

A Path to Wing Chun  
By Ray Van Raamsdonk

Kenneth Chung is a master of the soft approach to Wing Chun.

He is what some have in mind for the ideal master.

Many martial artists can totally demolish their opponent's but the master can do so with perfect control, with relaxation, without the need to intimidate or hurt the student in any way. Kenneth Chung fits this ideal master image. At the same time Kenneth Chung is a humble individual. He feels he is good, but doesn't claim to be the best. He says, "Just call me Ken."

Ken suggests a two hour private lesson in order for him to explain his Wing Chun method fully. The first thing he does is to feel your touch. Often you can boast all you want but you can't hide your lack of skill when you are in contact with an expert. Ken is able to uproot you easily, yet you can't uproot him. Students who thought they were quite rooted were surprised by their lack of root. Ken is one teacher who allows the student to have hands on experience. Many teachers don't let you touch them but Ken wants you to feel the touch so that it will leave a lasting impression. When the student first touches Ken, they are surprised by the feel. Ken offers nothing to work with. He seems to offer no resistance, nothing to slap, nothing to jerk. Ken is totally relaxed the whole time. Students who have a fairly high success rate at their club suddenly find they have a zero percent success rate against Ken. Even people with fast hands find that the attack is neutralized before it can even start. The attack never reaches the flurry stage.

Ken says too many people have flowery hands. The movements are too excessive, too hurried, too big. Too much signal is given by the student. Students who thought their techniques were simple find that Ken's are even simpler. When Ken moves there are no signals, nothing moves. He hits powerfully and effortlessly. He does not intimidate, but handles you with masterful skill. Ken is always one step ahead. Ken shows many many things but always stresses that the important things are the fundamentals such as stance. Where have you heard that before? Ken does not teach many specific techniques, nor does he show many drills. Yet he also doesn't hold anything back. There just are no secret moves.

Ken can change/improve your Wing Chun skill in just two hours. In a period of six months, your Wing Chun would not be recognizable from what it was. Having hands on practice with an expert and having the right mental concept is what makes the difference. Ken can talk Wing Chun nonstop for 24 hours a day, every day. He is like an inexhaustable pool of knowledge. If you can absorb it, then Ken is happy to give it. Ken doesn't believe in the concept that you have to hide things in Wing Chun. Ken thinks only if your Wing Chun was limited, would you have to hide that fact?

Nothing replaces a real seminar or lesson with Ken but here are:

1.0 Just a few tips from Ken to help your Wing Chun improve.

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Don't be greedy with the hits. Often people are already hit without realizing it.

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You don't always have to strike high. This exposes you to low hits.

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Many people have no rooting. The stance is weak, not sunken. The knees should be in. You should feel like you are melting into the ground. You can practice for a lifetime but if your stance is poor you will have wasted all of your effort. If you meet the right Wing Chun guy, you will be in big trouble.

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Don't act before you know what is going on. You must feel what is happening first. People act before they feel. Random flurries won't work. You can't just rely on speed.

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The head should not be forward. Keep the head back or it will get hit and it also brings the whole posture down to stiffen up the hands. Keep the head up and rely on your touch.

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Many students use too much force. Remember, Wing Chun is a ladies style and therefore brutal energy or brute strength should not be used. We are all getting older, some day you can no longer rely on your muscular strength. The speed and power approach is limited. You can only take that approach so far. Ken has yet to see a limit in the soft approach.

## 2.0 Stance and movement

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It is important to connect the hands with the feet. Many people get shoved back instead of being able to neutralize the force by absorbing it or by turning the stance.

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Stance training, such as stepping and turning is very important.

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When the opponent retreats, don't just stand there. You must come forward. If you stand there you will get kicked.

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Most people's hitting is too tense and relies too much on muscle power. Yip Man, who was 120 pounds and five feet four, had a very heavy but relaxed hitting power. When you feel my force you will feel it is very soft but yet it is very substantial. It has a bite which you cannot ignore. The force doesn't come from tensing, it doesn't come from speed.

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The shoulders should not come forward. They should stay back. Practice the first set slowly in the mirror and watch that the shoulders stay back.

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Face the opponent square and hit down the centerline. Face the opponent properly first before you hit.

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Don't chase the opponent's hands. Just hit the central axis of the opponent. Flowery movements are not good in Wing Chun. Simple connected movements will do.

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Sore shoulders come from trying to fight against energy. You should not lift the Bong sau, it should spiral forward with minimal shoulder use.

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Try to use the concept of neutralizing force along the tangent of a circle. The circle can be horizontal, vertical or diagonal.

