

The Myths Behind

IRON HAND'S TRUE

There's nothing mystical behind learning the secrets of the iron palm. All you need is a competent instructor, the right medicine, and time to master its techniques.

By Gene L. Chicoine with John R. Allen

Iron hand. It's almost impossible to pick up a martial arts magazine and not see an article on some aspect of this highly specialized type of training. Generally, the articles are brief and without sufficient content, rarely saying anything significant about the art except that a particular person makes claim to be a "master" and most unfortunately, frequently conveying misleading and dangerous information.

I have seen few *true* masters of anything in this country, let alone masters of this technique. Those eminently qualified have told me I have mastered the legitimate iron-palm techniques. These are not to be confused with those who break ice, split blocks stacked with separators so wide it can fit a hand, jump in the air and land with brute strength, or splinter flaming cinder chunks. The bona fide iron hand evolved over hundreds of years and encompassed several fields to maximize results. Among these is a synergism of special exercises, meditation, methods of striking, and of *paramount* concern, *the proper herbal medicine and its correct use.*

My late teacher, grandmaster Tung Sheng

Chang, perhaps the greatest open-style fighter from China in this century, said he had no knowledge of anyone alive, Chinese or otherwise, who knew more about iron palm than me. Was he wrong? If so, I would like to meet anyone whose capabilities exceed mine so I may have the opportunity to learn even more. However, after extensive travel, training, and teaching in the Orient, I doubt I'll have such an opportunity.

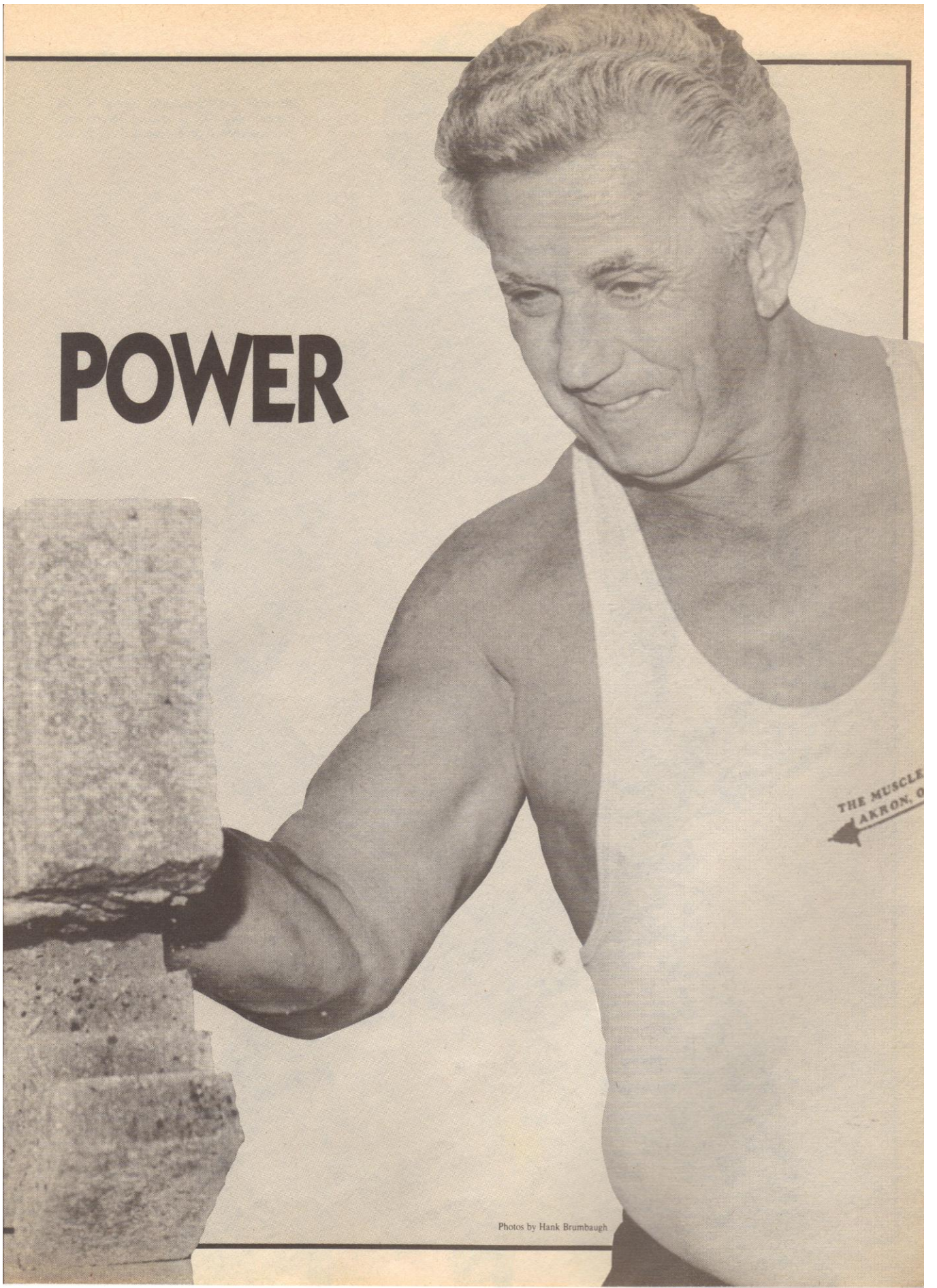
Regardless, I would like to share with you insights into what I have learned in this area the past 30 years. This should widen your frame of reference and perhaps save you from wasting your time on worthless methods. It could also protect you from risking serious injury.

