

Moving Across the Spectrum

A look at the relationship between Karate and Tai Chi

By Ian Deavin

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To put my position clearly I should start by explaining that my own background is of about 15 years Shotokan practice and almost 10 years of Yang style Tai Chi, bringing them both together in the same body has become a continuing process. What follows then is as much an account of a personal journey as an intellectual/physical study.

At first glance most Karate student's comment on Tai Chi is something along the lines of "what has it to do with fighting?" and yet there is (even now) a mystique attached to it in Karate literature and discussion. Sensei Nakayama I believe when asked "which is better Sensei, Karate or Tai Chi?" commented "Karate is for humans, Tai Chi is for supermen ". This mystique is added to today as we look, with limited understanding, at masters such as Kanazawa Shihan, who publicise their own practice and manage to maintain extraordinary ability into a stage of life when most people are considering problems doing day to day tasks. The health aspect and that of meditation/stress management for which Tai Chi has become known in the west has sanitised it, hiding the reality that it is a thoroughly practical martial art - it was first codified that way some 400 years ago, and is still regarded as that by teachers I have studied under in Beijing, Hong Kong and the UK. Some of whom do not see it as anything else and are bemused that anyone should consider it apart from its fighting applications.

Madam Yeung for example, daughter of the late Grandmaster Yang Shou-chung certainly considers her family style to be a martial art (and has the sense of humour to prove it!). So too with Madam Sun, daughter of Sun Lu-t'ang who originated Sun style Tai Chi from Xingi-chuan, Baghua and Wu/Hao style Tai Chi. At more than 80 years of age Madam Sun can still impress with her demonstrations, including a throat attack with the "tiger mouth" formed between thumb and forefinger that seems to bring a light to her eyes!

At a simplistic level we can see similarities in many postures, for example there are equivalents to the basic Uchi uke and Gedan barai, although in Tai Chi there are often a range of possible uses rather than the one or two generally taught to Karate students. Other examples of similarity come from various Kihon and Kata, all easier to demonstrate than describe. This is not really surprising, the bodies are the same and the aim of dealing with violence also the same, we should rather be surprised if such similarities did not exist.

Karate has its quota of fighting legends who would take on anybody, or went out onto the street looking for combat - so too has Tai Chi. Probably the best known of these was the founder of Yang style Yang Lu-ch'an who it seems was often challenged to prove his skill. Similarly Yang Ch'ien-hou, an imperial instructor, was once challenged to defend against attack with a spear. In more recent years Sun Lu-t'ang, originator of Sun style Tai Chi, managed to get quite a reputation as an outright fighter. The parallels continue, for example the saying "there is no first strike in Karate ", is matched by the words of Yang Lu-ch'an "when fighting with an opponent, do not move, but wait for the opponent to move, then move first."

It seems likely that in the trading of techniques that have gone on over the years between the many Chinese styles e.g. Shaolin and Tai Chi, much of both found its way across to Okinawa and was given a new interpretation, fed by such works as "The Bubushi" which chronicles Chi meridian attacks derived from Chinese medicine. Today we call these techniques Kyusho-jitsu if we do Karate and Dim-mak if we do Tai Chi.

It is not so simple that one system developed which then turned into another and so on. Rather this is a story of parallel development in all areas and a blending of ideas across from China to Okinawa. When Karate was taken to Japan by Master Funakoshi and others, in the early part of this century, it seems likely that however much they were able to pass on before they died was then developed in a Japanese way. Existing Japanese arts of Aikijitsu, Jujitsu etc. all have their equivalent in Chinese arts and any practitioner of Aikido or Judo will recognise common principles in Okinawan Kyusho-jitsu quite readily. They are still there in the Shotokan we practice today, just more difficult to recognise.

Tai Chi in the form, we recognise today, is credited with being some 400 years old as a formal system. The original being developed by the Chen family of Honan province, hence "Chen" style, which while soft and flowing also uses rapid breaks and reversals of energy - more obviously a martial art. Probably the most popular is said to be Yang style but has so many varied forms and teachers that sometimes it is completely divorced from its original Chen style roots. Other styles such as Wu and Sun again have martial aims, although all have often been modified in the cause of popularity or competition - much as with Karate!