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Many people apply their energy at the wrong moment. Try to feel when is the best time to apply your energy. Try to feel when the opponent's energy starts up.

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Don't push the force away. When nearly all students apply the Pak sau, the Bong sau, the Fook sau, the PoPai, they are pushing the force away. They are scared of the force, they want to get rid of that force. Instead you should accept that force, welcome that force.

The principle in Wing Chun is "Receive what comes." Receive means to really accept it, don't push it away.

### 3.0 Staying on the Wing Chun Path

When you are studying Wing Chun, don't think about weight lifting, about tournament competition, about self defense, about the other styles. This is going off the Wing Chun path. Your training will take much longer if you do.

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First pack in the proper Wing Chun concepts. Get the Wing Chun skill, then think about self defense.

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Most people's fighting is too fast for them to realize what is going on. They should feel what is going on first.

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Don't just move in random ways.

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Every action in Wing Chun should produce a result.

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Don't just play with hands

### 4.0 Relaxation, and softness, and the First set.

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You have to constantly remind yourself to relax. The tense way cannot work. You will get tired and it will fail against strength.

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It will take 1/2 a year to change from your old habits to new habits. Changing habits starts with having the proper concept in your mind.

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The sets or forms should be performed slower and softer. The first set should take 20 minutes to perform. More is of no benefit.

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When the Tan sau comes out, you should not see it visibly move. Similarly when the Fook sau goes back, you should not see it visibly move.

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Use "wet paste" energy, not brutal energy.

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Proper standing and turning will develop muscles which you have not so far developed. These are around the knee area. Without these muscles, your stance will be weak.

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The slow first set Tan sau, Fook sau sequence also develops muscles around the elbow area which you cannot see. Wing Chun power is hidden from view. We do not want large bicep muscles.

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Repetition is the key. Try to relax, slow down, be soft. Find out what is going on.

## 5.0 Position, Sensitivity, Timing, Speed and Power

Position comes first by training the form accurately.

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Without proper position your hitting accuracy will be off and your power transfer will be reduced.

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Without proper position, you cannot neutralize force.

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Without proper position, you will be off balanced.

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Proper position comes from performing the first set accurately in front of a mirror.

Sensitivity to force comes next.

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This comes over a long period of time from slow sticking hands practice.

Timing comes next.

Speed comes before power.

Power comes last.

## 6.0 More General Principles

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In fighting, don't trade punches with your opponent, worry about your defense first.

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Always travel the shortest distance which is the straight center line.

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The opponent can start first but we get there sooner.

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Wing Chun is sneaky. It uses the surprise element.

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You cannot just rush into a kick. If he can kick you, you can kick him.

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If he can punch you, you can punch him.

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When he lifts the leg to kick, you can lift the leg to kick his supporting leg or groin or shin area. Then step in.

## 7.0 Youth vs Age, Small vs Large

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With age your body deteriorates. You cannot rely on muscle power. You must rely on position and sensitivity.

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Every opponent has weak points. You must find the weak points.

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A larger opponent does not have the advantage with position and sensitivity.

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With protection, the larger opponent will win. Brute force methods have the advantage in this case. For Wing Chun, it is more fair on the street with no protection. The smaller person cannot have

a good chance against a larger opponent with protection.

## 8.0 Energy and force distribution in striking

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You should hit through the person's body, not aim for the surface.

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It is where the energy is applied that makes the difference. A chop to the shoulder is different than a palm hit to the front of the body. It takes 20 pounds of force to smash a nose.

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A small person cannot play around but must hit seriously.

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If you are lazy, you won't learn much.

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If you are too greedy and want too much, you will also stop your progress.

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If the attack is not committed, then don't react. With a committed punch or kick, you can react and win because the opponent cannot recover.

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The centerline path will get you there before him.

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Don't look at your hands. Feel what is going on. Don't look down.

It doesn't matter who learned from whom in the Wing Chun world. What matters is how much training you have put in, how good is your skill and having the right guidance. Remember, Yip Man did not sign any credentials. This leaves room for a lot of manipulative people to twist Wing Chun around. Ignorance is no bliss.

With the external method of training Wing Chun, you will reach your limit very fast. You can train for ten years, then all of a sudden, someone with one year's training can match your skill. You will wonder what happened to those nine years?

## 9.0 Remember the soft path ALWAYS!

Ken said he still has to repeat the same advice to his students even after ten years. The students get pressured by outside forces (martial arts, movies, articles) to drift away from the Wing Chun path. They have to be constantly reminded of the same thing over and over again like a broken record.

