Inneres Boxen
Interview with Torsten Kanzmeier
The Evolution of the Human Hand
The Matayoshi Family and Kingai Ryu
MISSION STATEMENT

Meibukan Magazine is an initiative of founders Lex Opdam and Mark Hemels. Aim of this web-based magazine is to spread the knowledge and spirit of the martial arts. In a non-profitable manner Meibukan Magazine draws attention to the historical, spiritual and technical background of the oriental martial arts. Starting point are the teachings of Okinawan karate-do. As ‘House of the Pure Martial Arts’, however, Meibukan Magazine offers a home to the various authentic martial arts traditions.

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Editor in chief
Lex Opdam

Editorial Board
Matthew Jones / Iwan Meij / Michael den Tandt

Art directors
Lex Opdam / Iwan Meij

Contributors
Guido Sleddens / Fred Lohse / Kevin Secours / Lex Opdam

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CONTACT

MEIBUKAN MAGAZINE
P.O. Box 8, 6663 ZG, Lent, Netherlands
Email: sub@meibukanmagazine.org
Url: WWW.MEIBUKANMAGAZINE.ORG

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Do we beat around the bush or cut to the chase…

For years now I have witnessed a battle within the world of martial arts concerning things such as right of ownership, origin, responsibility, interpretation, right of existence, systems, traditions, persons and schools. A struggle as old as mankind itself, but unfortunately one that ultimately ends up spreading discord, reflecting nothing of the unifying nature of the practice of the martial arts.

Although conflicts are often fought in plain view, there are also those that take place in a shadowy realm of hidden motives, sly manipulation and indoctrination covering several levels and taking on different guises.

Conflict and struggle are a part of life, or are at the very least conceived to be. However, should not that precisely be the reason for the martial artist to stand up and take action on his or her path? Action that expresses humanity instead of reverting to the animal-like state of the beast dominating its prey at any cost, blindly using whatever it deems necessary to obtain its objective regardless of the consequences.

In my opinion, there is a lot of preaching going on within the martial arts community when it comes to seeking the truth, teaching you to follow specific dogma’s, philosophical knowledge and physical techniques to enlighten you in discovering your ultimate path. Is it not then the connections we make ourselves and the relationships that we enter into that inspire us to reflect and to draw our own conclusions and also determine our own truth?

Despite the discussions in this edition of Meibukan Magazine ranging from the evolution of man to dissolving pressure, in the end we as humans and martial artists remain part of that evolution and must take a deep look into our own mirror to be able to reflect on the connections surrounding us and to dissolve the pressure emanating from them. The dojo offers us this magnificent opportunity to strengthen each other in our search and to connect with each other and ourselves. These connections, this sense of helping each other to discover and deal with what lies hidden beneath the surface, this should deserve our focus, this should be the home of our efforts guiding us away from paths of distraction that lead to destructive behavior and senseless struggle.

Lex Opdam
Editor in chief

“I take the pressure away”

Torsten Kanzmeier’s Inneres Boxen

Intriguing principles that seemingly conflict with all you know might just give you that extra edge. Torsten Kanzmeier explains how unpredictable movement takes the pressure away by applying the principle of ‘never going against’.

- by Guido Sleddens-

Martial arts are systems of codified practices and traditions of training for combat. While they may be studied for various reasons, martial arts share a single objective: to physically defeat other persons and to defend oneself or others from physical threat. In addition, some martial arts are linked to beliefs such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism and such while others follow a code of honor. Many arts are also practiced competitively, most commonly as combat sports, but may also take the form of dance.

In popular culture, the term “martial art” often is taken to refer to a combat system that originated in Asia. However, the term actually refers to any codified combat system, regardless of origin. Europe is home to many systems of martial arts, for example. Jogo de Pau, stick and sword fencing and Savate.

While each style has unique facets that make it different from other martial arts, a common characteristic is the systemization of fighting techniques.

In this literal sense, Inneres Boxen, or Lei gong Nei Quan (a Chinese translation of “Torsten’s Internal Boxing”) is not a martial art. It is not “an art made of systemized fighting techniques.”

Inneres Boxen is the expression of a principle, the principle of “never going against”.

Perhaps the most challenging situation in which to explore this principle of ‘never going against’ is in conflict. Conflict presupposes opposing positions, fixed viewpoints where there are resistance, fear and aggression. Traditionally people have sought solutions for these challenging situations. These solutions were based on the way we were thinking at the time, the way we saw the world and everything around us; the way our instincts told us to act and react; fight or flight. The deepest parts of our brains are designed to ensure our survival by compelling us to destroy our fellow humans the moment they want to take what is ours. Our mental software is based on the idea of “survival of the fittest.”

So ‘never going against’ seems at first glance to be an alien approach to a combat situation. It goes against everything we know. Interestingly enough it is also the environment in which the real power of the principle is to be found.

‘Never going against’ is simple but profound. It challenges us again and again to look at martial arts and fighting in a completely new way. It invites us to look at the way we think, at the way we are brought up to think, at how we deal with other people and subsequently at how we fight.

Most martial arts are based on learning how to react to an attack; how to survive, how to be strong, tough and prepared for anything coming our way. The impulse
of the defensive movement arises from, or is initiated by, the attack. That is what we usually call “self-defense.”

Systematized fighting techniques are subsequently based on possible attacks of one or more opponents. Various counter attack sequences are then studied and mastered. More recently popularized systems promote practicing the “instinctive reactions of the body” so that one may move as naturally as possible (as in Systema). The impulse for the movement though is always created by the attacker. If we let our movements be initiated by the attacker, we already give away our power.

“If we let our movements be initiated by the attacker, we already give away our power.”

In Inneres Boxen Torsten Kanzmeier takes it a step further. Rather than react to the attack, he moves in such a way that there is no one to attack. All movement is based on dissolving the pressure so that there is no reference point for an attacker to work with. The fight has ended before it started. If there is no one to attack, the attack collapses upon itself. To be more precise; he does not first offer a point of attack, as in most Taiji quan practices where one leads like a matador offering his red coat to the bull. Instead the attacker’s intention is already in his awareness before the movement is initiated. As there is no resistance against any intention, his movement is never in reaction to anything his ‘opponent’ does.

“All movement is based on dissolving the pressure so that there is no reference point for an attacker to work with. The fight has ended before it started.”

By dissolving the pressure from under the feet, you no longer project pressure in the environment.

An attack is in that sense a form of “broken movement”. In Lei Gong Nei Quan, Inneres Boxen we use “unbroken movement”: movement without starting and stopping, but continuous movement initiated by dissolving the pressure gravity is creating on our body.

Ideally the first movement in the combat situation is thus always initiated by the Leig Gong Nei Quan practitioner, therewith expressing the principle of ‘unbroken movement’. In this way Inneres Boxen is much more than a martial art, it is a practice and way to live an authentic life. One stands on one’s own feet and is not reacting to the world, but rather deliberately creating in the world.

In a normal fighting contest we are trying to trick the other person with certain movements, evasions and fake attacks. In Inneres Boxen a similar principle is applied but on a completely different level.

This special art of movement is designed to create “high level fakes” as MMA and BJJ fighter Bjorn Friedrich describes it. The “feeling of being faked” is a result of the fact that the normal reference points and normal relationship are being altered by the Lei Gong Nei Quan practitioner. It is very unusual to be in the presence of someone who is continuously dissolving the pressure in a situation where you (unconsciously) expect it.

As this movement of changing the reference points is an internal movement, the untrained eye cannot discern it and it will be experienced as if something completely unexpected happened.

To understand this one has to feel (become aware of) the connection between an attack and the accompanying “pressure” in the form of mental and or physical contraction. If one is issuing an attack it means one is pushing oneself off against the ground (to begin a movement), against someone’s presence and in particular against someone’s intention. An attack is in that sense a reactive movement that can be observed as a form of pressure, or contraction with a distinct beginning and an ending.

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Sometimes the people undergoing the techniques of Torsten Kanzmeier start to justify and explain that they were not prepared to counter the blow or throw. Usually one creates reference points to place an attack. One visualizes a point to hit against, one continuously measures the space around oneself, the distance to objects in the surroundings. One measures the location of the other person, and one predicts movement all on an unconscious level of awareness. All these measurements are based on pressure, as most people move with pressure, by opposing the force of gravity.

We are so used to live and work with pressure-based movement that if someone all of a sudden dissolves pressure in the relationship, one is completely off balance for a moment. The body constantly reacts and responds to the observations one unconsciously makes by tensing up and relaxing. Most of this body movement cannot be controlled, as one has not enough awareness of it. This can easily be experienced when you watch people looking at a scary movie; you see their body tension changing all the time. Or when you start to notice the subtle reactions in your body when you are around aggressive people. This constant adjusting and changing of muscle tension in the body is the level on which Inneres Boxen operates. When a Lei Gong Nei Quan practitioner starts to move around in your space, you start to feel strange and unusual. You realize this person is moving in a different way, but you cannot discern what is happening. At that moment the damage is already done. The defensive reflex is down and the technique is already applied and you find yourself at the effect of it.

“Vous réalisez que cette personne est en mouvement de manière différente, mais vous ne pouvez pas discerner ce qui se passe. À ce moment précis, le dommage est déjà fait.”

Just as the traditional martial arts are often connected with religions and modes of conduct, Inneres Boxen is deeply connected with expressing human values such as respect, appreciation, truth and love. As these values are natural qualities any person expresses as soon as they give up resisting and reacting to the world around them. In this way Inneres Boxen (Lei Gong Nei Quan) brings a person quickly to their own self, to the authentic expression of who they really are. Because all pressure and resistance is constantly being dissolved these natural human qualities start to shine through. Working with Torsten Kanzmeier means that you will be addressed on this level; as your normal defenses drop, you start to become more aware and more present. The body movement and the personality are deeply connected. The person and the body are in effect one and the same.

