

The Way of the Willow - By Sifu Donald Mak

*Softness is the mind of a willow
which turns the force of the wind against itself*

An old poem on the use of softness in the martial arts likened the idea of softness to that of borrowing strength akin a willow tree yielding and bending in the face of strong winds during a violent storm rather than resisting the powerful onslaught of the stronger wind. By not resisting, the willow tree can still prevail and live another day whereas trees that refused to yield may not survive intact and may even be broken and/or blown over.

The Wing Chun Kuen of my respected Sifu Chow Tze Chuen (鄒子傳) as was transmitted to him by Grandmaster Yip Man is based on this idea of using softness to overcome hardness. This article will introduce the reader to the key points of Sifu Chow Wing Chun Kuen that make this soft yielding possible. Topics such as how to neutralize with structure, dissolving with footwork, using shoulder path to create emptiness etc. will be explained.

Yielding Like a Willow

The willow tree is our chosen metaphor for illustrating an intelligent strategy and method for overcoming a stronger force. To grow into a willow tree, the seeds of a willow tree must be planted. From the seeds of a willow spring strong roots, upright trunk, supple branches and leaves. These are the basis for utilizing the concept of yielding like a willow.

In actual practice and application the hands can be regarded as the leaves and branches that form the first contact point with the stronger force. By harmonizing with the direction of the force, the opponent force can be lead to emptiness without violating the structural integrity of the Wing Chun practitioner just like the way a willow tree branches and leaves would yield to a strong wind yet remain standing.

Secondly the Wing Chun practitioner body can be likened to that of the willow tree trunk - upright and structurally aligned so as to be able to receive the opponent force internally and redirect it by using the waist or rechannel into the ground through the legs.

The third basis for yielding like a willow tree is the development of strong roots that allows the Wing Chun practitioner body to be stable and not easily swayed into an unbalance position by an external force.



The Willow

Prerequisites for Learning to Yield

In our way of Wing Chun Kuen as taught by Sifu Chow Tze Chuen we emphasize the development of the following as the prerequisites for learning how to yield :

The first key to learning how to yield successfully is to maintain the entire body in a relaxed mode at all times, more so during combat. Proper relaxation is not the same as letting the body go limp as is sometimes misinterpreted.

We define proper relaxation as *"not using unnecessary muscular exertion that does not contribute to the efficiency of the movement in achieving its objective "*

Within relaxation one can achieve the criteria of an internal martial art as defined by the four criteria of being a soft internal martial art :

Relaxation

- a. **"Yuk Yau But Yuk Keung "** (欲柔不欲強) -this means that the Wing Chun practitioner should yield rather than resist against the opponent through the use of muscular strength
- b. **"Yuk Shun But Yuk Yik "** (欲順不欲逆) - this calls for the Wing Chun practitioner to move in harmony rather than against the opponent flow of force
- c. **"Yuk Ding But Yuk Luen "** (欲定不欲亂) - this requires the Wing Chun practitioner to move steadily rather than erratically in order to maintain the centreline at all times
- d. **"Yuk Jui But Yuk San "** (欲聚不欲散) - this is translated into application to ensure that the Wing Chun practitioner is using his body mass properly by converging rather than spreading out his body resources inefficiently

Centreline

The second key to learning to yield successfully is to maintain a constant centreline. The centreline is so important in Wing Chun that it could rightly be called the art of defending and attacking the centreline. The maxim *"Man Fat Gwai Chung "* (literally *"ten thousand techniques originate from the centreline "*, 萬法歸中) best describes the pivotal role of the centreline in Wing Chun.

During attack and defence the tendency is that the opponent will attack the Wing Chun practitioner body centre, as the body most vulnerable weak spots are located there. Knowing where the centre is also gives the Wing Chun practitioner a reference area from which to construct his attack and defence strategy. A proper reference path allows for the strategy of yielding by letting the opponent force fall into empty space. The strategy of yielding will be further explained in the subsequent paragraph about the shoulder path.

The third prerequisite for yielding is the concept of the static elbow. This requires the positioning of the elbows close to the body and centreline.

Static Elbow

Maintaining static elbow positioning allows the Wing Chun practitioner to constantly protect his body in the midst of combat without having to consciously do so each time the opponent attacks or counterattacks. Correct positioning of the elbows also allows the body mass to be grouped behind the hands allowing the Wing Chun practitioner to use his entire body power rather than rely on the localized strength of the arms. The requirement of using the centreline without telegraphing one intention is also fulfilled.

It is for this reason that a common admonishment heard in Grandmaster Yip Man class was for the student not to keep the elbows too close to the body nor too far out. Keeping the elbows positioned correctly thus enables the Wing Chun practitioner to yield using the body and not just by moving the hands alone as is common among beginners of the art.

Body Squaring



The fourth key in learning yielding is that of body squaring. In Wing Chun the concept of body squaring means that the Wing Chun practitioner should keep his centreline perpendicular to the horizontal line formed both his shoulders. With body squaring both hands can be used easily for attack and defence without having to constantly move the body. Precision in attack and defence is also greatly enhanced by using a two-dimensional equilateral triangle provided for by body squaring as a guide for positioning the body in the most advantageous position relative to that of the opponent for successful yielding and counterattack.

For the purpose of yielding body squaring allows the Wing Chun practitioner to use the sides of the triangle to guide the opponent force into space where it can do no harm.

