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The Soft Force Of Wing Chun (Like the Snap of a Whip)

By Kris Eckert, with Kenneth Chung

"Wing Chun is like a giant pool of water. The teacher leads you to the pool, but how much you drink is up to you."

Wing Chun, a traditional Chinese martial arts system which falls somewhere within the realm of "internal" and "external", finds its essence in esoteric softness. The painstaking development of this sensitive, enigmatic soft "force" allows even very small people of seemingly inferior strength to develop "penetrating" power - a power made even more effective against an opponent using more typical, hard, brute force. The "hard" or rigid energy of the opponent actually serves to augment the "passive" whip-like energy of Wing Chun.

Why does one speak of such feminine qualities as softness, passivity, and sensitivity when discussing a fighting system? The word "esoteric", as used to describe this softness, is truly befitting. The most notable aspect of pure, traditional Wing Chun - that of softness - is not well-understood by many practitioners. You must feel it to understand it.

The Essence: Soft Substantial

The essence of Wing Chun, from its inception, has been in the development of soft, yet penetrating, force. All the movements, without exception, can be performed effectively by a small woman against a larger, stronger opponent. This kind of soft, feminine force does not come from hard external training. It is acquired through repetitive, precise positioning of the body. The positions and techniques are always practiced in a calm, relaxed manner. While the process to achieve this kind of force should be emphatically soft and relaxed, the end result for anyone on the receiving end of Wing Chun can be quite destructive. Ask a Wing Chun practitioner if "dit da jow" is used in Wing Chun training, and he's likely to reply, "Yes we have dit da jow; it's for the other guy!"

The Girl Hands of Wing Chun

Wing Chun's creator, the Buddhist nun, Ng Mui, and her most notable student, Yim Wing-Chun, for whom the system was named, were both women of small stature. Ng, teaching the unique movements of her close-range style, showed Yim Wing-Chun how to overcome larger and stronger opponents. Small people need to move into close range to become effective against a taller opponent. The long arms of a tall attacker become a burden against the super-close range, centerline attacks of Wing Chun. Yim Wing-Chun taught the techniques to her husband, and through subsequent generations, the system was well-guarded and passed on to only a few, very dedicated students.

The Symbol of Wing Chun

Proclaimed by his followers as the grandmaster of modern Wing Chun, Yip Man is credited with bringing Wing Chun's subtleties to immense popularity. Through the years his well-founded teaching methodology was tested innumerable times, always with great success. Since 1949, Yip Man single-handedly brought Wing Chun from relative obscurity to a world-renowned system which is practiced by millions worldwide. At 120 pounds, he was of very petite build, totally unlike the "stereotypical" martial artists currently in vogue. At 5 feet 5, frail, with small biceps, he looked, as many top Wing Chun practitioners do today, as if he couldn't tear a paper bag. Even though, publicly, he chose to never show full power in his sets of dummy demonstrations, his students remembered well his penetrating Wing Chun force. Even as an old man in poor health, his hands were very heavy, very substantial. Visualize Yip Man: for he is the symbol of Wing Chun.

Yip Man passed his knowledge on to many students, but only the most dedicated were given "yup sut" (inner circle) status. Leung Sheung earned such exalted status and is well-respected for his command of the essence of the system, as well as his insistence on mastering the basics.

Doa lo yut cheung hung

One of Leung Sheung's top students, Kenneth Chung, inherited the belief in the supreme importance of building the correct foundation.

"You can spend a lifetime practicing Wing Chun, but if you don't have the basics, you will come to regret it. You can be in the style for 40 years, but without the basics, you are nothing."

That is what is known in Cantonese as "doa lo yut cheung hung" - meaning that you are empty (i.e. lacking substance) when you get old because you were empty from the beginning. The foundation must be strong and correct. The foundation is everything in Wing Chun.

Success is no Accident

Paying meticulous attention to detail, Kenneth Chung gently encourages his students to persevere. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is forced in Chung's teaching. Remembering well the emotional and physical strain in the beginning of his own training, his guidance is firm, but sensitive. He believes that the degree of success in anything is always proportional to the expertise and dedication of the teacher, combined with the commitment and perseverance of the student. Chung says of the teacher-student relationship:

"It is the responsibility of the teacher to show the truth."

Though not everyone will endure the tedious physical and mental demands of Wing Chun, those who choose to stay and totally commit to his training regimen will find this truth. While some teachers are worried that they might give too much "secret" information to the wrong student, Chung's concern is that the student won't be able to absorb all that he wants to teach. He never gives up on a difficult student, but instead, sees that student as an even greater challenge to his teaching skills. The consistent success of Chung's students in major competitions, as well as in numerous spontaneous challenges with other stylists, is no accident.

Alone with Wing Chun

Like a mother bird, Chung deftly spoon-feeds his students little bites of information - infinitesimal, minute details about each movement. So specific is his knowledge that he shows how to delicately refine and isolate the movement of each muscle in every application to maximize force. He has no guarded secrets. The "secrets" of any style are not really secrets at all, but merely the "details" which compose the style. These details are what he gives so freely to those who come in earnest. What he expects in return is that his students absorb the information, and then constantly try to apply it in practice. He shows you the proper path to take, but then stresses that nobody can do Wing Chun for you. And nobody can hide his ability in Wing Chun. The proof of the dedication of your training is in the "touching of hands". There are no "dance-like" sets possibly giving false security of fighting ability. There is only real application of technique every day, every minute of every class.

