

WING CHUN: A Master Talks

The Wong Shun Leung Interview

BY PAUL WHITROD

Sifu Wong Shun Leung has been involved in martial arts for nearly forty years. His experience began like any school boy becoming in local fights. This developed into an interest in martial arts.

He made a name for himself by successfully fighting, for Wing Chun, against representatives from other schools of martial art. Now his reputation is worldwide as a teacher of Wing Chun Kung Fu.

He has a very realistic and practical approach to his teaching. Throughout my time in Hong Kong, students from all over the world have come to train with him. There have also been many reporters who wish to interview him. Usually they concentrate on his relationship with Bruce Lee and don't tap his own knowledge of martial arts.

The next few pages are an attempt to tap this knowledge and to give people an understanding of Wong Shun Leung's theories of Wing Chun Kung Fu.

COMBAT: What made you first interested in training martial arts?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *When I was young, I was a small person and I believed that practising these kinds of sport would give me more confidence in life.*

COMBAT: What kinds of style did you practice?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *I first trained in boxing and tai chi before being introduced to Wing Chun.*

COMBAT: Were you interested in fighting generally or did you see only the sporting aspect?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *I was mainly interested in the practical applications of these sports.*

COMBAT: What attracted you to Wing Chun and made you stay with the system?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *At first I had the wrong idea about martial arts, I thought that they were for self defence only. I liked the principle of Wing Chun which stated that attack was the best form of defence.*

The training idea of Wing Chun was to make you strong enough to attack an opponent, otherwise it was felt that you would be unable to defend yourself successfully.

Through training the forms we realised that, unlike other martial arts, there were no fixed response moves in Wing Chun. That is to say, if I attack in one

way you must respond in a certain manner. Wing Chun stipulates the use of concepts and principles, and there are techniques to follow these 'ideas'.

COMBAT: How did you train Wing Chun under Yip Man?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *Training always began with the first form, Siu Lum Tao and then single arm chi sao (sticky hands training). Once familiar with this was achieved then simple double chi sao was trained. When our Sifu (teacher) saw that we were competent with basic hand positions he would teach us footwork. We had to move backwards and forwards using our stances. When this was learned, turning the stance followed by lap sao was taught. Chum Kiu and Blau Gee, the second and third forms, were taught next followed by the wooden dummy.*

If the students is competent here then I will teach the long pole. However the case of the butterfly knives is slightly different. I can't teach the techniques to just anyone. This is not because of any secret or any prejudice, but because the ideas behind the movements are different to the empty hand ideas even though they look similar. Teaching the knives to a stu-

