

**1**

To repel a left-handed head punch, move your left leg forward and to the left as your assailant starts to launch his attack. Then push your right hand towards the inside of his left shoulder, with your fist open so you send his punch wide.'



**2**

'Lock your right hand under his shoulder, bring your right foot forward and lock your left hand on his neck, on the same side as your right shoulder grip.'



# Shaolin kung fu

China's ancient fighting art is a lethal mix of skill and spirituality

**C**hinese warrior monk Shi Yan Lei has a physique that looks like it's been cut from solid jade.

He's covered in scars from knife battles and regularly clubs himself with bricks and iron bars during training. Unsurprisingly, he radiates more menace than Darth Vader, even though at 5ft 5in (1.65m) he's closer in stature to an Ewok.

The diminutive Shifu (Chinese for master) learnt kung fu at the Shaolin temple, China's most respected martial arts training centre. He's a 34th-generation Shaolin disciple, which is what the 'Yan' in his name implies. While training at the facility he was also given the moniker Lei, meaning thunder. Shi is his original surname.

According to historians, the Shaolin monastery was built in the late fifth century AD and the residing Buddhist monks started practising martial arts shortly after. Through the centuries these exercises took on distinctive styles and developed into Shaolin fighting systems such as Black Crane, Northern Praying Mantis and Enchanted Staff.

## Full metal jacket

Shi started to train at the temple at the age of 14 and over the next ten years became a master of

3

'Bring your left leg behind you, so you've moved almost 180° counter-clockwise from your original position. Your opponent will now have lost balance, so start to pull his head down.'



4

'Bring your left knee up and smash him in the face. Bear in mind that these four stages needed to be performed as one seamless move and that you need to keep your eyes on your opponent and stay loose throughout.'



a fearsome fighting style called Steel Jacket, where the body becomes almost impervious to an opponent's attacks. 'While you're at the temple you choose a specific skill to specialise in,' says Shi. 'I wanted to learn to endure any kick or punch during a fight, so I would always be the last man standing.'

Shi went through hell to achieve this. 'When I was at the temple we trained for around eight hours every day,' he says. 'We had to get up at 5.30am and start training at 5.40am. The first session of the day would last until 8am and include a sprint up a mountain. A teacher would run behind us and beat us with a stick if we slowed down. This taught us an important lesson, which we could apply to everyday life: to focus on the task at hand and not to succumb to distractions, which lead to suffering.' After running, trainees would have a two-hour break, followed by another two-to-three-hour session, a three-hour break then a final three hours of training.

The toughest part of Shi's routine was having to wallop his chest, stomach, back, arms, legs and ribs with a brick or iron bar. He still does it today. 'Not only does it make your outer body strong, but when combined with Shaolin meditation and breathing techniques it toughens up your internal organs,' he explains. 'It's no good being tough on the outside if

your insides are weak and can be easily damaged during a fight.'

### Growing pains

You don't become a Shifu just by having a strong body. The Shaolin teachings are also key. 'I first became interested in martial arts when I was growing up in north China,' says Shi. 'I was a bit of a tearaway as a kid – always getting into street fights. I wanted to train, so I could defend myself, but when I started at the temple I quickly lost interest in street scraps. The combination of rigorous physical training, kung fu, qi gong [yoga-style exercises] and Ch'an Buddhist meditation gave me focus and an

## 'The toughest part of Shi's routine is walloping himself with an iron bar'

inner calm. I learnt to think rather than fight my way out of problems.'

That's not to say he hasn't had his fair share of rucks since he became a monk. 'We don't rely on a belt system of grading, we advance by fighting someone who's already at the level we're trying to get to,' says Shi.



**Name:** Shifu Shi Yan Lei  
**Age:** 36  
**From:** Xin Jiang province, China  
**Discipline:** Shaolin kung fu  
For info on Shaolin kung fu classes visit [shaolintempleuk.org](http://shaolintempleuk.org)

In 2000, Shi was sent by the chief Shaolin Abbot to open a temple in the UK. He and fellow Shifu Shi Yanzi set up Shaolin Temple UK in Tufnell Park, north London, where they teach kung fu, qi gong and Ch'an, and train fighters to compete in various martial arts championships. They are in the process of setting up another branch of the temple in Brighton.

### Mean streets

Since training in kung fu he's also been involved in death-defying street battles. 'The scars on my head and arms are from knife fights,' he says. 'When someone has tried to stab me it's always been a surprise attack, so I've had to block their knives with my skin.' It's at times like these that Shi's skills go from an impressive party trick to a life-saving skill.

But while physical fighting skills do help, Shi says the best defence against most attacks is self-belief. 'You can learn these moves [above] in 20 minutes but it's no good if you get scared and mess it up when faced with a real-life attack. The best solution is to believe in yourself. A potential assailant will go for a soft target – they won't want to attack someone who appears to be full of confidence.' After all, that someone might just be a Shaolin fighting machine.