

A Conversation with Daito-ryu's Other Child

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Over the past six months, I have had the honor to be invited to teach both kenjutsu and aikido at the Pacific Rim Martial Arts Academy, a school which offers instruction in hapkido, tae kwon do, judo, and aikido. The school is headed by Quanjan Nim (3rd generation Grandmaster) James Garrison of the Ju Sool Kwan hapkido tradition. The headquarters of the Ju Sool Kwan is in Korea.

It is asserted by practitioners of this art that the founder, Yong Sool Choi, studied Daito-ryu under Sokaku Takeda. Unfortunately, no records have been located to substantiate this assertion, and it may well be that none will ever be found. First of all, due to Japan's former colonization of Korea, many historical records were lost or destroyed. Secondly, according to Mr. Garrison, the Korean people generally do not have as strong an affinity for maintaining tradition unchanged, or even maintaining records of traditions as do the Japanese martial schools. Korean martial arts have, instead, maintained themselves as syncretic entities, absorbing and adapting new influences in each generation, attempting to establish themselves as viable in their chosen environment. Viability is determined by such factors as combat effectiveness, political influence, financial standing, social standing of the participants, and changes in fashion.

All this makes the world of Korean martial arts one of constant ferment, showing some of the best and worst traits of martial arts practice. On the down side, inflated ranks, even rank for sale, are rife, and political maneuvering among the practitioners occurs at all levels. Commercialism takes place on a mind-boggling scale, and traditions are sometimes changed to suit the whims of a fickle public. On the up side, however, creative individuals, who have diligently trained in the basic requirements of their respective arts, have a lot of room to breathe and to continue to develop. Korean yudo (judo), for example, shows an energy and fierceness often absent from the more mannered practice of modern-day Japanese dojos. Some of the innovative kicking techniques of tae kwon do have been incorporated into karate, both in Europe and America, and this, through the influence of international tournaments, seems to have been imported back into some Japanese karate schools.

Hapkido, perhaps more than any Korean martial art, exemplifies this creative drive. There are small dojos in back alleys, run by men in the shadowy world between the law and organized crime, schools that teach how to survive and win on the hard, mean streets of Seoul. The Presidential guard is composed of hapkido experts, and they focus on hapkido as it pertains to their role as a paramilitary force. Other schools appeal to a rising middle class, with flowing techniques softened and controlled, so that one returns safely home with hardly a bruise. Other schools are maintained by Buddhist organizations, and practice is considered a means of stilling the mind-much of training time is taken up in meditation. Breakaway factions have emerged, becoming more publicized abroad than in Korea. Most notable among these factions are the

Hwa Rang Do and Kuk Sool Won, both of which now claim lineages going back hundreds of years.

I recently had the opportunity to view a long video tape of a Korean national demonstration of Ju Sool Kwan hapkido. Although the techniques and styles of different groups within this federation varied, I believe that one could easily recognize all of the participants as belonging to a single tradition-colored, as it were, by the personality of the founder, and of the art.

Many of the demonstrations had a theatrical flair with broken bricks and boards, and dramatic footwork: crescent kicks, double hitch kicks, and flying side kicks. There was an emphasis on use of the belt and cane as weapons of self-defense, unarmed defenses against shinai and knife, and many self-defense moves from a chair.

There was frequently an attempt to show the techniques in as brutal a light as possible. Sequences were usually decided with a joint lock or throw. Younger teachers, hopeful of selection in the Presidential guard, perhaps, or merely intent on showing their power, deliberately threw their partners at awkward angles, sometimes directly on their head or neck. The ukes, for their part, grunted, moaned, even screamed in pain when locking techniques were applied, and although this was in part for the benefit of the audience, several were injured so severely that they had to be helped off the stage.

Mr. Garrison informed me that this theatrical performance is typical of demonstrations in Korea, but is antithetical to behavior in the dojang (dojo), where a stoic calm and quiet acceptance of pain is the norm, and practice, although quite rough at times, is not done in the brutal-seeming way of the demonstrations I observed.

Most non-Koreans have an image of hapkido derived partly from the movies (several prominent action stars including Hong Kong's Angela Mao and Boo Soong Han in America are hapkido practitioners-perhaps some readers will remember the painfully politically correct Billy Jack movies) and from martial arts magazines and demonstrations. However, the techniques that are shown in both of these venues are the most spectacular, and that includes dynamic crescent and flying kicks, whirling leg sweeps, and punches leading into judo-like throws. Only occasionally are locking techniques shown in any detail, and these, too, are often done in a showy manner which is furthest from hapkido's own mainstream.

