

QUEST FOR THE WAY: ORIGINS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

by Phillip Allen Humphries

Considerable mystery surrounds the origins and lineages of the world's martial disciplines. Some systems, most often those of classical origin, are bonded with religious doctrines; others are secular and utilitarian, street and military applicability their keynote themes. Amongst the general public, an air of mystique oftentimes surrounds the realm of martial art.

ORIGINS

Most systems, regardless of the mystical air that shrouds some of them, share common roots. They all originated from a basis in combat reality; preservation of the self. Shortly after human emergence into this world, incidences of aggression and interpersonal fighting would have occurred, necessitating the formulation of defensive measures as a matter of survival. While those initial occurrences of close quarter combat are long lost in the mists of those pre-Diluvial times, we can safely state that they did occur.

The techniques of unarmed combat would have emerged as Homo sapiens observed that, biomechanics being what they are, the human body moved in certain ways. That observation of the physics associated with human body mechanics would have eventually led to the formulation of concepts of movement that worked best within the context of interpersonal combat. Although initial interpersonal close quarter techniques may have been crude, Man's desire for survival would have prompted him to lend considerable attention to discerning those methods that worked—reliably under combat conditions—from those that were less than optimally effective in the heat of battle. This would have been the beginning.

We can place the origin of human close quarter engagements in the time and place where the first populations of Homo sapiens inhabited the Earth and, consequently, where mankind would have first had occasion to engage in battle. From those first close quarter battle occurrences, human beings began their pursuance of fighting competencies that eventually led to the development of the martial systems which have trickled down to us in the present day.

DIVERSIFICATION

Diversification of humans into different groupings led not only to eventual diversity in customs and beliefs, but to divergent interpretations of martial art. As Man spread, fighting and fighting methods spread with him. Man fanned out from his point of origin and eventually found himself in widely divergent environments, separated by social structure, religion and language. Man's means of personal combat diversified, but the physics didn't change. The human body mechanics didn't change. Gravity didn't change.

The world's fighting arts eventually became stylized, each region imparting a unique flavor. The observance of different fauna led to some martial postures and techniques being based on their dynamics of movement. For example, Nondansho Kata incorporated the movement of the crane. Geography, terrain, climate, clothing, and the physical characteristics of the people would be factors shaping the various martial methodologies. The mysticism and religious traditions would also affect the fighting arts.

LINKS

Some martial arts historians believe there is evidence to support the theory that the martial concepts of the ancient Greek Pankration system made their way to India via the military campaigns of Alexander the Great. There, Pankration methods fused with indigenous Indian martial arts, such as Kuttu Varisai, and made their way to Shaolin Temple in Hunan Province China with the Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma. The martial teachings of Bodhidharma spread from the Shaolin Temple, blending further with indigenous Chuanfa forms. From China, Shaolin fighting techniques—kung fu—entered Okinawa, where they combined with existing forms of Okinawan unarmed combat, known as Te in the RyuKyu Islands. (Examples of that

process would be Uechi-Ryu, Shorin-Ryu and Shorinji Kempo.). Karate—empty hand or China hand—techniques entered Japan via Okinawa. Along those lines, Shotokan's Funakoshi related that he believed that a portion of what came to be known as karate was a transplant to Okinawa from China, the Chinese pugilistic methods merging with the local fighting arts. Later in history, American military men, exposed to the Eastern martial systems, would bring them home to America.

Some Chinese believe that all the various kung-fu systems of China emanated from one ancient system, and that the original form of kung-fu began in China in 2,700 BCE. Bottom line: Chinese fighting techniques and methodologies heavily influenced the other Asian martial arts, existing forms of martial arts in Okinawa, Japan and Korea blending with the Chinese methods.

PHYSICS AND COMMON GROUND

The human anatomy functions in only so many ways. One can readily observe that a reverse punch executed by a Taekwondo practitioner is similar, if not nearly identical, to a reverse punch executed by a Shotokan or Shorin-Ryu stylist. The same is true of kicks and other strikes. A side kick executed by a practitioner of Choy Li Fut is going to rely on the same body mechanics as a similar kick executed by a Shito-Ryu stylist, a practitioner of Krav Maga, Savate, or American Kenpo.

The physics that a practitioner of Daito-Ryu Aiki-jujutsu would utilize to execute a wrist joint lock or throw are the same physics that allow a similar joint lock or throw to be executed by a practitioner of any other style or system. The means of arriving at the joint lock or throw may differ, but the body structure and physics that allow the body to be thrown or the joint to be locked are a common ground.

Examine the fist: Most fighting systems will teach students that the second and third metacarpal bones should be the points of impact so as to maximize the effectiveness of the strike while minimizing the risk of injury to the practitioner. Attitude of the punching fist -vertical, canted, horizontal - may vary, system to system. Some styles may utilize the bottom knuckles (seen in Jeet Kune Do) as a striking surface, but the majority of the world's martial arts incorporate the first two knuckles. Human anatomy, and the associated physics, constitutes the common ground of all the fighting arts. Once the physics - body mechanics - are understood by the practitioner, stylistic differences become less important.