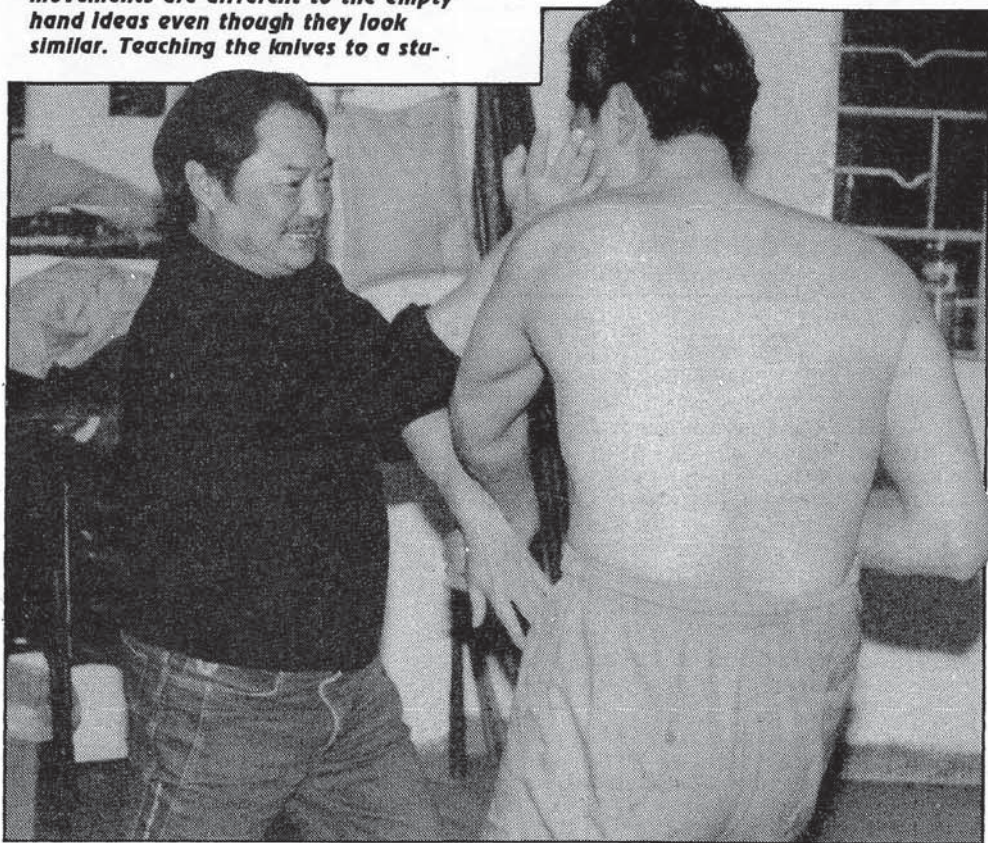
dent who has a weak grasp of the basic Wing Chun idea may cause him confusion.

Ever since I have been teaching, I have followed almost the same sequence of teaching as Yip Man. The only way by which I differ is that after Chum Kiu I teach about one third of the dummy form, following this I will teach the student Blau Gee and then the remaining dummy form.

Grandmaster Yip Man asked me why I taught this way. I felt that the movements of the first third of the dummy closely resembled the first and second forms. However the last two thirds of the dummy form had theories and movements which resembled the third form Blau Gee.

COMBAT: How does the training differ from that in other styles?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: *Other styles would place much emphasis on the training of forms and combination techniques. Wing Chun ideas will not allow this method of training. Wing Chun theory will not allow any fixed responses or combinations of techniques.*



Sifu illustrates the idea of always attacking his opponent.

A Wing Chun fighter will use the theory to find a technique for the given situation. His daily practise will give him the reflex to automatically select the right technique. It should not matter what technique follows the previous one as long as they fit the theory and flow though and not put the fighter in vulnerable or awkward positions.

It is therefore important for the student to practice the reflex action so he may apply the theory to Wing Chun to various situations created by any opponent.

Grandmaster Yip Man used to be of the belief, and this is shared by many of his students, that it is your opponent who will teach you how to hit him.

I often see students training who are trying to think too much how to hit their opponents. This is wrong because the student has preconceived ideas as to how he should move and how the opponent might move.

When fighting, your opponent should also be free to move how he likes, he will not think as you. Hence your movements will be determined by his actions. If your intentions are to hit your opponent above all else, then you may over commit yourself or allow your opponent to attack you easily. It is far better to allow your opponent to guide you, during the fight, and show you how to hit him.

COMBAT: How did you train mentally and physically for your matches against other styles?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: For such a fight, you must train hard to just develop the self confidence to enter such a match. You must also, by way of your self confidence, know that you can win.

When Wing Chun practitioners go to fight and are defeated then the mentality is not think that the other man is better than himself. Instead he needs to ask himself what were his mistakes to invite the attack. This is the kind of positive thinking which any fighter must possess.

