

*Eben:* “Alright. So thanks Sifu, we’re going to be talking for our fourth talk now. And today we’re talking about *chi sau*, which is a huge part of our training, a huge part of Wing Chun. It’s tempting to say that we start it at a red sash, but in some sense we’re already starting it at a white sash—we sort of do it throughout the entire curriculum, it seems, with *dan chi sau* and other exercises that are leading up towards *chi sau*. So it seems to always be there in some sense. I just wanted to start maybe with a big question that we can take in various ways, but what is *chi sau*? So, in some sense, that question could be where does it start and where does it end in the curriculum almost: is there a way to delineate exactly what is *chi sau*? Or what are we doing in *chi sau*, why do we do it that way?” [1:00]

*Sifu:* “Sure, yeah, it’s a big question and as usual with our chats I’ll probably go off-road several times and hopefully find my way back onto the path. So as you said, the *chi sau* training—and loosely translated meaning “sticking hands”, so sticking hands training—is a big part of the Wing Chun system. I would say it’s probably the most important part of the training that we do. Everything’s important. But what the *chi sau* does is it really integrates a lot of the microskills or microdrills or competencies that we do in different places and it makes it more comprehensive and integrated. It brings it really closer and closer into the realm of self-defense. I don’t even want to use the word “sparring” because it really isn’t a sparring drill even though really advanced dynamic *chi sau* can maybe look like that. And the reason it’s so important is because it takes a lot of the theories, the principles, the attributes, and puts it together in an incrementally, more and more dynamic exercise curriculum so that that kung fu can really go deep into your nervous system. – All the things we want to integrate now is not all these separate parts. We’re really learning to respond appropriately. And now I’ll just link it back to our main theory in Wing Chun which is centerline. So in *chi sau* we’re constantly training on the centerline, like we do in many other drills.

“And part of the curriculum is to first learn some of the rules of the exercise so that two people can actually do it in a cooperative way, in a way that benefits both people, and supports the overall learning. So the first couple of pieces of the curriculum is just learning basic movements so that you can both play the game. You’re not really doing anything dynamic or exciting or whatever—you’re just learning how to get into certain positions with a partner so that both of you can eventually go on an exploration.

“But ultimately, when we look at the Wing Chun theory of centerline, so *chi sau* is really helping you have skills to continue to occupy and control the centerline when somebody else actually happens to have two structured hands on centerline as well. In Wing Chun fight theory, that’s probably our most difficult self-defense scenario: is well what do you do if someone else actually has two very skilled and trained hands on centerline? Everything else for us—again, I keep saying this: in theory, with big asterisk, and it’s the last time I’m going to say it, so now I’m going to talk like I know what I’m talking about...I just lost my train of thought here.”

*E:* “You’re talking about two hands on centerline...”

*S:* “Yes, so that is the most difficult scenario for us, as Wing Chun practitioners, to deal with. So that’s what we want to train: we want to train for the most difficult thing. When the centerline is wide open, in a self-defense situation—so, basically, one thing that’s happening is: Wing Chun people are never the aggressors, first of all. So what that means is if I have to use my kung fu, someone is coming towards me; so they’re initiating, they’re presenting a hole. And all I’m tracking is do they have any hands on

centerline when they're coming either to strike me, kick me, grab me, tackle me, or whatever else? If the centerline is wide open, all I'm going to do is, I'm just going to step in and hit with good timing, and finish it, and then that's done. If they happen to have one hand on centerline, then my two hands that are trained on centerline are easily going to be able to defeat that. So the challenge is what happens if someone comes, not just with two hands on centerline, but two skilled hands. Because even if someone comes towards me with two hands on centerline but they don't have any skill and they don't have structured positions, my two hands will just cut through that stuff like a hot knife through butter [5:00]. It's as if nothing's there. Or as if they weren't even on the centerline. So the *chi sau*, it gives you another training partner where you're both on centerline with structured techniques, learning how to actually control it, maintain it, or redirect, block, or change someone else's energy.

"That links it directly to the theory, which is I want to control and occupy centerline; that is, I've probably said many times before, how that translates into a fight is, if I occupy centerline, I don't get hit and I can hit anytime I want. Again, theory. How close we get to that in real-life is another story, but again I'm just talking about the theory within our system.

"In the curriculum, we start off, as you referenced earlier, with *dan chi sau*—which is single-hand *chi sau*. So we're just training one arm at a time, with a partner's one arm, to go through some rote repetitious cycles or patterns of movement. Because doing two hands at the same time with different techniques, sharing centerline, is just too much. And even still, as you know, people don't even start doing *dan chi sau* literally somewhere between six months to a year after they've basically learned just how to stand up and how to do different hand positions and do some basic stepping. Even then, we have to prepare them to do single-hand *chi sau*.

