

Passing on the Art of Wing Chun:

Fighting Strategies

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The spread of the wing chun system of China can be attributed to the late Grandmaster Yip Man. Before he began teaching, wing chun was known only in Southern China. But because of his fighting ability and knowledge of the system, Yip Man drew disciples from all walks of life and from other martial arts systems. From the time he began teaching the art till the time of his death, Yip Man explained the theories and strategies of wing chun which had been taught to him by Chan Wa Soon and Leung Bik. Yip Man's disciples have since spread the art of wing chun gung-fu throughout the world.

Yip Man had a number of famous disciples. Among them was Ho Kam Ming of Macau who began training with Yip Man in the fifties. Ho had previously studied other martial arts, but was attracted to wing chun because of the technical fighting skill and understanding of Yip Man. Ho Kam Ming trained hard, being a perfectionist and never one to take the easy way out. He learned both the fighting skills of wing chun and the theories to make those skills work through diligent practice and long discussions with Yip Man. Ho was a close disciple of Yip Man and spent a great deal of his family wealth on learning wing chun and helping his teacher. When Yip Man became extremely ill, Ho Kam Ming took him to the hospital. Ho took care of Yip Man as he would his own father, helping him in his illness and staying with him until Yip Man's death in 1972.

Ho Kam Ming has had schools in Hong Kong and in Macau where he is the only wing chun teacher certified by the

city of Macau. He has trained championship teams in full contact wing chun, and has had many winning fighters from his Macau school. Beside being known for his tournament teams, Ho is also well-known in Hong Kong for his super wing chun technique and structure. Ho was given the nickname "King of Chum Kiu" (Chum Kiu is one of the forms of the wing chun systems) because of his skill in executing the form.

In 1960 Augustine Fong began training under Ho Kam Ming in Macau. Fong studied under Ho for eight years then moved to the United States and eventually opened a school in Tucson, Arizona. Fong learned the fighting skills and theory of wing chun from Ho Kam Ming just as Ho learned them from Yip Man. Some of the important strategies of wing chun are explained in the remainder of this article, first in general terms then through relevant wing chun sayings. These strategies have been passed down in the form of wing chun sayings from instructor to student since Ng Mui the originator of wing chun first taught the system.

Strategies of the Inside Line

The best angle or line of attack in wing chun is called the "inside line" or inside centerline. In order to get the inside line you must control the opponent's attacking line, so for a brief second or two he cannot attack. Control of the inside line destroys the opponent's attacking structure, opening the inside line for your attack and making it virtually impossible for the opponent to recover before you strike him. The inside line is difficult to describe on paper because every movement of the opponent changes the best line of attack. You must learn to see and/or feel where the best line of attack is. Usually this is the most direct line (generally a straight line), but there are also times when circular attacks are the best attacks. If you can always use the perfect line of attack, the chance of you losing a fight is very small. The inside line is best learned from a qualified wing chun sifu.

Try to get the inside line, then you will be able to strike directly.

The most direct and safe attack is the inside line of attack. While this is usually a straight line attack, you must sometimes have to circle outside to produce the most advantageous attack. In either case, the attack should always end striking into the opponent's center or vertical motherline plane. Striking into the center means that your power is released directly towards the center of the opponent's body to cause internal damage and to make your attack harder to deflect. By releasing explosive power into the center of the body, whether from a side, back or front angle, you will damage whatever internal organs are in that area. However, if you strike to the side and away from the center, you may or may not cause internal injuries, and the opponent may be able to deflect the blow by turning. You should not specifically aim at a target on the opponent's body, but because you strike directly into the vertical motherline, the opponent's body absorbs more of your power since it is harder for him to deflect that power, resulting in more internal damage. You should try to get the inside line so you have the most direct attack.

Destroying the opponent's centerline will control his structure.

In wing chun there are a number of trapping techniques which use the "por jung" or breaking the centerline principle. Por jung techniques are used to destroy or control the opponent's structure on the centerline in order to open the inside line for an attack. Because you control and stop the opponent's motion on his centerline, you momentarily prevent his arms or body from striking you so that you can attack unhindered. Por jung is a very important principle for fighting because you control the situation by controlling the opponent's entire structure and not just his hands.