The iron palm program

Let's begin with an overview of what should be done prior to beginning the true iron palm program. First, a little-known series of exercises should be performed leading up to bag training, both to develop power and prepare the bone structure. There are a minimum of three and as many as ten. Can you name them? Second, a form of meditation (there are many) must be learned, mastered and correctly per-

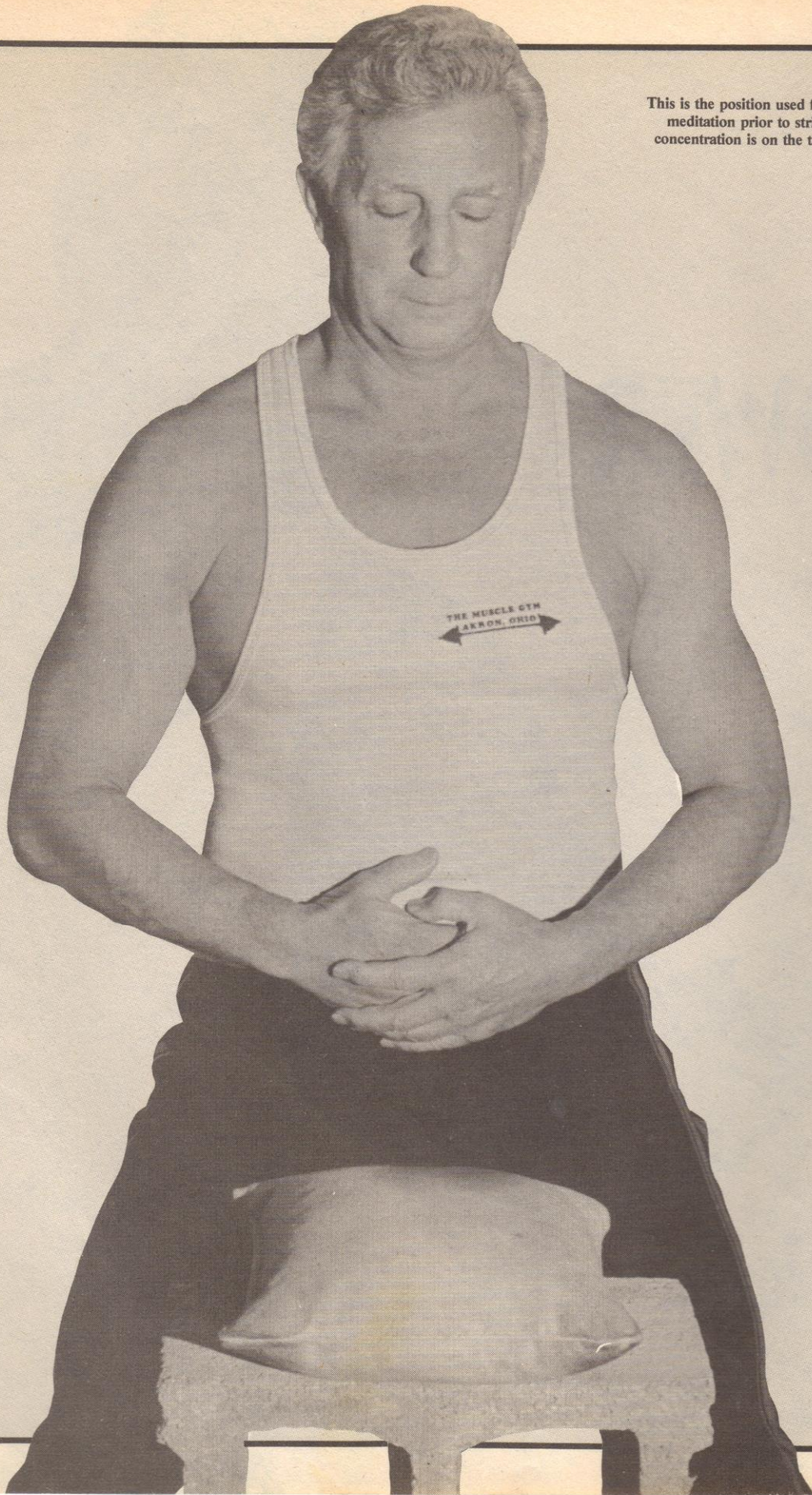


POWER



Photos by Hank Brumbaugh

This is the position used for the five-minute meditation prior to striking. The focus of concentration is on the tan tien and palms.



formed to run the chi in a particular way. Do you know it? Third, proper breathing is indispensable to iron palm. This will be the so-called "belly breathing" (i.e., hypogastric or diaphragmatic in nature as will all aspects of the Chinese martial arts, but coordinated with striking practice in certain ways). Were you taught them? Fourth, the all-important consideration: the medicinal formula to be used during training. Here is where we divide the knowledgeable from the charlatans, where we insure great success or guarantee dismal failure.

The herbs used in the iron palm formula have four indispensable functions. They:

- Draw the elusive chi to the hands;
- Harden the bones of the hand;
- Prevent injury, especially the tendency of the blood to clot in the hands when striking the bag of steel shot;
- Deaden the sting of striking and condition the skin *without* altering the appearance of the hands.

