

This article is still a work in progress and not yet finished; I would like you to take time to read this advance copy and let me know what you think. Your feedback is greatly appreciated. Simply write down your thoughts as they pop up and send me an e-mail to [feedback@wingsunkungfu.com](mailto:feedback@wingsunkungfu.com)

## **When does Self-Defense start? Or The very first line of Defense!**

by Ralph Haenel

**1.** When being asked at what point a self-defense action typically starts, or at least should start, the most common reply is: "When one is attacked."

**2.** The educated answer of a Wing Tsun Kung Fu student is more complex and states that one first of all must try to avoid the situation altogether, to get away, even run away, make all attempts of using verbal skills to talk ones way out of a potentially harmful situation; and **only** if that has failed and an actual physical attack is imminent, even if the launch of this attack is hardly visible to the untrained eye, then the skilled Wing Tsun students attacks, in many cases very aggressively, the attacker.

The objective is not to allow the attacker to even finish the first attack, not to leave any space or time for a second attack, but rather to force the **attacker** into a helpless situation.

**3.** For the bona fide answer to our question "When does Self-Defense start?" we have to explain the term self-defense in more detail. So, stay with me while we look at the subject of Self-Defense from a few different angles: *the law, the potential victim, realism versus perception, the training.*

How does *the law* view Self-Defense? The criminal code of Canada states:

- S34. (1) Every one who is unlawfully assaulted without having provoked the assault is justified in repelling force by force if the force he uses is not intended to cause death or grievous bodily harm and is no more than is necessary to enable him to defend himself.
- (2) Every one who is unlawfully assaulted and who causes death or grievous bodily harm in repelling the assault is justified if
- (a) he causes it under reasonable apprehension of death or grievous bodily harm from the violence with which the assault was originally made or with which the assailant pursues his purposes; and
- (b) he believes, on reasonable grounds, that he cannot otherwise preserve himself from death or grievous bodily harm.
- S35. Every one who has without justification assaulted another but did not commence the assault with intent to cause death or grievous bodily harm, or has without justification provoked an assault on himself by another, may justify the use of force subsequent to the assault if
- (a) he uses the force
- (i) under reasonable apprehension of death or grievous bodily harm from the violence of the person whom he has assaulted or provoked, and
- (ii) in the belief, on reasonable grounds, that it is necessary in order to preserve himself from death or grievous bodily harm;
- (b) he did not, at any time before the necessity of preserving himself from death or grievous bodily harm arose, endeavour to cause death or grievous bodily harm; and
- (c) he declined further conflict and quitted or retreated from it as far as it was feasible to do so before the necessity of preserving himself from death or grievous bodily harm arose.
- S36. Provocation includes, for the purposes of sections 34 and 35, provocation by blows, words or gestures.
- S37. (1) Every one is justified in using force to defend himself or any one under his protection from assault, if he uses no more force than is necessary to prevent the assault or the repetition of it.
- (2) Nothing in this section shall be deemed to justify the wilful infliction of any hurt or mischief that is excessive, having regard to the nature of the assault that the force used was intended to prevent.

These sections of the Canadian criminal code cover four important points regarding self-defense:

- First, what constitutes self-defense in an unprovoked assault?
- Second, what constitutes self-defense in a provoked assault (i.e. you started it)?
- Third, what constitutes provocation?
- Last, what constitutes prevention of assault?

For the purpose of this article the preceding points are sufficient. More details will be covered in the article 'Canadian Law and Self-Defense' by Sihing Gary Hughes in one of our upcoming print publications.

Let's move on to another vital point, *the potential victim*. What does Self-Defense mean for the person who is about to be attacked?

- A Self-Defense situation is very emotional.
- There is (usually) no "re-match", this situation, the now; **your fate** is what counts.
- Self-Defense is often chaos, anything goes and often all at once.
- An attack is seldom announced in advance; you have no "stats" on the attacker. The thug is virtually the *unknown adrenalin monster*.
- The outcome for the victim (you) can be very serious, very possibly final.

This shows us once again that the atrocious and unfair scenario of realistic Self-Defense has very little in common with what is typically practiced in many martial arts schools, which leads us to the next point as to why some students choose to train other martial arts, *realism versus perception*.

Over the years a few students have left Wing Tsun Kung Fu schools to choose certain martial arts for reasons as follows (see comments in *Italic*):

... because of successful 2-person exercises in the other style.

*Of course, if the exercise is exactly choreographed, it has to work, but what about Reality?*

... other styles have more katas (forms performed against invisible opponents).

*Knowing more techniques doesn't equal better performance in reality. In fractions of seconds one has to choose the **right** defense "Less is actually More!"*

... going back to their "old" martial arts schools, where techniques work again.

