

Wing Tsun Kung Fu Weekend Seminar in Victoria on Vancouver Island, April 1st 2007

by Ray Van Raamsdonk, Wing Chun instructor,
studying Yip Man's 詠春 since 1976

I have been training Wing Chun with my friend Jason on Thursday evenings. This was a special time set aside for just him and I because he has trained more than 37 years of martial arts and needed more than we do in the regular classes. He helped me teach Wing Chun in 1980. He started learning Hung Gar in Hong Kong when he was six years old and is pretty well the best member.

During the past year he has been bugging me to tell him how to reach the next level of Wing Chun. The problem is that he is a bit better than I am so it's difficult to give good practical advice. So then I thought to get Kenneth Chung up again but we don't quite have the number of members or members at a high enough level for that.

I remember Heiko and Karl telling me how good Ralph Haenel in Vancouver was and after that I heard the same from a few other of my students who had met him. I think Karl met him in 1998 so that was almost 10 years ago.

So I decided, let's try to get Ralph Haenel to Victoria if he is willing. I heard he was a nice guy to start with. Secondly, he has a skill level something like Kenneth Chung's. Thirdly, he is supposed to be a good teacher. One of my classmates from Dr. Khoe has been training with Ralph for seven years now and he also gave me good reviews. This person's name is Chris Chinfen. He was a karate black belt and studied under Dr. Khoe for about seven years. Then he became a black belt in the Bobby Taboada Escrima system. He also became a black belt in Silat and went to Indonesia on top of that.

Then he studied under some top Tai Chi type in Vancouver and finally met Ralph. He said he had never seen anyone as good as Ralph and so he joined and never looked back.

Then I had a student named John Kaiser who met Kenneth Chung and a few years later moved to the East Coast and taught a bit of Wing Chun. He has been back in Victoria now for a couple of years and teaches Wing Chun in Langford. For years and years he used to tell me how good his brother Gary Kaiser was. His brother in Calgary ran a Tiger Claw kung fu club and also taught Tai Chi and Ba Gau. Before that he was a kickboxer and won about 70 matches. Over the years he had taught about 20,000 students.

Then he moved to Vancouver where he met Ralph Haenel. He said he was shocked at how good Ralph was and how logical his system was. He couldn't touch Ralph with anything. That sounded very much like people's experiences with Kenneth Chung. So he joined Ralph's school.



Gary said he has seen so many strong guys walk into Ralph's studio but none of them could touch him.

John decided one day to go over and see Ralph in Vancouver. He said Ralph asked him to chop him in the throat. John told him he didn't want to do that because he might hurt Ralph. So Ralph said 'come on, do it'. So John hit him with hesitance but there was no effect. So then Ralph told him to really hit. So John hit him harder. Then Ralph said 'no, I mean really hit'. So John hit again and again for 10 minutes until he was exhausted.

Then one of Ralph's light touches sent John flying across his studio to crash into the wall.

Then one of my students moved back to Vancouver. He wondered where he should learn. I told him he should try Ralph Haenel. So he joined Ralph's club and also got private instruction. A few months later he wrote me an e-mail saying that Ralph is amazing. He also said: 'by the way those stories about being able to punch and chop Ralph with no effect are true'. So I thought that's nice but maybe it shows you just don't know how to punch. Then another club member here said that the throat has no protection in spots so even with one finger he could do damage.

Concerning the WT organization, I never thought that any videos of Leung Ting looked any good. Also most clips of WT on the net showed people just getting chain punched into the ground with a million chain punches. Once they are down they still keep hammering away. But after I met Emin Boztepe I knew those guys could do other things too and that there was probably a diversity of talent in the huge organization.

So finally on Sunday, April 1 we invited Ralph here. The seminar was from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. Four hours for \$40 which is very reasonable. We had about 15 of our members there and Ralph brought another 10 from Vancouver.