Use structure to recover your own line, then you will see how important the line is.

In fighting it is important that you learn to see and/or feel the best line (the inside line) for an attack, but you must also learn how to recover the inside line when the opponent attacks. Whoever has the inside line has the best line of attack. If the opponent gets the inside line before you do, you must be flexible enough to change your structure to divert and control the incoming attack, thereby opening a new inside line for your own counterattack. When you learn to block and control to regain the inside line, you will see how vitally important the inside line is to winning a fight.

Protect your own structure. Guard the centerline to protect the flanks.

Wing chun is simultaneously offensive and defensive. As you attack on the inside line you must control the opponent's bridge (his forearm) or his body structure to prevent him from striking you. Protecting your structure is important in fighting so that you will not sustain injuries. It is more efficient to guard your centerline and protect yourself by blocking (controlling) and attacking simultaneously.

At the highest level of wing chun this is done without physically blocking or controlling the opponent which is called "bo lay ying" or glass technique because the opponent cannot block your attack. It is as if the opponent is looking through glass and sees nothing while you strike him. Bo lay ying techniques require a thorough understanding of structure and the inside line because you must know how to move out of the attacking line to protect yourself without physically blocking while simultaneously striking the opponent. Bo lay ying techniques control the inside line in such a way that the opponent cannot even mount an effective block. These techniques though, are extremely high level and take years of practice.

Strategies of Closing the Gap

Closing the gap is an expression used in wing chun to describe the way you cover the distance between yourself and your opponent. You must close the gap quickly to trap the opponent's structure and open the inside line. Closing the gap in this manner prevents the opponent from striking you while you have an open area to strike. If you close the gap without trapping the opponent, you are taking a chance. The wing chun system is based on economy and efficiency of motion; taking a chance is not economical or efficient. Closing the gap is not a simple skill as it requires timing, feeling, fast reactions, quick flexible stances, and the ability to analyze the opponent's structure in an instant. These skills take years to develop though practice and experience gained from chi sau and man sau (asking hands) exercises.

Aggressive and fast attacks are well suited for closing the gap.

Aggressiveness in wing chun means to drive fiercely into the opponent while maintaining full control of the situation. It is not a headlong rush to strike first without analyzing what is going on. Wing chun aggressive attacks are one that control the opponent as well as strike. To be able to close the gap aggressively, you must be able to control your own power and analyze what alternative motions the opponent has. Speed is important in closing the gap but you must use speed with correct timing. If your opponent is a highly skilled fighter, a series of fast but poorly timed attacks can get you into serious trouble because the opponent will break your timing to hit you first. You should close the gap aggressively with both control and timing.

Make the first move to have control.

With the first move in a fight, you should already be in command of the situation by setting up the opponent so he will react to your attack in a predictable manner. By closing the gap with a trapping motion and by attacking on the inside line, you will control the possible reactions of the opponent. Even if your first attack does not penetrate, it should set up a favorable situation for a second attack to get in. Making the first move maximizes the chances that your strategy will work. However, this does not necessarily mean you always move first. Your opponent may actually begin an attack, but if you move faster, at the right angle, with the right timing, and with a controlling motion, your attack will be completed first. Moving first is essential to winning a fight.

With a weak opponent use direct frontal assault.

If your opponent is weak, you can easily blast through his defense. The major idea in wing chun is not to waste time or effort, so if you know the opponent is weaker, or presents a weaker structure, close the gap by going straight in with an aggressive, direct attack. This is a principle of timing as well as closing the gap and so this strategy can be used in all aspects of fighting.

Do not collide with a strong opponent.

A strong opponent's defense cannot be easily blasted through; consequently, you should not attack or contact the opponent's power straight on. When faced with strong power do not go against it. Instead go around the direction of

the power to attack at an angle so that you are not colliding with the stronger position. The feeling of when to go in and when to go around is developed through wing chun sticky hands practice. This principle is also for timing so that when you feel strong power, that is not the time to attack directly but to go around.