Working on dissolving the pressure in the body and in movement has a liberating effect on the personality; our defenses start to drop and we start to get more into “feel”. Enhancing the feeling of awareness of the individual is one of the most dramatic effects of Inneres Boxen.

As described above, dissolving pressure in ourselves takes away reference points that are expected to be there for an attacker. One of the unexpected results is that the attacker experiences he suddenly has lost the intent to act – the grounds or motivation behind his impulse to attack have suddenly disappeared!

This happens, again, on an unconscious level, before one has the ability to notice and/or correct it. By that time, the attacker finds him or herself already on the floor, or experiences the deep impact of a blow. The reason why one is not quick enough to react and adjust oneself to the moment Torsten Kanzmeier moves in, is because different parts of the brain are involved in the process. The conscious brain is too slow to react to the unconscious impulses created by the alternative way of moving Torsten Kanzmeier applies. The unconscious impulses are observed by the mirror neurons in the brain and steer all of our unconscious movement very directly. The conscious mind is too slow to react because the impulses start to travel only after one has become aware of the movement and after one has decided to make a counter movement. Only then the impulses can travel to the limbs over a relatively long distance from the brain to the limbs. To clearly understand this, please read the Lei Gong Nei Quan handbook.

“These principles are certainly not new. They are described in the classical writings of Taiji Quan but are hard to interpret because of the mystifying concepts the Chinese like to use.”

These principles are certainly not new. They are described in the classical writings of Taiji Quan but are hard to interpret because of the mystifying concepts the Chinese like to use. To begin to look at fighting from this perspective one needs to be open to explore ways that seem to be very weak and soft and not functional at first. This challenges everything we know about impact, force and effectiveness. Just as we get addicted to feeling the pumped up muscles after weight training, to tell ourselves we are making progress, we are addicted to receiving the feedback of our strong punches as we strike a bag. Most of us are also addicted to the feeling of being better, of winning and beating another person. To let go of these needs on a deep level opens us up to the experience of being effortless in the movement. Suddenly our opponent fell to the ground without us “doing anything.”

We feel like we did not use any force, we were just moving as if with no intention to put someone down. It feels this way because we are so conditioned...
to expect resistance, to expect some pressure to overcome. When someone drops to the floor just because we want them to and direct them for the first time, it is a very weird experience. This may be the greatest challenge in learning this art: To overcome our preconceived ideas about being “better,” “more powerful” and “winning”. Not going against, not resisting but including, is a universal principle.

“...this may be the greatest challenge in learning this art: To overcome our preconceived ideas about being “better,” “more powerful” and “winning”.

Not building up pressure, but dissolving it. Not going against gravity, but using it to create pure movement. Not going against the other’s but “including” them. Not using muscle power and body weight, but feeling awareness and intention to create free movements with deep impact.

If we look into the idea of “never going against” we start exploring and are actually taking the position that Torsten always takes when he teaches his art. He invites his students to look and look again at what they are doing. His approach quickly leads to the experience of what is traditionally meant by “mind boxing”: “To directly experience that the mind is leading the body and is creating the next moment as it affects, influences and possibly directs the mind and body of the other.

His internal style of martial art can be defined as a continuous exploration of the mechanics of movement of body and mind. The two are not separated and cannot be truly understood if not studied as a whole.

So, how does this work?

If we consider our physical reality, we are constantly dealing with the greatest force on the planet: gravity. For most people this force is taken for granted. If we look again at what is actually happening, we are constantly being affected by this force. Most of us resist this force on an unconscious level. If you study the way people move you can see that most of us are trying to overcome this force (felt as weight) by pushing ourselves off the floor. We are constantly in reaction to the force of gravity.

This ‘reactive’ behaviour has led us down a road of resistance, pressure, weight and inertia. It has become our habit to resist. This habitual way of being has an incredible impact on our thinking and the way in which we perceive the world. We have become used to limited ourselves also in our thinking, and to resisting whatever we encounter. We have learned to better ourselves at the expense of others, to conquer and defeat others, and to find our place in the world by going against others that seem to be in our way. We have come to the idea that if we become “a tough guy” and prepare ourselves well, we can handle any attack. We have studied to toughen our body, block our emotions and be harder than the rest. Of course this leads to results, but at what cost?

In the training of Inneres Boxen the purpose is to challenge the student to look exactly in the place where he is creating his defenses, resistance and pressure. How the impact of his techniques is limited by the way he thinks. By studying his movement, he starts to understand how his movement is connected to the way he is thinking. To be able to do this, one has to “feel,” to gain some awareness of how we build up our resistances and how we are constantly “pushing others away,” as we react to everything around us.

The ideas are certainly not new. What is unusual is to have an individual who can show and transmit this knowledge without any “Qi force hocus pocus”. Everything is to be understood through the continuous exploration of movement and thinking and by opening up our feeling awareness so that we can “take the pressure away.”

The effectiveness of Inneres Boxen is to be found in the fact that punches and kicks cannot be stopped and drive deeply into the tissue of the opponent’s body. The defensive reflex is bypassed, and people find themselves on the floor, pinned in a way that they cannot explain. The practitioner always remains light and playful and the practice of the art leads to physical and mental wellbeing.

Starting with the very first movement, the very first step, we can either push ourselves off the floor or dissolve the feeling or pressure and weight under the soles of our feet. This is the basic movement in Inneres Boxen. The dissolving is created by visualizing the pressure to melt away. There are several good visualization techniques that should be practiced. What happens is that by using these visualizations, the body responds and one can overcome the conditioned reactions the body has on gravity. For our brains it does not matter what input we get; it just translates the information we put in to a certain kind of body tension or body alignment. Our body tension is created by our conscious and unconscious mental activity. Most of it is created by the subconscious mind. With Lei Gong Nei Quan we are working with this part of the mind, thereby influencing ourselves and the people around us on that level.

Instead of starting and stopping as we move against gravity, or try to deal with it, we constantly dissolve the pressure under our feet. As we do this there is a natural impulse in the body that creates a light and free movement. It immediately changes our experience of everything around us and creates and lightness of being.

This physical state has a liberating effect on our thought process. As a result different kinds of thoughts enter our minds. We get new and inspiring ideas. We start to think beyond our “normal”...
way of thinking. Scientific research has showed us that we think more than 90% of the same thoughts every day. To start thinking “outside the box”, or outside of our day to day thinking we start to evolve and grow as a human being. Along with the physical unbroken movement, a kind of mental unbroken movement expresses itself as inspiration and creative thinking that can easily be linked with others. In a group of Inneres Boxen practitioners we begin to see this linking, as the resistance among each other diminishes, we start to feel each others presence on a deeper level and we start to see that we can predict each others actions and finish each others sentences…The physical practice of Inneres Boxen in a group creates a connection and link on the mental level and leads to a situation of creative and inspirational co-creation. As the awareness of resistance and pressure increases and one has the experience of dissolving it in the moment, the participants become open to spontaneous brainstorming. Situations that are explored are looked at from multiple dimensions. In this way Inneres Boxen training creates a fertile environment for the development of new ideas that take us beyond our indoctrinated hierarchical thinking patterns.

For more information about Torsten Kanzmeier and Inneres Boxen please visit www.inneres-boxen.com

Guido Sleddens, Guido Sleddens (1959) is a Trainer/Coach. He started studying martial arts with Aikido in highschool and soon after that began studying everything that was available back then including kickboxing, Taiji, boxing, Kempo and Goju-ryu karate (he earned several black belts in Kempo and Goju Ryu Karate), Hung Kuen, Bagua and Qigong. Peter Ralston was a big influence, “I always searched for real ‘effortless power’ but had my breakthrough by studying consciousness in different traditions: “the body needs to practice and gets old, No Mind is the Master”. Meeting Torsten in 2008 was great; his way is simple and consistent. We work together teaching his principles in business environments (www.walk-your-talk.com).
Fred Lohse explores the mysterious Kingai-ryu, guiding us through its history and shedding light on its relationship with other Okinawan martial arts.

- by Fred Lohse -

The “mysterious” Kingai-ryu is referenced in a variety of ways in the existing literature on the Okinawan martial arts. It has been treated as the progenitor of Goju-ryu, a sister system to Uechi-ryu, a Chinese crane system, and more commonly as the empty-hand system of the Matayoshi tradition. In reality, it is none of these things. While actual information on the system is rather scarce, this article is an attempt to dispel some of the myths about Kingai-ryu, and its connection to the Okinawan martial arts. It draws on written documents about the system published by the Kodokan dojo in Okinawa, the practice of the “unarmed” arts passed down in the Matayoshi tradition, and conversations and interviews with a number of people familiar with the system(s). While this article is not meant to be definitive, as much of the secrecy and “mystery” around the system remains (and is perhaps even less penetrable since the death of Shinpo Matayoshi), it is meant to shed more light on a virtually undocumented portion of Okinawa’s martial culture.

The most common understanding of Kingai-ryu is that it is the unarmed art passed down in the Matayoshi tradition, and conversations and interviews with a number of people familiar with the system(s). While this article is not meant to be definitive, as much of the secrecy and “mystery” around the system remains (and is perhaps even less penetrable since the death of Shinpo Matayoshi), it is meant to shed more light on a virtually undocumented portion of Okinawa’s martial culture.