To start with, Ralph was a very pleasant, friendly and easy going type of guy with a brilliant wit. Lots of humor the whole time. It shows that he had been teaching a very long time and knew his subject to the finest detail very well.

To start with he began with the Siu Lim Tao or Little Idea form. He had everyone assume the basic neutral stance with the hands in the crossed position. Then he demonstrated that your partner should slowly push on your elbows while you push forward with your elbows continuously for several minutes.

What you find is that you become quickly aware of the relationship of your body parts and where you might have the wrong tensions, which would make you quite uncomfortable and would also destabilize your stance. So this gave an understanding of connections and connectedness. Ralph said the elbows are down and forward and the shoulders are down and back. A lot of emphasis was put on the elbow position, which everyone knows about and has heard about, yet only some types of physical exercises bring the point home.

Then Ralph had us push out the punch with the elbow out and in to note the difference. He was really starting from the most basic fundamentals. With no effort Ralph could hold back everyone's punches yet his punches would travel right through when someone tried to hold his punch. Ralph demonstrated that people had over inflated ideas about their punching capability when he walked into their best punches; mind you it was only to his upper body and not to the head. However, our chops were to his neck. Ralph said the punch should send the guy flying across the room. In comparison, our punches couldn't stop his advance. He said if someone is really coming at you, wanting to take your head off and you have this kind of punch, then what? He said 'Oh, everyone will say but in reality I would be much better and also would punch him in the head'. Ralph said 'well, the opponent will also for the same'. He emphasized that what you do in class is often not in synch with the reality where suddenly nothing works because the fundamentals were flawed.



So then that gets to the point of how do you develop this kind of power. Actually Emin Boztepe demonstrated the same thing but didn't really explain it in any way that we would be able to do the same thing. Someone asked him about Bruce Lee's one inch punch. Emin said that's nothing. So then he took out largest member and with a very relaxed looking punch send him four feet back and one foot off the ground landing on some desks. Still he said in reality that would be worse because he wouldn't fly anywhere but would drop to the ground right in front of him.



Ralph said that according to Yip Man, the more joints you use, the more powerful your punch would be. He said first you have the wrist power, elbow power and shoulder power for a total of three joints. With each joint you can already generate some force and with all three combined there is substantial power. But this is only the Siu Lim Tao level punch. Then the Chum Kiu adds more. It adds the ankle, knee and hip joints to the force equation thus amplifying punching power further. Finally the spine is considered like one big joint very similar to a bow and this significantly adds to the power generation. This is the Bill Jee level of power.

At the Bill Jee level the process also works in reverse to allow the absorption of the opponent's energy.

The look of Ralph's punch looked very relaxed. His whole body was very relaxed and looked very much like a spring which used the seven joints of his body for power generation. Ralph said that everyone has this ideal punching range where their punch has maximum power. But he said isn't it funny that in reality, the opponent is never quite at the right spot! He is either an inch further way or an inch too close but never where you want him. So he showed how everyone had no power at these other ranges and said obviously this is no good. He showed how at any distance he could generate power. I was shown the same thing many years ago by New York Tai Chi master William C.C. Chen who sent me flying across his studio with a few different movements from the basic Yang style form. He told me every movement in the form should have such power. Ralph likened his punch to having a steel ball on a chain. He said that kind of weapon could function in the very close range and well as at the far range. No matter where your position was, if you got hit by that ball it would feel quite uncomfortable.

One key to Ralph's power delivery was of course total relaxation from the starting point to the point of contact and from that point of contact through the target by about a foot. The idea of total relaxation was emphasized again and again. Ralph said that there are many strong people with big bulging muscles but very few of these have a good punch. He said a good punch requires all the right elements in proper coordination to produce the desired effect. Normal people, he said, tighten up their fist just before delivery thus essentially putting the brakes on their punch thereby significantly reducing its power.

So now we knew that Ralph is hard to punch out and it is not possible to stop his punch unless you know a lot. Then what?