Everything else is secondary to acquiring the right herbs to prepare the medicine for treating your hands. If everything else is perfect, but your medicine is no good, there will be *no* success. If the medicine is good, but you have some shortcomings in other aspects of the program, there can still be a large measure of success. *The medicine is everything.*

For many years different preparations have been marketed under the guise of iron palm medicine. They fall into three categories:

- Those that have no benefits;
- Those of a bruise medicine character, the various "dit da jow"-type lotions that may afford a small degree of protection, but lack power development capabilities;
- Those that draw some chi to the palms,

but in a very *limited* sense. Most preparations fall under the heading of the "bruise" medicine and easily can be identified by the color (should be dark), by smell (should be strong and pungent), and the content (among other things, raw herbs should be present in the liquid so the medicine will grow in strength).

Bruise medicine fails in all three areas. With this criteria in mind (there are other considerations), light brown, mildly fragrant herbal preparations available in four-to-six ounce bottles and selling for \$6-12 are *not* suitable for iron-palm training.

True iron palm medicine has well over 20 types of herbs in the formula, some rare and difficult to obtain, compiled in certain relationships and blended with a high-proof rice whiskey or vodka in special proportion. Allowed to ferment or "cook" for a stipulated period, it produces a powerful liquid which can have incredible impact on the internal power of the body. Therefore, it is quite expensive.