The most common understanding of Kingai-ryu is that it is the unarmed art passed down in the Matayoshi tradition, stemming from the instruction Shinko Matayoshi received from Roshi Kingai, his teacher in China. However, this initial assumption is incorrect. The Kingai-ryu as taught by Roshi Kingai is not a solely unarmed style; it includes the use of weaponry, such as the nunti, tinbe, suruchin, and shuriken. Additionally, there is more than one art with an unarmed element that the Matayoshi family preserved but did not commonly teach, making the Kingai-ryu only part of the “unarmed” portion of the Matayoshi legacy. To further confuse matters, one way the family referred to their martial tradition is Kingai-ryu Matayoshi Kobudo, or Kingai system Matayoshi traditional weapon arts. This would mean that everything under the Matayoshi umbrella is Kingai-ryu, whether it came from Roshi Kingai or not. However, for this article I will treat the term Kingai-ryu as that element of the Matayoshi tradition that stems specifically from what Shinko Matayoshi learned from Roshi Kingai in Fuchow.

Kingai-ryu Tode Jutsu
金硬流唐手術
Shinko Matayoshi traveled to Fuchow on the recommendation of his friend Kenki Go, arriving sometime around 1907-08. In Fuchow, he took up residence with Koki Go, Kenki Go’s father. Koki Go soon introduced Shinko to a friend and fellow martial artist, Roshi Kingai. Kingai is said to have been a well known martial artist in the Fuchow area, and is supposed to have been a senior to the same Shu Shi Wa (Zhou Zeihe) that was Kanbun Uechi’s teacher in Fuchow.1 Kingai referred to his system as Kingai-ryu, and referred to the characters comprising the name in the following manner: “Kin refers to supplely reacting to change, while Gai refers to a steel like hardness”. Together they refer to hard and soft as one.2 The reading for Kin, which is usually translated as gold, money, or metal, is rather idiosyncratic, perhaps based on a personal understanding of the name. The system was also referred to as a Golden Bird style by Shinko Matayoshi, connecting the Kin (gold) character to it in a different way.

With some breaks, including travel to Taiwan, some travel around China, trips back to Okinawa and Japan, and a period of around 10 years during which he lived back in Okinawa (from the early 1920’s), Shinko studied with Roshi Kingai from about 1909 or 1910 to 1935, when he finally returned to Okinawa for good. In addition to martial arts, he also studied Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and moxabustion with Kingai. Before he finally left for Okinawa in 1935, Roshi Kingai presented him with two scrolls, the upper and lower, that detailed Kingai-ryu’s bushin (god of military arts or patron saint), Roshi Komyo Taigen (Guangming Da Yuanshuai, or Generalissimo Guangming).3 Roshi Komyo Taigen is seen as a Buddhist saint (bodhisattva). He symbolizes wisdom, a knowledge of the evil passions inherent in human nature, the imparting of the light of Buddhism’s virtue and the protection of the 18 arhats, as well as the need to stay true to these teachings. The family still holds Roshi Komyo Taigen’s...
scrolls, which represent Shinko’s mastery of Kingai’s system. Unfortunately the content of these scrolls has never been made public.

The system itself appears to be a Fujianese Tiger-Crane system. Sanchin is the base kata, and central to it. The entire list of kata, as published by the Kodokan and Matayoshi family after the death of Shinpo Matayoshi, can be seen in figure 1.

As can be seen from this list, a number of the kata are common to other systems in Okinawa, including Sanchin, Sesan, Gojushiho, and Wankan. How close these kata are to the other versions on Okinawa is somewhat unclear, however they are not identical. Bishop (1989, pp. 150) states that the Sesan in the system is identical to Uechi Ryu’s, but having personally seen the Kingai Sesan, I disagree. There are some similarities in pattern and technique choice, particularly the extensive use of open hand attacks, but the kata is most assuredly not identical. According to Bishop (1989, pp. 150) states that the Sesan in the system is identical to Uechi Ryu’s, but having personally seen the Kingai Sesan, I disagree. There are some similarities in pattern and technique choice, particularly the extensive use of open hand attacks, but the kata is most assuredly not identical. As another example, the late Sensei Seikichi Odo taught a version of Gojushiho taught to him by Shinpo Matayoshi that he called Gojushiho Ichi. He also taught a Kyan lineage Gojushiho, as Gojushiho Ni. The Matayoshi Gojushiho has some similarities to the other versions on Okinawa, which stem from Sokon Matsumura, but is in most ways a very different kata. I do not know if there are any similarities between the Matayoshi Gojushiho and the other versions on Okinawa, although there may be some similarities in the applica-

This leaves us with a variety of possibilities regarding the primogeniture of these kata: that there is actually an Okinawan source for them, that they were common Chinese kata that were imported into Okinawa, that these names for kata were common in Okinawa and/or Fujian, or of course something else entirely. The connection to a variety of Okinawan martial arts does seem obvious however. In any case, the system includes a variety of empty hand and armed kata, emphasizes open hand and knuckle strikes, and is not identical to any of Okinawa’s extant karate systems. It also contains instruction on vital point striking (kyusho).

Shinko’s training under Kingai is said to have been quite severe. However, Shinko treasured the opportunity to learn the art from such an accomplished master, and steeped himself in the training, as well as in the Chinese medicine he was studying. The art master Kingai taught was based on certain core teachings, including kata study and much work with the applications of the kata. One of the “secrets” of the system was “daninpo”, a method for striking a person. This particular method of striking is related to human physiology. It starts with an understanding of the vital points of the vital points on the human body, and is considered a killing art, intended solely for actual combat.

Included in this method is “kida”, a method of striking the opponent by utilizing his energy (ki). It is also called kokyu-daho, which means to strike the opponent in time with his breathing. According to the system, the appropriate attack for these points is usually with the fingertip or the point of a one knuckle strike. It would appear that Roshi Kingai’s instruction was not a simple pugilistic method, but also included medicine,
written elements, and of course the armed and unarmed skills of the system. Along with the physical instruction, the secrets of this method were transmitted to Shinko through the use of three-ideogram poems. In many ways, this type of instruction is very different from that of the more tightly focused systems, systems which often cover empty handed combat alone, that are common to Okinawa today.

It is, not surprisingly, unclear where this system came from. If, for instance, Kingai was a senior to Shiwa Shu, why is the system so different from what Kanbun Uechi was taught? Who were both Kingai and Shu students of? Was the system created by Kingai? If so, that would explain the name, as well as possibly explain the variant explanation of the characters. But what did he study before he founded his own system? It seems to be based in Fujianese Tiger-Crane boxing, but what lineage? How is it connected to other Okinawan systems? To other Chinese roots of Okinawan systems? The kata imply that there is a connection to both Nafadi and Suidi, but again it is unclear what that connection is. Unfortunately, these and other questions are likely to remain unanswered, as with the death of Shinko Matayoshi the transmission of the complete system has likely been lost.

Kingai-ryu’s historical connections to Okinawa’s martial heritage seem extensive, if somewhat vague. On a more modern level, the expression of Roshi Kingai’s teachings in the Matayoshi Kobudo is a core element of the system, even if the empty hand kata were not taught as part of it. Therefore, through the impact the Matayoshi kobudo has had on the Okinawan martial arts and the large number of Okinawan martial artists familiar with it, there is also a deep influence on modern Okinawan karate coming from the Kingai-ryu.

But in looking at the Kingai-ryu, it is also important not to elide it with other elements of the Matayoshi tradition. While not taught publicly, the Matayoshi family also maintained another martial tradition, one that had a huge influence on the development of Okinawan karate in the 20th century, and one that was separate from the Kingai-ryu.

Shorin Ha Tsuru Ken, Kenki Go Lineage 少林派鶴拳 (呉賢貴伝来)
As a young man, Shinko Matayoshi began his studies of Chinese martial arts under his friend, Kenki Go (1887-1940), Wu Hein Kui in Chinese. Go was a Fujianese man who possibly moved to Okinawa in 1912, at the age of 26. Go was a Fujianese man who possibly moved to Okinawa in 1912, at the age of 26. He was working for an Okinawan named Masatada Gima at his tea-shop, the Senshun Kai, in Naha’s Higashi Machi district, but in 1913 he opened his own shop, the Eiko Tea Company.

Go took the Japanese name Sakaki Yoshikawa and married an Okinawan woman, Makato Yoshikawa; they had a daughter named Toyo Yoshikawa. Go was also a teacher of Southern Shaolin Crane Boxing.

Shinko’s trip to China was in part inspired by Kenki Go’s stories of the martial arts there. As noted above, the family history relates that Go encouraged him to travel, and gave him both a recommendation and an address to go to in Fuchow. There, after a long journey, Shinko ended up at the Go family home, which was in Suibukanmae machi, Minami-dai, Fuchow city, in Fujian province. There he was taken in by Koki Go, Kenki Go’s father. Koki Go was also a teacher of Fujian Crane fist, and began teaching the young Shinko. This relationship would eventually lead to Shinko’s introduction to Kingai-roshi, a friend of Koki Go’s. Shinko trained with Koki Go until he started training with Kingai, and maintained his practice of the Go family white crane throughout his life.

The Matayoshi connection to Kenki Go’s crane kempo would not stop with Shinko however. Shinko began instructing his son, Shinpo, in the sys-
tem when he was very young. Later, in 1935, after Shinko had returned to Okinawa for good, he introduced his son to his old friend Kenki Go, and Shinpo studied with him until Kenki Go’s death in 1940.