Next Ralph, but not necessarily in the order of this documentation, showed us how to perform some of the Little Idea form. Of course everyone knew this form. It's just a basic form. We all know the talk that the first form is the foundation. It's the fundamentals. Ralph asked everyone:

what does the first form teach? So people said the usual comments: it teaches the foundation; it teaches the stance; it teaches about energy; it is a Qi Gong form; it teaches the techniques; it teaches about power; it teaches about economy; it teaches fluidity; it teaches about energy transfer; it teaches about the four quadrants; it provides the basic for chi sau; it trains your muscles; it develops a calm mind, etc. So then Ralph said that's ok but then what's missing? Why don't you guys have a good punch? Why don't you guys have enough sensitivity? Why do you guys get tired after five minutes of punching?

Then Ralph introduced the idea of stretching. He said hold out your punch. Now push your punch forward. Now pull your shoulder back. Imagine someone is trying to rip your arm into two pieces. At the same time make sure your stance is good, your head is up. Ralph used a lot of good imagery. For example in the head is up case: 'imagine that you are standing in front of a fence. You can almost peer over the top. Unfortunately your feet are nailed to the ground. So you stretch your neck more and more to get a little glimpse.' Likewise, when the two hands are stretched in the Fak sau position, imagine that someone is holding a big bonus pay cheque an inch away from each hand. But you must grab both of them at the same time otherwise you don't get any pay. So you try to stretch and stretch and make your arms just an inch longer. You hold these stretch positions for as long as you can. We only held each position for several minutes and people were complaining. The elbow had to be straight and not bent. I asked Ralph how long does he take to do the first form? He said he has special classes where the student takes three hours to complete the first form using these stretching ideas. He said a few months of that will significantly increase your power generation ability. It worked for him and it worked for his students and it worked for Emin.

Ralph said he learned from Kernspecht at the castle for eight hours a day. He learned from three Turkish teachers, one of which was Emin Boztepe. He said one teacher was very hard. He would walk through you and there was no way to stop him. Another was very soft and relaxed and had tremendous hitting power. A third was very analytical and technical. I asked where did all these little details of the Wing Chun system come from? Did it come from the Chinese Wing Chun practitioners that he met or did it come from European ingenuity and reverse engineering? Ralph said of course some Chinese are very good, maybe have natural talents maybe something else but most comes from re-thinking the system. So millions of hours of thinking, trying, trial and error, comparing, analyzing and constantly going back to the drawing board produced these results.



On the subject of Yip Man, Ralph said no one really knew how good he was at least these days. He said if you went back in time and met him then maybe you would be very disappointed. On the other hand, maybe you would be very impressed and think he was like a god. So he said you should just deal with what you can do — not what you heard someone else can do. Skill comes from putting in the time, putting in thousands of hours and when you think you reached your limit and can't do any more then do it for another few hours. That's the European approach.

Years before Emin said that he had to train on the wooden dummy. His teacher Kernspecht said he just had to get a cup of coffee. Seven hours later Kernspecht came back. The students all know that they train until they are told to stop. So he trained until his arms bled. To use that seems foolish but that is the training that produced the result. I have heard very similar stories

for Chinese trained Wushu artists. You train until you cry from the pain and then you train some more.



Next Ralph slowly put the small pieces together. The first partner drill is the basic lat sau slap and punch routine. This teaches many things but a few are to punch straight towards the centre. Most people even with lots of experience don't punch exactly to the center. Then you do the pak sau towards the center. If you Pak off the center then the puncher will quickly apply a stinging Fak sau to your neck. So this teaches you to go to the center. It was at this point that Ralph had people do their best fak sau to his neck. Whether relaxed or tense their fak sau's (chops) were not effective. Then Ralph demonstrated his relaxed fak sau using very little energy but the recipients felt almost

that they would black out. Ralph demonstrated how the skills developed in the lat sau exercises relate to fighting.