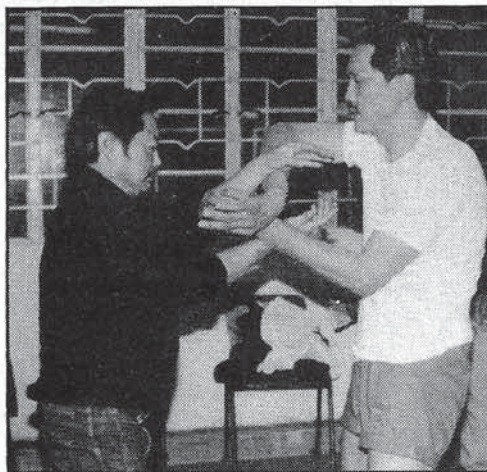
COMBAT: You were a strong fighter long before you began Wing Chun did you find the concepts immediately useful or only certain techniques?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: I am very small, so larger people used to attempt to take advantage of me. I had many opportunities to fight and use Wing Chun. I found the concept of always making my actions the most useful.

Wing Chun never, never speaks of just blocking an attack but rather to counter with another attack. Offence is the best form of defence. For example if for 9, out of 10, seconds I am concentrating on hitting you, then for 9 seconds you must be defending, I have a better chance of striking you.

I never think or speak of just blocking an attack but rather how to counter attack an opponent. The skills gained from chi sao should enable my attacking force to somehow continue towards the opponent.

COMBAT: Which is the best way to train Wing Chun?



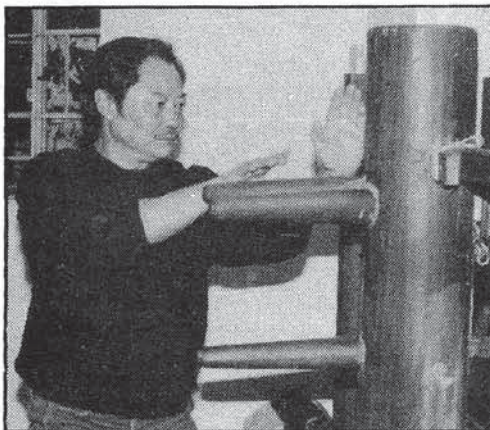
Basic Chi Sau positions.

WONG SHUN LEUNG: The best way to train is to find an experienced coach and trainer. The student must trust such a person and believe in him to follow closely his instruction. The student must know his ability too, and work hard for improvement. The Wing Chun student is training to be a fighter and so must be able to withstand some punishment as well as launch strong attacks. The student of Wing Chun must also be smart enough to know how to apply the concepts of Wing Chun to survive a situation.

In the old days I did not teach for the money and so I could teach whomever I wanted. I usually taught people who had the potential to become strong fighters. Now circumstances are different, if you are keen to learn, I will teach you. My living is now made by teaching Wing Chun.

The old students would do anything that I, as his coach, would ask him to do. I was not gaining any financial reward, the student could trust that I would only ask the student to do something beneficial to his training. Hence money would not stand in the way of a good students progress.

Those students whom I taught were very often already of athletic build, this was gained from their participation in other sports. I found that those students who participated in endurance sports were more geared to applying Wing Chun correctly. They could apply the forces in a continuous stream over a



Positions can be trained on the wooden dummy.

long period of time as is Wing Chun's requirement.

COMBAT: How does the teaching of Yip Man differ from the way you teach?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: Yip Man taught in a traditional manner. This meant that Yip Man would give some information only once in a while. If you were not alert and missed the point, then hard lines.

He would expect the students to grasp the whole meaning from maybe one or two words of explanation. Of course, he welcomed questions and discussions which showed that a student was thinking for himself.

Hence the information was not evenly distributed. Some students might get little bits of loose information, whilst others received more information. You had to be able to read between the lines to arrive at an answer; there was no systematic manner of explanation.

Grandmaster Yip Man also had a different attitude to that which I have. He used to believe that teaching one good student would be better than teaching ten bad ones. Hence, he would not spend too much time with a student whom he thought not worthy of his time.

This is why some teachers of Wing Chun teach in different manners. From Yip Man's one word of explanation they may have got the wrong meaning which they now pass on. Their grasp of the ideas which Yip Man gave depended very much on their intelligence, attendance to class and so on their training attitude. This is not a criticism of Yip Man but rather it reflects the attitude of the time which was very much traditional.