In the years since Shinko had first studied with him, Go had been moving in the highest circles of Okinawan karate, participating in the famous Kenkyu-kai Tode with Chojun Miyagi, Juhatsu Kyoda, Kenwa Mabuni, and other notable karate teachers. In part through this group Go had a huge impact on the Okinawan karate of his day. Versions of the kata he taught there are preserved in a number of Okinawan systems. Additionally, while there are no direct Kenki Go kata in Goju-ryu Go was also said to have had a deep effect on Chojun Miyagi’s martial arts. The two were good friends (Miyagi was also a friend of Shinko’s), and among other things traveled together to China, to research martial arts there.

Just what Crane lineage Kenki Go’s system was is unclear. Neither Kenki Go or his father left a written lineage, or described their teachers. Neither the Matayoshi family or other students of Go’s, like Shojo Itoman, Kenwa Mabuni, or Juhatsu Kyoda, have any records of who Go’s teachers were. According to the Liu family, who teach Feeding Crane in Taiwan, the Kakuho form resembles Flying Crane, but this is only a guess based on the form. Tokashiki (1995) considers it possible the Go family learned Singing Crane from its founder Xie Zongxian. It has also been suggested that Go learned Crane boxing from Shu Shiwai, who taught Kanbun Uechi. Shu supposedly knew Crane boxing as well as the Tiger boxing he taught Uechi. (See Wei et. al, 1998, pp. 221.)

The techniques and kata of Uechi-ryu and Kenki Go’s kempo seem to have very limited technical similarity however. Indeed, the system, despite similarities in kata names and some base technique, does not seem to be identical to any extant Crane system in China, at least to my knowledge. Nor is it similar to any extant Okinawan system. It is perhaps loosely connected to the Kingai-ryu, as Koki Go was a friend of Roshi Kingai and it seems likely his son knew him as well, but the systems do not share any kata. It has recent connections to many modern Okinawan karate styles, through Go’s participation in the kenkyukai. It may also have deeper historical connections to a number of Okinawan martial arts, through the connections between Go, Shu, Uechi, and Matayoshi (and possibly Ko Ryu-ryu and Higashionna). It can safely be assumed the Go family knew Shu, as he and their friend Kin-gai had trained together, and taught in the same town. It is also said that Kanbun Uechi and Kenki Go referred students to each other in Okinawa, and had known each other in China. (See McKenna, 2001, and Yagi Takami, 1977, pp.439.) However, what the actual connection was, and how it related to their training, is unknown.

Much like the Kingai-ryu, Go’s kempo is usually considered an unarmed system, however this is also incorrect, as it is a complete martial system, containing armed techniques as well. The content of the system, as published by the Matayoshi family, is listed in Figure 2. A number of these forms are still preserved in different Okinawan systems. Nepai is part of Juhatsu Kyoda’s Tou’on-ryu, and in its current performance maintains a strong similarity to the crane kata the Matayoshi family taught. As Nipaipo it is also preserved in Shito-ryu, though its presentation is

![Kenki Go in a crane posture. Kenwa Mabuni is to the rear left.](image1)

![Shinpo Matayoshi in a crane posture. Kodokan dojo, 1986.](image2)

![Shigekazu Kanzaki, headmaster of Tou’on-ryu, in a crane posture from Kenki Go’s Nepai.](image3)
much different. Happoren is also preserved in some Shito-ryu lineages.

Tsuruho, or crane method, has been passed on in a number of variations, under various names. It can be seen in Ryuei-ryu (Paiho), some Shito-ryu (Hakulu, Hakutsuru), possibly the Ryusans passed down by Chomo Hanashiro, and as an adjunct form in various other systems. The characters for the form can be read Kakuho or Tsuruho, but it has been referred to in a variety of ways, including Hakutsuru, Hakaku, Hakuchou, Kakufu, Okaku, and so on. The content of the kata also varies. The base pattern is usually visible, but with a large number of possible variations.

This variation may not be as unusual as it initially seems. Some have theorized that Go was experimenting with or creating the form when he was teaching it in the Kenkyukai, leading to the differences in different people’s kata. However, my instruction in the form also included a number of possible “alterations” - places where techniques could be added or modified while performing the kata. In looking at the methodology implied by the syllabus, the various White Crane Heiho forms imply a system based more on concept than overly didactic form. This is a different approach to kata than that normally seen nowadays, one emphasizing a certain creativity with the material, as well as a practice approach that emphasizes concept over form. This in turn would tie into both the variations possible in

the kata and the variations seen in different people’s performance of it. Instead of experiments or mistakes, the variations may instead be different iterations of the same principals.

This kata in particular seems to have grabbed the imagination of Okinawan karate practitioners, and their Western students. It is the form that Shinpo Matayoshi taught a number of his senior students, and has been demonstrated and taught by a number of them, in different iterations. It is also the empty-hand form Shinpo Matayoshi most often demonstrated. Since it comes from the Matayoshi family, it has also been referred to as Kingai-ryu Hakutsuru. This is in some ways a semantic issue, as depending on how you are referring to the Matayoshi family martial arts, they can all be considered Kingai-ryu, and therefore this is Kingai-ryu as well. However, the form originates in the Shorin Ha Tsuru Ken, Kenki Ko’s lineage.

Again, both the material and its presentation leave a number of questions. Shinpo Matayoshi did not teach the system publicly, and to my knowledge did not pass it down in its entirety to anyone. It seems none of Go’s other students did either. Just how Kenki Go taught, what training methods are included in the system, and so on is rather unclear. Unfortunately, with the death of Shinpo Matayoshi these questions are likely to remain unanswered. While Sensei Matayoshi seems to have taught more of this system, sharing Kakuhu in particular with many of his senior students over the years, the system in its entirety does not seem to have been passed down. Indeed, many portions of it, like the double swords, seem to be unknown on Okinawa today.

Other Material

Interestingly enough, an examination of the Kingai-ryu and Kenki Go’s Hakutsuru Kempo does not immediately cover the entirety of the Matayoshi unarmed tradition. Among the forms that Shinpo Matayoshi was famous for demonstrating were Monkey, Mantis, and Drunken forms. Given the syllabi listed in figures 1 & 2, where do these forms fit? Shinpo Matayoshi was never clear on this, at least not to me or my teachers. They could be part of Kenki Go’s White Crane Heiho forms, teaching certain elements of movement and technique included at different levels of instruction. They do not seem to fit in the Kingai-ryu syllabus anywhere, though they were referred to as Kingai-ryu at times by Shinpo Matayoshi (the nomenclature issues discussed above may hold true here as well). However Kingai’s junior Shu is known to have also practiced Monkey boxing, among other styles, and so these forms may have been passed down from their mutual teacher, as an adjunct to the Kingai-ryu, or as something Shinko picked up around Kingai’s students. Shinko Matayoshi also studied some form of Chinese Boxing in Shanghai for a time, and it is possible they come from whatever art he practiced there. They may also stem from the Matayoshi family kempo Shinko Matayoshi learned as a young man from his father and paternal grandfather, but again there is no record of what this kempo consisted of.

These forms, like so much of the unarmed material passed on in the Matayoshi family, remain somewhat of a mystery. They also do not seem to have been passed down to any of Shinpo Matayoshi’s students in any systematic manner.

Connections to Okinawan Karate

The various connections between these
systems -Kingai-ryu and Kenki Go’s kempo- and other Okinawan systems raise a number of questions about the Chinese progenitors of some Okinawan karate. Kenki Go’s family home is said to have been close to the Ryukyukan, where many Okinawan karate pioneers, people like Kanryo Higashionna and Kanbun Uechi, first stayed in Fuchow. Both Higashionna and Uechi are said to have trained at the Kojo dojo, at the Ryukyukan, but it is unclear just what system that dojo taught, or how it was connected to other local martial arts. It seems unlikely there would be martial artists in the same neighborhood who did not know each other, but both the Go family’s and Shiwa Shu’s connection to the Ryukyukan or the Kojo dojo (if any) is unclear, as is Roshi Kingai’s.

Going back further, to the 1830s or so, Sokon Matsumura is also said to have learned martial arts in Fuchow. What he studied is unknown, but he passed on the kata Gojushiho, Sesan, and supposedly a crane form. Given that he was an expatriate Okinawan, it seems possible he also had a connection to the Ryukyukan, and through it to the surrounding community. Certainly he practiced some form of martial arts in Fujian. The various iterations of Sesan across Okinawa imply, in their similarities, a connection between them. In particular the Goju, Tou’on, and Uechi versions are very similar in pattern, as are the Sanchin of the three systems. That these forms are also seen, in a recognizably similar form, in Kingai-ryu, a system that on the surface has no contact with other Okinawan systems, points towards a common root, probably based in Fuchow. That an earlier visitor to the area, Matsumura, passed on a Sesan that also demonstrates a clear connection to these forms, as well as other katas that share names and some technical similarities with kata in the Kingai-ryu, points at least to the possibility that a local art or arts, practiced in or near the Ryukyukan, is a common thread between the various Okinawan systems. This in turn may even suggest a native Okinawan origin for these arts, one that influenced local Chinese arts, as opposed to the other way around. However, while some single progenitor art is a tidy concept, even more likely is an ongoing relationship between native Chinese martial artists and visiting Okinawans, and a local training community that partook of elements of both traditions. Using a similar community in Okinawa as a better documented example, when expatriate Fujianese (Go and To Daiki) came to Okinawa, they got involved in, and influenced, local training communities like the kenkyukai. Their expatriate status perhaps lent them a certain social status in this group, as did their previous martial training. They became part of a community that shared information and practice in a way that is perhaps less common today. They also became part of a community that people moved around in, studying with multiple teachers and sharing knowledge with friends.