Charge into the opponent executing 3 motions together.

Aggressiveness and the correct timing are essential in closing the gap. In addition you must move with wing chun body unity. This means your hand techniques (attack and control) and your stance work together. You should coordinate the 3 motions of your stance movement. Your attack, and your controlling motion so that they work to assist each other. If you coordinate these three moves together, it is more difficult for the opponent to manage your aggressiveness since he is faced with a strong position and must deal with being attacked and trapped at the same instant.

Strategies of the Bridge

In Wing Chun the "bridge arm" refers to the forearm (from the elbow to the wrist). The bridge can be compared to the front line of troops in an army; the rest of the army (your body) depends on the front line to defend it. Winning or losing depends on how strong the bridge is and on its position. Therefore you should train to develop a hard and solid bridge arm and to maintain the best strategic position for your bridge during a fight. To win a fight, you should learn to control the opponent by destroying his bridge structure. If you control the opponent's bridge properly. You will have a clear line of attack. If you do not control the opponent's bridge, you may or may not be successful in striking him. It is more efficient to know you have a clear line of attack than to take the chance that you might get in. Controlling the opponent's bridge is important for both offense (to open the line for an attack) and defense (to trap the opponent so he cannot strike you).

The arm bridge is short and the stance narrow.

In a wing chun fighting position (jong sau) both arm bridges should be close to your body. Both elbows should be bent and spaced about a fist's distance from your body. If you extend the front arm bridge too far away from your body, you will lose potential explode power because there is less distance to generate power. You will also lose flexibility. If your arm bridge is close to your body, you have more potential explode power, and you have more flexibility to move all directions because of the bent elbow position.

If your stance is too wide, you will be slower and less mobile. Narrower stances are faster because they take less energy to move. They are also more mobile because they require less shifting of weight and make it easier to pivot in all directions. The wing chun stance was developed for flexibility and mobility in all directions.

Your entire body structure, including your bridge arm position and stance, are of utmost importance in fighting. A short arm bridge and a narrow stance are the basic wing chun fighting structure. You must train diligently to understand how they are utilized in fighting.

Glass-like head, cotton-like stomach, and iron arm bridge.

You should face your opponent with the idea that your head is fragile and vulnerable like glass which means you must protect it. You should feel that your body is soft like cotton and that people can hurt you. Having a fragile head and tender body will make you realize how important it is to protect yourself against attacks. You should develop your arm bridge to be like iron so that it can protect your glass-like head and your cotton-like body.

Controlling the opponent's arm bridge makes the situation more favorable.

Controlling the opponent's arm bridge involves trapping his bridge or maneuvering it into a position that is extremely difficult to get out of. This gives you a brief moment to attack without worrying about possible counterattacks. Each time you successfully control the opponent's bridge, you create an opening for your attack. The more you can control the opponent's bridge, the better your chances are of winning a fight. The ability to control the opponent's arm bridge is learned from sticky hands and other partner exercises. Trapping is a major principle of the wing chun system and

must be studied throughly.

Short motions can jam the opponent's bridge.

One of the ways to trap the opponent's bridge is to jam it. In order to jam the bridge you must be close enough to destroy the opponent's bridge angle which will cause his bridge position to collapse. Short motions with explosive power are very effective in jamming because they snap the opponent's bridge, destroying the structure and leaving little time for the opponent to react effectively. Short explosive power is whiplike power produced by the joints of the arm snapping together so that the power whips forward into the opponent. In a trapping motion, the snapping or whipping action can be so strong that it off-balances or destroys the opponent's body position as well as his bridge. Jamming is a very effective wing chun trapping technique.

When the opponent's bridge comes, you walk on his bridge.