Shotokan Karate as we know it, of course, came from Japan quite recently and it is perhaps part of the maturing of the style that many of its practitioners are looking back to its Okinawan and Chinese origins.

Development of Shotokan as a sport on the other hand may be seen as taking it further away from its roots - developing it for modern needs. The great benefit of this is to offer a contact point to a much wider audience around the world, who can then learn something of what underlies their sport both technically and spiritually. Certainly without the general popularisation of martial arts through TV, films and clubs I would not have found an entry point in the Britain of the early 1970's. Fortunately this has been accompanied by increasing availability of literature, videos and travel so that we can find the "source" and keep in touch with it, so long as we can learn to recognise it!

It is said that Karateka are hard at first but find softness, whereas Tai Chi practitioners begin soft and become hard, thus both come together at the end - a view supported by Hong Kong Shotokan instructor (and Chen style Tai Chi practitioner) Sensei Wong who on my first visit pointed out that they are " all the same ". Kanazawa Shihan and Higionna Sensei both demonstrate with their bodies superb technique with flow and resilience. The former combining the hard and soft of Shotokan Karate and Tai Chi, while the latter exemplifying the principles inherent in Goju Ryu (literally "hard / soft"). The Taoist concept of Yin and Yang (frequently called upon to explain hip rotation and pull back of a punch to hikite) suggests that only one without the other leaves us vulnerable, lacking balance and power - both are needed.

In the search for pliability Tai Chi and other soft/internal students train just as hard as any Karate group - one of the quickest ways I know to pain and collapse is through Chinese "soft" leg strengthening exercises. The forms may look gentle but the training isn't!

This linear spectrum from hard to soft is taken a stage further by joining the ends together in a circle, suggesting that ultimately each extreme leads to the other. Taoism (on which Tai Chi principles are based) takes this yet further by dividing the circle into Yang and Yin, each containing an element of the other. Showing their inseparable nature and the ability which is available to us to move at will to any point within the range exemplified by the symbolism of the Tao.

Interestingly the Taoism / Tai Chi link is mirrored by Zen / Karate, and indeed the Indian Zen teacher Osho tells us that Zen is a fusion of Buddhism and Taoism created by Boddidhama; the fighting monk who carried the light of Buddhism to China and at the same time handed on martial arts training, which eventually found its way via Okinawa to Japan!

The personal experience of this overweight 44 year old is that I was only able to make sense of what my Shotokan instructors have said and demonstrated by picking up on Tai Chi. For example moving on the heel which is now being taught by people such as Sensei Murakami, I had never been taught before in Karate, but it was almost the first thing I learned in Yang style. Ideas of moving on the heel or the ball of foot or "Bubbling Spring" point are common in Chinese Kung Fu such as Tai Chi. In the same way maintaining the same height and keeping the hips level e.g. In gyaku-zuki, are fundamental to Chinese arts, where unsurprisingly the same punch is to be found, although executed a little differently and often in conjunction with a simultaneous block. Kata also took on new meaning for me bearing in mind Tai Chi applications, which offered ways of explaining some of the techniques which did not make sense - by putting another body into the Kata in a Tai Chi way possible applications became clear.

Imagine then my delight to be introduced to Kyusho Jitsu, by Sensei Vince Morris and to find that Shotokan can be explained using exactly the same principles for close-up work as for Tai Chi applications and with the same approach: - once you make contact stay in-touch, only leave once the matter is sorted. In Tai Chi practice, slow and very low energy pushing hands partner work is used to develop such factors as sensitivity, centring, balance, and as a way of working with a partner in order to find weaknesses in each other. The practice and execution of Kyusho techniques require exactly the same abilities and have a similar "feel" as in Tai Chi.

What does seem to be true is that Tai Chi concentrates on the "how-to-do" of a technique, Karate (at least initially, and perhaps because of the large classes it attracts) pays more attention to the "what-to-do". Interestingly when small groups of Dan grades get together, training turns to ideas such as awareness, relaxation, penetration, snap and the storing of power like a coiled spring. The same ideas taught fundamentally in Tai Chi where storing the energy like an elastic band across the back and down the legs is the whole point of "silk reeling" exercise and where "cannon fist" is practiced.