His Wing Chun was very simple, very economical, very relaxed and very powerful. The lat sau program gets progressively more complex and teaches specific skills, which then are reintroduced into either chi sau training or free style fighting training.

While discussing chi sau, Ralph asked if anyone knew about chi sau. Most people had trained it. So then he demonstrated with whoever his sensitivity, positioning, timing, speed and power all of which were well integrated and were built up by his foundation of the first form, his special exercises, his lat sau program and his chi sau program. The good people said he was very sensitive, not making a mistake of whether to go left or right or up or down. He let the force guide his actions. Everything was up to his partner. Everything was relaxed. His hands slipped in everywhere with ease. Our best member with many years of relaxed and accurate chi sau experience was corrected to a few more millimeters of positioning accuracy. Small errors in position made big differences in the outcome. A master level teacher makes this very apparent. I wondered if Ralph would be the type of guy who just intimidates you and punches you out like many martial artists are capable of or if he could really control with easy skillful people trying to get him. I am not impressed with the former category. I would say Ralph falls into the latter category. He did what my first teacher Patrick Chow, a private student of Yip Man, was able to do. With skill and not relying on speed or power he could control and manipulate and hit at will.

One good thing about Ralph, which is the sign of a good teacher, is that he could correct the smallest problems in positioning, structure, feeling or whatever. He did this with great patience. You didn't feel pressured. You felt encouraged. He had the same mentality as Kenneth Chung I felt. Ken Chung didn't say your stuff is crap. He said I am here to enhance your skills. I am here to try to bring them to a higher level. I felt Ralph Haenel had the same kind of attitude. His overall approach was very similar. Just his way of explaining was different but was along the same kind of path.

Throughout the seminar Ralph encouraged any questions about anything which he would answer patiently with great detail and always with some physical hands on demonstrations. It left no doubt in anyone's mind that his ideas made good logical sense, were effective and were something that anyone with proper training could do. On that note Ralph mentioned that he had a 64-year -old lady, which isn't old mind you, but when she was matched up with much younger

stronger people, she surprised them. Being smaller, weaker and older, she didn't have the luxury of outlasting them in a fight so she developed the ability to strike instantly with good positioning, speed and power as soon as she detected the first flinch of an aggressive motion towards her. Of course we all have limitations but the idea is to maximize our abilities and not to emphasize on our limitations. Ralph said we all can go much more than we think we can. Even in the ability to receive strikes, Ralph said the body has an amazing ability in this regard. He said he is often asked if he does Iron short Qi Gong to develop his ability to receive punches and chops but he said no, it was just repetitive practice and getting used to it. One of our members who had seen a lot of masters in her life said that Ralph Haenel very much reminded her of a Chen style tai chi master in the way he moved and in the way he delivered force. Yet he never studied any Tai Chi. Ralph said perhaps it is that humans are very similar in construction so there are bound to be some overlapping things between the arts.

Some questions came up about closing the gap against punchers, kickers grapplers, etc. Ralph then talked about the Chum Kiu form footwork. He demonstrated his agility to move quickly and precisely with small steps. He said in movements we should have the image of a beautiful Chinese lady wearing a Qi Pao. In such a dress she cannot take a wide stance of any kind. She must move in small elegant and precise steps. Against a fast punch coming in Ralph deftly sidestepped the punch just slipping the punch while positioning him in such a way that the opponent's total structure was being controlled. He showed how this would work no matter what your size relative to the opponent. We didn't have time to train this as it was just an answer to someone's question. The grapplers in our club of course wanted to know how he handled grapplers and why he didn't enter the UFC. Those are the typical questions these days. First Ralph said that if you have to have a special method to deal with a special attack then already you will lose. He said your core natural abilities have to handle the entries. He demonstrated against a few shoots the idea. Such questions can go on and on because people can say well but what if this and that and this. Ralph said with every single thing he said people can go on and on like that for hours and it really doesn't help. Still he was happy to entertain all such questions until the questioners ran out of steam. Against a variety of kicks, Ralph could effectively get the proper position, range, angle to neutralize the force and also he effectively counter kicked using simple Wing Chun kicks which acted both as kicks and steps at the same time. With everything he just went forward combining kicking, punching and stepping together into one smooth action as if you were getting attacked with an army.