"So what are we doing? Well, we're having them practice their stationary horse stance. They're having them learn to listen to their partner's movements, because the movements are a call-and-response, where one person initiates and the other one has to respond, and then vice versa. So they're learning sensitivity. They're learning timing. They're learning proper response when someone moves from one position to the other, how you will block, neutralize or change that so you're learning some basic ways to actually stop somebody or move them off centerline or redirect them. You're learning all kinds of things—it's a great opportunity to integrate ideas like *doi yeng*, keeping your shoulders and hips square and your orientation facing your opponent or your partner, while you're training on centerline; and you have to share the centerline because both of you can't occupy it at the same time. So there's all these things you can put in there: straight-line; proper techniques; training your *yi*, your intention, by where you're looking while you're doing it—all kinds of things, in a very simple one-armed patterned movement practice with a partner.

"The sticking piece—so let's talk about that. Because you're also training that in this sort of continuous movement pattern with your partner, that your hands are always joined and sticking with each other. And I'm not talking about, 'oh, I'm just lightly touching the other person,' nor am I talking about grinding their arm with constant, hard, forceful energy. Sticking suggests a certain quality, that's a little bit more than just like touch, but significantly less than grinding and forcing somebody. So whatever ideas or senses or metaphors come to somebody when you think of sticking—it's like you're very much attached there, you can pull away, but it's maybe not so easy.

"And why do we want to train sticking hands in Wing Chun? Well, one of the benefits that we have as an art is we train to respond based on the felt sense-touch of the other person versus what my eyes are telling me. I mean depending on which sort of scientific studies you read, they say anywhere that

sensate touch or movement touch is about ten to twenty times faster in terms of being able to detect than your visual system, and then being able to respond. So there's an advantage there, in terms of training to notice felt movements, sensations, and in order to do that I obviously have to have a contact with the other person in order to feel them. So training to stick with somebody even as they're moving their arms high, low, whatever it is on centerline is as long as they're on centerline you want to stick and have contact with that person. To feel what they're up to so that you can respond appropriately.

"Now we don't necessarily stick with people when they leave centerline—it's not necessary, in terms of Wing Chun, for a fight—if anyone leaves centerline, well I go straight-line, centerline, and I'm going to get contact with them. If they're leaving centerline, they're going to either have to pull their hand back, come around the side, and again all things being equal, if I'm taking the straight-line, i.e., I walk the bow...or sorry: I walk the string, and he walks the bow—as one of our idioms suggests, I'm going to get there first. I'm not too interested in needing to stick with somebody or follow their arms or strikes or whatever [10:00] when they leave centerline; I will just go straight in and continue to hit if they leave the centerline wide open. But if they're on centerline, I'm going to stick with them, and I'm going to have structure, and I'm going to have distancing, and I'm going to have the appropriate response at the right time with the right power, etc. etc. etc.

"Right away, you're just really starting to bring all these beautiful qualities, attributes, and principles into a very simple exercise. But it's very deep, in terms of the *dan chi sau*—single-hand rolling, as we call it.

"When people are fairly proficient in that then we bring them into the basic roll, the *luk sau*, where both people are sharing centerline, with two hands on centerline, with different combinations of the three pillar techniques in Wing Chun *chi sau* practice. So those are the *tan sau*, the *fook sau*, and the *bong sau*.

"They call them pillar techniques, and my understanding around that is, number one: is their precise location is always occupying the sweet spot on the centerline. So for those of us who know what centerline is, it's the vertical axis of the body projected forward in front of you as far away as your fingertips if your arm's outstretched, and that vertical line is something that you want to own, occupy, and protect at all times. But there's a sweet spot on that line, and that is where my forearm...or my arm goes parallel to the floor. It goes straight out, and the point on that line—which is, you know, sort of in my chest or solar plexus area—that's the sweet spot; that's the quickest way to get contact with another person on that vertical centerline. So in a fight if I want to hit someone or get contact, first, I want to go there. And because it's more at the mid-range of the upper-body, it then allows me to go up to the head or low to the abdomen—which is the upper gate of the body, and that's the only gate that the hands occupy is from the waist up; so I'm sort of in the middle of that bell curve, that I can go high and I can go low with minimal movement, but I'm also training to occupy the place where I can hit somebody the quickest way possible. So that's why those three techniques, in my opinion, are called the pillars of *chi sau*, because they occupy that sweet spot: the *tan sau*, the *fook sau*, the *bong sau*.

"Now, of course, the other thing that those three techniques have in common is a bent elbow. And, so I'll just ask you, what does a bent elbow imply in a martial art technique?"