*It is often the inability to admit that a sport-oriented martial art cannot deal with a scenario without rules as well as the comfort of a previously acquired skill whether or not it will be beneficial in a real life situation.*

... going to other martial arts, where the system of rules and regulations protects and promotes the theory that a "collection" of techniques equals self-defense skills.

*In short, since there are no regulations whatsoever in the martial arts business, many schools claim to deliver everything to everyone. Think about the "pill that cures it all."*

... going to other schools, because self-defense techniques work there, no physical contact

*Yes, I've even heard this one: ... "In the new school I finally learn something, since we are not allowed to make contact" ... does this make any sense or need further comment?*

... going to other schools, because no talking is allowed during training

*Just imagine, no physical contact, no communication, what can go wrong?*

*Training* Wing Tsun Kung Fu. Are we really better? Is Wing Tsun truly the best? Well, let us start with the statement: We are **DIFFERENT!** As our slogan says, we are committed to deliver **Complete Self-Defense for Real People!** No sport, no trophies, no competitions (other than with ourselves to continuously strive for improvement and growth).

The following training sample is integral to illustrating how & why Wing Tsun is different when it comes to self-defense.

Over time, in subsequent program blocks, Wing Tsun training includes:

- ✓ Lat-Sau (fight) programs that focus on types of problems which occur in reality, rather than specific series of techniques or drills
- ✓ very few forms (4 to be exact), which we see as “toolboxes” of the system, manifesting concepts and strategies of the Wing Tsun Kung Fu system
- ✓ intuition, sensory reflexes, rewiring the way we move and respond to certain scenarios
- ✓ dealing with the acceptance of “no rules”, the harsh realization that anything can happen
- ✓ medium contact to arms, legs and upper body, which should be based on a mutual agreement of both training partners
- ✓ moderate talking is encouraged to support the exchange of information during partner training while helping each other to improve their training efforts

A real-life attack does not include the referee, time-outs, rules or fairness that people become accustomed to when approaching martial arts as a sport.

Sifu Keith R. Kernspecht, founder & chief-instructor of the European Wing Tsun Organization with over 2000 schools, published two easy to understand ‘BlitzDefence’ guides about selected Wing Tsun responses, one for men and one for women; yet a few key-points are valid for any group:

- define your borders (know your personal space, and be aware of obstacles “on the street”)
- watch your borders (be aware of the intentions of people around you)
- defend your borders (be ready to respond to threats in an instant)

Well, at the moment we are back again to our headline question or better questions:

**When does Self-Defense start? Or What is the very first line of Defense?**

To answer that we have to look at the typical problems some people encounter in their training similar to what I experienced long ago during my Jiu-Jitsu and Karate days. If techniques or drills weren’t effective or simply didn’t work, the instructor(s) usual response was often one of the following:

1. You are too slow. ... Get faster.
2. You are too weak. ... Do more strength training.
3. Your timing is wrong. (example in judo, pulling sleeve counting while walking 1, 2, 3 and throw)
4. What you did was against the rules.
5. It was the wrong technique. ... Try this one.

Once you follow the choreography to perfection, step by step, move and counter-move, everything seems to be fine, since it is clearly defined by rules & regulations as is any sport. Or is it?

In Wing Tsun Kung Fu we train for the event:

- that we are the victim, not the fair opponent
- that we are slower than the attacker
- that we are weaker than the attacker
- that we do not have the advantage of having adrenaline already surging through our veins
- that we are not looking for a fight nor to inflict injury
- that no rules are in place to protect us

Then add FEAR! Even the best boxer knows fear, or at least should, imagine yourself in a potentially life threatening situation, are you afraid? You should be. So, how do we train & prepare for **all** of that? After consideration of all the facts it is natural to draw the conclusion that one needs a responsible, helpful and supportive *training partner*.

### **Now we are getting somewhere!**

Learning Self-Defense is not about who you can “take down” in class. Never forget, people have different motivations for training, plan different goals within different timeframes, train with different intensity. If you feel stronger, better, faster than your training partner, that doesn’t mean that you are better in reality. Remember, *reality versus perception*, where you face the stronger, faster *adrenalin monster* as we sometimes like to describe the worst possible attacker.

In actuality, it is very valuable to train with physically weaker partners (smaller, slower, softer), allow them try to follow through with a punch, hit you as fast as they possibly can. If their punches don’t hurt you? Who cares, that isn’t the goal in a training situation anyway. If they are actually getting through – you have more work to do whether or not they are your physical match. You can focus on the finer details of a movement, when strength is not an issue, focus on developing true reflexes, move beyond natural human tendencies to compare and conquer. Training partners are one of the most important aspects of successfully learning Wing Tsun Kung Fu – not only having a good one but more crucially, being a good one. Are you?