METAPHYSICS AND MAGIC

Ancient Man may have interfaced mental along with physical refinement in his fighting systems. This wouldn't necessarily have been done for some lofty philosophical reason, but simply because it provided for a superior martial outcome. It would have been the natural thing to do. In the West, we call it fighting spirit, or mental resolve. Chi in Chinese, Ki in Japanese; mind over matter is a suitable way to describe that aspect in Western terms. It has long been understood that a unification of mind, body, and spirit resulting in a controlled focusing of the body's energy was advantageous in personal combat. Indigenous animistic and shamanistic practices—metaphysics and magic—would have impacted that mental/spiritual aspect of martial art. It is clearly evident the impact that Taoism and Buddhism had on the Asian martial ways, such as the Zen-Samurai relationship. The channeling of energy in the human body that allows the mechanical applications to function most efficiently is a facet that differentiates some of the fighting arts. The illumination of the spirit that allows a practitioner to appropriately channel that human energy is the Way (see Taoism). It is the realization of the Way that is the object of the quest that occupies the hearts and minds of many martial artists throughout their life.

THE QUEST

Nowhere in martial arts does the mystical, metaphysical side come into play more so than in the area of Ki (Chinese Chi). The interface of religious doctrine with the fighting arts most widely recognized by the average Westerner are the Zen-Samurai and Shaolin Temple-kungfu relationships. There are many, many more; those are just the most widely recognized in popular

culture. The religious disciplines sought a joining of mind, body and soul. They were, within their respective scopes of viewing the universe and natural order of things, providing a coded pathway to something that is beneficial, not only in martial application, but for life in general.

The understanding and development of Ki may be simplified considerably if we apply Gichin Funakoshi's thoughts on Karate-Do. Funakoshi believed that one should "train with both heart and soul without worrying about theory." Master Funakoshi offered that all the various skills and techniques were interrelated and that mastery of a single technique would allow the practitioner to realize how all the techniques were interrelated. Know intimately one piece of the puzzle and you will then be prepared to figure out the rest. In furtherance of that concept, Master Funakoshi believed that all the kata could be distilled into just a few. We can extrapolate and apply that insightful concept to the development of Ki, the extraordinary energy that the human mind can muster and direct.

The religious teachings and concepts of Zen Buddhism (Chinese Ch'an) provided paradigms that served as mental "kata", allowing the warrior to develop proper mindset for the cultivation of internal energy. Miyamoto Musashi spoke of the Way—emptiness of mind—in his classic *The Book of Five Rings*. If we look at the mind preparation teachings of Buddhism as kata for linking body, mind and soul, we can then apply Funakoshi's distillation concept to those "forms", taking what is useful, as Bruce Lee insightfully suggested in his text on Jeet Kune Do.

A practitioner need not adhere to the teachings of Zen Buddhism, or any particular religious dogma, in order to learn how to muster and focus Ki. One can take the essence of the mind preparation techniques, whether found in Eastern religion (Taoism, Zen) or esoteric strains of Christian meditative practice (inner consciousness; contemplative) and—applying Funakoshi's distillation concept—reduce those teachings to an eclectic form. One can be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist; it doesn't matter which particular window an individual chooses to view the universe through. The Way so sought after by martial artists seeking development of Ki is the ability to orchestrate a synthesis of spirit, human intellect, and the physical so that they function in concert rather than in opposition. The magic associated with some martial art is natural human intrinsic energy, directed by human intellect and focused by human resolve.

MODERN ECLECTICISM AND TRADITIONAL MARTIAL WAYS

Funakoshi believed in there being one karate-do. He believed that divergent schools, or styles, would have a bad effect on the art. In his work *Karate-Do, My Way of Life*, he related "my belief is that all these 'schools' should be amalgamated into one so that karate-do may pursue an orderly and useful progress into man's future." In the same work, he also said "inasmuch as there are not now, and never have been, any hard and fast rules regarding the various kata, it is hardly surprising to find that they change not only with the times but also from instructor to instructor."

Funakoshi supported the concept that kata and technique should be adaptable to the times. He also resisted classification of karate into schools or styles. He formulated his belief that there were no hard and fast rules governing kata from his study of karate in Okinawa as a youth. Funakoshi simplified and renamed the kata he learned—rendering them more suitable, in his opinion, for exposure to youthful students—and those refined forms became the "classical" kata of the Shotokan system. While there is a line of thought that suggests that many useful techniques were removed or watered down by Funakoshi during his distillation process, his idea that the many divergent forms and techniques could be boiled down to universal concepts was quite insightful. One can see that Funakoshi's eclectic outlook vis-à-vis the traditional Okinawan forms resulted in the formation of the 'classical', traditional forms of Japanese Karate-Do. The Okinawan forms he studied in his youth were, themselves, blended renditions of Chinese kempo and indigenous fighting (Te) methodologies, distilled over the years. Later in history, Bruce Lee would blend and distill martial concepts; Jun Fan Kung Fu and Jeet Kune Do were born.