E: "I'm going to guess that there's still something there to, you still can fully extend, so there's still a hit that can happen from it."

S: “Yeah, so from the *tan sau*, *fook sau*, *bong sau*, which have bent elbows in all of those techniques, they’re not strikes; they are blocking, deflecting, neutralizing, sensing techniques.”

E: “And I was thinking about that while you were describing that, the three pillars, none of them are strikes.”

S: “So now I link that back to the theory, right? So if centerline is the ability to not get hit and hit anytime you want, then of course if you’re able to occupy and control the centerline with *tan sau*, *fook sau*, *bong sau*, not get hit, then, from those techniques that have the bent elbow, you can strike anytime you want. So, just linking those two things together now. Ok, so now they make sense.

“If you can develop a really high skill level that, when, in a cooperative, very dynamic *chi sau* exercise, where maybe you’re on the receiving end of someone else’s initiating energy, so they’re going to maybe try and create opportunities, holes, or attacks, and if you can keep shutting them down with *tan sau*, *fook sau*, *bong sau*, and continue to control the centerline with them not being able to hit you, that’s an extremely high level of skill. Where you don’t actually have to hit anybody. And from that place you can hit anytime you want. So that’s what *chi sau* is actually preparing for is that ability.

“I’ve journeyed to different Wing Chun clubs, and videos on YouTube, and all of that, and you see quite a divergent understanding and expression of what *chi sau* is, what does it do, how is it trained, is there a curriculum, is it not, is it a competition or is it cooperative—I mean, there’s a lot of diversity out there. But, for us, we have a very structured curriculum that builds and integrates the skills so that you’ll have this very high level ability I told you about earlier to occupy and control the centerline without actually having to hit somebody but knowing you could at any one of those moments. And in some of the other [15:00] clubs or videos that I’ve watched, you’ll see that people’s “success”—and I say that with sarcastic parentheses around that word—is they do a really quick flashy strike to make contact with somebody, and because maybe they have really good startle reflexes, or they’re young and their nervous system is wired for a lot of quick, flashy speed, but there’s no structure behind it, they’re breaking their *doi yeng*, they’re coming out of their horse stance, there’s actually no power behind the hit but it looks really good and flashy—that’s not what *chi sau* is meant to be doing, in my opinion. That’s not going to work in a real situation unless you’re really lucky.

“So from that cooperative rolling position, where I have my two hands on centerline at that sweet spot, in the middle of it, and my partner does, it’s really easy for any one of us to just quickly flash a hand out to someone’s throat without them really being able to stop it. So does that mean you have good kung fu? No, those are cheap shots. Those are cheap shots. And I have met very experienced seasoned Wing Chun practitioners, some with decades of experience, continue to think that that’s success, that they can turn off to the side, do a big quick throat shot, collapse the other hand, break *doi yeng*, but because they can artificially put their hand at my throat, because I’m thinking we’re doing a cooperative practice, or in order for me to really shut it down, I have to hit him if he’s going to go with that kind of speed, like I have to hit him to stop him, but it’s *chi sau*, so I’m not going to do that, so there’s this dilemma: that if you have people practicing *chi sau* without understanding the same rules, process, it can become very messy, ugly, and sometimes even disturbingly violent. Because egos can escalate. It’s about: can I control that line? That sweet spot on centerline.

“And if in our play, when my partner’s feeding me some energy for me to learn from, i.e., investing in loss or maybe he or she perceives a hole in my structure, in my arms, and they try and make a move, then great, then we learn from that experience. I try and shut them down with timing, skill, and then he may, or she may, want to counter, and then we can do this in a very nuanced, subtle way. Where we both know without actually having to strike each other: actually, I can strike you right now, you know I can, so you’re going to let me follow through and do three or four sequential movements, so I can learn how to continue to flow in my kung fu, instead of getting shut down and thwarted and stopped after I pause and present some hands that, for me, this is a hit even though I’m not touching you. But the other person quickly flinches, takes the centerline away, and they don’t recognize that: well, in theory, I just hit you, like let me finish a few sequences here. Because otherwise, the skill to be fluid and dynamic and continuous with your kung fu never develops. You get those one or two shots then all of a sudden there’s this tension, and then there’s this fight with arms, and then...

