



Street-fighting Yogi

Martial arts action hero and yogi *extraordinaire* Duncan Wong can really kick some asana...

By Tess Ghilaga

If Quentin Tarantino needs an action hero for his next martial arts film, Duncan Wong is ready for his close-up. Indeed, his life story reads like a feel-good movie script: An underdog overcomes adversity to achieve physical and spiritual enlightenment.

"I was born with certain skills and special energy," says Wong. "But I was also the runt of the litter and had many challenges in a harsh inner city environment."

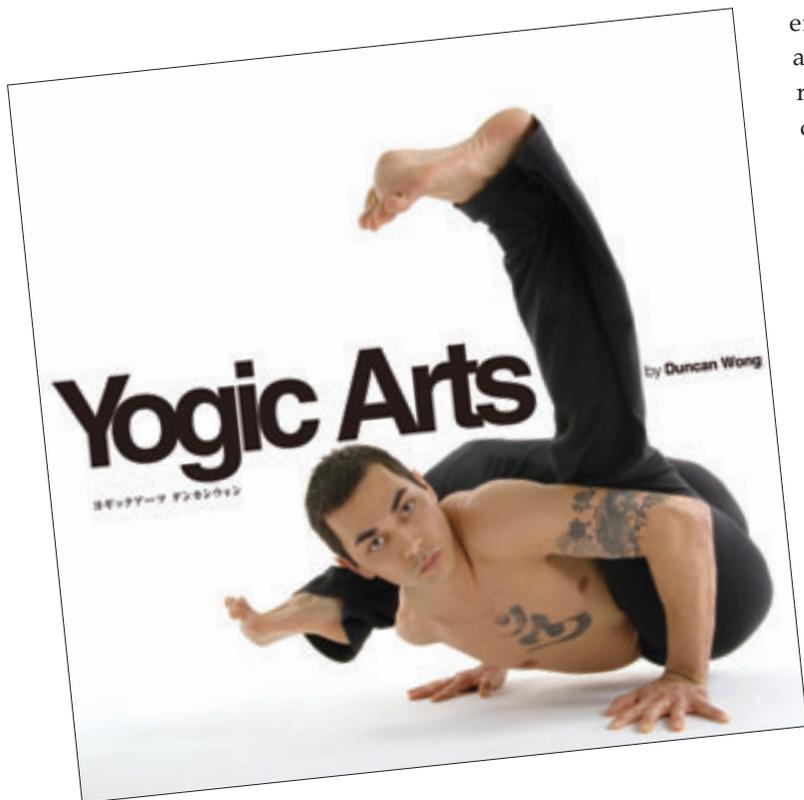
Street fighting was common in California's rural Sacramento Delta Valley, a Native Indian burial ground, where Wong weaved his way among the ethnic rivalries of whites, blacks, Asians, and Mexicans. Armed with copious kick-boxing skills and the influence of his grandfather's Gung Fu practice, Wong could more than hold his own.

All this was good training for Wong's move to San Francisco during his teen years. There, he would discover strong racial divisions in the city's bustling neighborhoods of Chinatown and Japantown. "San Francisco was tough, but a cake walk compared to the segregated ethnic wars of the Sacramento Valley," he says. "It was

"San Francisco was tough, but a cake walk when compared to the segregated ethnic wars of the Sacramento Valley."

the rocker versus punk era in the early '80s."

While living in San Francisco, he met Kwahn Jang Nym, S.J. Su, a Korean Buddhist sword master



who would go on to become his life-long mentor and whom Wong credits for making him "the complete individual I am today." About this time, Wong also began immersing himself in traditional Ashtanga vinyasa yoga and Kuk Sool Won (traditional Korean Buddhist) martial arts. "My earlier formative years in the practice of yoga unfolded with many visions and experiences of what I would now perceive as enlightenment and classical awakening," he says.

At the age of 20, Wong received the extraordinary gift of *shaktipat drishti diksha* from Sri Gurumayi (leader of the Siddha lineage), resulting in self-actualization and past-life referencing. The revelation guided his path in a positive direction by integrating his passion for yoga and martial arts.

In 1995, Wong created the Yogic Arts series in order to bring his unique blend of yoga and martial arts to an international audience. The ancient healing techniques in martial arts naturally support the yoga practice. Fittingly, Wong opened his first

studio near the studios of martial-arts legend Bruce Lee and Sri Gurumayi in Oakland, California.

Similar to many other schools of yoga, the Yogic Arts philosophy is that physical enlightenment is necessary for the mind to truly awaken. Physical enlightenment refers to the refinement and balance of the body as a divine instrument, supporting the upward movement of the Kundalini shakti in each of us. Like many traditional teachers, Wong starts his classes with Kapalabhati breathing, followed by classic Ujjayi pranayama. Each class begins and ends with Vedic priest mystery-school mantras, which invoke the masters and the spirit of the practice. Then, Wong plays urban and world music to connect practitioners to their inner biorhythms and awaken a deeper transformative state.