Modification and streamlining, when necessary, is how martial arts progress as times and human conditions change. This concept is valid if it is applied to enhance vice detract from the effectiveness of the arts in combat. The object of martial art is to provide for survival in combat conditions. Health and wellbeing are positive associated facets that go hand in hand with combat effectiveness. Martial art is the art of winning and of living well.

There is nothing new under the sun as far as martial art is concerned. When modern martial artists refer to discovering a concept or technique, what they really are referencing is the rediscovery of that concept or technique, whether they realize it or not. Modern martial artists did not invent eclecticism; it has been around, as a concept, for a long, long time.

MODERN MARTIAL ART (or is it?)

Today's martial arts, whether the practitioners are aware of it or not, tend to be a brew of eclecticism and traditionalism. Oftentimes, they are nothing more than modern interpretations (or rediscoveries) of traditional methodologies.

Ancient, classical ways have been maintained in the form of kata, traditions, decorum, terminology, and typically form the foundation for the basic strikes, kicks, blocks and stances. In modern systems, one can find evidence of the hands of Western boxing, round kicks of Muay thai, joint locks of Jujitsu, throws of Judo, deflections and avoidances taken from Aikido and Tai Chi, and takedowns from freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling.

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is a morphing of Japanese Judo and Jujutsu; Krav Maga an amalgamation of combat effective techniques from several traditional martial systems in the spirit of W. E. Fairbairn's storied hand-to-hand tactics of Royal Shanghai Police and WWII commando fame; and today's popular MMA a mixture of submission wrestling, BJJ, boxing, and Muay thai. Many American schools blend theory from a number of systems. Ground fighting and grappling techniques find their way into standup fighting curriculums at Taekwondo dojangs and Shotokan Karate dojos; pugilistic competencies find their way into Judo dojos and submission wrestling gyms. Martial theories patched together from Chuanfa, Aikido, Jujitsu, Karate, Judo, Kempo, Savate, and military close quarter combatives are blended in melting pot martial arts clubs all across the United States, in much the same way as America itself forms a melting pot for diversified cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Nonclassical American martial arts, such as the Self Defense Systems Intl (SDS) Bushido Kempo, Bushido Jujitsu, Taifung Kenpo and Aiki-jitsu systems were predominantly built from elements of traditional Chinese and Japanese martial arts, tempered by fundamental principles of no-nonsense, street-applicable combatives. Other examples of that blending process can be found in Kajukenbo and Vee Arnis Jitsu.

TRUE SWORD

Combat situations are generally very unforgiving in nature. Combat is chaotic and judgmental errors oftentimes lead directly to injury or death. As Musashi said in his 350-year old classic, "do not do anything useless." Martial moves that have no solid basis in combat reality are nothing more than dance and, as such, are useless. They should be avoided. The goal is to distinguish between that which is useless and that which is "True Sword." Television series and feature films have exposed the general public, and the martial arts community, to a constant bombardment of scenes where a single martial arts master, utilizing a dazzling array of high spinning kicks and gravity-defying acrobatic maneuvers, handily defeats scores of opponents. It looks great. It sells. It isn't real.

It is stupid to turn your back on, or take your eyes off, an opponent. It is equally stupid (for most of us) to engage in aerial ballet while involved in a real confrontation with someone who intends to harm or kill you. Flash for the sake of flash and posturing for the sake of posturing is a fool's ticket to a quick defeat. This is not to say that dynamic techniques found in Taekwondo or Capoeira are not valid techniques. Additionally, it is not to say that someone who is adept at sport Judo can't

dump you on your head in an alley. It is to say that when your life is potentially at stake, only the most sensible, street-proven techniques should be employed. It is a matter of pure utility and common sense; sport or theater isn't in the equation.

There are many techniques and variations of techniques with different ways to employ each of those techniques. Many things can impact whether a particular technique will be effective in a combat engagement: target availability, clothing impact on target Sensitivity/vulnerability, block/counter/avoidance risk, etc. Knowing where techniques belong is the key.

The easiest to execute, most devastating technique that one can use, based on the immediate fight dynamics, is what should be used. Economy of movement is important; flamboyance is not. If one can avoid a foe's technique by simply moving or by economically redirecting the opponent's energy, that is superior martial arts. It is all going to be dependent on circumstances (threat level involved in the conflict, number of opponents, etc.).

A most important element is mindset. The mind must be clear and prepared. Superior mental attitude and the ability to see—to know—the fight create the winning combination when interfaced with solid technique. All movement must have a purpose; a function necessary to accomplish the goal, which is to win—to survive. The effectiveness of the techniques of modern sport Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) notwithstanding, one must realize that there is a difference between sport and street fighting. Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and International Fight League (IFL) matches are sporting events governed by rules. Street fighting—combat—has no rules. Unless there happens to be a cop nearby, there won't be a "Big John McCarthy" to intervene.