“So that’s what I learned when I first came here, you know, almost twenty years ago, was when I was training with some local practitioners doing *chi sau*, for them it was very much a competition; it was almost like sparring—like they weren’t hitting each other hard, but they were hitting—and it would just be those one or two quick, flashy moves. Or if I would do something more subtle, and just present my hands, you know a couple of inches from their face, saying, ‘hey, like, you let me in here,’ but I didn’t hit them, they would think that, oh, because I didn’t hit them, then they can defend against that, but I’ve already stopped, and I’ve made it easy for them. Anyways, I’m going on and on about this, but my point is that there is a ceiling in terms of your skill level that you’re going to hit if you train *chi sau* that kind of way. And so that’s what prompted me to then go on and get my gold sash within our lineage and teach because I needed to teach students the same way to train so that my training can eventually get better. Because I knew I wasn’t going to progress with the current practices that I’d been exposed to with different clubs and different lineages when I moved here.

“So, a little off-road there, but sort of related. So when we talk about the *chi sau* is it’s training your hands to be able to continue to occupy, return to, or deal with someone else who’s wanting to occupy the centerline as well. And the different hand positions simulate the only four possibilities of what’s possible in a fight, if somebody has, coincidentally or intentionally, two hands on centerline. I’m either going to have my [20:00] two hands on top of theirs, my two under theirs, I’ll have one on top and one underneath, or I’ll have the other side on top and the other one underneath. So there’s your four different possibilities of any fight striking situation, even grappling, where someone’s hands are on centerline. And so *chi sau* trains all those four positions over and over and over again, but with skilled, structured hands on centerline not just any two hands. So again I emphasize that, for us, this is the most difficult thing to deal with in a fight: someone who actually knows what to do. Everything else is relatively easy.

“So once we learn the basic roll, where we have set positions and movements, there’s always somebody who’s going to be initiating and then someone who’s going to be responding. So it’s not a free-for-all here. Somebody’s going to be into the *jao sau* position, which is the running or the feeding of hands, as they say, and the other person will be in *jip sau*, which is in the receiving hands. This way, we always have a set initiator and a responder, so both can practice. If I feel an opening, how do I get in there, and if someone else says ‘oh, someone’s attacking, how do I counter-attack?’ But we do it with skill, we do it with proper technique—we take all those attributes and principles we talked about before: balance, timing, coordination, orientation, sensitivity, relaxation, straight-line centerline, supporting ideas, like all of that stuff is embedded in the physical practice of *chi sau*.

“Once we learn the basic roll, then we train: ok, what happens if someone moves you off centerline? Well, then, we train how do we come back in the least amount of time, with the most relaxation, to neutralize that hand that just took me off centerline. How do I deal with someone who comes in with Wing Chun attacks? So we practice set sequence drills with proper responses. And so then our repertoire becomes more and more expansive in terms of what your arms and hands can do in terms of techniques. And then when we’re really good at that, then we start doing this with dynamic movement by pulling and pushing the person’s horse while we’re still rolling, while we’re still changing techniques, while we’re still running hands; I’m trying to pull and push this person off balance while they have to stay on centerline and try and neutralize me, just with their *tan sau*, *fook sau*, *bong sau*, and still try and see if they can feel holes when I’m aggressing, if they can counter-attack, while their balance is being challenged. So then it becomes even more and more dynamic at that point in time where you’re running hands, changing hands, moving your balance—and that’s where you get a feel for holes. You have to be a really skilled person, when your balance is being constantly challenged and you’re having hand-positions constantly changing at the same time, to find a hole on centerline.

“With that practice, you get the rules, you get the understanding, but more importantly I think is that over time you develop these relationships with your kung fu brothers and sisters. And with all of those different relationships, you feel different subtleties about a person’s body-structure, the way they move, their cadence of movement, their intensity, and so while you’re sort of focusing on centerline, in the undercurrents, you’re unconscious awareness is picking up all this information and learning, and adapting.

“That’s why they say it’s really important that when you’re doing *chi sau*, train with as many different people as you can, different body types, personalities—because all of that comes out in their basic roll. You want to give your nervous system the ability to continuously attune and then micro-tune to all the differences. And it’s that ability for attunement on contact that is high-level fighting Wing Chun. Your training helps you develop that. Because in a fight, I can’t do a mental calculation that ‘ok this person’s four inches taller than me, therefore I have to bring my typical standard *tan sau* technique four inches higher...’, right, I’ll be hit twenty times before I finish that thought. But all the training that we do in *chi sau* is, the biggest part of that is, on contact, on contact, where you don’t have time to be in your left-brain thinking about things, your right-brain memory synthesizes and integrates all those drills in *chi sau* you did before to actually bring something out in the moment. To occupy centerline with exactly the right technique, exactly the right angles, so you can walk into the eye of the hurricane confidently to get that sweet spot on centerline, do your business, finish the fight.

“That’s sort of an overview there, with a little bit of the curriculum built in there, but maybe I’ll pause now, if for no other reason than I’ll have a sip of my coffee, but also [25:00] see if there’s any follow-up questions on that big download.”