The most favorable method of controlling the opponent's bridge is for you to be on top of his bridge. Trapping his attacking structure downwards. To walk on the bridge means to attack and control the opponent's bridge arm from above. While walking on the bridge is an important method of controlling the opponent, this does not mean you should always strive to end up on the top position. You must react to the fighting situation. In some situations it may be better to control the opponent from the side or from underneath. You must develop the ability to analyze the opponent's attacking structure instantly to find the best angle to control the bridge. The skill of walking on the bridge is developed in wing chun chi sau practice

Strategies of Yin and Yang

Wing Chun followings the principles of yin and yang in all ways. Yin is the dark, negative, empty, soft or passive aspect in all things. Yang is the light, positive, substantial, hard or active aspect in all things. Nothing is all yin or all yang, and what is yin eventually changes to yang. What is yang eventually becomes yin. These ideas are important in fighting strategy because an attack is active or yang, but it must become passive or yin after power has been released. A brilliant fighter knows intuitively from experience and study which of the opponent's hands or legs is active or live and which one is passive or dead. He will attack with timing to destroy the active or to prevent the passive from becoming active. This takes skill and practice. Knowing the yin and yang in your own techniques allows you to see the yin in yang in the opponent's techniques. Having an understanding of how things change from hard to soft, substantial to empty, yang to yin will improve your fighting skill.

Yin and yang, empty and solid -- you have to know how to separate them

In your own fighting you must distinguish between yin and yang in each technique. You must know if your hand is active or passive and what that means in relation to the opponent. You have to know which is your live hand and which is your dead hand in order to understand the opponent's hands. If you cannot separate active and passive, hard and soft, you will not be able to control your own techniques. In order to control the opponent, you must first be able to control yourself.

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Up, down, back and forth: your techniques have to flow

The yin/yang principle is used in the application of techniques as well as in the analysis of them. You must change from yin to yang and yang to yin to continue to produce the most power possible. A wing chun fighter does this by rotating the hands, attacking with one hand while the other controls then hanging hands so that the first hand controls while the other hand strikes. This rotational pattern can be up and down, back and forth, or side to side. When you fight this way, your techniques will flow according to the theory of yin and yang.

Even though a technique may be yang or striking, it also has yin within it. Similarly, a technique that is yin or controlling also has yang within it. To be able to adjust effectively to the opponent's motions, you must be able to control as well as change the amount of yin and yang in each of your own techniques. An attacking technique such as

a punch that has mostly yang power must change to more yin power when it is blocked so that you can flow into a controlling technique while maintaining the correct structure. A controlling technique that has more yin power must change to more yang when it becomes an attack. The ability to control your power while applying the principle of rotating techniques will allow you to react and adjust to the opponent in a smooth, flowing manner using the right amount of power for each situation. However, this is not easy and to develop this skill you need years of practice in chi sau following the right ideas.

You have to know the principle of yin and yang

Yin and yang can be applied to all aspects of fighting. You have to know when to hit and when not to hit; this relates to the opponent's yin and yang sides. When the opponent attacks, that side is live or yang. You should attack the live side before the opponent completes his motion to stop the attack. You must break through or control the opponent's live side so that it becomes dead while your live attack strikes on the inside line. When you attack after the opponent has already completed his attack, you should attack the opponent's dead side to prevent it from becoming live. If there is no motion to analyze, you should attack the open side. Knowing when to hit and when not to hit relates to knowing the principle of yin and yang.

Strategies of Timing and Feeling

Knowing the right timing to hit comes from feeling. If you can feel the opponent's motion, you will be able to identify the right timing to attack. Wing chun trains feeling and timing from sticky hands. You must develop feeling first in the arms, then with more practice, the ability to feel slowly spreads throughout the body so that you can feel with your entire body. Knowing when the opponent is going to move before the opponent actually moves comes from years of developing feeling and from experience in fighting. Knowing the right timing to attack comes from this feeling and knowing how to gain the inside line.