Position, Position

In the very beginning, three-fourths of the training is spent on developing the fundamental position. The basic Wing Chun horse stance is of paramount importance, and will eventually, after many grueling hours, give the feeling of having "suction" against the floor. This "rootedness" is countered by an extreme lightness and spontaneity of movement. The stance is solid and heavy, but because it is done with total relaxation, the muscles are instantaneously ready to react. If a muscle is tensed, it will slow the reaction time. Starting from day one, the source of power is isolated. While many styles begin with large, flowery, less-difficult movements, and through many years of training refine them down to very small effective movements, Wing Chun moves from small to smaller. The movements are very confined - the release of energy is not acquired through rigid, exaggerated external training, but rather by training every fiber in the muscle to respond in a soft, integrated, yet explosive manner. The force is trained to be released subliminally without conscious thought. In true fighting, there is no time to think. In an attack, if you have to think about how to react, it's too late - you've probably already been hit. Your reaction must happen instantaneously, subconsciously. That kind of trained reaction bypasses the overt thought process of the brain, and occurs automatically.

Five Guidelines

To achieve this kind of reaction, the five guidelines which form the basis of Wing Chun theory must be practiced with great patience and diligence. Chung encourages constantly perfecting the understanding and application of these principles. The training might be monotonous and boring to some. A new student stands in the same stance every class for months, achieving a level of proficiency with these principles before moving on to more advanced work. It is not a pretty style. It's not fancy, it's not flashy; in fact, it looks so boring that an uninitiated observer might easily fall asleep watching a Wing Chun form. However, the importance of this early training cannot be overemphasized.

While in the Wing Chun horse stance, the student strives toward a deeper physical and mental understanding of the five basic guidelines:

1. Kim sut - Hips and knees pressing together. The knees not "pinching" in with stiffness, but rather "pressing" firmly, and softly inward and downward. All Wing Chun teachers will mention "kim sut" in the beginning, but if they don't push it, the practitioner will soon forget. It is too much effort for a lot of people, and it is painful. If they (teacher and student) are not committed, it is the first thing they will abandon. If you push it, it is extra hard work, but "kim sut" cannot be avoided if one is to become proficient. In Chung's class, when the student thinks that he is really sinking into the floor and really pressing the knees and hips together, Chung will walk by and quietly tell him to "sink" and "press" just a little bit more.
2. Lok ma - Lower the stance downward, sinking through the knees. Lok ma is where the "rootedness" is developed. It trains the legs to effectively support the body, and helps the practitioner to, later on, develop the advancing step of Wing Chun.
3. Ting yu - Back straight, pelvis rolled under slightly so that each vertebrae is stacked one on top of the other. The spine is completely aligned. The upper body should not be leaning back nor is the head tilted forward. Maintaining the head in the right position and proper execution of ting yu is a prerequisite for dung tao.
4. Dung tao - Head up, neck relaxing into the shoulders; shoulders drifting downward by gravity with no tension. The head should be held as if being pulled upward gently by a string to help draw the spine straight.
5. Mai jiang - Pressing the elbows inward and forward. Without using force, the elbows should maintain a fist's distance from the torso. The energy projects from the elbow forward, through a relaxed forearm and hand.

Hing mui dom se

This is done "hing mui dom se," meaning relaxed and effortless in mind and body. When the opponent pushes, the Wing Chun practitioner does not push back, but rather instantly redirects the force and attacks. The body is very relaxed, almost limp. In this relaxed state your opponent's tension is easily transmitted, you can feel his intentions, yet he cannot feel yours. The essence of the system cannot be seen as large, externally visible movements, but can only be felt when in contact.

To reach a high level of proficiency, all movements must be performed correctly. Using basic techniques incorrectly, the student quickly reaches a frustrating plateau in his training. Only the student, in infinite patience and absolute trust in his teacher, who is willing to perfect the foundation movements, will advance.

Teacher, Coach, Friend

While Chung, a true teacher, coach, and friend, never interferes in the personal lives of his students, he is always ready to help in any way. He tells his students:

"Don't follow behind me - come beside me as friend."

Everyone who trains with him walks away, each day, a little wiser, a little stronger. His Wing Chun fighting advice that you need to "let go" (of your conscious thought) might also be sage advice in your personal and professional life as well. What holds one back in any endeavor usually causes the same ill-effect in other endeavors. For Wing Chun to reach its highest effectiveness, the student must be centered in mind and body. Chung expects his students to work hard but also to strive for a proper balance. Motivation makes progress - but excessive motivation (i.e. greed) acts to inhibit progress. In Wing Chun the student must always be calm, even putting on a smile in the face of adversity.

Behind the Delicatessen

The traditional essence of Wing Chun will live on in the many dedicated students of Kenneth Chung, a man of consummate skill, intelligence, and painstaking patience. They train until late at night behind a delicatessen. Though he doesn't want his students to call him Sifu, and there's no bowing or fancy uniforms in class, there is a voluntary, unspoken, commanding respect for this Wing Chun "legend-in-the-making."

Article from "Inside Kung Fu" (February 1992). Pictures are omitted. Check out the original article for excellent pictorial demonstrations paralleling this discussion.

About the Authors:

Northern California-based Kenneth Chung has been practicing Wing Chun for 28 years. He began teaching publicly in 1968. Since those years, he has taught several

thousand people. [Ed: Note that the article was written in 1992. Please check the current location and schedule of classes for either the BAWC San Jose or San Francisco schools.]

Kris Eckert, B.A., M.B.A, is a traditional kung-fu practitioner currently residing in Shandong province, People's Republic of China. She trained with Kenneth Chung's class for six weeks while writing this article.

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