

# Wing Chun Windows

by Kathy Jo B. Connors

An appropriate characterization of the quality we seek through our practice is "relaxed but substantial." It is doubtful that any term can relay the full essence or sensation, and risks misleading those who have not yet experienced a highly skilled practitioner first hand. "Soft" is an unfortunate yet popular misnomer, bearing no relation to the sensation one has when struck. Some things can be adequately understood only by experiencing them. I know of no words to sufficiently describe something so deeply illuminated and extraordinarily demonstrated by virtue of a lifetime's practice, as exemplified by Kenneth Chung.

There are two complimentary and general goals of my training. The first is to detect and exploit defects in my opponent's performance. The second is to eliminate all such exploitable defects from my own performance. I distinguish these from goals such as to become stronger, faster, more forceful or more agile. Though they are admirable aims in and of themselves, they may satisfy one of the more general goals, but not necessarily both. Such attributes may also be insufficient for those who are not commensurately endowed, and not sustainable as we age and languish.

Effectiveness in both goals requires critical and simultaneous *balance in everything*. Not too much, nor too little of anything, but *just enough*. It means trying sufficiently, but not too hard. It means being fully intent, without over committing. It means being prepared to respond to anything, without anticipating anything. It means controlling fully, without excessive effort or greed for it. It means being sufficiently motivated to progress in training and development, without incurring anxiety, frustration, or poor habits due to impatience. This necessity of balance in all things is a constant challenge, and underlies a strongly paradoxical quality of our practice.

While my personal skill is far from perfected, I strive for optimal positioning and sensitivity at all times. Accurate and precise positioning in turn yields additional advantages, such as optimization of distance and timing. I strive to feel and utilize a positioning defect as thin as a gnat's wing in the opponent. I wish to minimize any unnecessary movement of my own. When using moving footwork, my vulnerability is increased and I am momentarily disconnected from my best supporting ally - the ground. At the same time, I must train to be fully aware of my own limitations, and both sensitive and sensible enough to move when necessary.

Whether moving or stationary, I strive to maintain my vertical alignment at all times, and to recover it quickly if lost. To unnecessarily compromise my structure or

alignment, even a fraction of a degree for the briefest moment, is too much risk against a more skilled or capable opponent. At the same time I aim to deprive the opponent of their alignment and stability. The balance here, is that I must do so without sacrificing my own alignment, stability, and positioning. I must always *try enough, but never try too much*. I aim to sense any over commitment or tension in my opponent, and to use it against them, eventually to the extent of exploiting autonomic responses before movement takes place.

With advanced practitioners, a misunderstood "softness" is perceived by their opponent through deprivation of tension or other signals. Meticulous and lengthy practice is required in order to respond to an opponent with total control, yet without tension or exertion of large muscle groups. To optimize our power, we work on paradoxical elements like relaxation, alignment and body unity. With emphasis or "greediness" for power, it becomes ironically elusive. This may be more easily self-evident for those of us who are smaller and weaker by nature. The keys to this approach are often unobvious. The underlying ideas are quite simple, yet the work is not easy nor are the results instantaneous.

We must build and internalize the skills we want at our disposal for fighting application. To achieve this, the variables are reduced during the early training period to enable sufficient focus and awareness on the minutest of details. Excessive engagement in activities like sparring, power hitting, speed drills and the like during early phases of skill building would preclude focus and awareness on the many small and refined elements essential to our development. Pressing into realistic application too early tends to ingrain habits which conflict with our ultimate skill and performance goals.

Just as we share the same concepts and principles, the positions and technique names we employ should be easily recognizable to anyone with knowledge or experience in any branch of Wing Chun. Differences are apparent because of our underlying "engine." The characteristics that drive our *system of movement*, are not universal between branches and schools. Having had exposure to several flavors of Wing Chun, I can say with confidence that some have a far different emphasis in their work and implementation of concepts and principles than we do. There are attributes and capabilities that some other practitioners work very hard to develop or incorporate, that we conversely strive painstakingly to eliminate.