It is also an unfortunate truth that many of the practitioners who claim to be teaching hapkido, particularly outside of Korea, have earned their ranks through less than honorable means. Legitimate instructors are few. Thus, it has been difficult for many of us who are outside the hapkido family to realize just how close hapkido technique can be to both Daito-ryu and aikido, because we have not had the chance to see top-level instructors.

It was quite striking to me in viewing the aforementioned video, and even more so, in observing a recent demonstration by Mr. Garrison, that joint locking techniques and kokyu-nage throws form a major part of the curriculum. Quite a few countries have techniques for locking joints

and grappling. Notable are those in China (generically known as chin'na), and Indonesia/Malaysia (as part of pentjak silat). In the arts of both these countries, however, the way of rooting the body, and of using the limbs, torso, and hips to direct power into the technique are quite different from the methods that are common to both Daito-ryu and aikido.

This way of aligning the body and coordinating one's movement is also different from either judo or karate, both of which could have had an influence on hapkido due to their incorporation into the Korean education system before the Second World War. It is true that hapkido has some throws which appear to be derived from judo, and has some punching and kicking techniques which may, in part, be influenced by karate, but the majority of the locks and throws as well as the taisabaki (movements to displace the body out of the line of attack and in a position to effectively attack one's opponent) are nearly identical to those of aikido. In fact, if one took the video, and erased the lead-in techniques of kicks, blocks and punches, and changed the clothing of the participants to Japanese-style keiko gi and hakama, then the remaining techniques would look like an extremely rugged form of aikido.

Hapkido's "mood" and way of presenting itself seems to be from another world entirely, and many of its techniques are alien, not only to the Daito-ryu line, but to all Japanese martial arts. It is certainly true that hapkido has also incorporated many techniques from both native Korean and Chinese sources. However, this "alien" character is primarily derived, I believe, from the fact that Korean people see combat, demonstrations, and martial arts practice very differently than Japanese people do, and therefore it is natural that they both structure and perform their martial arts differently. Nonetheless, based on the way the core techniques of locks and throws are performed, I am convinced that hapkido is derived from Daito-ryu.

This "categorical opinion" is prompted by another video I recently viewed, that of Katsuyuki Kondo Sensei's Daito-ryu. I have observed Daito-ryu over the years, and I find it a most singular art. Although it is classified as a koryu (old martial tradition), it is quite unlike any other remaining jujutsu school in Japan. One of the most significant differences is the number of kata-literally hundreds of elaborations of grappling and locking techniques. The almost minute delineation of technique is quite unusual among old martial arts, particularly when concerning hand-to-hand unarmed combat. Unarmed techniques were almost always a small subset of techniques in a much larger body of kata concerned with combat with weapons. A second difference is the almost rococo nature of the kata-there is often an almost circus-like atmosphere (common in most offshoot schools of Daito-ryu as well), in both the dramatic arching throws, and those in which a person is locked to submission, and then a second limb is locked, then a third, and then sometimes, while still locking the first individual, a second or third person may attack, to be immediately locked and piled on the one(s) below. Finally, there is the reversal of roles, now common in modern martial arts, in which the sensei or senior is tori (the one who throws or wins), and where the junior is uke (the one who is pinned or loses). Unlike Daito-ryu, almost all other koryu insist that the one in the teaching position takes falls. Instruction takes place as the teacher sets the situation up so that it is necessary for the student to be working at the limit of their capabilities in order to "win."

There is actually a moment on the Daito-ryu film where Kondo Sensei takes a fall for his student to illustrate a point, and good-naturedly has to stop the demonstration to catch his breath, having had the wind knocked out of him. I mention this not to criticize Kondo Sensei, who is clearly maintaining the tradition of Daito-ryu's methods for what is, at the least, its third generation from Takeda Sokaku Sensei, but to note how different Daito-ryu is from other koryu jujutsu.