I asked Ralph if he was getting tired of all this or still felt he was growing. His answer again was very similar to that of Kenneth Chung. They both felt they are constantly growing, learning, refining, re-adjusting their theories. They were as excited and enthusiastic as a new beginner. Our best member was encouraged and said Ralph's theories confirmed his own. He said he was on the same path as Ralph but Ralph was just ahead of him. He said he didn't have the luxury to train as much as Ralph and that the amount of training and thousands of hands touched is what makes a big difference in one's skill.



On the subject of teaching, Ralph said in the famous Kernspecht castle in Germany the Wing Chun practitioners are taught how to teach. You didn't only learn how to be a good Wing Chun fighter but learned how to teach, how to analyze, how to understand, detect and correct defects.

He said only a few Wing Chun people can get their act together and do all the things well. Often someone is very good at one thing but not so good at another. I think Ralph may be one of those who has got his whole act together.

In the seminar we had a few students with a month or two of training, some with 10 years and one with more than 35 years of training. Ralph pointed out as we know very well that it is of course not the years that are important but the hours of training and what it is you are training exactly. You can train all your life and still get nowhere so a good teacher is very important if you can find one. A good teacher also needs a good student so it's a two way street.



Over the years our club — especially in the late 80's and early 90's — had the privilege of seeing many masters and good teachers. When I first met Kenneth Chung, I thought I knew lots of things. He told me to go and work on my stance. Our club has also seen it all — seen all the videos, have a collective experience of many kinds of fighting arts — yet Ralph was able to open their eyes to the ever importance of the basic fundamentals of the Siu Lim Tao form. Every Wing Chun guy knows all the talk but how many can do the Wing Chun walk? How many can take out the guy who can take punches, who is a seasoned fighter and who means to take your head off?

On the subject of the UFC someone asked Ralph why he doesn't enter the UFC. Ralph said a standard answer is Wing Chun is too deadly. The UFC has rules and we don't have rules. But he

didn't have these answers. He gave someone a knife and Ralph had a knife. He said 'OK, let's have a knife fight'. He said now this is no longer Wing Chun. It requires a different kind of training. It is not Wing Chun training. He also said Wing Chun was not designed for tournament and UFC fighting where both are trained fighters. Both know a fight is about to happen. Both are very alert and specifically trained for such an encounter. He said if you are on the street and suddenly someone means to take you out. There is no warning, no preparation time. This is what Wing Chun is designed for. To act reflexively with speed, power, and precision to take out the attacker.

I have been to many seminars in my life. I would give this seminar five out of five stars and wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to any group of Wing Chun practitioners regardless of the lineage. I think open minded martial artists from other types of arts would also get a real appreciation of Wing Chun from Ralph's seminar. For our members this seminar has again confirmed that Wing Chun is indeed a very deep art. I would say that few people including myself can really teach this art very well. But I am also always learning and improving and Ralph Haenel is definitely a very good model to follow. If Ralph is willing then we would love to learn more things from him.



photos by Ray Van Raamsdonk

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Ralph Haenel, German-born self-defense expert and book author, looks back at over 30 years of martial arts training. He started his studies in Judo, Japanese Jiu-Jitsu and Karate.

In 2009, he celebrated the 25th anniversary of learning and teaching Wing Tsun Kung Fu. For nearly two decades now, his life is committed to teaching Wing Tsun full time.

Benefit from his experience of having learned in the worldwide largest professional Kung Fu organization. For 16 years Ralph was educated by expert WingTsun masters whose previous careers spanned from professional boxing to full contact champions to military combat instructors.

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