Main complaints about training partners I have received?

My training partner ...

1. never, or rarely ever follows the routine, the exercise we are supposed to be developing.
2. is trying to solve everything with strength.
3. is too aggressive right from the start, instead of training with each other.
4. is combating any effort to begin training the exercise correctly.
5. doesn’t want to train with partners who are too short, too weak, too new, too young, is a woman ... etc.
6. is calling the training partner names because they don’t want to “train hard”.

To top it off, my favourite quote of one training partner to another (favourite = being as sarcastic as possible): “Let us train, you are a woman, I need a break.” This statement illustrates that the student is not only very self-absorbed but also likely to progress very slowly due to an unwillingness to overcome some very dated perceptions.

So, what can you do? Do you “let it happen”? Do you go home? Do you avoid this training partner the next time? Do you talk to the training partner? Do you talk to the instructor (of course!) on a confidential basis?

Here we finally find our answer. **This is the first line of defense. This is where Self-Defense should and must start!** Of course it is quite the opposite from being pleasant and enjoyable. But

this is exactly the point. Here you begin to learn to defend yourself, to draw a border, to make a clear statement “Not with me”, “I will not allow you to treat me that way”.

Is that difficult to say? Yes, of course, at least for most people. Some say “I just want to learn to defend myself, I don’t want to have to deal with unwilling or obnoxious training partners as well”. (Remember in other martial arts? ... no contact, no talking, no problem)

Here we would be missing the point, this is your **best training**, the best chance to really learn how to defend yourself. Your training partner is only intolerable towards you, but not actually knocking you out. You have other training partners around you, who are willing to help you, instructors you can approach. Here is where it starts, **the first line of defense**.

If you don’t train it here, in the safety of your school, with your training partners, how do you want to solve the problem on the street, somebody furiously yelling at you, invading your space, pushing you, when you quite possibly notice for a brief moment how bystanders turn away, when you feel you are alone, when physical injury, pain is imminent? It could be too late. In your school, this is the place where Self-Defense starts!

The class room is the place to safely gain knowledge of the specific strategies and tactics that make Wing Tsun Kung Fu so *unique*. It’s the place to heighten the perception of beginning violence; and often where you become aware of the signs in the first place, where you find out in what ways we could possibly be attacked. While increasingly learning to deal with this extreme form of stress (vicious attacks) we practice **stress relief**.

This of course does not exclude tough training in which the student will be guided (!) through high-pressure scenarios, which have to be explored according to the skill level a student is at. Many Wing Tsun students know these training units, where nothing seems to work. It is not about right or wrong, it is not about mistakes you think you make, it is about the difficult adaptation process of being exposed to continuous attacks. You don’t ever have to like them, but in a strange way, you do get used to them. **Sport is rules, self-defense is chaos**. So, we have to learn to adapt to chaos. But the learning process must be controlled to be efficient and to yield positive results.

A good well-educated Wing Tsun Kung Fu instructor will have the ability and skill to slip into the roles of different attackers, tackle, box, wrestle, kick, etc. and more importantly put you under increasing pressure so in a real situation, the stress and pressure will be secondary and your trained reflexes will take over and keep you safe.

In order to draw **the very first line of defense** your training goals should be:

1. Learn how to draw your borders while you safely (not stress-free) train in a protected environment with a skilled instructor, for example in private lessons.
2. Train with partners who are willing to cooperate, to discover and respect these borders.
3. Workout with training partners who are willing to help each other, improving to protect these borders.

**SPEAK OUT! This is where Self-Defense starts!**

**In conclusion:** Wing Tsun Kung Fu stands for fierce self-defense, fear management and a healthy confidence, but the necessary skills can only bloom when the training process is geared towards working with each other and not in an atmosphere of working against each other.

I am looking forward to your feedback. Any thoughts, comments, critique is very welcome. Send your e-mail to [feedback@wingtsunkungfu.com](mailto:feedback@wingtsunkungfu.com) Thank you!

Note #1! Whenever we do comparisons between the realistic self-defense system Wing Tsun and sport-oriented martial arts, we do not claim that others cannot defend themselves. The point we are making is that Wing Tsun Kung Fu is DIFFERENT; Wing Tsun is a highly specialized and sole self-defense system, while others promote fairness and sportive attitude which is only partially connected to self-defense.

Note #2! When learning how to defend oneself, this is often set equal to learning how to fight, which is not the same. Another article will explain the actual differences between a typical self-defense situation and different types of 'fights', i.e. ritual fights, honour fights, competition fights.

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