

## **If I Knew Then What I Know Now**

I had come from Chicago with a year and half experience of Northern Shaolin and Tai Praying Mantis styles of kung fu before meeting Sifu Gregory Fong. The emphasis in this Shaolin training was on forms, chin na, various fighting techniques, stance training, and weapons. I was a novice student who showed potential because of my enthusiasm for learning and willingness to work. I read and watched anything remotely connected to Kung Fu and became absorbed in the art, all the while trying to distinguish fact from fiction about what I learned about this enigmatic art. After experiencing two different types of teaching philosophies, I feel that I have come to better understand what the purpose of training is and should be. I hope I can interpret the principles and purposes of Sifu Fong's teaching the way he would want them to be articulated.

One main difference between my Shaolin training and Sifu Fong's training is the emphasis on forms. In Shaolin, sashes or colored belts measured progress. The sashes were also used to determine rank. There were on average three forms per level and some of these may have included a weapon form. Along with different styles of punching and kicking, the forms also contained many different animal styles or fists. A crane's beak was to hit pressure points causing damage in the same way a punch could. A tigers claw was to emulate a tigers sharp claws and quick brut force. The forms were intended to increase coordination in tandem with footwork and stances. Form training also intended on increasing "power" through repetition of the form. This "power" can also be synonymous with the elusive "chi." Forms became a platform for which one could refine his or her techniques in a practical setting (i.e. a fighting situation). The aesthetics or

fluidity of forms became a way to measure ones kung fu. I felt as long as my forms looked better on the outside, I was improving my kung fu.

Sifu Fong's approach to forms is different from any training I had learned in Shaolin. I remember attending Sifu Fong's class the first day and having my image of kung fu shockingly scrutinized. Part of Sifu Fong's classes focus on practical application. One way to provide an applicable environment was to spar. Sparring was something I had done only with my friends, for fun, without intent to really discover my ability to fight. I couldn't understand why the techniques I had learned in forms had betrayed me at such a crucial moment. This was a moment where I could demonstrate my kung fu. After all, I had worked hard for this. So how could students smaller than me win every time? Why weren't my punches penetrating? My stances looked great, but why were they slowing me down? Where was my chi at this time of need? Having to submit my ego to this eye opening experience, it was time to question and consider what had just happened. I realized that all of my time in form training had no practical relevance other than coordination and beginning to look as though I knew what I was doing. Sifu Fong's class therefore keeps form training to a minimum and emphasizes that it is not a reflection of true application. Similarly, stance training is not emphasized, because of its inability to deliver power and its awkwardness in reference to natural walking distance. After all, walking is something we have been doing for most of our lives. He also stresses that in order to fight well you need some kind of experience in fighting. This also includes taking a punch as well as giving one.

Sifu Fong maintains that action begins with a thought. His training thereby teaches union of mind and body to maximize power. The power I am referring to is the difference between a common forearm style punch and a punch that incorporates the whole body. However, sum power depends on the mind as much as it does body. When delivering a punch it is important to have “I.” “I” is the intent one has when doing anything, the foundation for any action. There are signs to pick up on when one has or does not have “I” in training. For example, the eyes are an easy way to measure how much one’s mental and physical resources are involved in delivering one’s best punch. The mind controls the body; without commitment to your action, execution is never maximized. It is important to note that “I” needs to be exercised throughout any action. Once “I” is lost, one’s body no longer has reason for action; which is not the purpose of training. “I” training’s purpose is to involve oneself as an active or conscious member of one’s training.

With the notion of “I” in mind, we can turn our attention to the content of movement and intent. The body needs to reflect the intention you have. For example, in a sparring situation, it is easy to recoil your whole body back defensively and still try to maintain some sort of offense. By this I mean, your stance is lower, you disengage (distance from opponent), and your body is suited for nothing but running away. Your mind has not committed to being offensive and your body has externalized this defensiveness. In this situation, your energy or efforts are moving backwards. This does not mean that walking backwards cannot create an active offense. Sifu’s training focuses on maintaining a mental and physical offense. All blocks are in effect hits. Fighting posture is slightly forward with weight favoring the back foot; momentum is easily

picked up; like runners beginning a 50 -yard dash. This body language cycles back to the mental aspect of offense and “I.” These two components must always work together and have the same intent. So, by having a slightly forward stance and intent, punching power is maximized and energy is moving forward. Again, training involves learning to integrate physical muscle and “I” with applied physics to maximize power.