Taking this as an example in Okinawa, it does not seem so far fetched for Okinawans in Fujian to participate in a similar community, particularly since there is a good deal of evidence to support the idea. This in turn can muddy the more simple, and therefore in some ways more appealing, concept that some of Okinawa’s karate pioneers learned from just one main teacher, and then passed that art on. So while it seems nice to believe that the Okinawan arts came from Fujian, it is equally possible that Okinawan practice helped in the development of a local training community in Fuchow based around the Ryukyukan, one connected by frequent contact with Okinawa, and one that possibly formed one base for...
much of today’s Okinawan karate. While technically Kenki Go’s system, unlike the Kingai-ryu, seems to have no direct connection to any extant Okinawan system, the social connections around his practice seem more relevant to the development of the Okinawan arts. He, and his family, seem to have known both the Shiwa Shu that taught Kanbun Uechi, and Roshi Kingai, Shinko Matayoshi’s teacher. The system that Shu taught bears a strong resemblance to the karate of Higashionna, who studied under someone in Fuchow, possibly Xie Zongxian, who in turn may have also known the Go family. That the Go family knew expatriot Okinawans is clear, as Kenki Go met his first employee, an Okinawan, in Fuchow, he is said to have known Uechi in China, and later Shinko Matayoshi stayed in their home. They also lived near the Ryukyukan, and were engaged at some level in commerce with Okinawa. As an expatriate, Go later lived in Okinawa, and trained with most of the greatest karate men of his generation.

In some ways, the Go family, Roshi Kingai, and Shinko Matayoshi may be an example of the social network around the martial arts in Okinawa and Fuchow. Go was an international traveler and expatriate, living, working, and training in both Okinawa and Fuchow, as well as traveling around China. His training was connected in various ways to that of a number of Okinawan luminaries such as Uechi, Matayoshi, and possibly Higashionna. He lived and practiced near the Kojo dojo, a pivotal environment for a number of Okinawan practitioners, and was associated with a number of important local teachers, including Zhou and Kingai at the very least. He was also friendly with other expatriate Fujianese in Okinawa like To Daiki (Tang Daiji; see Fujiwara and Gima, 1986, pp.74). Taking his experience as an example, we have a demonstration of the fluidity of the connections between the Fujianese community in the area around the Ryukyukan, the expatriate Okinawan community in that area, expatriate Fujianese in Okinawa, and the local Okinawan martial arts community.

As a whole, this set of relationships points to information and people moving back and forth, sharing knowledge and influencing each other, rather than a straight one way transmission of knowledge. This is shown clearly in the traditions the Matayoshi family passed down. They did not simply teach a pure Okinawan or Chinese art. Instead, the Matayoshi family taught a blend of the things they took from both sources, their Okinawan training influenced by Shinko’s time in China, the Chinese elements blended with the native Okinawan training he had at a number of points in his life. Just what influence Shinko may have had on his Chinese teachers, the Go family and Kingai, is unknown, but if they were open minded it is unlikely they would have taken a student with a strong background and not at least been interested in what he had to show. However this, like most investigation into the connections between current Okinawan and past Chinese martial arts, is primarily speculation.

Conclusion
All told, the various elements of the Matayoshi tradition add up to an enormous amount of material. The best known, of course, is the Matayoshi kobudo, now taught world-wide. Shinpo Matayoshi was also famous for his White Crane, the Kenki Go lineage crane kempo, which he demonstrated frequently over the years. Together with the various elements of the Kingai-ryu, the rest of Kenki Go’s system, Shinpo Matayoshi’s expertise in both Sensei Kyan’s Shorin-ryu and in Goju-ryu, and whatever other elements of training the Matayoshi family passed on, the sheer volume of material is enormous. That a large portion of it was not passed down is not surprising; passing down the bulk of the kobudo taught by Shinpo Matayoshi was in itself a large undertaking.

Just why Shinpo Matayoshi decided to focus his instruction on the pieces of his family heritage he did is unknown. He may have decided that the core elements of Kingai’s system incorporated into the kobudo was a full expression of the Kingai-ryu, and therefore teaching more was unnecessary. He may have seen that there were many karate systems flourishing in Okinawa, and decided that instead of adding another he would focus on the armed elements of the tradition, particularly as he felt that much of the island’s armed heritage was being neglected. He may simply not have had the time to try to teach everything, and so started with the weapon arts, and stayed there. Certainly in selecting his material he elected to focus on native Okinawan elements; perhaps for that reason alone he decided to limit the amount of time he would spend on the primarily Chinese systems of Kingai-ryu and Kenki Go’s crane kempo. In any case, it is unfortunate that these systems have essentially died out. While a number of Shinpo Matayoshi’s senior students teach a small piece of, most often, Gokenki’s kempo, these systems have not, to my knowledge, been passed down in their entirety to anyone. They formed a link between the martial past of both Okinawa and Fujian and Okinawan martial arts of today. They also were a living snapshot of a developing practice, one that is continually changing. The elements of these arts that are not as heavily emphasized today -armed technique, traditional medicine, vital point striking, written mnemonics- are elements of training that, without being preserved, may eventually be lost completely. However, while these systems have not been passed down in their entirety, they do continue. The Go family kempo has become a part of Okinawan karate. Pieces of it are practiced in a number of systems, and in some ways it has become an Okinawan ideal, the “secret” white crane. The Kingai-ryu has, through its presence in the Matayoshi kobudo, influenced generations of Okinawan martial artists, and will continue to do so as long as this tradition is practiced. Perhaps in that way the “unarmed” elements of the Matayoshi tradition will be maintained into the future, a part of the continually growing and changing spectrum of the Okinawan martial tradition.

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Notes
1. There is no record of Matayoshi having any contact with either Zhou or Uechi, however. Uechi left Fuchow around 1904, and Matayoshi arrived no earlier than 1907.
2. This quote, and much of this information is taken from ZOKR (1999).
3. This Guangming Da Yuanshuai may have been a historical figure in China.
4. Thanks to Julian “Butch” Spain sensei for information on the content and lineage of the kata taught by Sensei Seiki Odo.
5. There is a discrepancy in the dates here. Most sources give Go’s arrival in Okinawa as around 1912, but the Matayoshi family tradition states that Shinko Matayoshi knew him before he left Okinawa in 1905.
7. In turn he posits Xie as Kanryo Higashion-na’s teacher, Ko Ryu Ryu.
8. See McKenna, 2001, for more information on the Go family.
9. Interestingly enough, this list differs from one given by another student of Go Kenki’s. See McKenna, 2001.
10. Thanks to Mario McKenna for insights into Tou’on-ryu’s Nepal.
11. Thanks to Fernando Camera for sharing theories on Kenki Go’s participation in the Kenkyukai.
12. Perhaps as an extension of the variations in the kata, Shino Matayoshi rarely performed this kata the same way twice. I saw him do it a good number of times, and have seen video of him doing it for various events, and each time it was a little different. Additionally, he referred to it publicly as Kakuko, Hakutsuru, Okaku, and Hakaku. One added element of this variation in public, he told me, was that then people could not “steal” his kata. I was present for one situation in which an American student demonstrated a version of the form, and when asked where he had learned it told Sensei Matayoshi a friend taught it to him, but would not say who. Matayoshi replied that that was unlikely, as the only time he had done the form that way was at a certain demonstration, and therefore the student must have copied it from video. Matayoshi then kindly went on to correct the student’s performance.
13. Some more detailed information on Go’s teaching is included in McKenna, 2001.
14. Versions of these were demonstrated on a video the Kodokan dojo published in the mid 1990s. According to students from the 60’s, these forms were also a little more “open” in content and presentation.
15. This may not be the case. I have been told that recently some members of the Zen Okinawa Kobudo Renmei are gathering at the Kodokan dojo to practice Kingai Ryu. I do not know who is teaching, or what the actual content of this class is.

Fred Lohse, is a 5th degree black belt in Goju-ryu karate and Matayoshi kobudo, and has been training both for over 20 years. He lived in Japan from 1990-1992, and has master’s degrees in Japanese Studies and International Education from Harvard University. He trains and teaches karate and kobudo with Kodokan Boston, in Boston, Massachusetts.

For more information about Fred Lohse or the Kodokan Boston please visit www.kodokanboston.org
You were studying with Helmut Barthel, the founder of Tan Tien Tschuean, and you also taught in his school. Can you talk a little bit about your experiences?

When I met Helmut Barthel for the first time when I was seventeen, it was quite an occasion for me. Because he asked me if I wanted to study Kung Fu, I said yes and then he put his right hand softly on my chest and at the same moment it seemed as if I was being kicked by a horse. It was so intense that I fell on the floor gasping for air. Then he pulled me up, put his hand on my chest again and took the pain away. With tears in my eyes I looked into his clear eyes and he asked me again. "Do you still want to learn Kung fu?" and I said yes…

In this way I started learning with him. We were only a small group there. About six or seven people. On my first training I was very surprised because it was completely different from how I had imagined it to be. I was a big fan of Bruce Lee and all I knew about martial arts I had learned from magazines and movies. When I heard of this teacher, I had to wait for about six months before I could start training in his school. I had to ask over and over again before he let me in.

I thought Kung Fu was about learning forms and sequences of movement but here it was always about dissolving one’s own resistances and pressure and to move from there. Helmut himself was always training with some senior students. He was always exploring to find a way of movement that would be the most effective with the use of least effort or movement. He would kick for example, and then asked them if they could see it coming, and then try again and again until his kick became unstoppable for them. Or he would practise throws with the very least of effort possible.