Wherever and whomever I have been teaching, it has been my preference to convey the information to all people in attendance. I try to treat everyone equally during my lessons and seminars.

If, therefore, students are allowed such free interpretation as that which Yip Man allowed then the students may take Wing Chun as an art. In fact it is a skill. We are not performing for an audience but rather doing a job.

COMBAT: How do the hand boxing forms relate to Chi sau?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: If we use the analogy of basic English language, the *Siu Lim Tao* is the ABC of Wing Chun. When learning *Chum Kiu* we learn to make some words. Upon progression to *chi sau* we can express those words as sentences.

However, the application of *Biu Gee* is different. The mentality when applying *Biu Gee* is different. A situation must be very bad before the concepts of *biu gee* are used.

In this form we must consider outside influences. For example is there a wall behind us or a chair nearby?

***Biu Gee* teaches us that in some situations events may be such that rules will be broken and that a fighter may use anything that works to survive. It is this form which teaches us that in Wing**

Chun there are no absolute situations, no perfect conditions when you are fighting for your life. The chances are that you will not be fighting when you want or on your own terms. There may be no warning and your first initiation to the fight may be an injury. You may be sitting, standing in any position. *Biu Gee* will make you aware that things may not go your way.

COMBAT: How does chi sau and the forms relate to combat?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: Many Wing Chun guys don't know how to fight. In chi sau you will practise those techniques which you have learned for the forms. We are training our reflex actions for certain situations created by our opponents

Some people have the wrong idea that chi sau is to teach you to tie up your opponent or stick endlessly to each others arms. It is not. It is to train the reflex ability to continue your attacks if they have been deflected.

In a true fight we must fight in reality. It should be our intention to do what ever is necessary to survive the situation. It is our mentality to combat which will teach us how to hit the opponent.

If you are kind hearted you may try to play with the opponents arms, whilst doing him no harm. Confidence in chi sau may result in over confidence in a fight. However, delay in an attack will only give the opponent more time to attack you.

You as the fighter have the responsibility to attack your opponent and to try to finish him off in the shortest time and not to waste the time doing unnecessary fancy techniques. If you don't finish him he will finish you. If you don't want to finish him and he doesn't



Lap Sao exercise is a good all round drill.

want to finish you then why are you fighting?

COMBAT: What difficulties did you find whilst learning chi sau and other Wing Chun techniques?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: When I was learning, from the beginning, my Sifu wanted us to lay good foundations. That is he wanted us to practise the basics slowly and diligently, as his own Sifu had instructed him to do so. It is only by taking time to lay these solid foundations that any of the normal complications could be resolved in a progressive manner. Only by understanding the theory from the beginning,

could any errors be reasoned out and corrected.

COMBAT: What are the most common mistakes which you find with students now a days?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: Some students still put too much emphasis on pre-set combinations. Quite often the students already have this idea from books, magazines and by talking to friends. They don't understand how to apply the concepts of Wing Chun.

This means that the students are concentrating too much on the individual technique rather than seeing the whole situation. They cannot appreciate the theory which would suggest a technique.