In wing chun, the basic developmental timing is called regular timing. In sticky hands practice, this timing is between two motions; generally you attack between the time the opponent's motion stops and the next begins. Regular timing is for development of your timing in reaction to the opponent's motion. In fighting applications, you will not use regular timing because regular timing exists within the other timings. These timings are called breaking, creating, and double timing. Breaking timing is utilized when you attack before the opponent has finished his first motion. In other words you interrupt his motion so that he cannot complete his attack. Creating timing is utilized when you cause the opponent to move and then you attack in reaction to his motion. Double or delayed timing is utilized when you use creating timing first, causing the opponent to attack or move, then you use breaking timing to break through the opponent's second attack. All of these types of timing need to be mastered to be able to flow and control a fighting situation.

Timing is achieved through practice

You have to understand regular timing in order to be able to apply the other wing chun timings. Regular timing is learned through sticky hands by first knowing when your own motion stops and starts and then feeling when the opponent's motion stops and starts. You should execute an attack between the stop and start of the opponent's motion. It takes a great deal of practice to become proficient at regular timing. Through this practice and from the experience of seeing attacks coming at you, you develop the ability to feel when the opponent's motion is going to begin and when it has stopped, so that you know instinctively when to attack.

Be accurate with timing

The timing of any movement has to be in the right moment to work. What makes a technique work is the combination of self-timing or the correct timing of your own motions within the timing of your attack and control. All parts of your body that are utilized in a technique must have the proper self-timing to achieve the highest efficiency. The stance movement, the drilling action of the arm or leg and the release of power all must be in the right timing. You must develop perfect timing of your own motions and perfect timing in relation to the opponent's movement to be consistently successful in fighting. In a fight the opponent will do anything he can to prevent you from hitting him. Then you have to have perfect timing to get through. You must be accurate with timing.

If you should hit, hit. If you should not hit, do not hit. Do not want to hit too much. Do not be afraid of getting hit.

If it is the right time to hit, then hit. You can either create the right timing or break through the opponent's timing to hit. But you must understand regular timing to do this. If you cannot feel the right timing or cannot create the right timing, do not hit because it will be a wasted motion. If you want to hit too much, you will forget about the right timing and you will strike without any timing at all. Then you may walk into the opponent's attack or he may walk into yours. On the other hand, if you are afraid of getting hit, you will ruin your timing because you are afraid to let the technique go; then even with the right timing you will miss the chance to hit. Study timing thoroughly to know when to hit and when not to hit.

Rapid moves are hard to guard against. Attack when the opponent slows down.

If the opponent strikes in rapid succession, and you do not have skill in changing the line and breaking timing, you will have trouble blocking. Instead, avoid the attacks by moving out of the way; then attack when the opponent's techniques are spread apart or slower.

When you have developed a high degree of skill in wing chun you will be able to counteract a fast, aggressive fighter by using bo lay ying or glass techniques. When the fighter attacks, you move out of the way, protecting yourself with your body structure and striking on the inside line. Bo lay ying techniques are extremely difficult to execute because of the many factors that must be analyzed instantly. Only an experienced and highly skilled fighter can execute these techniques. Because the opponent cannot react to the attack in time, he cannot block effectively, and so is hit.

The wing chun style has many more strategies which have been passed down from teacher to student in the form of sayings. All of these strategies make the wing chun system what it is. To know the wing chun system thoroughly, you must understand, and more importantly, be able to apply these strategies in actual fighting situations.

There is another wing chun saying: "Those who completely master the system are very few." Wing chun may seem easy to learn and talk about, but that is just the surface level of knowledge. It takes years of diligent practice under a teacher who understands these strategies to master the system. Being able to talk about strategies is not enough; you must be able to produce these strategies in an actual situation to show you truly understand them.

In any martial art, it is important to respect the knowledge of the system and the teachers that pass on that knowledge. Without the kindness of the late Grandmaster Yip Man in teaching his disciples, we in the West would not know wing chun. It is vitally significant to the art that there are still teachers such as Master Ho Kam Ming who respect the wing chun tradition and continue to pass on the knowledge so that students who want to find the true wing chun way can do so. To open the way for students interested in wing chun, Augustine Fong has invited his teacher, Master Ho, to come to the United States to give several seminars. For those students who are serious about traditional wing chun, this will be a historic opportunity to learn firsthand from Master Ho.