Sifu has taught me to break down and analyze my movements. The dissection of a punch is complex and needs to be experienced to be understood. There are many steps or concepts involved in making a punch more “penetrating.” To understand what it means for one’s power to penetrate an object rather than to push or shove is to consider how a heavy bag reacts to being struck. When one learns to develop that “penetration,” the heavy bag internalizes that energy and moves very little. What you begin to see is that energy has been internalized and is externalizing itself at the top of the heavy bag and through the chain holding it up. This “penetrating” force causes the whole bag move independently of the chain or its support. When one punches without that “penetrating” force, the bag sways dependent of its support. You are not transferring your energy into but rather pushing it and causing it to move. This does not mean that one’s punch will not hurt, but by learning to use the whole body, one will soon find that his punch is much more powerful than before.

There are a few concepts that are required to make ones punch more “penetrating.” There is your weight falling forward. By adding muscle and extension at the last second of impact, penetrating power can be maximized. Gravity is doing its job; it is a matter of supplementing that force with your own muscle and “I”. There is also the concept of stepping on the “brake.” Your front foot becomes the “brake” for your

forward moving body. The best analogy for this is to imagine you driving. The car is moving and you step on the brake. The car stops and you, the driver, fly forward. It is here where that energy transfers. Your idle body releases the energy of the forward momentum which has been halted by your foot, the "brake," and in turn shoots through your arm. Then, there is the application of creating a soft hand to a hard fist (which will eventually connect other muscles). This is crucial and difficult to time. Like kicking a soccer ball, the leg is soft until the moment of impact. At that moment of impact, the body locks up and incorporates what muscles it needs in order to accomplish its task. If the "soft to hard" concept is never acquired, energy cannot move forward. Energy can never be released. Finally, in punching and elsewhere in life, this law applies, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." When punching, the opposite half of your body is reacting and an opposite force is pulling the forward momentum of a punch. While one group of muscles expands, the other contracts. All of these principles must be coordinated together in order to work effectively. Only by truly experiencing these principles, however, can one understand what is meant by them. Only through this experience can a student fully understand and appreciate why Sifu Fong stresses building the body as a whole. By discovering these concepts, one will find a disconcerting paradox in training. Training is not a matter of knowing what to do, but what not to do. It is an infinite exploration of questions and concepts, mentally and physically. The more one learns the more one realizes how much he does not know.

**Kung Fu- hard work**

The definition of kung fu had never been clearer than when I stepped into Sifu Fong's class. The labors were an endurance test of physical ability. Sifu Fong's training is geared toward maximizing power. One must build muscle to maximize this power. The muscles one needs, however, are not the sorts that are created by free weight training; where muscles are isolated and worked individually. Maximum strength and utilization of that strength comes from working the body as a whole. By contrast, individual muscle gain works independent of the full body, which means one will have less power. Why use one set of muscles when one can learn how to use all groups of muscle? Power comes from the use of the whole body, especially the major muscle groups. For example, the isolated bicep muscle, which has long served as an image of strength, has little value in kung fu. Like any other muscle, it is dependent on other muscle groups in order for it to be utilized efficiently.

The physical demands of Sifu Fong's class are by definition "hard work." Some examples of training for a "whole" body workout include staff exercises, "hand standing," I-chuan standing, and floor sanding (basically an ab -roller using a towel). Staff exercises are executed as extensions of one's arms in order to build strength. "Hand standing" in a push up position on one's fists, for an indefinite amount of time builds not only one's arms from the knuckles up, but also from the neck to legs especially the abdominal area. These simple exercises are designed to build and coordinate the bodies potential for punching. They maximize power by minimizing movement and training the different groups of muscles to work together.

