Wing Chun’s 4-in-1 Punch

The basic Wing Chun punch can be used for striking, defending, breaking and throwing.

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This essay provides a glimpse into the versatility of wing chun gung fu as an art by focusing on the mechanics and use of the simple basic punch for striking, blocking, breaking and throwing.

Master Augustine Fong of Tucson, Ariz., the author’s well-known sifu, has made many contributions to the understanding of wing chun. During his regular classes, he demonstrates the versatility of wing chun in allowing a trained person to adapt and adjust to a multitude of self-defense situations and flow as needed.

For example, take the basic wing chun punch (chair kuen). As with most activities, learning the basics will help you master the advanced techniques. So the punch, when done with proper coordination, near simultaneity or simultaneity with the other hand, leg motions or foot-work can perform quite different functions, including striking, defending, breaking or throwing.

Striking
The best time to strike is when there is an open line, access to the “mother line,” or the central axis of the opponent. The strike can be a simple straight punch. But wing chun is a fairly conservative system, which minimizes danger even when attacking. So one maximizes control of the opponent in the process with both hands working together to create a triangular controlling and dynamic formation. To the untrained observer, the wing chun practitioner may appear to be vulnerable on his punching side from the opponent’s free hand. But looks can be deceiving. When moving forward, the wing chun student can turn the intended punch into a tan block and the intended block into a punch. The skills developed through good chi sau sticky hands practice gives the wing chun student an early warning system, which creates a sense of the structures involved as well as noting the path of an incoming attack. While a single devastating counter strike can occur, wing chun practice develops additional insurance with flow and continuous attacks and changing motions. A real strike in wing chun never comes from a static posture.
Defending

The same wing chun basic punch (chair kuen) can be used as a defensive maneuver for closing the line or path of an incoming punch, while simultaneously opening a line to the opponent’s center. The intention to defend can also be accomplished conservatively with the addition of a pak sau (slapping hand) with the other hand and a little footstep forward, a little turn or both. The opponent’s punch will be derailed, and again with control and timing, there won’t be any viable energy path for the opponent’s other hand or feet because of the trapping of the energy.

Breaking

Wing chun control has other manifestations besides striking and deflecting. The details of cavity strikes, chin na, and kum la are beyond the scope of this article. But joint control and breaking are part of the skill building that makes wing chun a complete art. When an opponent attempts a strike or grab, the wing chun stylist can again attack and defend simultaneously — using a joint break, for example — with a punch directed at the joint. Although a fist is formed, the landing point of the punch need not be the fist. The motion can slide into contacting with the “bridge” past the fist and wrist. Again, this illustrates the multiple use of wing chun motions. The punch is just a motion.

Throw

Some form of throwing has existed in kung fu from its early days. This is especially true following the influence of Mongolian wrestling. Wing chun is no exception. Despite its common misconception as only a striking art, wing chun can deal with the throwing function from its own structure and motion and in accordance with its own purpose. Unlike some forms of throwing wing chun prefers throwing straight down to the ground or into a nearby wall or object. That way, the wing chun stylist doesn’t have to chase his opponent after the throw. Follow-up action may be needed if the opponent remains dangerous. The key to the throw is destabilizing the opponent’s axis and controlling one’s own stability and motion. These are things that take time to learn. A simple punch directed with the intention throwing — opportunity permitting — can be accompanied with appropriate footwork and support from the other hand. This can result in a devastating throw, with a host of follow-up options available to the practitioner.

Mother Line Control

Wing chun theory concentrates a lot on the central axis, mother line or the normal gravitational path of any individual irrespective of style. Reading the shape and location of the other person’s mother line is part of wing chun development, which is cultivated through various forms of chi sau. Thus, when a punch is used for throwing, the punch turns the opponent on his axis in a manner akin to pushing on a revolving door. The simultaneous stepping dislodges the base of the axis from its root and results in the collapse of the opponent’s structure.

Again, the key is becoming proficient with the motion as well as the punch. Even when the knuckles
don’t connect, releasing the energy at another contact point, such as the bridge or forearm, can do the job of turning the other person’s structure on its axis.

Alternate Scenarios
There is always a possibility that an intended action may not be effective. Maybe the opponent’s structure is very dense or heavy, for example. But this should be no problem for the Chinese stylist thanks to the wing chun maxim that there is no unstoppable motion. Wing chun alternate scenarios immediately emerge after the initial move. The punch that failed initially can easily be changed into a fak sau or a rising whisking hand to the throat or another area of the body. Similarly, if an intended strike is blocked, the striking hand can turn into a controlling hand and the controlling hand can become a strike.

When it comes to breaking, if an opponent’s elbow joint is less than cooperative, the punching motion, when accompanied by footwork, can help control the next joint, such as the shoulder. Striking, blocking, breaking or throwing can quickly be changed to other alternatives. In wing chun, it’s never over ‘till it’s over.

Timing and Footwork

The importance of timing and footwork in wing chun and implementing the four functions cannot be overestimated.

Timing and footwork patterns are sharpened in various two-person drills and a variety of chi sau or sticky hands applications. Proper timing will produce the right speed and power for the appropriate action. Timing is not the same as speed or power, although wing chun training also develops speed and explosive power. Without proper timing, speed and power can be controlled by a skillful or strong opponent. Timing includes specific mixes of appropriate speed and power with an accompanying knowledge of an open line; a line that can be opened; or an open line that can be closed. This can include moving, turning, and changing techniques as necessary. There is a rich body of footwork in wing chun — a separate subject in itself.

Conclusion
Wing chun is a capstone in the development of Chinese martial arts. Consequently, it includes striking, intercepting, joint control and throwing. To perform multi-tasking, wing chun moved away from animal forms and focused on trying to understand the most efficient use of the human body and its mechanics in different contexts. The three hand forms, among other objectives, allows a practitioner to understand himself, while controlling the body, mind and one’s energy. Control is the operative word here.

Your chi sau skill will advance once you gain more knowledge of the forms and learn to interact with different hands and in different contexts, such as standing, sitting, stepping, walking, moving away and re-engaging. This teaches in Fong’s wing chun, controlling the other person in addition to controlling oneself. Both functions of knowing oneself and the enemy — as Sun Tzu realized — are important in engagement and good kung-fu. If you can control the other person as well as yourself, a variety of reflexive motions can occur. A punch doesn’t have to be just a punch; it can be four separate, but equally effective motions.
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