Was it a hard training?
It was not too hard for me at that time. Helmut was always training himself. He was always exploring to find a way of movement that would make him move faster or slower but it was always incredibly effective. He was always practising the same things over and over again; he was really into it and he let others attack him over and over until he had dissolved all his own reflexes completely; he wanted his art to be perfect and still is going for it.

His slogan is: “It is good to be better, but it is better to learn.”

How did his way of training affect you?
I was very intrigued with his way; it was of course very unusual. I started to realize that it is possible to fight and to win without needing force, mass or body size. And it made me train in this way too. It was difficult for me but very interesting.

In the beginning of the 80s when I was 20 years old, Helmut Barthel started a school in Heide, north of Hamburg.
where about 20 people came who were also doing other kinds of martial arts. From then on I trained twice a week, and then my teacher started to work with me personally where I also had to attack him.

How did his martial art work on you? I got very scared because I was not able to do anything against him whatever I tried; he always had me completely under control. He hit me harder and threw me harder so that I would get accustomed how to deal with pain. We also learned some kind of Taiji set that was used as an instrument to explore movement. How we could deal with our own pressure and resistance in our own movement. Again we learned how to dissolve pressure. We learned how to feel our body and to feel into our feet. I was mostly feeling pain because it was so strange and impossible to do it.

How did you deal with the fact that you did not understand much? Of course I asked how he did things and why he was so effective. But he always responded by doing it to me again, and it was very painful so I started asking the senior students. Because when I asked him how he hit, he always hit me! The seniors told me “One cannot use any muscle power to hit, but you have to let your weight sink from the feet and then move yourself from the hand. The movement should not be built on pressure and muscle but by controlled falling of the limbs. Dropping the elbow will set the hand free so it can speed forwards if you align properly with gravity.

The sticking hands training drill was a favourite one; in that drill it became very clear when one is using muscle or pressure. As soon as I create some pressure with my hand the other can feel my whole body and I cannot detach myself from him. When my teacher did it I could only feel his very light hand, and nothing else. When that hand hit me, it came from nowhere and weighed a thousand tons. His hands felt always completely unattached from they where connected to his body. So it was effective and controlled at the same time.

“As when my teacher did it I could only feel his very light hand, and nothing else. When that hand hit me, it came from nowhere and weighed a thousand tons.”

As if a bullet was shot from a barrel but at the same time still controlled by it. It’s hard to explain.

Could you compare it to other martial arts? During the eighties and nineties there were always karate and judo people who came to visit who wanted to test it out. It was mostly to hard and to direct for them. Mostly they landed on the ground without knowing what had happened to them. They had no idea what was going on. In 1984 the school went to another location and he bought himself an old inn with a ballroom where more and more people went to receive his training. For the training there were 40 or 50 people waiting until Helmut turned up and he told them what to do. He was walking around, it was very relaxed and people had fun. People really enjoyed the training and the exploration. And more and more people from the whole of Germany came to see what was going on. By that time he lived there with 12 or 13 people. It was like a commune. People got more interested in exploring Kung fu in this way because it became clear one could integrate it into one’s life. He started to ask me when I was going to come and live with him in the group.

How did you react to him asking? First I did not want to. I had a house and a girlfriend, I did not see the reason to go and live there. I was quite pleased with my development during training, it was a very fun period. He asked me during one year over and over again when I would come and live with him. And then at a certain point when my life was not going very well, I decided to move in. It was spring 1985. I understood that it was just about learning Kung fu; I never thought about work or the future or anything. When I moved in I shared a room with four others. It was like entering a Kung Fu monastery, and I endured all the inconveniences to be able to learn this art; I really wanted to know. At that time Helmut had six people who came there at the same time to learn and live there. And it became my job to teach that group. And that is what I did every day for 12 hours.

What and how did you teach? My teacher told me what to do with them and for how long. And then he came by and corrected them how to do...
things. And that is were my real learning started; it was again completely different from how I had imagined it to be.

I saw everyday again and again over and over for hours on end how the others did it wrong. How they created pressure in themselves, how they used force. From observing this the result was amazing; in myself during practice the resistance became less. What I did was to feel Helmut’s movements more and more and then I tried to recreate this feeling during my own training. And then things started to work for me that did not work in the others.

At some point during the night Helmut took me out of my bed and I trained together with him and a few others. It was the beginning of a new kind of training. And this was just about fighting. It was just us, a small group. We always had to attack him over and over. Any way we wanted. By ourselves or together with one or two. In this way he integrated his principles inside himself. This training was very hard for us and very painful. It was always very serious and focused. These were fierce fighting bouts that always took place in the middle of the night.

How do you explain that he was able to always win?

He was harder, faster and without any compromises; every technique he used had incredible impact and we could not see it coming. But he could see everything we did. It was like as if you were not fighting a human being because it was impossible to influence him as you would influence a human being. To me he felt like a grizzly bear with whom one was locked in a room. He completely transformed into a being that could not be beaten in any way. It was a very special training, that went on for years every night. We had bruises, black eyes and so on, but we did not break anything. We all changed from this training, psychologically.

After a while I could be without any compromise myself and I could switch off fears of getting hurt and worries that would block me during a fight. I became much more in control over myself to switch this “fighter identity” on and off.

It was physically and mentally a hard learning period. And I felt very privileged to take part in it. Some others who wanted to join this group came to watch, but then got so scared from what they saw that they almost shit their pants.

Helmut was able to do the things that were written in the Taiji classics. He could move people from a distance, throw them against the wall, push them without touching them physically. This has to do with the skilful manipulation and influencing of the reflexes of the other person. One is only able to do this because one has his own reflexes under his control. (In my book I go deeply into this subject and we have found a good scientific explanation how this kind of “faking” can be done.)[ Torsten Kanzmeier’s E-book can be ordered at his webpage]

To me it felt like he took control over my body, my movements as if he was directing and controlling me with an impulse that came from him. And although I did not want this, he managed to overrule our will and make us do things we had not decided with our own will.

On a psychological level the night training was very intense. What came towards us was an animal like controlled uncompromising power of control. What I learned from this is that our defences that we use for ourselves, like pulling back and trying to escape from fear are in reality a trap. They are a trap because my instinct to defend my life is being limited by me trying to escape the confrontation.

In the past there have been many misunderstandings about him and our situation. But the people who trained with him know what was really going on. A real teacher has the courage and the knowledge to lead his students through their deepest stuff. He did it like a father and like a Kung Fu brother. Like a real grandmaster of the martial arts.

Another thing I learned from this is that I know the way how to teach others to become mentally stronger. At the same time my movements became softer and softer, and had more joy in life. I became more alive. It is strange when I think about it but my ego went down; I did not need to be strong all the time.

And I learned more about the principles of not using force. I saw the importance of using focused kinetic energy that was applicable in all directions in any given moment; my teacher did not have any contradicting movements, it was real unbroken movement so to speak. The same amount of control he had over himself, he had over us and his intense exploration of these principles made him unusually skilful.
What else did you learn from this time that you use now?

Well something I use in my work now is that I know that when you study something and stay with it long enough one can learn things you would have never believed possible. This intense time has really brought me to myself. I came to experience and feel myself on a deep level. This has become the key to what I am doing today. It is about being self-aware. And that is the key to success; it has become for me much deeper than I understood then or believed to be at that time. As if some light has gone on and I have begun to see.

The usual understanding of being self-aware is something very different from what I mean with this experience. I am talking about becoming more self-aware through feeling. By working with this feeling awareness, my movements become much more effective. When people train something they hope to gain a feeling for the movements. And that works well to a certain extent. But I discovered a way to come into one’s feeling immediately and to then fill the movements with feeling. In that way a completely new effectiveness and quality of movement arises.

What are you doing now, what kind of training do you give?

I am not so much interested in training certain patterns of movement, or form; I rather work with the forms and patterns that people already know. I am interested in making their particular art more effective. For this I use a specially designed trainings program around unbroken movement where the individual becomes more effective in the techniques they are already using. Let me give you an example. When people are successful in their particular sport we say they have a certain talent for it. A talent they always had. When the trainer discovers this talent in someone they start to encourage the person more. They do this by giving the individual more attention in an empowering way. By being approved in this way, the individual becomes better.

My way is slightly different. Now first of all, what is a talent? It is a special feeling one has for a certain sport or motion in this case. What I do is make people aware of the feeling that is the determining factor for the talent. Then I bring them straight into the feeling so that their talent increases. I do this by starting to use movement sequences that are fully aligned with gravity, where they start to surrender to the force of gravity. As a result the people I work with get more in touch with themselves, with their original talent and they become more independent in bringing this talent or this passion out into their practice. So through my work people get into a higher vibration, they start to feel the joy of life more, and their movement becomes unbroken, free and very effective. It is all about dissolving resistance, stress and pressure.

When we are talking about fighting arts how does this apply?

So what you see a lot in the martial arts is that people look angry or have an aggressive seriousness about them. I understood that all this heaviness is actually limiting the effectiveness or impact of their techniques. When you look at Mike Tyson for example you could see in the beginning, when he was enjoying his boxing more he was much more powerful and effective. There are many examples like this. So by getting my people more into feel, there is a whole transformation starting. Sometimes people tell me that they thought feeling was something soft and weak, now they understand it is the source of power.