The subject of I-chuan standing merits a discussion on its own and I will only briefly touch on it here. I-chuan translates as "mind-fist." I-chuan standing is the

most difficult training I have ever practiced. I-chuan is as difficult mentally as it is physically. I-chuan's foundation is a proper understanding of skeletal structure and body mechanics. There are inherent physiological traits we possess but, through time they are modified, forgotten, or overridden mentally and physically. I-chuan aims on eliminating these anomalies. Elements of I-chuan training are incorporated in the Praying Mantis class, making it a powerful marriage. I never imagined my workouts to entail one hour of standing in two positions appearing to be doing very little, but in fact my mental and physical abilities are being pushed to their extremes. Practicing I-chuan has dramatically increased my mental and physical strength, health, and vitality.

In my opinion, the hardest work in I-chuan is maintaining the content one develops in standing and reapplying it again in movement. Content is more than just making one's forms look pretty and fluid. One must ask, "Am I working?" That is to say, am I physically working? When one practices I-chuan, he must be able apply physical muscle to his standing and training. The best illustration for one's "work," in standing, is to pick up a bucket of water, outstretched in front. You will notice how your body naturally locks up and uses different muscle groups in order to do accomplish this task. Your body becomes stretched upright while the neck is unifying the body. Your body is neither hard nor soft but "alive." Maintaining the "aliveness" is important to note because this is what the I-chuan practitioner is trying to recreate at all times, especially in the context of a form or practicing with a partner. There is a natural body reaction that happens when real labor is necessary. Your body has recruited a certain amount of muscle in order to lift the bucket. It has also provided inherent skeletal positioning when called upon to perform these tasks while the body is kept "alive." That is, the body is

doing “work” and no part is left unutilized or “empty.” The concept of the body being regarded as “alive” is integrated as part of the “work.” How can I incorporate more muscle into my task and how can I maintain muscle in my training? By learning to adopt skeletal positioning and muscle recruitment, one can begin to put content into one’s training, but again, content is not possible without constant “I” and the ability to recreate the mental image of “work.” When standing, one must constantly refer to the actual labor, for example, picking up the bucket of water. Again, “Is my mind and body “alive,” or am I just standing without content. Am I working?”

All of Sifu Fong’s training emphasizes health. Health is the reason we do any kung fu. There is great attention paid to body mechanics and health is always a priority when executing punches, kicks, or other techniques. For example, the flip kick, which is practiced in many martial art styles, can be destructive. It is stressful on leg joints and can cause long -term damage. Again, it is important to have a teacher who understands the body in order to teach a healthy and constructive martial art; rather than a blind one who contributes to one’s illness and stunts one’s growth in wellness and understanding of the body.

Finally, the understanding of chi has plagued me since day one. I have ready many books that talk about chi, make chi references in training, and allude to the greater powers of chi. The translation is complex and the English language would have to use many words in order for it to have the same essence. Chi is, more or less, energy. It

needs to be an experience in order for it to be intelligently discussed. Before studying with Sifu Fong, I had thought of chi as some sort of mystical abstraction. Sifu Fong has helped debunk some of the myths concerning chi. Chi is not the unseen energy that is going to reveal itself in order to fight your battles for you. Nor is it going to transform you into an ultimate fighter. If there is one truth about chi that I do understand; it is that muscles have to do the work. It is an undeniable truth about your labors in kung fu. “Internal arts” suggest something other than physicality; which has lent itself to creating more confusion on the topic of chi. My understanding on this matter is still growing and will reveal itself more with time.

In conclusion, kung fu is about honest hard work. Honesty is often times the most difficult task of all. I feel it is important to find a teacher one can trust and be enriched by when considering any martial art. Sifu Fong has pushed me deeper in kung fu more than any of my previous training, not with stories or empty promises, but with hard work. More importantly, he has taught and allowed me to think about my actions and apply reason to them.

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