings cover each arm, or 30 pounds per arm. Vera believes, as did Wong and others before him, that by the time a student can punch and block in all directions with this weight surrounding the length of his arms, the blocks will not only deflect the oncoming blows but will break an opponent's bones. The punches, says Vera, will drive

through any block as if it weren't there.

Vera points out that he has never used any Americanized methods of training. Although he does not think his methods are better in that they make you stronger than modern modes of training, he does believe that training methods which are developed by martial artists might be better suited for learning the arts. For example, the *har gar* rings tend to build strength and speed, as conventional weights do, but they tend not to build bulk, which Vera sees as unnecessary for martial artists and perhaps a hindrance. Maybe the old traditionalists knew very well what they were doing, and to try and improve on their methods is something other than what the arts were originally intended to be. Instead of becoming a martial artist, one may simply become a "martialist," a person who can perform the actions of the masters of old, but who lacks the vision of the beauty of these actions.

It's difficult to assess whether or not this kind of belief has any value for modern-day martial artists. It is lucky, however, that studios such as Wong's and teachers such as Vera still exist. In this way, at least, the curious can take the time to compare. **K**

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