Ken said the soft touch works. Plant this seed in your head. It is very difficult to break down an existing structure. If you come to Wing Chun from another martial art, it is very difficult to change you. It is easier to build a structure from the ground up (someone who knows nothing) than to break

down your old habits, your old prejudices.

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It takes at least two years to build a proper foundation.

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It takes six months of effort to break a two year habit.

Ken said the first set of Wing Chun looks stupid and feels tedious to others but it is very good martial art. After 15 minutes of proper first set training, you should feel very warm.

The above is only a small sample of some of the kinds of things that Kenneth Chung said. Each point you have probably heard before. Every point, you may think, is common sense, but when students apply their Wing Chun, all this common sense goes out the window in the heat of the battle.

Ken could apply what he said. It is only when you feel how Ken performs his Wing Chun that you start to appreciate many of the things you may have heard before. Even videos do not do the job. One student had seen Ken in a video and didn't think that much of it. He thought Ken was too soft, no balance of Yin and Yang. When this student met Ken, he was very shocked at how much Ken really knew and how little he knew himself about Wing Chun.

Ken's Wing Chun is a feeling art. Ken is not one for many drills. Often, when two people do Wing Chun drills, the position, the feeling, and the timing will interact in the wrong way. However, both people will be having a good time but are really learning nothing.

In Ken's mind the most important training at the start is correct positioning. Correct positioning starts with the correct stance. Without the stance being correct the hands and feet will not be able to coordinate in the proper way. The drills will turn into disconnected hand exercises which make the practitioners think they are learning something but they are not. They are feeding their ego by thinking, "Oh, my hands are getting pretty good!" When the position is correct it means the stance, the arm angles, and the centerline are accurate, then you are ready to work on the second step which is to apply the feeling to tell you when and how to change your structure to match your opponent's structure. We must feel what is happening first, then change our structure to the best one to match the opponent's structure. This part of the training is difficult to get without one-on-one practice with someone who has got it. For this reason, Ken wanted you to feel him. To probe and experiment with him so that you could feel how he reacts and changes according to the input you give him. When you try to push him, pull him, disengage from him, turn your stance on him, how does he react? What does he change to? What movements change to what other movements and why? After long hours of such practice your Wing Chun takes on a new form.

When the positions are correct, the proper feeling can be applied. When the positions and relaxation levels are good, then timing can be applied. Timing means during what part of the opponent's energy cycle do you apply your energy? When working with Ken he will let you feel the peaks and valleys of his energy and guide you when to apply your movement. He will point out, if you are using too much strength or too little strength, or you are leaning forward, or your stance is not sunk, or your head is not back, or your hip is not straight. He can make you feel the difference. It is the feeling element which is very important.

A two person drill without concern for these proper elements will not lead to a good level of skill.



Ken knows people do many drills but the proper position, the feeling and the timing are often not correct. Therefore he wants students to feel these things on him first so they can be convinced they must change to improve. Ken tries to tell you the proper concept: first intellectually, second by having you feel it and third by telling you his personal experience. From his experience, people can practice very hard for years and years without getting anywhere because they have the wrong concept. In Ken's mind, just doing drills, leads to an unconnected art. Instead, all positions, feelings and concepts should be linked together within the framework of sticking hands. This should be practiced very slowly at first.

#### 10.0 Ken's background in Wing Chun

Ken learned from Leung Sheung from 1963 to 1968, for 5 years. Then again from 1973 to 1978 for another 5 years. Leung Sheung always pushed the soft way. Ken said, "At first many of us did not appreciate his words. It takes a long time to realize the proper way. Words cannot adequately describe the way. You have to feel it before you can understand." (Note: Ken does pure Wing Chun but has had experience with some of the top people in Chen style Tai Chi. This experience convinced him even more that he is on the right track.) Remember Wing Chun stresses the soft touch. It is a woman's style. Yip Man was a small man but none could touch him. Leung Sheung was a large man so why should he learn from a small man?

Wing Chun is not an externally powerful style. Don't think power, speed and beautiful form. We don't want the pumping iron kind of energy. We acquire energy through the soft touch. In Wing Chun you cannot see the muscles that are developed. Bicep muscle build-up is not required. In Wing Chun we are always ready to fight. We do not need to warm up, take off our glasses and get into a strong fighting pose. Whether you can defend yourself depends on who is your opponent. First pack in your Wing Chun skill, then worry about defense.

Note: This article was based on notes originally taken by Ray Van Raamsdonk after a seminar he hosted featuring Kenneth Chung. David Williams edited those notes with Kenneth Chung and Ben Der's additional comments and corrections.