Simultaneous Defense & Attack

The fifth prerequisite of yielding calls for the ability to carry out defense and attack at the same time. This is described in another maxims " *Siu Da Tong Bo* " (消打同步) or " *Sheung Kiu Bing Hang* " (雙橋並行) . The principle of " *Lin Siu Dai*

Da " (連消帶打, loosely translated as Simultaneous Defence & Attack) is another outstanding characteristic of the Wing Chun system.

This principle requires that all defensive action must be quickly followed up by an attack in order not to lose the momentary advantage accorded by the opponent. Or to put it simply a good defence is a good attack.

An actual combative situation calls for the control of external and internal factors. Incorrect control of these factors means possible loss of the match due to a host of factors such as fatigue, mistiming, loss of concentration etc.

The application of simultaneous defense and attack in relation to the concept of yielding calls for the Wing Chun practitioner to yield to the opponent by borrowing the opponent strength, body posture, line and angle of movement to get himself into the best position from which he can take control of the opponent body and from thereon successfully dominate and prevail over the opponent.

The final key to learning successful yielding is the ability to use the stances of Wing Chun.

Stances

A correctly aligned stance allows the Wing Chun practitioner to absorb the opponent strength in a static position and reposition his body such that the opponent force has nothing to impact on in a dynamic position.

Keys to Yielding like a Willow

In this final section we touch on the keys to being able to yield like a willow in the face of a stronger force.

The keys to yielding successfully are :

Neutralizing with Shoulder Path

This is the foremost mechanism for yielding to a stronger force. This key idea calls for the Wing Chun practitioner to lead the opponent force to fall into emptiness by using the shoulder path. The sides of the two-dimensional equilateral triangle as mentioned in the sub-section on body squaring acts as the mental path by which the Wing Chun practitioner can guide the opponent resultant force vector to go.

Shoulder Path under Yee Jee Kim Yeung Ma



Shoulder Path under Pien Sun Ma



Shoulder Path under Ching Sun Ma



Using Structure

A Wing Chun maxim goes "*Ying Siu Bo Fa , Ying Fu Sung Yung*" (形消步化, 應付從容, Structure Neutralizes, Footwork Dissolves, the opponents can be handled with less effort spent). This maxim points out the importance of having good body structure and footwork . Good body structure calls for :

- static elbow positioning



Slanting Body & Single
Weighted leg distribution

- b. the use of the slanting body structure
- c. the single weighted leg distribution
- d. waist springing

Point (a) has already been mentioned in an earlier subsection. A detailed discussion of points (b) ~ (d) is beyond the scope of this article. The following picture of Sifu Chow is to give a preliminary idea to the reader about the slanting body structure and single weighted leg distribution.

Good body structure allows the Wing Chun practitioner to yield like a willow in the following manner :

- remain in the same spot while absorbing the opponent strength into the Wing Chun practitioner body through the creation of a force path vector directly from the receiving point to the ground where the opponent strength is rechannelled harmlessly
- pivot the body while controlling the centreline and guiding the opponent attacks to fall onto the neutralizing shoulder path defined by the two-dimensional equilateral triangle where the opponent strong force becomes harmless

However the dynamics of an actual combat is such that sometimes the Wing Chun practitioner has to step, more so if faced with an opponent who can move swiftly or is exerting much more power than what the Wing Chun practitioner static body structure is able to absorb. This is where the use of footwork in the second part of the maxim "*Ying Siu Bo Fa*" comes into play.

As mentioned above in "Using Structure" when one static body structure or in-place turning of the body is insufficient to neutralize the opponent's attack, stepping becomes a must. In our Wing Chun the use of footwork enables the Wing Chun practitioner to remove his body totally from the path of the force or by following the direction of the opponent force vector.

Using Footwork

Application of Ying Siu
Bo Fa

The use of footwork requires the Wing Chun practitioner to move to a more strategic position from which to counterattack while keeping the body weight distributed 100% on the rear leg coupled with the shoulder path alignment.

The use of footwork in Wing Chun has other purposes. Its introduction expands the range of movements available to the Wing Chun practitioner to not only neutralize but close the gap, chase, adhere, stick and follow the opponent movements in all directions. At the same time the opponent constantly finds his movements cut off, restricted or falls on empty space without having the opportunity to use his strength to strike back at the Wing Chun practitioner.

Photos Illustration :



1

S : Sifu Donald Mak on the right side

O : Opponent on the left side

1. S and O both at ready position, S Bai -jong , places his right hand in front of his left hand sitting on the Ching Sun Ma



2

2-3 O advances and attacks S with his right punch moving upward to groin. S withdraw his left leg back by Huen Bo to shift to his left side in order to move his body from the path of the force.



3



4

4-5 S immediately advances with the Huen Bo coupled with the shoulder path alignment to O left side and uses the Back-Sweep leg and Pak Sao-High side palm concurrently.



5

Conclusion

In this article we have introduced the reader to the unique flavor of our Wing Chun lineage as passed on to Sifu Chow Tze Chuen from Grandmaster Yip Man.

The use of key fundamentals -the seeds of Wing Chun- coupled with the keys to soft yielding akin a bending and swaying willow tree during a violent storm is in our opinion what makes Wing Chun Kuen an intelligent and superior form of martial art. In the words of Grandmaster Yip Man "If you stand on the highest mountain, there is none higher. Wing Chun is the highest".

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