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RHI GIBSON

THE POWERFUL ART OF TRAUMA-INFORMED WING CHUN

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SIFU RHI GIBSON has been training in martial arts for over 30 years, inspired by their father, who was an avid *Zen Do Kai* and *Ninjitsu* student when Rhi was growing up. Rhi started *Taekwondo* at eight years old and became the lineage's first and youngest female Black Belt in Australia at aged 12.

One of the many valuable things Rhi's father passed on was the importance of understanding a technique's finer details, which gave them a solid foundation for learning *Wing Chun*. When Rhi left *Taekwondo*, they spent many years attending different martial art schools looking for a teacher and system

that had more to offer in terms of self-defence, technique and philosophy. However, nothing stuck.

It wasn't until 2003, when Rhi walked into their first *Wing Chun* class, that they became instantaneously captured by the sophistication of the technical elements of the system in comparison to other martial arts they had tried.

How did you start teaching *Wing Chun*?

For 19 years, I trained as a private closed-door student of Master Ian Protheroe, a student of Grandmaster William Cheung. I was promoted to teaching duties at Level 6, which was unprecedented at the time for a lower grade within the

school. At this time, I also developed and taught a short self-defence course for women outside of the school, based on *Wing Chun* principles.

In 2011, I was awarded full instructor status when I completed Level 10 technical grading. The grading included a written thesis, the entire open-hand system, Wooden Dummy, Butterfly Sword forms and drills, Long Pole forms and drills, *Cbin Na*, Rattan Ring, practical self-defence, and many rounds of sparring. I continued teaching in the school for another decade. This year has led me to branch off on my own teaching journey.

What's your style of *Wing Chun* teaching?

My teaching style is influenced by my career in the community sector, as for the past 24 years, I've worked in the mental health, forensic mental health, domestic and family violence, sexual violence, victims of crimes and disability sectors.

As a qualified Social Worker, I have additional specialist training in trauma counselling and am passionate about human rights and social justice. I'm committed to the elimination of violence in communities. While *Wing Chun* is a system for self-defence, my teaching practice is committed to not positioning those who have experienced violence as responsible for their own protection. Perpetrators that commit acts of violence are to be held accountable for their actions.

My aim is to create safe training spaces for those who have experienced trauma, which is far more common than people realise. So, my style of teaching is to pass on the traditional art of *Wing Chun* with a trauma-informed framework.

What does a trauma-informed framework mean in *Wing Chun* martial arts?

The concept of trauma-informed martial arts practice is beginning to emerge. There has been a lot of advancement in trauma research over the past couple of decades. Similarly, to the trauma-informed *Yoga* movement, research highlights the therapeutic value of martial arts in supporting those with lived experiences of trauma.

A trauma-informed framework starts with the assumption that individuals are more likely to have experienced a trauma than not. The six principles of trauma-informed practice that can be adapted to *Wing Chun* classrooms are: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and respect for diversity.

Martial arts teachers are in a position of power and are responsible for influencing school culture. Part of creating

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trauma-informed safe spaces in *Wing Chun* is having a zero-tolerance leadership that challenges and calls out sexist, racist and homophobic discourse. For example, a Code of Conduct is not enough if the culture accepts sexist jokes, sexual harassment and inappropriate comments.

A trauma-informed framework always supports those who are victims/survivors by adopting language that is not victim-blaming or shaming. Also, I think it is important that I mention here that a trauma-informed framework benefits all genders. This is not just about violence against women. I have worked alongside many men who have been impacted by trauma.



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Can you give an example of how *Wing Chun* can be used therapeutically?

For me, *Wing Chun* has often been an anchor when navigating life difficulties. Given the tools within *Wing Chun* to practise solo is empowering, as it can be accessed at any time to refocus, rebalance, recalibrate and regulate.

I use my solo practice daily as a form of meditation that supports me to remain grounded and centred. The breath work in *Sil Lim Tao* is perfect to calm a hyper-aroused nervous

system, as it can be practised slowly with deep intent and consciousness, alleviating stress-related symptoms.

I particularly love teaching and training Pre-determined *Chi Sau* and random *Chi Sau*, and have had the privilege of training with the same partners over the last two decades in *Wing Chun*. The art of Pre-determined *Chi Sau* and random *Chi Sau* doesn't only develop the martial aspect but is also a synchronistic dance, a form of dual meditation shared between two people, and I find therapeutic value in this deeply respectful connection.

You mentioned teaching women. Can you tell us more about your thoughts on women in *Wing Chun*?

Stating what seems to be obvious, the martial arts industry is male-dominated, and I suspect more women (trans and non-binary included) will train as more inclusive spaces become available. There seem to be more female *Wing Chun* practitioners emerging globally, which will hopefully encourage more women to take up the art. I've trained with some incredible women throughout my *Wing Chun* career and am excited about the future of women in *Wing Chun*. Based on its origins, *Wing Chun* provides us with an opportunity to celebrate the matriarchal lineage.

How could schools be more gender inclusive from your perspective?

If *Wing Chun* teachers want to become more inclusive of gender diversity, then creating safe spaces is the first step. To combat gendered violence, one needs to learn about the issues and be committed to challenging socially constructed traditional gender stereotypes within martial arts.

For example, to demonstrate a zero-tolerance towards gendered violence, schools could raise awareness during the “International 16 days of Activism Against Gendered Violence”. Also, welcoming gender diversity such as non-binary folks and transgender people, by a show of visibility in allyship, such as including the rainbow flag on school websites.

Ultimately, we need more representation of gender diversity in leadership for the next generation of students to have role models. Teachers should focus on supporting gender diversity in teaching duties, but this can only be done if the school is safe and inclusive. For myself, I now offer private tuition and trauma-informed classes for women and those in the LGBTQIA+ community to fill this gap in our industry.

For more information about **Sifu Rhi Gibson**, please visit the website: www.rhiwingchungkungfu.com