Even competent or well-intentioned Chinese instructors use formulas containing only *one* ingredient (albeit a strong one) from the more than 20 used here.

Also, there are definitive mechanics to properly using the medicine after you manage to obtain authentic herbs. Where do you put it on the hand? How do you put it on? How often? Can it be used with open wounds or sores? Is it poisonous? Do you wash it off? How soon after training? Does it have other uses?

Also, one must be taught the many methods used in striking the hand: how many times to strike each way, how many strikes to make at the beginning of training and what progression

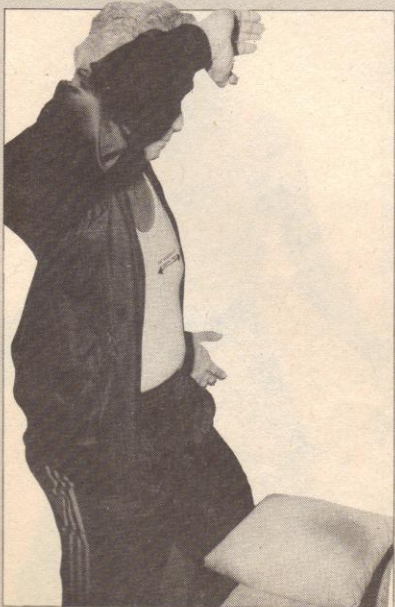
should be followed, the benefits and drawbacks of training just one hand as opposed to both, and the best way to generate maximum power. It is far more involved than people realize. There are other technical considerations: how to properly construct your bag, what type and size of steel shot to use, how much and how high to place the striking surface relative to your stance, for example.

Now, if you feel you've met all conditions, how do you tell if it's been as productive as the real iron palm should be? By trying it out. A good measure is to obtain two-by-four-by-15-inch concrete patio or building blocks and stack them solid (*no* spacers) so the top of the stack is even or slightly below your waist. Then with only an open palm and no more than one-and-a-half feet of travel, slap the stack of blocks and see how many you can break. This can be accomplished after about two-to-three years of training with everything being right: *teacher, methods and medicine.*

Sifu John R. Allen of the Green Dragon Studio has helped train many students who perform this feat regardless of size; several even using the *back* of their hands for breaking. I have consistently broken ten such blocks when supported, and up to 12 inches more with side strikes against blocks in the free-standing position and allowing the arm to travel one foot. When you approach such capabilities *without trickery* (spacers, baking the blocks until bone dry, nicking or notching the blocks to start a fault line) you can be assured of receiving the proper training.

If you don't approach this level of physical power, then seek an authentic teacher who also can provide the centuries-old Shaolin formula for the required medicine. *He need*

Chicoine demonstrates the preparatory position for striking a 75-pound bag of steel shot. Note the relationship of the bag relative to the horse stance.



This is the finishing position for the first method using the palm. Subsequent striking surfaces are the back of the hand, knife edge, palm heel, and finger tips.

The knife-hand strike. As with all methods, tension on the hand is only induced prior to impact to keep chi flowing through the arm.



not be Oriental. We have been handicapped since the early 1970s by various Oriental teachers who are limited in experience and rely on your ignorance of their culture, language and history of the kung-fu arts to deceive you.

Instructor credibility

Where iron palm, similar obscure strength programs and even advanced fighting forms are concerned, there are ways to tell if your teacher has the proper training. Some common examples:

- Does your instructor stress long periods of time to "master" basic fighting and exercise forms? While this may certainly reflect the Oriental penchant for detail, it also suggests the instructor may have very little to teach. Rather than actual concern for not moving you along before you are ready, he actually needs to stretch what little he does know over as much time as he can. A related approach is to put off certain types of training, or the "you-will-get-it-someday" routine. Iron palm can be taught any time after basics and in one class session.