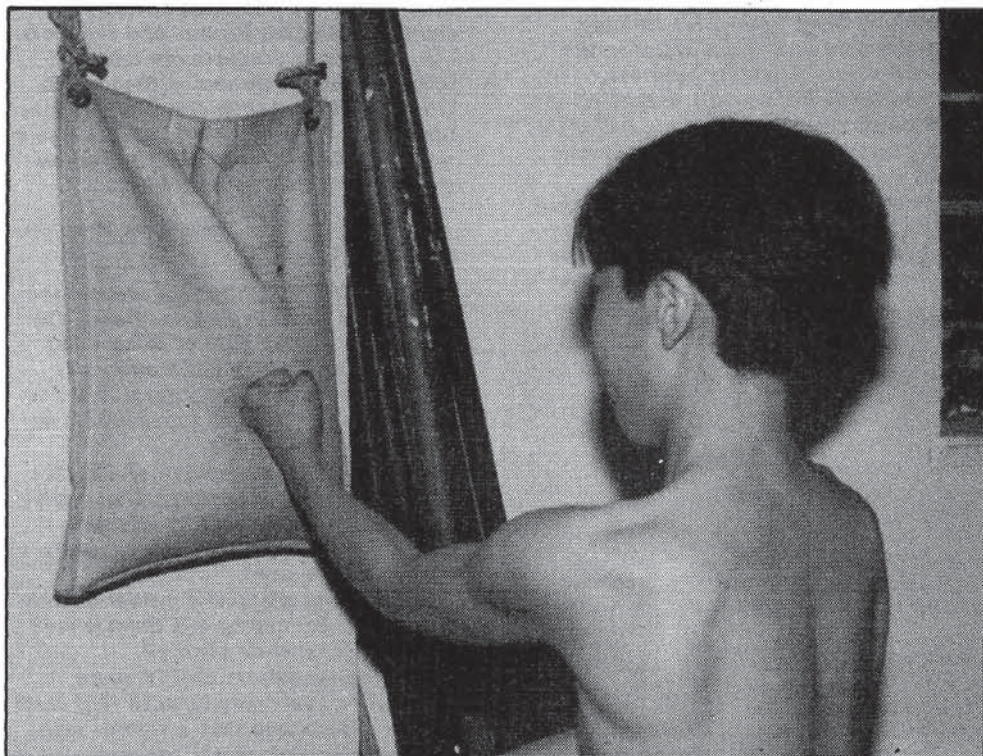
COMBAT: Most students are not able to concentrate all their time and energy on learning martial skills. However these same people want to attain a reasonable level of skill. What should be trained the most, for people with limited time?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: There is no quick way of learning Wing Chun. You must train diligently at it. What you put in will form the basis of what you get from it.

I have shed a lot of blood for Wing Chun, broken bones, cuts etc are common for this kind of training. This may scare many people but you are learning a combat art and we are not here to horse around.

Superficial training will only mislead people into believing that they have special skills which in fact no one can possess. Fighting is savage business and will usually cause injuries to both parties. Soft training will not prepare you for this.

COMBAT: Many new schools are opening which claim to teach only self defence or complete martial systems. How can a seemingly traditional system, like Wing Chun, compete with these styles which appear to give the public what it wants?



Punching training is important to enable strong attacks to be delivered.

WONG SHUN LEUNG: I believe that to get the full picture of martial art you must study a complete system under a good coach.

It is, often, only a business gimmick to advertise quick self defence techniques or magical powers.

There are many stupid people in the world who will believe in mystical powers to protect their bodies from attack, they don't want to train hard but wish to take a short cut. Those who train hard and drip sweat and blood will know whether they stand any chance in the fight or not, whilst those who haven't will always be in doubt and hide behind their beliefs.

If there was a really easy way of becoming a superman then we would all train this way—after all who wants pain all the time. You could also say that if some kung fu could make you a superman then Olympic boxers would train in it and never loose.

COMBAT: Do you feel that there is any difference between traditional styles and modern self defence?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: The object of Wing Chun is to teach you how to hit your opponent. It should teach you to use the simplest method to hit your opponent. Any martial art must teach you this concept if it is to offer fighting techniques.

The idea of a self defence class as opposed to a martial arts class may be in the minds of students, or put in the minds of students by teacher wanting to encourage business by seeming to address a topical subject.

There is no easy way of defending ourselves without being strong enough to attack as well. We must train hard to achieve this for ourselves under a coach who is willing to offer the correct advice and training.

COMBAT: Many instructors teach chi sau in such a way that the student will never expect to be hit by his opponent do you feel that training any martial art can eliminate the possibilities of getting hurt?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: If you don't want to be hurt then maybe you should run away and not fight. If you are training kung fu then you want to fight and by your training you must be able to absorb and give punishment.

COMBAT: Do you feel that Wing Chun has any limitations? Many students like to combine boxing with kicking, throwing and grappling on the ground to develop eclectic systems.