If one could peer discretely through the windows of various training halls, many of the underlying differences in approach would be apparent. Through the window of some schools we might see beginning and novice students, along with their seniors, practicing and performing with great physical vigor and heightened states of excitement. For some, primary emphasis may be on enhancing muscular power or

developing highly athletic endurance. In those schools, students may spend a lot of time punching or kicking heavy bags to exhaustion, doing pushups, running laps, or lifting weights. Others spend the largest proportion of training time and effort in performing repetitive and sequentially choreographed application drills, toward execution of reflexive but predetermined sequences of techniques. This is sometimes coupled with high speed and duress to the student, under the premise that they will eventually get it right. Some schools will hurry through more traditional chi sau exercises and forms practice, or eliminate these from class time altogether, allocating greater proportion of time to other activities.

What you would most often see through the window of our school would make a far duller documentary. You would see a lot more *stillness* and meticulously slow practice. Most trainees would be drenched in the sweat of their own "relaxation" and concentration, while engaged in concentrated working and attempted perfection of the Wing Chun sets. Others might be engaged in relatively slow execution of simple partner drills like dan chi sau, bong lop or lop kuen exercises, or the simple rolling hands of luk sau and poon sau. You would see the teachers and fellow students frequently patting someone's shoulder to remind and encourage a relaxed posture, nudging a tilted head back into position, or one of endless other small reminders for precise alignment, placement, and motion. Someone may be in the corner punching the wall bag with slow, steady, relaxed, and precise determination, with emphasis on relaxation rather than to express power against the bag. Others may *appear* to be "just standing" here and there throughout the room, facing a mirror in their stance. The profoundness lies in what is *felt* more than what is seen, stemming from the emphasis on stance work, positioning and precision. Another student in the room might spend seemingly hours taking tiny steps, back and forth along an imaginary line in the floor, all the while struggling to wipe a grimace from their face which could reveal strain to an opponent or predator.

More aggressive and random challenges are facilitated as the student's capacity to retain the desired skills under duress increases. To continuously pressure the student far beyond their current level of skill and development, is to elicit self-protective responses at the expense of instincts, practices and habits that may be partially or wholly inconsistent with Wing Chun. With repetition, undesirable habits (that is, practices which increase our vulnerability in some way) become increasingly difficult to eradicate. More so to the extent that the student is successful under conditionally favorable circumstances. It is a cursory argument that the student should rely on assets of strength, bulk, or youthful athleticism just because "they can." This puts the student at risk of becoming overconfident yet unprepared for an opponent with whom their own capabilities are insufficient, and whereby a different set of skills is called for.

The images through kwoon windows can mirror fundamental differences in training paradigms and goals. Many schools train students from the very beginning with immediate and short term application in mind. In contrast to this, our training emphasizes building the core "engine" and foundation skills first in the context of longer term development. Early on, our fighting application is more implicit than explicit. Later, *after* the core "engine" is built, skills are tuned through exercises that increasingly simulate and eventually approach fighting application. The idea is for the student to work to the extent of their capabilities and continue to press and challenge them enough to expand beyond current limitations without wholesale abandonment of the skills under construction. There is also a consideration for the risks of sustaining injury in the spirit of "contest," impatience for results, or most frivolously, *ego*. At best, serious albeit unintentional injury would interrupt one's training. Worse, it might put an end to training, and have other serious and sustained ramifications on quality of life.

Choice in the matter of training approach depends not only on accessibility, but also largely on long and short term priorities, and whether or not you believe you can reach your desired goals. The choice may also reflect varying degrees of appreciation that "kung fu" implies an investment of sustained *effort and time*.

In contrast to mystical or wimpy attributes sometimes ascribed to our approach, advanced practitioners possess highly developed skills that can be frightening in a very literal sense. To touch Ken, for example, is similar to a fly accidentally brushing the spider's web. It initially feels soft and non-threatening. But once contact is made, there is no escape. The more you resist, the worse the situation becomes. There is no movement that will not be sensed even before the thought of motion is fully formed in your mind. You are engulfed in something you cannot extricate yourself from. Worse, the substance that is controlling you is impervious, akin to striking or wrestling with fog. Efforts to free yourself merely prolong and increase a sense of panic. In a "real" exchange with someone of high caliber you might be grateful to be sent flying back to endure possibly broken bones or superficial injuries in exchange for some distance between you and your seemingly "soft" nemesis. The alternative is far less appealing. But without a controlled sampling of the kind of heart stopping power that threatens to rupture your insides and crumple you in a heap, such skill is doubtful to be appreciated.

Any and all insights I may have are owed to my teacher, Kenneth Chung. Any shortcomings in my understanding or expression belong wholly to me.