- Has your instructor ever suggested "it is all in your mind" or your attitude is inconsistent with progress? This is misinformation cloaked in the old "mind-over-matter" structure. The occidental world is susceptible to the element of "mysticism" associated with the fighting arts; however, attitude, confidence or "positive thinking" have little to do with it. Internal and external power are strictly physical and mechanical, and are derived from hard work, self-discipline, and consistency in training. The exceptional strength which develops is attributable more to the right kind of herbs combined with diligence in training, than any mental, psychological or mystical factor.

- Does your instructor refuse a polite request to demonstrate his iron palm capability (or aspects from any other program, form, or skills) or to allow one of his senior students to do so? This refusal is usually couched in an explanation that such petitions are a personal challenge and indicate a lack of confidence in the teacher. However, any teacher worth his salt will be happy to either personally demonstrate, or through the medium of a student. Grandmaster Chang himself was a great advocate of the "those that can do; those that can't talk" philosophy.

Set your goals

Finally, what does iron-palm training accomplish? Apparently, a great deal of confusion exists over its effects. For example, some confuse iron-palm training results with widely misunderstood "dim mak." In reality, when the actual content of dim mak is known, the two have very little in common. Iron palm has nothing to do with touching a certain spot at a certain time of day, after which predicted dysfunctions of the body will occur within a known schedule. Even where (if) a few real chi gung masters had such capabilities, generally a reverse effect on known acupuncture points, hitting one of these spots less than one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter with a highly trained, extremely powerful opponent moving at you full force, is not likely.

What iron palm does do is increase external striking power dramatically while transmitting internal power when solid contact is made. This causes a combination of external and internal damage, the degree to which one is emphasized by the striking expertise of the practitioner and his level of internal power. (Your author can selectively break any stipu-

lated block in a stack by transmitting his power only to that location, leaving those in between unbroken. When this is carried over to the self-defense situation it can determine both the extent and area of damage — internal or external).

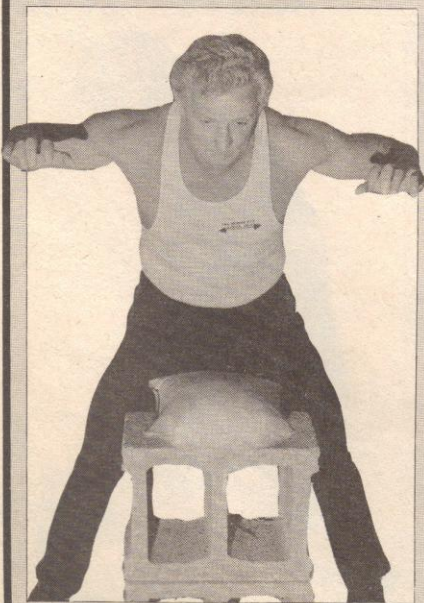
By way of illustration, this author can knock an individual backward with force yet do no harm at all. In public demonstrations, this author frequently strikes a senior student on the side of the chest and a reddened area corresponding to the size of his palm appears on the back of the student within 30 minutes. This will turn into a bruise outlining the palm print within 24 hours.

The type of power, penetration and capability shown by authentic iron palm instructors has been secret for centuries; a careful assessment always is made to determine the motivation and integrity of a potential student. Factors such as loyalty, consideration, dedication, honesty, and deportment should be requisite to giving such skills. The student should always understand the magnitude of his training.



About the Authors: Gene L. Chicoine is president of the International Shuai Chiao Association. Chicoine, who has over 42 years experience in the martial arts, is making his first appearance in Inside Kung-Fu. John R. Allen is second vice president of the International Shuai Chiao Association and producer of the largest variety of kung-fu teaching tapes available on the market. Both martial artists can be contacted through Green Dragon Studio, Tallmadge YMCA, 148 Jean Ave., Munroe Falls, Ohio 44262.

This is the first stage of the breathing exercise done immediately after the striking sequence. As the practitioner bends over, tension is maintained on the palms as they are pushed toward the floor.



This is the second stage of the breathing exercise. Breathing is only diaphragmatic and the exhale should be long and even as the palms descend.

This is the position for the final aspect of the program: standing meditation continues until chi running down the arms to the palms generates a pulsing sensation.

