

the Wire Beater & Iron Rings



This short tutorial is about a couple of tools used a lot in traditional Chinese martial arts (and in some related arts): the wire beater and the iron rings. The reason for dealing with both these tools together is that they are often practiced together and the benefits of their use are somewhat interdependent, although they can also be practiced separately.

First let's talk about the beater. The beater is a simple metal instrument used in

mainstream Chinese martial arts (like all Shaolin-related arts). The beater is used for, well, beating -- usually oneself. That said, it isn't some masochistic indulgence, and it certainly isn't intended as a way of showing off how much 'stick' you can take! In fact, traditionally, students would need to get beyond beginner level before a teacher would even introduce them to the use of the beater (the rings less so). In other words, the beater is intended for serious students, not for those who may revel in showy displays of 'toughness'!

Use of the beater varies a lot in Chinese martial arts. In Iron Shirt, a kind of martial arts chigung, it can be used over the entire body; in the martial arts I learnt the beater was used only on the arms and legs, particularly the forearms and shins. Regular (ie., daily) use of the beater is recommended, especially in the initial stages, to achieve a certain level of firmness and resilience (after which daily practice becomes unnecessary). The level of toughness which can be applied to the forearms is quite remarkable, even if the beater is only used in a mechanical way. The benefits of using the beater regularly are multiple. First, the firm, tough quality that persistent use lends to the forearms will give the student added confidence. My yong chun teacher was fond of reminding his students: 'the face is tofu; the chest is glass. But the arms are iron!' This analogy reminded students that while strikes to the super-vulnerable face were to be avoided, and even the chest had limited capacity for resistance, the arms were (or at least could be) tough enough to use with confidence in blocking any blows elsewhere on the body.

Secondly, after training with the beater in the correct way for a few months, the student will certainly notice that other people -- sparring opponents, perhaps, or maybe just someone trying to 'push them around' -- are also aware that the feel of their forearms and shins are not what is generally expected. In the case of a sparring opponent, this can be a valuable advantage. In the case of someone trying to push you around, the effect will almost always be a radical change of mind -- suddenly, it just doesn't seem worth it to keep trying to push whatever point originally motivated them!

What about the rings? Well, they are also employed for toughening the forearms, although not the shins. Typically, after using the beater, the rings can be used on the arms, in the way detailed following. The method I learnt was to put the rings on the arms, as shown in the below photos. The photos show the placement of the rings at the end of an exhalation. So...let's get into the details of how to train with these two items...

Training Methods

Ideally, the student should spend 10 to 20 minutes each day lightly striking all parts of the forearms and calves. At first, those areas with less flesh may bruise easily. There are two ways to deal with this problem. Firstly, if you apply a medicinal lotion to improve blood circulation, you will be less prone to bruising. Secondly, focus mostly on the less bare areas at first, both generally, and in any given session. That is to say, you work more on the parts of the arms and legs with more flesh in the first weeks or months of practice, and also in any given practice session -- leave the bonier areas till last, because by that time your blood circulation in the area you are beating will be better than at the beginning of a session.

There are plenty of herbal lotions available to improve blood circulation on the market, and many traditional Chinese martial arts schools, such as the one I learnt at, will have their own. In the experience of this practitioner, the best universally available medicinal lotion for this use is called 'Jeng Gu Shui'. It's available from most Chinese medicine shops around the world. Rub Jeng Gu Shui into the skin before you start with the beater. If you practice 'cold', this approach is essential. However, if you practice with the beater after a general workout, then there is much less need for the Jeng-gu Shui, and you may quickly dispense with using it.



On the left is an image of a typical wire beater; on the right some iron rings. These rings have been covered with insulating tape; the reason for this is simply because bare rings make a hell of a racket! The tape deadens the sound somewhat. The way the rings are used, or at least the training method used at the school I went to was basically to put the rings on the arms, when the beating has already been carried out, or at the end of a workout session (ie., when the blood circulation in the arms is at its best). Then, usually but not always in the 'horse-riding stance', the hands are brought up to the shoulders with an inhalation, then pushed outwards, as if pushing against something, with a long exhalation. I don't think the method of exhalation is too important, although we always practiced exhalation through the teeth (with an audible snake-like hissing sound). The exhalation should be drawn out to several times the length of the inhalation, which should be taken in a quick, sharp breath. It's important to imagine that you are pushing against something as you exhale. Of course, with the weight of the iron rings on your arms, you really are pushing against something -- the weight of the rings pulling downward, and this is precisely the reason for their use. After some time, you will be able to do without regular use of the rings. In the early stages, however, the important thing is to develop a 'sense of chi'; a feeling of being aware of one's chi, and using this feeling of chi's existence to guide it; basically to push it, or 'send it' in the direction you want to. While practicing with this method, that's quite straightforward: you want to send the chi to your hands.

