

The following is a Q+A discussion between myself and an old friend/training partner, and his son who has spent some years training in Japan

By Ian Deavin

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Question:

I don't know if you have read this or not but it is interesting because it concerns Master Chu. Google Carl Burgess then go to "Chief Instructor Carl Burgess" click on "home page", then go to "articles". In "magazine article's" click on "A Master Calls". If you have not read this you will find it interesting. What is your view on what is said?

Ian Deavin:

That was an interesting episode - I remember reading the original article and comments in the press. At the time it seemed that the UK Tai Chi scene was comfortably health related with background stuff about "supreme ultimate boxing" but no one actually teaching it. It was an abrasive and confrontational time at least in the press and letters pages!

My views?

Chi - a very valuable concept/model to describe/manipulate a very complex and sophisticated use of the mind/body. No reason to think that it can't be explained in western terms (which is one of the reasons I like the approach of Karel Koskuba) nor to invoke magic - although we may simply not yet have the terms or the understanding in our cultural/linguistic framework to express it. My experience of very good practitioners has been that they are human beings who have developed their minds and bodies in a very particular way.

Docherty vs. Chu - don't know either of them, never touched them - would like to.

Yang Tai Chi - Yang Cheng Fu specifically said that he changed it to enable people to use it primarily for health. There is of course more than one Yang style - there is another family line that I believe take a more "practical" view of martial arts.

So the comparison between the 2 men is not really useful - other than to stir the pot - which did need stirring! They come from different directions - yes if you want vigorous fighting related stuff then Wu Dang with Docherty is the obvious - but if you want a more health related format then go with Chu - both have health and fighting in their proposition but in different balances.

Tai Chi as a martial art - there is a balance to be made by each practitioner between the hard and soft in their own body - one of the reasons I like Chen style and the teachers I presently study with - the balance feels good. The soft is very soft and the hard is very hard.

These discussions always seem to ignore the fact that no art is complete in itself - i.e. they are eclectic by nature and have links with other practices e.g. Qinna, Chi Kung, weapons, Taoist exercises, meditation etc. the Japanese arts have their parallels - Karate, Jujitsu etc. all draw on the cultural background of Shinto, Buddhism Bushido etc. Similarly the practitioners are not accounted for - they are self-selecting - young vigorous people tend to practice vigorous arts and over time accumulate a package of personal experience and abilities - no master is representative of just his/her own present art since invariably it seems they have all practiced a variety of arts to differing levels - in seeking a teacher, find one that can teach what you lack or need - the style is irrelevant.

It is the fight in the dog - not the dog in the fight.

But if you only practice for fighting then that is pretty sad - how many ultimate warriors are there? Do I really want to be one? Truly could I have been one? Would I want to be the way I would need to be to become that?

No I seek my own balance between martial and health.

If Tai Chi is not also for life then I would have lost interest - which is where I got to with Karate - and interestingly I am finding that the health and the martial sides are inextricably linked anyway - see: www.sheffordtaichi.org/health-mobility/.

One of the things I like about Chen Xiaowang's son Chen Ying Jun, is that at 35 he still seems to be in that mixing it up stage, but has such a strong Tai Chi background with a fair ability in English to communicate his ability and enthusiasm for both the health and the martial. As for his dad - I believe he is around 60 but he walks out of joint locks put on by strong people and makes the hall shake with his demonstrations - and I believe he has not long ago recovered from a bout of arthritis.

What is really encouraging to me is that I now have a small understanding of how they do it and that in my own way I can become "stronger" as I get older. Every now and then I get a glimpse of just how the martial stuff can work and am staggered by the speed and brutality possible - I know I am faster now than when doing karate and probably hit harder too.

Response:

I just about agree with all that.

My son has done some Karate and kick boxing in Japan. He also watches "Pride" and "Ultimate Fighting" He is convinced that when it comes to fighting these guys can beat most styles. They basically take you to the ground and either choke you out or pop your joints. It's a sad fact that 25 years of Tai Chi would not come up to the mark against five years of ultimate fighting. Royce Gracie of Brazilian Jui Jitsu beats just about everybody on a one to one. A high ranking aikido man once challenged one of these guys to a fight saying that his inner energy and superior technique would expose the weakness of the more crude? Ultimate fighter. The Aikido guy sadly was left in a pool of blood within seconds.