In its sequencing, Yogic Arts relies greatly on Ashtanga and Kuk Sool Won martial arts. The blending of these two ancient practices offers a mind/body challenge to even the most robust yogi. Wong's prowess and agility is a testament to the power of this unified series. From

the martial arts, you get joint conditioning and core strength; from the Ashtanga-based asanas, fluidity and purification. "My traits as a teacher can be defined as being intensely present and super-playful," says the 38-year-old Wong.

Harnessing the bandhas is vital in a 90-minute Yogic Arts series. Wong's instruction fosters fluid jump-backs from students adept at finding their bandhas. "Core power is the key to functional movement and dynamic stabilization," says Wong. "Engaging the transverse abdominal muscles of the inner belly and the perineal muscles of the pelvic floor are essential to a central, safe, and empowered flow."

Innovative sequencing such as his Active Energy Set involves dynamic kicking, lunging, and pulsing-type movements to create an element of fire and air. On the other hand, a Flowing Form sequence focuses on standing, arm-balancing, seated, and reclined poses with an emphasis on holding them, creating the elements of water and earth. "Sustaining the formula of offering a practice that is at once challenging, yet attainable is for

Continued on page 87

"It is the hands-on bodywork which truly establishes the healing aspect and sacred touch of this practice."

Bridging the Gap

Continued from page 17

dilate blood vessels. This results in a decrease in blood pressure. At the same time, the physical demands of moving into and maintaining a full inversion require us to focus our minds deeply and, often, slow our breathing.

So in performing the Headstand, we're able to re-create major elements of the physiological and mental state associated with the relaxation response state. But what's exciting about this is that rather than creating the state from the mind out, we have literally reverse-engineered it—from the body in.

And that leads us to the big question and even greater possibilities: If a full inversion practice creates a physiological state that mimics the relaxation response state, can a regular full-inversion practice deliver the same well-documented disease-prevention and mental health benefits that come from meditation, hypnosis, and visualization? If so, an intelligent, progressive inversion practice could be a more accessible alternative for health-seeking people who "can't or won't meditate to save their lives."

Time will tell, but I wouldn't be surprised if, one day in the future, we saw physicians writing prescriptions for inversion therapy as a complementary treatment for a wide variety of ailments. 

Jonathan Fields co-directs the Center For Yoga Studies™ at New York's Sonic Yoga. He writes, speaks, and leads trainings and workshops regularly on yoga, healthy lifestyles, and passion-driven careers, and maintains a private yoga therapy practice in Manhattan. Send questions for future Bridging the Gap columns to him at jonathan@sonicyoga.com.

The Athletic Yogi

Continued from page 42

cause you to overexaggerate the curve your lower back. If you have particularly tight hamstrings, or suffer from low-back pain, Felstead suggests supine hamstring poses with props. Doing poses that require lying on your back—such as Supta Padangusthasana (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose) with a strap placed around your foot—protects your back from injury, plus you can hold the pose longer and with less strain. "The longer you hold a stretch the better," she says.

For all hamstring poses, Felstead advocates holding for a minimum of 20 seconds and up to two minutes to receive the full benefit of the stretch. You should go as deeply as you can where you can feel the stretch at work, but don't push yourself beyond your threshold. Reduce the intensity or duration of the stretch if you feel any pain, twinges, or sharpness, even if it fades. Don't try to tough it out. "You need to know your body better, and yoga can help you make that connection," says Felstead. As you progress, you can take on more intense hamstring stretches, such as Parighasana (Gate Pose) and Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Forward Bend).

Once your hamstrings are back in shape, don't think you can ignore them. You should commit at least once a week to a one-hour yoga routine that weaves in a good dose of these hamstring-specific poses. "One day of yoga won't do it," says Felstead. "But a regular practice can keep your hamstrings going for a long time." 

Matthew Solan lives in St. Petersburg, Florida. You can contact him through his website, www.matthewsolan.com

Street-Fighting Yogi

Continued from page 66

me the key to inspiration and aspiration in the individual practitioner," says the beautifully tattooed yogi.

Wong relocated to Manhattan in 1998 under the care of his spiritual parents, co-creators of Jivamukti yoga Sri Tripura Sundari (Sharon Gannon) and Sri Deva Das (David Life), who recruited him to run their ash-tanga program and live in their home. A loyal following blossomed—and within two years, Wong's desire to practice his signature series compelled him to open the Shiva Yoga Shala in New York City, where his Yogic Arts method took its full form. Wong's achievements can be directly linked to his healing touch, where he also includes elements of Thai yoga massage for total surrender. "It is the hands-on bodywork which truly establishes the healing aspect and sacred touch of this practice," Wong says.

This gifted teacher's work with Jivamukti gave him the extraordinary opportunity to travel the globe and experience new cultures. "In the West, people generally speak out, focusing on their external practice," says Wong. "In the East, people tend to reserve their outward expression, while possessing an inner presence in their movement and stillness."

Currently, Wong divides his time between his studios in Shanghai (www.namasteyoga.com.cn) and Tokyo (www.lotus8.co.jp). In addition to teaching the Yogic Arts series, Wong hosts workshops and teacher trainings throughout the year all over the world. 

For more information on **Duncan Wong**, visit his website, www.yogicarts.com.