

# Does Your Kung-Fu Have ANIMAL FLAVOR?

Discovering the animal within all of us is more than a matter of watching someone perform an animal style movement.

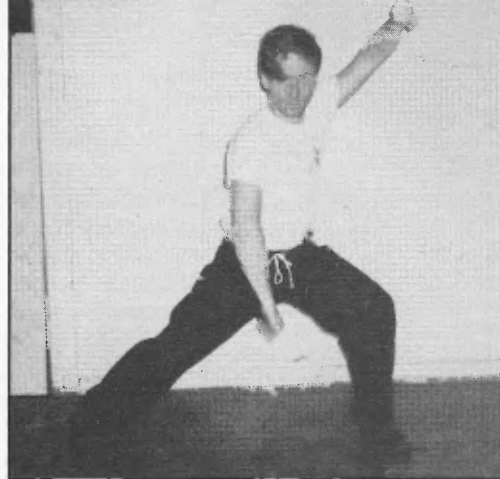
**By George Xu and Kevin Back**

*You have seen it before. Two martial artists of the same style are doing the same form, but there's something different in their performances. You can literally see the power flow out from one while the other seems flat. Probably all the one was missing is something known as "animal flavor." Masters of any field have a certain animal flavor to their art. You might say that a good dancer looks as graceful as a bird in flight; a fast runner has the speed of a gazelle. Think about it. Most analogies use animal references. We may be more intelligent than they are but in most cases physically, they hold the edge. Unarmed, we would surely lose to most wild animals. What's instinctive to them has to be trained in us.*

**N**omatter what the style, all high-level martial artists have "animal flavor"—that certain suppleness or freedom of movement that comes with serious training. You can distinguish between a high-level and a low-level practitioner by the essence or the amount of animal flavor in his movements.

It has no set definition because it is many things; it is an all-encompassing term. Animal flavor can be easiest described as "one move everything moves." It is the concerted efforts of all muscles to a specific outcome. Internal muscles as well as external muscles—small muscle groups as well as large muscle groups working together. It is like a dog shaking water off his body—all muscles at once, one moves everything moves.

Specifically, when all muscle groups work together it is known as "internal animal flavor." It is the most important of the two types of animal flavor and is the one we should try and achieve. The other type is known as "external animal flavor." This type of animal flavor is good but lacks the additional energy and the added direction associated with



Whole energy must be in one line. The top photo shows a loss of power at the waist where the line is broken. In the photo above, George Xu's body is on one line with no loss of power or function.



**In this photo, George Xu is demonstrating "one move everything moves." His whole body is coordinated to attack or defend.**

which usually has little or no practical or martial value. It can be likened to animal acting or pretending to be the animal. This type of flavor loses the animal spirit or internal "yi" (yi—cautious focused tension) of the animal, and most of the martial art value is lost. It takes more than looking like an animal to have martial art value. If you watch national tournaments, you will see the external animal flavor. They are merely mimicking the animals movements of an animal style. In these stylists, it is not the internal energy that brings about the animal flavor. It is the practiced movements and mimicry that leads to this type of animal flavor. Their muscles are alive, but they lack the internal energy to guide the internal muscles leading the external muscles. To attain full power, all muscles must be used from small muscles to large. Even so-called external styles can benefit from internal animal flavor.

Your internal energy is centered in the "dan tien" (the area in your stomach muscles below your navel). It is there that you concentrate on it and try and release it through your movements. As stated earlier, animal flavor is many things including the freedom of movement that comes with practice. This freedom of movement is important to having animal flavor. Your movements should be loose, agile and relaxed. These types of movements can also be called instinctive or "nervous system" reaction that we all have. Have you ever prepared yourself to test a hot iron or hot water? That is the calm focused tension that we are trying to achieve in a fighting situation. You have never reacted as quick as when you stuck your finger on a hot surface. All muscles were working together to keep

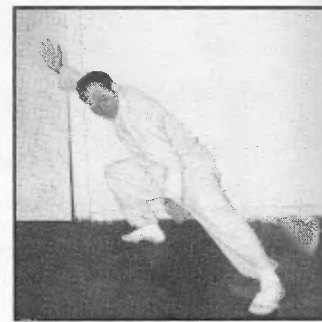


**These photos show the shrinking aspect of shrinking and expanding. The photo at right shows a body compressed more while the photo at left shows the body compressed only in certain areas. He's not getting full body power.**



that explodes outward. Before a cat pounces, it shrinks then expands to pounce on its prey.