All I say is when you practice Tai Chi do you feel better after than before? - answer - yes!

Also I know that to be an effective fighter in ANY art boxing, karate, tai chi or whatever involves A) REGULAR, daily if possible training B) serious fitness C) dare I say it physical strength D) an ability to take pain. Of course speed and timing as well. It's no good learning a fighting technique at a seminar and thinking you will be able to apply it in a street situation - it won't happen! You need to repeat the move, as the Chinese say, a thousand times, to commit it to muscle memory so it becomes as natural as keeping your balance on a bike.

PS: At my class last night I had six students. At the end of the lesson I said "we will just spend the last five minutes doing a bit of pushing hands" you could hear an audible groan. Shame really!

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I think we are basically coming at it from similar positions - at the end of the day whatever system you use to train if you want to be a fighter then you need to fight and you become that kind of person - I don't think it is a great lifestyle choice. I quite believe the stories of powerful Tai Chi masters - but they took on all comers! - and many had a reputation for being unpleasant brutal people. And yes they do use strength - as Chen Ying Jun said recently - we use strength, but on top of internal power. As you say daily training to change the body - change it completely - no wonder the Boxers believed themselves invulnerable - say 2 to 3 hours of standing, 7 forms each of 20 to 30 minutes then 2 to 3 hours of partner work e.g. push hands.

That is the kind of schedule that Wang Yangji and Chen Xiaowang went through and both were at least twice all China champions - and happen to be really nice people although I'd hate to piss them off!

Your students perhaps don't understand - as I didn't until recently - that pushing hands is to develop sensitivity and the form is to develop power - including of course the chi gong like practice of standing in postures. This year I was fortunate to do an instructors class with Chen Xiaowang where over 3 hours we did 4 exercises (for 1 hour) and 4 postures (for 2 hours) each posture held for as long as possible - say 1/2 hour. Sensitivity is a lever - it gives you time and when you are always ahead of your opponent then you can control their balance and thus their body and mind. "He moves - I move first." This gives you opportunities, which you may or may not take - however I think that done as it is conceived and codified in the form - mindlessly and flowingly - the fight process is so fast and under no conscious control so that serious injury is inevitable.

Bill Wong 7th Dan Shotokan in Hong Kong also does Chen style and told me that one reason he keeps doing Karate is because it teaches you to keep going through pain.

I think the same training is available in the Chinese system if you are prepared to go through it - I have heard from many Tai Chi teachers of the hard training they had to endure - we should remember there is an informal system - when young train in hard styles then in late teens train in soft styles. It is on top of the hard styles not instead of, and the push hands can be brutal including vital points, joint locks, chokes, kicks, elbows, knees, take downs etc.

Interesting to consider the Ultimate fighting scene - they play by "the rules" - very rough rules granted but that is something Vince Morris was always very clear about - any form of sport holds back - I believe that the kind of fighting Tai chi was developed for is self-defence in a time when if attacked or seriously challenged then it was acceptable to attack the eyes, destroy the throat or snap the neck or some other extreme and instant escalation.

That kind of power and the mind-set that goes with it is very scary - but very honest and an ultimate measure of personal responsibility. This is something that intrigues me - the connection of our highest developed self with our very basic origins. It is something I think I sense in top Tai chi teachers - but somehow I suspect that one would only "touch" this at the cost of being badly injured.

It would be interesting to compare that with the "sport fight winning power complex philosophy" it is perhaps very similar in some people - the Pilipino schools seem to try to preserve the "life/death" connection.

Perhaps I am "romanticising the past"?

I think I am just trying to be real about the environment with a measure of back engineering.

But to be fair we should look at what has happened to Karate, Aikido and Judo - the skill that allowed small people to defeat large ones has been neutralised by the big people getting very much larger and stronger - and changing the rules to suit themselves -so that the sport stuff is dominated by very big muscles and/or point scoring that would not really create an injury. I guess that I see the balance more in the form of "the Wolf" from Sumo - strong, fit, agile, focused, skilled and actually not that heavy for his sport - he was almost always outweighed by his opponents.

