

'Relax more, hit harder!'

By Gert-Jan Ketelaar

Head Trainer Ving Tsun Kung Fu and founder of the United Ving Tsun Kung Fu Society

Developing power from relaxing in Ving Tsun Kung Fu

It is necessary to develop a solid punch to be able to end a fight. Of course, this principle is not exclusive to Ving Tsun Kung Fu. But the spectrum of existing martial arts do train punches in manners very different to ours - which has consequences for their punching power. Not all punching techniques with their associated muscle usage result in the same level of punching power. Even your train of thought when hitting will influence this. Many roads lead to Rome, but punching power is not independent of the punching technique used. In Ving Tsun we assume that in a real situation your opponent will usually be physically stronger than you and not per se of a similar weight class. When you assume this, it is important to maximize your power. The fact that you might have trained martial arts for years is no guarantee that you will win a real fight. There are some fighting styles which focus so heavily on applying techniques and tricks that the physical aspect of punching hard is not trained. Winning a real fight is not only about taking advantage of opportunities and making contact, but on top of that hitting someone hard enough for a knock out. Hitting is different from making contact, right? You don't want your punches to come across to your opponent like an Eastern massage where he might be inclined to say "that's it, a little to the left."

In Ving Tsun, punching hard is a function of bringing a completely relaxed arm into motion as quickly as possible. One must not confuse relaxing with inaccuracy. Movements can still be very accurate - executed to the millimeter when you punch with a relaxed arm. On the contrary to what is often thought, Ving Tsun is not static or stiff but the power is generated from the complete body. Every part of the body must give the punch full support. The stance of the feet, the hips, shoulders, and elbows are of utmost importance and can be seen as "the whole" or "the chain" in which we attempt to make each link equally strong. We see the chain in this context as a metaphor and thereby touch upon the well known principle "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link".

Why is it difficult to relax? When we think of "relax" we think of laziness and lethargy, and someone who is lethargic will lose, right? Tension does not have to be learned, relaxation does. In a fight everyone is by definition more tense than normal - this is natural. The fear of pain and hurt causes too much stress in most cases and thereby tension. Quick reactions and spontaneous movements will no longer be possible. On top of that, there are a number of martial arts that teach people to be more tense than they normally are. Think of the fighters who tense their muscles for long periods at a time. In Ving Tsun Kung Fu, and a few other fighting systems, much of the training is directed at conscious relaxation. This training is built into the partner exercises but is also trained by practicing the (solo) basis forms. The most common movement of all the forms in Ving Tsun Kung Fu is the 'Huen Sau' – Chinese for 'circling arm'. The Huen Sau training has the important effect of stretching your arm muscles, whereby, through consistent training, it is possible to execute a punch looser and quicker (see technique photos under).

What are the advantages of being able to relax (under stress)?

Firstly, you save your valuable energy for the moment that you can effectively use it. Energy which you need, not only to punch or effectively attack, but also to be alert. Intimidating an opponent in Ving Tsun Kung Fu does not come through poses or positions which cost a good deal of energy, but

rather through a psychological presence. Tensing muscles is senseless anyway, when you're not in direct contact with an opponent. By being relaxed and 'cool', you can make your opponent even more insecure and self-conscious. By long-term training and conviction in your own potential you won't have to fake this presence.

Secondly, you can react at any moment. To move, you must be relaxed. When you assume a tense fighting position, you block yourself from being able to make quick action or reaction. You must first relax at the moment that you wish to make an action or react to an action from your opponent. This may seem like nitpicking but fights are simply about milliseconds, timing and control over what you're doing at every moment.

How can you relax when you punch?

Before and during your punching motion your whole body must be completely relaxed. A common mistake is that people try to punch hard with tightly clenched fists. I don't imply that these punches are incapable of inflicting pain. But when you are relaxed you are able to hit faster and therefore harder. This way, the same person can have a greater effect by using his energy more efficiently. Primarily, keep your hands loose, so no tightly squeezed fists, and keep the muscles in your forearm relaxed. The relaxed punching motion that we make in Ving Tsun is not some wave or throw. By means of a short, explosive movement which reaches a high speed, we attain the shock-power that Ving Tsun Kung Fu is known for. This power is made with the entire body and is not simple a snap-motion of the wrist, as some Ving Tsun people contend. The punch that Bruce Lee was so eager to demonstrate and named "the one-inch punch" was, in fact, the Ving Tsun punch. In Ving Tsun we say: "punching power comes from the ground". By this we mean that the entire body lends to the power of the punch - which is launched from the ground. The generation of the speed comes mainly from the shoulders and elbow. To be able to accelerate from say 0 to 120mph is a skill which, with the right approach and training, can be developed for years. Punching with lots of tension as is done in the hard fighting styles can be compared with an iron bar, while the relaxed punch in Ving Tsun Kung Fu can be compared to an iron ball on the end of a chain.

Whenever I teach Kung Fu, I tell my students that the arm should be completely relaxed throughout the entire punching motion, there is always a beginner who will say "but at the end of the punch, you need to tense up, right?". My opinion is that it's entirely unnecessary to train your arm or hand to tense up for even brief moments. Just thinking about this brief tension will cause an overly stiff motion. Those who say to tense briefly are usually tight for three quarters of the entire punching motion – not just the end. If you always train to not clench your muscles, in all probability you'll still be too tense in a real fight.

Compare it to a bullet and gun. If you throw a bullet at someone, it will have a very different result than if you were to load it into a gun and shoot it. The bullet remains the same, the speed is different. The bullet does not need to tense up at the last moment. Of course, a hand is no bullet but too much tension causes a slow movement and a weak punch. Holding a clenched fist to your opponent has no effect. It's the speed of the movement that counts. The hand and arm have a certain weight, let's say the hand weighs about a pound. You can refer to this as the mass which must be moved in the punch. The faster you can do this, the harder you can punch. As the famous scientist said: $\text{power} = \text{mass} \times \text{speed}$.

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Photo 1: The starting position in which the 'Huen Sau' or the 'circling arm' is trained. Make sure your shoulder is not raised or tensed but stays straight. The elbows are completely stretched and remain so during the entire movement. The other arm is bent with a loose fist kept on the side of the body, as to condition both arms during the training and make a habit of keeping your arms up.



Photo 2: The elbows stretched and the wrist bent as closely as possible toward you. The fingers separate from each other and try to pull them toward you. The muscles of the whole arm are now tightend.



Photo 3: The elbow stays bent for the whole position as in Photo 2 and is turned downward around the axis of the arm. The direction of the motion is towards the pinky.



Photo 4: The position of the arm stays the same but the arm is turned as much as possible, without changing the position of the body. From there, make a fist whereby the forearm will be tensed. Then pull back the arm as quick as possible to the same position as your other arm as shown. The entire Huen Sau cycle is meant to be practiced slowly and fluently. Next do the same with the other arm.