The importance of true internal animal flavor is obvious. The body reacts (instead of just limbs) so the amount of power generated will be greatly enhanced. Kick a man and usually his arms and maybe his legs will move. However, kick an animal (I'm not telling you to) and its entire body will react and shrink away from the attack. Then it will retaliate from



**In the photo at left, there is no purpose to the stance. In the photo at right, there is a goal—George is about to attack the groin.**

this shrunken position. The whole body should move in harmony from head-to-toe. Unfortunately, the type of reaction doesn't come overnight. But then nothing worthwhile ever does. Once you have found a good teacher, you can watch his flavor and keep it in mind while you are practicing your forms. Do your forms slowly, correctly, and seriously. Concentrate on your internal energy. Give the movements meaning, and pretend that there is an enemy in front of you. You need to teach your muscles the proper movements so that you can react to a situation. Your body will use the internal speed to go into the proper movements. Also concentrate on giving your movements a "spring-shaking power" while moving. This can be translated into two types of power. The first is "fast-to-heavy." This type of blow can be used many ways for heavy crushing power to knock away enemies. The second is "point-shaking power" where the blow is in and out quickly. It is a jabbing type motion for quick, damaging results. When you shrink then expand, you expand into the

## **"Animal flavor is many things, including the freedom of movement that comes with practice."**

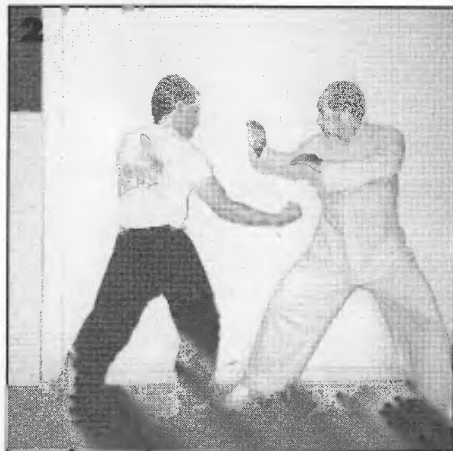
spring-shaking power.

An elephant is big and strong, but his movements aren't alive. The snake, tiger, and leopard all have explosive power that comes from shrinking, then expanding. The energy starts in the feet and travels up where it is controlled by the waist, while gaining more power up and through the rest of the body. Like a compressed spring (the shrinking) has the potential for energy at all times. When it is released the energy goes up through the body of the spring and outward (expanding).

The Chinese use five levels of power to gauge their abilities and progress.

- *Strength level*—Otherwise known as "ox power." This can be

These photos show further application of animal flavor. One can distinguish between a high-level and low-level martial artist by the essence or amount of animal flavor in his movements.



compared to two rams butting heads. They use nothing but strength and accomplish very little.

- *Technique level*—This level is for people who learn techniques in fighting but don't put any internal power behind the technique.
- *"Jing" level*—With this level, your internal energy is just coming through. You suddenly realize some internal vibrating power.
- *Chi level*—This is the advanced stage of the jing; it is the further development of the internal energy.
- *Spiritual or "shen" level*—This is the highest level. You can see the shape and structure of the animal coming through. With the chi you can see the spirit of the animal come out in your movements. This level is the union of the previous four levels, and it becomes an art.

Ninety percent of the people stay at the second level. They think that each technique they learn is a key to a different door or situation, so they spend too much time trying to sort too many keys and get lost. Once a student goes beyond the second level to the jing level, they discover they



Grandmaster Shen Shou Pu demonstrates "monkey steal the heart."

have much more power than they realized, and usually continue to work on developing their chi. Having the above levels, you can return to the concentrated spirit. If spirit is concentrated then it is continuous and uninterrupted practice of chi is returned to the shen. Manifestations of the chi improves agility. When shen is concentrated, opening and closing, shrinking and expanding occur appropriately; the differentiation between what is and isn't useful become clear. It is important to focus completely on the mind and waist and not concentrate on external energy.

Your internal energy is raw power that must be controlled and focused—to be properly released. That is why you practice the form to have an external outlet for this raw energy. If you still don't realize what animal flavor is, watch an animal while it is being attacked (i.e., pet. Not necessarily a wild animal). Watch how they react. Watch their yi. Watch how the whole body reacts from head-to-toe. Application of animal flavor depends on many things: suppleness; shrinking and expanding; and finally, one moves everything moves. These three are the keys to develop your confidence so your body will follow what your heart directs. Don't respond with just hands or feet. Instead the whole body must come into play. Don't be stiff, be natural. Loosen up your movements so that you flow. When we are learning kung-fu we tend to stiffen up, trying to remember the movements. When this happens, we lose many of the beneficial aspects of being calm and relaxed. With these points in mind when we train, we can tap an unknown power source within ourselves.

*About the Authors: George Xu is one of the world's most respected internal arts instructors. Kevin Back is a freelance writer and a private student of George Xu.*