I think the most import thing I forgot is that in sport fights a "winner" is needed - in a street fight just to survive is a win. For me, perhaps the most important aim of martial arts is to propagate the ability to survive well in conflict situations.

Son's response:

- No martial art is complete; eclecticism is the order of the day. Even the Gracies, with their previously proclaimed 'unbeatable system' now get beaten easily by the new breed of cross-trained, 'mixed martial artists'.

- MMA (Mixed martial arts) IS a sport, not a street fight. However, it is far closer to being a real confrontation than most martial arts purely because it is full-contact. The best way to learn to drive a car is to drive one, not pretend to drive one. There has to be an element of contact in an art to make it 'effective'.

- You have to decide what YOU want out of your training. If you want longevity, western boxing, wrestling, and karate may not be the way to go. They place too much strain on your joints and cardiovascular system.

- Good self-defence is 95% about an emotional/psychological response. Should I walk down that dark, short cut home? Is the 16 stone builder glaring at people in the pub gonna 'kick off'? The physical response only becomes necessary when other escape avenues have been explored. A good "self-defence" teacher will concentrate on the mental, rather than physical response.

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I guess that only after a wide experience can one really see the breadth needed in having a rounded martial arts package in one's body - one thing that does impress me about the Chinese point of view is it's inclusiveness the way that the approach takes in hard through to soft and encourages a student to - go get stuff. For example Wang Yang Ji will often demonstrate techniques from wrestling or boxing, from white crane or Xingyi or Tai Chi to show their similarities - often with vital point possibilities. Then again as Karel puts it - if you hit hard enough the whole body becomes a vital point. I guess it depends then on how protected your opponent is!

In this way the student has a good understanding of long range approach, long range kicking and punching, entering ones opponent, short range strikes , locks, control of opponent, takedowns, ground control and ground work, preferably with street reality training.

Generally students who get any way along this path develop an interest in the mental aspects that help them do it better, then psychology, meditation, philosophy etc. become important

The soft arts then add a complete new layer by physically changing the body, to behave and perform better in those situations and by allowing techniques to be refined to very small, very powerful and very fast, almost imperceptible movements. I once did a seminar with Neil Adams and was impressed by the way his movements completely demonstrated the basic internal principles.

Hard stylists train hard to become soft, soft stylists train soft to become hard. The benefit of the Chinese internal approach is that it is a development system. Hard stylists tend to find softness by accident - in which case it seems incomplete and un-controlled - even unaware - unless they follow the path from hard to soft at the appropriate time they become caught in a cul de sac.

I have believed for a long time that one must learn to survive on the opponents' territory since you cannot choose the when or where of a conflict. The aim of course being that it should not be a fight but a simple removal of an obstacle - as Vince Morris put it - "I hate violence - I just want to get it over as quickly as possible and get home for tea!"

On the fight flight and pre-emptive attack there are many socio-legal factors - interestingly explored on <http://www.nononsenseselfdefense.com>

A thought on the hit first or self-defend front -

My understanding of the soft - Tai chi approach to this is that ideally this argument is rendered redundant by being prepared but uncommitted, as soon as an attack enters ones awareness on the level of subconscious perception e.g. by touch, then the body responds in a way that absorbs, neutralizes and returns the energy, - nothing conscious need be done other than to control the extent of damage inflicted if possible or desired - the trained body automatically operates with the minimum of oversight. Where weapons are in play then I guess it is important to have one's senses other than touch well attuned!

One survives or one doesn't - dependent on the preparedness of the person from the hard daily training - their Kung Fu – as much or even more than, anything they consciously do in the conflict. Consciousness is simply too slow especially once violence has kicked off.

I think Musashi put it well in his statement of principles in *The Book of Five Rings*:

1. Do not think dishonestly
2. The Way is in training
3. Become acquainted with every art
4. Know the Ways of all professions
5. Distinguish between gain and loss in worldly matters
6. Develop intuitive judgment and understanding for everything
7. Perceive those things which cannot be seen
8. Pay attention even to trifles
9. Do nothing which is of no use

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