Daito-ryu has an extremely long and elaborate curriculum, the memorization alone of which would take decades. This suggests that Daito-ryu, despite the rigor of many of its techniques, was not a warfare art, as battlefield combat is taught far more economically. It was developed, or at least revised and embellished in peacetime, for peacetime use. Daito-ryu was made by an individual who seems to have had an almost obsessive desire to elaborate every possible way one human being could pin or lock another into submission. This elaboration is so extensive that I believe many individuals, although not "staying the distance" to master the entire curriculum could, after a number of years, absorb inclusive principles which would enable them to "distill a tincture" of Daito-ryu in their own martial art. Most of the significant successors to Daito-ryu, including such individuals as Seigo Okamoto of the Daito-ryu Roppokai, Ryuho Okuyama of Hakko-ryu, Kotaro Yoshida (at least as passed down by his putative second generation successor, Don Angier) and most significantly, Morihei Ueshiba of aikido and Yong Sool Choi of hapkido, abandoned the Daito-ryu kata, as well as many of the more dramatic and unrealistic techniques. Despite their many differences, elaborations of approximately ten to twelve techniques are among the core techniques of all of these arts (ikkyo-gokyo, kotegaeshi, shihonage, irimi/kokyu/tenchi-nage, juji-garami, koshinage, and kokyuho). These techniques are practiced in a somewhat flowing way, without the ritualistic and rather stilted form of Daito-ryu kata. Those who left Daito-ryu did so for a variety of reasons, but each, on a technical level, seems to have altered the art in much the same way simplifying technique, and emphasizing principle over minute variations. And yet, aikido and hapkido, although bearing clear similarities, are very different arts. For those in the aikido world troubled by what they see as aikido's insufficiencies as a system of hand-to-hand combat, hapkido offers the other side of the mirror. Iriminage, for example, is done with a knuckle pressing into nerve centers under the cheekbone, and painful pressure points are attacked all over the body. Kicks can land with bone-crushing force, and techniques are often decided with a finishing blow rather than a simple pin. If one is concerned that one's aikido lacks pure combat effectiveness, at least in a street-fighting situation, there is another art "in the family" which, while holding roughly the same technical roots, cannot be attacked on the same grounds.

For my part, I anticipate a continued association with Mr. Garrison and other legitimate hapkido practitioners, and I look forward to all I can learn from them. However, I have no intention of confusing these two arts-aikido and hapkido. I am not speaking of better or worse; I am speaking of difference. As I have written before, almost every martial art has a moral basis, sometimes of profound depth. As a senior hapkido student recently stated in a letter, "As the practitioner becomes more and more advanced, contact with the uke becomes less violent, less forceful, and less necessary. And thus, at the master level, hapkido and aikido tend to greatly resemble one another." However, unlike almost all other martial arts in which peace, a surprise

and revelation, lies at the end of a long and harsh road, aikido seems to require that aiki (harmonious spirit) be present as an explicit goal from the first day. The techniques one learns upon entering the dojo are the same as those learned on the last.

I am mystified and challenged by O-Sensei, a man who went to war, who obsessively trained both in bujutsu and austere religious rituals, and emerged, claiming that “aikido is the realization of love” and “aiki is not a technique to fight with or defeat an enemy. It is the way to reconcile the world and make human beings one family.” I would encourage readers to look at the photograph that has been printed several times on the back of this magazine, advertising O-Sensei’s films, in which he is in a tenkan movement with his wrist held by Kazuo Chiba. I would submit that there is nothing, anywhere, in any other martial art, that is expressing exactly what O-Sensei expresses here, with his perfect postural alignment, and open curved arms. Were someone to lay a sleeping baby in his arms, that infant would not wake. Yet this is where the “problem” of aikido lies, for O-Sensei himself trained much as that senior exponent of hapkido describes above, a method very different than that handed down to the followers of aikido. The question that still nags at me and drives me onward after all my years of training, both within aikido and outside its boundaries, is simply, “Is aikido the best way to learn aikido?”

When I practice my koryu, I make every effort to reach the spirit of the founders, who were born and died in a bloody era of survival. Such practice has both kept me safe, and enabled me to help and protect other people. But as I practice, I often stop and think, “What are you doing? There are millions of people, right this minute, slaughtering others using methods not too different from what you are practicing now.” I have found good reasons to continue my martial training, but I must be mindful of its pitfalls every time I practice. To paraphrase Nietzsche, if I begin to play with power too casually, it may begin all too casually to play with me.

When I ask if aikido is “for real,” I mean “Will aikido create, within me, what O-Sensei asserted was created and embodied within him?” The development of combat skills will probably always be an interest of mine, but such concerns are relevant only in so far as their execution keeps me safe so that I can ask truly important questions. Thus, in my heart of hearts, I deeply desire that all my studies lead me to be able to stand in as elegant and perfect a posture of welcome and protection as the old man in the photograph. Strong, open, at peace.

Ellis Amdur, a crisis intervention specialist in Seattle, and the creator of ‘Therapeutic Self-Defense,’ began his martial arts training in 1968. Since that time he has spent 13 years in Japan, and now holds the mokuroku menjo and shihan-dai licenses in Araki-ryu Torite Kogusogu, and okuden (betsu mokuroku) and shihan menjo in Toda-ha Buko-ryu naginatajutsu. Amdur is 3rd dan in aikido and is also active in Ch’en family t’ai chi di’uan.