In the Tai Chi technique of Fa Jing an explosive use of the body directs massive split second power and in close punching (the "one inch" punch) penetration is achieved over small distances. Clearly the approaches coincide at many points, but Tai Chi does differ in that it starts from the point of view of managing this energy, with technique being a way to express this. Karate originates with the technique and later develops the energy management.

Early Tai Chi practice for example deals with Peng, Lu, Ji and An.

Peng may be thought of as the creation of an impenetrable barrier about one's body using arms etc. by maintaining a force outward equal to that applied inward.

Lu is the slight yielding or letting-in of an opponent's technique, this draws them into commitment and allows the force to be neutralised.

Ji then is the feeding back of the force in a press with one hand supporting the other.

An is a push, feeding energy out with the palms of the hands.

Learning to use body control in this way seems to be in line with all the principles of close-in Okinawan Kyusho techniques and the Shotokan style that has come from them. This ability to read, neutralise, deflect, adapt to, open up, close down and control an opponent's body by numerous subtle internal techniques, completely compliments what we in the west have come to interpret as Shotokan's large, linear movements.

Kanazawa Shihan has said on training courses "How can you expect to do something fast if you cannot do it slow? Karate people should practice 3 times slow, 1 time fast". He obviously makes it work for himself and for the students, who come away saying "I can do the technique so much

better when I train with Sensei than in our dojo” or something similar. Tai Chi forms and partner work are practiced from slow to very slow which gives time to experience the internal effects of outer movements and the external effects of inner feelings. Time also to identify and remove superfluous actions.

Partner work in Tai Chi builds confrontation gradually so that it can be seen and dealt with, leading to harmonious interaction. Western Karate practice has not generally been like this (although of course instructors vary) but can benefit from the approach. Otherwise intimidation can build such a high fear barrier that partner work encapsulates struggle rather than learning. The differences between Karate and Tai Chi really are more about how beginners train than anything fundamental. It is much like focusing on the shape of a bumper bar or colour of upholstery as being significant differences between cars. There really are more important considerations.

The hardness of Karate belies the pliability of its masters, the softness of Tai Chi obscures the power it makes possible. As they are intended to do!

To be only hard or soft is to be unbalanced and vulnerable at some level. Greater progress comes when a person recognises where they are and takes responsibility for that by choosing to learn how to move throughout the spectrum. Karate or Tai Chi are paths to this development and what follows beyond - we can use both, they are opposite sides of the same coin.

It is probably more profitable to consider people and bodies rather than the choreography of styles. However my first experience of Tai Chi pushing hands practice with a group in the far-east certainly demonstrated a difference. I might as well not have done any martial art before. Everyone pushed me around all over the park, then very gently explained in detail how they did it and how my “hard” training had left me stiff and vulnerable. A humbling example of facing the Buddhist “beginner’s mind” in reality.

They continued however, to explain that the best internal/soft fighters are those who have done hard styles first.

It seems that while we should fight others on our own ground we must learn on theirs. As martial artists we must learn to survive against any style and that means meeting it “at home”. Clearly we cannot study all arts, this is neither necessary nor desirable anyway, but integrating the spectrum between hard - soft, external - internal extremes allows us to reach the principles common to all styles. Anyone interested to see this clearly need only read "Go Rin No Sho", "A Book of Five Rings" by Miyamoto Musashi to feel the kinship between Karate and swordsmanship. Empty-hand or twin-swords, the thinking and feeling is the same - where the mind and spirit lead the body follows.

When we study Karate and Tai Chi the gap between them at first yawns chasm wide, but in time I have found (like others before) that my body integrates them both at my own level. This pleases neither "side", since clearly I cannot be "good" at either! However the more I learn about each and talk to people from all styles the more I see that the fighting masters of yesterday and today have practical open minds about who they learn from (often being forced to learn from some fairly unwelcome people anyway) why should not we?

Additional information.

I would greatly recommend the writings and seminars of Patrick McCarthy, Kyoshi 7th Dan, to anyone interested in the development of Shotokan from Okinawan Karate and Chinese Kung Fu.

www.sheffordtaichi.org
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