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# THE TAO OF TEACHING

## CONSTANT REFINEMENT

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**I**N MY thirteen years as a full-time martial arts teacher, I often wondered what makes a person a Grandmaster. What experiences in life serve as inspirations, moments of clarity, or discoveries that leads to greatness?

### The Making of a Grandmaster

My *Sifu*, Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung, continually reaches new peaks to this day, even after having achieved a high level of skill and applicability in his *Kung Fu*. Having followed him for many years, if you asked him what led to his greatness,

I am confident Grandmaster Wan will always say “teaching”. In teaching, observing and sharing with others, he could focus on his practice externally. His experience, critical and experimental training, along with education, lead to the development of his *Practical Wing Chun* system. It is the desire for constant evolution and improvement that continues to feed his mastery of *Wing Chun*.

As a physical educator and educational researcher, and as someone who is looking to refine his development as a martial arts teacher, I believe all of us have the potential to

achieve similar results as Grandmaster Wan. Using scholarly research, we can accomplish this greatness in a formulated way. There are methodologies, regularly practised, that improve the learning and teaching experience. My *Sifu's* approach parallels the scientific method, through research, testing and validation of results.

In my current studies at Northeastern University, I have analysed and reviewed many educational theories and have incorporated many of them into my practice as a martial arts teacher. One particular research by Dr William Kilpatrick expanded on a method of instruction called the “Project Method”. This method attempts to allow students to solve problems with as little teacher direction as possible. The teacher is seen more as a facilitator than a provider of knowledge and information, which I think is ideal for learning in a martial arts setting. It goes against the coercive system that some martial arts schools still adopt (“this technique is done this way because my *Sifu* told me so”). The Project Method alternatively provides a means by which students can claim ownership over their practice.

For our martial arts world, examples of projects may be introducing techniques to junior students or leading a class as a senior student. By making the student responsible, as a teacher, they develop self-motivation, self-conduct, problem-solving skills and creative thinking. This educational approach can encourage

intermediate and advanced martial arts practitioners to develop in-depth knowledge of their practice. It leads to a refinement of skills and also benefits a practitioner’s discipline, which is one of the core principles of traditional *Kung Fu* practice.

At my school, I encourage my experienced students to understand the concepts behind teaching and learning. They learn to think like a student and then as a teacher. Through hard work, reflection and critical thinking, students learn the tools to help themselves improve and discover. I believe this is how my *Sifu* has and continues to refine his skills, even after 60 years of practice.

### Teaching is the Highest Form of Learning

*Guro* Dan Inosanto once said to me, “Teaching is the highest form of learning.” This insightful quote means to me that as we become better teachers, we also become better learners. When we teach, we see the mistakes of others and can address the errors in both the students and ourselves. It requires observation and reflection. Whether as a teacher or a senior student, teaching should not be only about what we want to teach; it should be how a student or peer can learn. Our curriculum should revolve around their needs and capabilities. Instructions and lectures should not be a one-way street. We need to keep an open dialogue with our students and not assume they have easily absorbed the material. As a teacher, we should get to know

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ourselves as we get to know our students, creating a *Yin/Yang* synergy of teaching and learning.

Often, even when we have a lesson plan for a class, we tend to deviate from it based on the feedback and energy of students. Tangent topics and exercises may take centre stage, and we, as teachers, need to adjust to the ebb and flow. Rather than emphasise a strict structure, we can keep the students engaged and find a suitable method in which they can claim knowledge. The lesson plan, or curriculum, only serves as a directional guideline.

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### A Family System

I sometimes feel that some of my experienced students focus solely on their training and do not find value in teaching. It is understandable to think that teaching a junior will take away from their own training time, but it is a great misconception. The time to teach a technique to a junior is the chance to reflect on our understanding of the action. We may ask, “Was the demonstration up to my standards?”, “Did I verbalise the movement clearly?” or “Is this technique even good at all?”

Learning motor skills such as *Wing Chun* techniques is like travelling into unknown territory. Sometimes, we may “master” a technique only to later discover something new about it in a different light. If we can internalise the knowledge and then express it with our words, we then truly begin to understand our practice.

With this mindset, we start to truly become senior students. In a *Kung Fu* school, we use terms like *Sifu*, *Sibing* and *Sije* in addressing each other on the practice floor, and even outside of the school. A traditional martial arts school is like a family where instructors and students help each other. The teachers and senior students are there to support the growth of junior students. When one part begins to grow, we all grow together.

### Adapt to Change

Like many other schools, I am experimenting with online training as a means of distance learning and staying connected. We are continuously exploring creative learning tools but, most importantly, listening to the feedback from our students. Now that the global pandemic is requiring social distancing, we need to stay flexible to keep our students connected and motivated. While it can be disheartening, we can use this opportunity to find new and exciting ways to practise. Many are adopting online training as a means of distance learning and staying connected. We are exploring available tools to continue training and, most importantly, listen to the feedback of our students.

Some of my senior students bravely stepped up to be responsible for weekly online sessions for the student body. For a martial art system that predominantly focuses on the sense of touch, the versatility of their teaching style has grown considerably. Since they can only rely on visual and verbal cues to help their peers, they have emphasised proprioceptive practice through the forms, follow-along visual training, and analytical explanations of techniques. Over the weeks, I have been impressed with how their explanations and demonstrations have grown, and with the positive feedback from the student body.

### A Scientific Approach

As a teacher or someone who wants to open a school one day, we must remain mindful of our students’ learning experiences. The scientific approach to curriculum-making coined by Dr Franklin Bobbitt, a pioneer of the curriculum field, suggested that teachers should only impart practical knowledge to students. To me, applying the scientific approach to martial arts means continually refining our practice, curriculum, education methods and classroom management based on the needs of the student body and changes in modern society.

Sometimes, we still hear that traditional martial arts mean sticking to practice from tens or hundreds of years before. However, I believe tradition means we hold on to the values and concepts of our martial arts practice while being honest and relevant in its applicability. Much like how my *Sifu* has continually evolved his *Wing Chun* practice into his own system, we can apply this scientific method to our teaching and martial skills, and continue to enrich our mind, body and *Kung Fu* family for generations to come.

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For more information about *Sifu William Kwok* and *Practical Wing Chun*, please visit his website: [www.newyorkwingchun.com](http://www.newyorkwingchun.com)