WONG SHUN LEUNG: In training *Biu Gee* we are taught to be free. The first forms tell us about normal situations. *Biu Gee* is for the abnormal situations. The ideas in *Biu Gee* sometimes will contradict normal Wing Chun ideas in order to allow the person to survive a bad situation. We are told to do what is necessary to survive and so there are no limitations.

Styles have different concepts and objectives. With Wing Chun, we want to attack our opponent in a very direct and savage manner. Other styles will



Sifu uses a *Biu Gee* technique to escape a dangerous position.



contradict this objective by attempting non-direct tactics. If we combine them our objectives can become confused in the heat of the fight. We will be less effective.

COMBAT: Do you consider Wing Chun to be a style or an expression of concepts?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: An express of concepts. Wing Chun does not have to be done to the letter. Only enough needs to be done to fulfill the requirements of the theory.

An example, of the above is the fixed elbow position. The beginner is taught simply to keep his elbows as close to the centre line as possible this is the concept.

Once we are good at this, we need to relax our elbows rather than stick rigidly to a position and restrict our movements. The skills which we develop in Wing Chun, will allow us to relax our arms and to use the fixed elbow position only when needed. After all the elbow belongs to the fighter and not the fighter to his elbows they work for you.

COMBAT: How does Wing Chun differ from other styles? Are any styles similar or also good for fighting skill?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: I am now teaching Wing Chun and am in no position to criticise other kung fu systems. But I would like to say that many styles ask men to imitate animal positions. Humans don't have the ability to imitate some positions. For example some animals can leap around from here to there quite easily because they have tails to help them maintain

balance. We humans don't have such a tail to aide us and so some techniques may not be natural.

Therefore when someone asks me what animal style Wing Chun is we could say 'human style'. We use the weapons which nature has given to us to the best of our ability.

We also train in a realistic manner by allowing our opponents the freedom to attack at will. In this way we have a infinite supply of situations by which our opponents can check and test our technique.

COMBAT: Now you have trained and taught Wing Chun for almost 40 years. Can you give a simple definition of Wing Chun?

WONG SHUN LEUNG: The Wing Chun idea brings out your in built animal instincts to protect your self and to do the most harm to an aggressor in the shortest possible time.

All people have the animal instinct to fight when they are born, it is a natural thing.

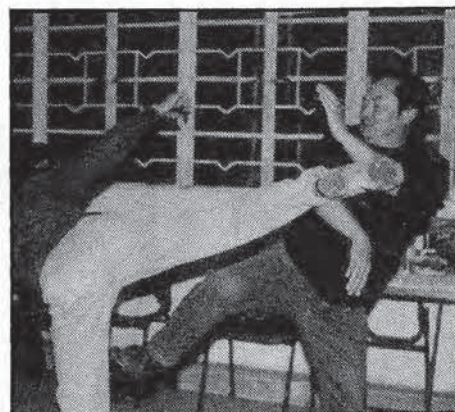
Our day to day life in so called civilisation has tamed this instinct. for example we do not need to hunt for our food, we can obtain it in a supermarket.

As a teacher of kung fu I often appreciate the way women fight each other. It is very often the case in the animal kindom that females are the most vicious than the male counterparts of the same race.

When women fight they may not use *bong sau* or *tan sau*, but they do use Wing Chun principles. Very often they will bite, pull hair, gouge eyes and scratch. There is nothing wrong in these techniques, they are direct and give the opponent a great deal of pain.

The fight from instict to survive. When men fight they often try to be fancy to impress others. It is the Wing Chun way to harm the opponent in the shortest possible time and to suffer the minimum damage. If you are not trying to achieve this goal then why fight?

Anyone interested in learning Wing Chun in the United Kingdom can contact any of Master Wong's representatives here. They are:- Nino Bernardo, 'The Basement' on (071) 254 7973, or Clive Potter (0727) 839 309 or anthony Kan (0582) 766 737 both of the 'Wong Shun Leung Wing Chun Kung Fu Association (U.K.)'



Sifu deals with an opponents round kick.