By working in this way I can increase the impact of a boxer’s punch from 40 to 50 per cent. Some trainers tell me that a 10 per cent increase is the highest possible in their experience! Also the idea of reacting to the aggressor as an impulse for the technique is not part of my system. In my opinion, it should never be about reacting to what the other does… it should all be about your own unbroken movement. That is something I learned from my teacher. It is a very misunderstood concept in martial arts. People think like: “…if he does this..I will do that.. they consider all kinds of possible scenarios but they forget to have control over their own movement, their own thinking. People tend to look outside for answers, to feel safe. It is easier when some ‘authority’ tells you if you are doing it right. It is something to deeply contemplate. Who dares to really look inside. You have to be a little crazy to do this (laughing). To find your own reference points. And it’s all about feeling…Not “feelings,” but feeling awareness. The whole area where we look at the impact our movements have on other people is one of the main things I focus on. How our movements create resistances and defences in other people, and how to not to do that. How to dissolve their defensive reflexes and make their muscles soften up the moment I hit them. That is how I can hit them deeply into their belly, no matter how strong their muscles are!

Using “feeling awareness” we are actually working a lot with unconscious impulses that control your muscles. It is also a way to help people to drop their resistances and fear and find their own power.

With what kind of martial artists do you work?

I work both with professionals and hobbyists from different styles and backgrounds. I worked with Sascha Dimitrenko, Zolt Erdei, Sebastian Zbick, Khoren Gevor all upcoming world and European Boxing champions.

I introduced Fred Rooyers (a famous Dutch karate-ka and kick-boxing champion from the eighties) and his kick-boxers to my work and they were quite impressed. For them this way of thinking and moving is challenging. They have to start looking at all the adrenaline-based tension of the actual fighting situation. What they need, is to feel confident and believe that my kind of effortless power is available, in any situation. I also work with many Taiji people and other styles, Krav Maga and Systema.
As I said, many martial artists look outside themselves for the way to become better or do something the way “it should be done”. My work is to help people tap into their own power. It is not a good idea to try to be someone else. But what does that mean? If we are inspired by someone who is very good at martial arts, we have to understand that we can never be that person. Or you are going to be a clone! This is one of the gifts my teacher gave me; by finding his unbelievable abilities by himself, without a teacher to show him, he made it possible for us to do the same. Unbroken movement and having deep impact can be done by anyone. You just have to look in the right place. For everyone I have something that is bringing them a step further in their development. That’s what I like about this work.

“From tree-swinging to magic Death Touches”

The evolution of the human hand in fighting

Kevin Secours delivers a thought provoking piece using a myriad of sources as stepping stones to reveal how our most basic tool developed into our most used weapon.

- by Kevin Secours -

Our Awesome Potential

The Thai restaurant seethed like a sleeping dragon. Steam from pots bubbling with noodles and curry inside, seeped through its vents, fading into a New York City winter night. From inside, windows slick with condensation blurred the outside world into a carnival of neon smears.

We were well into our third hour of dining. Our meal had long since ended, desert had come and gone and crumpled napkins had been thrown down onto our plates with groans of submission, but the conversation was just getting started. With over 2 centuries of martial arts experience between the 7 of us and now with five pots of green tea fueling our chatter, talk had been hop-scotching through the history of human combat like children running through a toy store. It felt like we were building something, restoring and reassembling pieces of knowledge that had long been divided.

From all of the discussions that evening, it was ironically the simplest thought that stayed with me after the night had ended. It was not the legends, or the myths or the mysticism—although I will admit, I always loved the stories. It wasn’t the complex nuances of some advanced techniques—regrettably, no one at the table seemed to know any magic death touches or how to throw fireballs—and if they did, they weren’t talking. Instead, it was the most basic tool shared by every warrior in my company that night and certainly by every martial artist throughout history, that left my thoughts filled for days afterwards. It was the humble role of the human hand in the fighting arts.

As each of my colleagues spoke that evening, they gestured casually. It was never anything dramatic—there were no tasseled Thunderbird jump suits at the table or Elvis-style karate chops in the air. No one was picking up boiling cauldrons with their forearms or making Kung fu movie noises every time they moved. There was only the efficient grace and quiet confidence of a roll of the fingers, the certain flick of the wrist, the heaviness of a palm gripping a cup of tea, or the sheer connectedness of a colleague’s hand to their total being that left their mark on me. How did we, not only as individuals, but as a species, come to forge such excellence in our bodies? What long succession of adaptation had brought us these intricate motor skills and more importantly, was it simply the need to survive that had led to the creation of fighting arts, or was there something more complex at work?

Each of my friend’s actions revealed the subtle stamp of their chosen styles. Some had knuckles calloused like sickly white coins glued on every joint, earned by decades of makiwara training. Others had hands that were natural and bare, almost delicate, that floated with supreme elegance. Some moved with a tense energy that resonated in the connective tissue of their joints like coiled springs. One barely moved at all, simply sitting, smiling, and absorbing the conversation. Just in...
our hands, in those few small motions and gestures that night, lay the seeds of the history of our species’ journey of survival through the ages.

**Competing with Claws**

Elsewhere, I’ve discussed how human beings are basically “pale” predators. We lack the fangs and claws of most of the other dominant predators in our world. In that void, the trials of evolution have offset our weaknesses with a brain of such amazing capacity however, that we have been able to engineer not only our survival, but our dominance.1 Humans have catapulted themselves beyond their supposed ranking as meek prey into a predator of unparalleled capacity. In the words of Chip Walter, through our intelligence and the technology which it has spawned, we have become Cyber sapiens—creatures physically capable of steering their own evolution. How did this come to be?2

It is estimated that prior to 60 million years ago, our ancestors’ hands were awkward instruments. Tree-dwelling would change that. Through generations of climbing nimbly through the branches of the ancient forest canopy, early thumbs grew more flexible in order to better grab. Claws were replaced by less imposing finger nails to make feeding easier and the wrist attachment began to loosen, permitting the tilting and twisting needed for swinging by the arms.3 To this day, we carry the mark of this tree-dwelling ancestry deep within our nervous system. From our third trimester in the womb, loud noises make a baby reach and grab. This is regarded as a response to the infant’s perceived fear of falling.4 Generally, this response gets integrated into the child’s understanding by its 4th month of life. In fact, failing to integrate this response can lead to inappropriate emotional reactions and tantrums and long-standing mood swings even into adulthood.5 In its earliest form, the so-called “Moro Reflex” can take as much as 3–4 seconds to engage in infants. As the response becomes better integrated into the child’s repertoire of reactions, response times decrease drastically to as little as 300-400 milliseconds in older children,6 however even among infants, repetition of a given stimuli can increase familiarity and fatigue response times, until they are scarcely present.7

Eventually, it is believed that shifting climates thinned the ancient forests, forcing our ancestors to descend from the tree tops. As ground dwellers, we likely evolved from 4 legs to 2, in order to reach food growing above ground level. Verticality changed the structure of our feet and led to the development of our big toe. As Walter notes, from this simple digit, hailed a change in the way that we behaved as a species. Our 2-leggedness forced us to revamp our social and sexual relations. It even changed how we were born. The size of our brains increased massively without a proportionate change in hip size, making our species even more unique, as the only animal that apparently suffers so brutally during child birth. In this new dynamic, human mothers were left with slow-maturing, large-brained offspring that remained dependent on them for longer periods of time, tying females to nurturing responsibilities and removing them from early food gathering and hunting.8

This move to verticality left our hands free to develop fine motor skills.9 Although our closest primate cousins can certainly use a stick to jostle ants from a hole, they can achieve nothing close to the sustainable evolution of human tool making.10 It should be noted however, that chimpanzees appear to be close to using weapons. Wild chimpanzees have been repeatedly observed swinging and throwing branches and rocks during violent encounters.11 Still, they remain limited to simply brandishing their clubs in horizontal flailing actions. Limitations in wrist and thumb structure prevent them from maintaining solid grips, aligning the crude weapons with their forearm, or swinging them vertically and diagonally.12 Similarly, chimps are able to throw stones, but their structure prevents them from using hip rotation to accelerate the torso during the swing. This drastically limits the effect of these efforts to basic expressions of aggression and alarm.13

It was specifically the opposition of the fourth and fifth fingers to the human thumb, combined with the flexibility of our wrists that allowed us to hold a stick aligned along the axis of our arm. This permits a large, powerful and controlled swinging radius which massively amplifies the impact of blows. As Wilson notes: “Having the ability to telescope the arm outward would convey a lethal advantage in close, hostile encounters, and once this obliquely oriented “squeeze” grip was introduced into the hominid hand, no adversary or prey in the same weight class was safe in its presence without being unusually fleet-footed, hard-headed, or thick-skinned.”14

Our rapidly evolving brains also allowed us to amplify the destructiveness of those early weapons, shaping them, sharpening them, and attaching blades onto them. As our ancestors chipped away at rock and wood, they were in effect building the fangs and claws they lacked and upsetting the natural order of the world forever. Reverse Punches, Tiger Claws and Spear Hands:

In their modern form, our hands are comprised of fourteen joints and twenty-seve bones, with muscle-free fingers that are puppeted by tendons anchored in the palm and mid-forearm. They are precision instruments of remarkable capability. Just take a second to consider the complexity of using a
mouse and keyboard as you read this article. The combination of our hands’ strength, precision and sensitivity is nothing less than awe-inspiring. The vulnerability of their structure however, particularly their lack of bone mass when compared to the thickness of the average skull, would appear to make the hand a rather poor battering weapon. We continue to use the fist to strike quite simply because, given our physical arsenal, it’s one of the best empty-handed tools that we have.