When you are using the beater, it is helpful to tense the arms a little, but this tensing should be gentle; you don't need to take it too far, and in fact, it's a waste of time and energy to do so. However, when you put on the rings, then the tensing takes over. Still, this tensing is as much psychological as physical; the important thing here is the 'idea'. That idea is that your arms only 'give' on inhalation-- they

force forward on exhalation, and nothing stops them doing that. The power to push through anything, whether thin air or a brick wall comes from the breath behind it, which forces itself to the fore regardless. The shoulders are kept low, but in a relaxed way, not forced down, and at the same time without slouching. If the shoulders are slouched, or hunched, it's much more difficult to send chi to the hands.



There isn't a lot more to using the beater, but one further thing is worth bearing in mind: the 'no pain, no gain' notion has no place here. Which is to say, there is no gain *except* pain derived from pulverising yourself with the beater! You need to go easy with it, especially in the initial stages. Generally, most peoples' forearms and shins are sturdy enough to use the beater on directly, simply adjusting the amount of force you use to suit. But if you find even using the beater lightly is painful or uncomfortable (usually because you're hitting bare bones), you need to try using green beans (mung beans) for a few weeks or months first. Just pour them into an old sock (one without a hole!), and slap the forearms and shins with this sock full of beans in place of the beater.

Beyond the Mechanical

Above detailed are the mechanics of training with the iron rings and the iron beater. There really is not a lot more involved in the technicalities of that training. However, there *is* a lot more to the use of these two tools, things that may not be obvious at first. It's just that the remaining aspects of training with these tools are more related to the mind, intent and chi, than to the physical body. Training with the wire beater and iron rings, even without paying any particular attention to one's thoughts, will certainly have a positive effect on the toughness of the forearms and shins, and for many students, this is enough. However, it is possible to go much further.

In days gone by, the use of these two pieces of hardware was inseparable from the student's software -- there were strict demands on the student's mind, as well as

body. Traditionally, the first 100 days of training with the beater was accompanied by mandatory sexual abstinence. Nowadays, that seems to be given as an option more than a requirement. Of the European martial artists I've met who've trained with these items, none have taken the first 100 days of abstinence seriously, and none have even tried to do without sex, convinced that this will make no difference, partly because they are aware that they are not capable of going three months without sex, and partly because in European societies people are taught to think of sex as a necessary part of a healthy lifestyle.

This is unfortunate. because in reality, the energy saved from sexual abstinence, when re-channeled to this kind of training does make a big difference. But reward in this kind of training is in direct relation to the level of difficulty. It's also worth noting that the traditional '100 days' demand was made for the most part on young men, mostly in their 20s. As a man enters middle age, sexual urge is not as strong, thus abstinence becomes easier. It's no big deal for an old man to go 100 days without sex; most old men do so anyway! Thus, a good rule of thumb would be 100 days without sex for a man in his 20s, 200 for a man in his 30s, 400 for one in his 40s, 800 for one in his 50s, and so on -- in other words, double to period of abstention for each decade..

The ideal situation is to curb all sexual thought or fantasy, although this is difficult for most people. Even when this is carried out successfully, 'wet dreams' can be a problem, occurring at a time one's defences are down so to speak. The answer to this kind of problem may vary from person to person, and each individual needs to do some experimentation to find out how best to deal with it. My own teacher taught that the feet need to be kept cool and uncovered during sleep, and this worked for me too. It seems -- and this is just speculation -- that the body somehow knows that if the extremities are cold, then it doesn't have the blood to waste sending to parts of the body that don't need it! Obviously, this needs to be approached with common sense and caution; freezing one's feet off for the sake of toughening the shins simply isn't worth it. The student himself needs to find the right balance between what is practical and useful and what his zeal or enthusiasm drives him to do. But if common sense is applied and practice is consistent and reasonably dedicated, the results of training with these two items can be very rewarding.