Like us, apes also fight with their fists, with powerful hands and multi-dimensional shoulder joints, forged by countless generations of tree-swinging. Chimps and gorillas often fight with their fists and through their reach and range of motion they are able to keep most “canine-flashing predators” at bay. Today, the human shoulder joint remains the most mobile joint in our bodies (and among the least stable and the most commonly injured). Our superior shoulder mobility permits a wide array of long-distance whipping and swinging actions which provides a formidable array of versatility. Although weaponry was pivotal in gaining advantage over external predators, the hands were and remain a viable alternative against other humans. Some researchers even believe that human predators were a greater factor in motivating advances in technology and communication than any beast. It would seem that we have always been our own worst predator. While the martial artist’s fist today carries the stamp of these millions of years of early development, the modern variations in how the fists and other body parts are currently used have now become more a question of culture than structure. Shared biomechanics and common anatomical weaknesses have always ultimately dictated the way we fight. Differences beyond these considerations are matters of ideology and aesthetics. We have gone from hunting tigers, to mimicking their hand gestures when we battle each other, from wielding spears to conditioning our hands so that they might become as deadly as spears.

The full scope of a comparative analysis of how the hand is used among various martial arts far exceeds the scope of this article, so I will limit myself to a very basic survey of one aspect of how the fist is used in the hopes that it will be enough to support this point. Consider the most basic punch. Even the decision to train the fists rather than the open hands is a point of distinction. The Chinese arts are traditionally regarded as favoring the use of open-handed techniques over fists. This association is so strong, that Japanese and Okinawan arts that maintained open-handed strikes in their katas were said to be truer to their Chinese roots. This emphasis on open hands may have been due to prevalent use of these arts by civilians and clergy against unarmored opponents. Others argue that open handed striking allows practitioners to target vital points or to activate energy meridians by spreading or focusing the fingers in order to increase striking power. Open-handed use may also simply have been a question of practicality; many modern combative systems prioritize the palm when striking, noting that to use the fist correctly, without breaking the wrist or knuckle, can take years of correct training and conditioning and that palm strikes are simply easier and more reliable. Preferences for open hands in some cases may even be a question of ideology, with the open hands better replicating the ideals of swordsmanship or a philosophical ideal of emptiness and spiritual void. In the end, most traditional styles which do advocate using the fist, stress the importance of conditioning the hand for striking.

Even if we limit our consideration to the use of the closed fist, a wide variety of theories still abound. A prominent distinction is the difference in striking surfaces, with the largest debate existing between using either the first 2 knuckles of the hand (the so called large knuckles) versus the surface created by the bottom 3 knuckles. Most karate styles favor 2-knuckle punching, citing that the longer bones of the first 2 knuckles are stronger and more resistant to impact. 2-knuckle punches are typically delivered horizontally, with the power of the body being delivered down along the axis of the arm. Other arts favor vertical punches which impact with the bottom 3 knuckles. Proponents insist that the smaller and weaker knuckles of the last 2 fingers are no more at risk, since the force of impact is distributed evenly over 3 knuckles. Some modern proponents like Bruce Lee, advocated the vertical 3-knuckle punch, stressing that it allowed practitioners to keep their elbow down to protect their sides and centerline and allowed for faster, less telegraphic and more powerful punching.
Many old-time, boxers similarly promoted the vertical punch. In bare knuckle engagements, a vertical fist places the first row of knuckles forward and redirects the force of impact down into the puncher’s legs, whereas horizontal hand placements place the mid-joints of the fingers forward when punching higher targets. More importantly, it is argued that vertical punching allows the puncher to generate greater power by creating a longer line of power from the toes of their rear foot to the impacting knuckles. The optimal strength. The ¾ position is believed to keep the extensor carpi radialis longus and brachioradialis muscles contracted in the forearm, avoiding the over-stretching found in typical horizontal fist formations. It is argued that the diagonal hand positioning also more closely matches the angles of the rib cage around the solar plexus, thereby offering superior penetration into vital points compared to the simple vertical fist. Beyond fist positioning, the actual structure and form of the fist itself can also vary in the martial arts. Different schools place tremendous importance on the placement of the thumb. Some styles such as Ishin-ryu karate emphasize keeping the thumb pressed against the mid-knuckle of the forefinger when punching. Other arts emphasize crossing the thumb over the first and/or second finger. Some stylists extend the index finger along the inside of the palm while curling the remaining fingers in order to reinforce the thumb against lateral impacts (Motubu fist). Similarly, the mid-knuckle of the various fingers can be extended slightly to protrude from the rest of the fist and provide a more precise striking tool for the activation of pressure points. Shao-lin White Crane Kung fu employs the Fung Ying Chuan (Phoenix Eye Fist) which strikes with the mid-knuckle of the index finger. The depth of these variations of course is enormous. Nevertheless, even this quick survey serves to illustrate the tremendous lack of consensus that exists regarding our most basic striking tool.

Framing Elemental Chaos
“...made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now man is more of an ape than any ape.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

In the previous section, we saw that since the fist’s early origins, cultural influences have led to enormous variations in use. In the end, all methods cannot be correct. There must be one measurably best way to punch. The point of my article is not to make this determination, nor is it to promote any one method. Rather, I wish to illustrate that this disparity itself is a second symptom of our unique history as humans. To understand the full story that our fists reveal about our psyches as humans, we must consider the effects our physical developments bore on our brains themselves. Intellect and technology allowed us to compensate for a lack of razor sharp canines and flesh-rending talons until we were able to far exceed even our most capable predators. Our next point of consideration is how the creation of tools and weapons allowed human culture to rapidly outpace our very DNA’s capacity for physical change. The continued cultivation of our opposable thumbs triggered a huge shift in our perception of the world around us. Now, instead of simply reacting to our environments, our ancestors began to manipulate and interact with their environments in ways never before seen in nature. Homo habilis’ quickly became more fully self-aware, and this actualization challenged our ability to express ourselves as a species. The exact role which the birth of language played in our explosive
brain growth remains a matter of some debate. Some researchers argue that it was the physical manipulation of tools that led to brain growth, which in turn permitted the development of language. Others maintain that it was the need for language that led to its creation and pushed our brains over the critical threshold. In either order, the combined adaptations of weapon use and improved language skills laid the foundation for warriorhood as we now know it.

Language permitted a specialized degree of communication that allowed human ancestors to work in teams, to strategize, bait, deceive and trap otherwise insurmountable predators. In fact, Charles Darwin in The Descent of Man, noted that had early hominids been any less deficient as predators, they likely would have failed to become social leeches and ticks or move in herds and packs to discourage potential predators. As Professor Dawkins insightfully asserted, this instinct for self-preservation occurs at a genetic level: “The individual is a selfish machine, programmed to do whatever is best for its genes as a whole...a survival machine.”

This fundamental selfishness is often optimistically misinterpreted as a form of kindness. Most notably, Konrad Lorenz in his work On Aggression documented the inhibition which many animals display when fighting their own species. Lorenz viewed animal combat as a formal tournament. He documented how opponents tried to assert dominance without inflicting harm. In his estimation, every animal carried within them an instinctive inhibition against murder. Lorenz argued that this equilibrium was disrupted by the invention of weapons which provided superior psychological distance that facilitated the act of harming. This view as “the unique killer” was widely promoted by many popular authors, including Arthur Koestler. Many martial artists may be more familiar with the contemporary writings of Lt. Col. David Grossman who also built heavily upon this theory of natural inhibition. The reality however, is that this willingness to work together against predators, from its most ancient roots, likely stems from far more selfish motives. Returning to Richard Dawkins, it is inaccurate to condemn Homo sapiens to this unique status as unique killers: “…the gloved fist view of animal fights seems to have at least some truth. Superficially this looks like a form of altruism...[but] there is no obvious merit in indiscriminately trying to kill rivals. In a large and complex system of rivalries, removing one rival from the scene does not necessarily do any good; other rivals may be more likely to benefit from his death than oneself.”

Conflict negotiation specialist William Ury similarly notes that fighting carries a heavy risk of personal injury, death and loss. The human capacity for both peace and violence is well documented, however Ury notes that modern research indicates that humans are not inherently peaceful. They are prone to aggression, yet they often refrain from violence to minimize the risk of personal injury. This behavior is quite common among many species. In fact, recent studies have documented that murder occurs throughout the animal kingdom:

“Massacre of a neighboring individual or troop may be beneficial to an animal, if it can thereby take over the

Martial artists interpret the capacities of their bodies in distinctly different variations in their resolution of the riddle of violence. Here noted masters Cheng Man Chin, Yip Man, Mas Oyama and Morihei Ueshiba present a small sample of the variety present in the use of the human hand in the martial arts.
neighbor’s territory, food, or females. But attacks also involve some risks to the attacker. Many animal species lack the means to kill their fellows, and of those species with the means, some refrain from using them. It may sound utterly repugnant to do a cost/benefit analysis of murder, but such analyses nevertheless help one understand why murder appears to characterize only some animal species."

Already, a more accurate picture of the ancient roots of combativeness emerges and while much has been written about the viciousness of humanity, the vengefulness, the malice, the ugliness of these drives at their darkest and most vile, is this ability simply the natural byproduct of being technologically distanced and de-sensitize from our prey as Lorenz would have us believe, or are other factors at work?

The answer lies in the evolution of our brains themselves. Evolution is a process of adaptation. It consists of continuous adjustments to the challenge at hand. To borrow the analogy of Professor Richard Dawkins, evolution is not a brisk leap up a steep precipice, but rather a slow, incremental journey up a long and gentle slope. A quick glance at the basic structure of our brains completely shatters any claims that they were designed with foresight. What we find instead is a patchwork of mismatched parts, with successive adaptations grown one atop the other. Outdated sections work together with modern improvements like a house renovated without a plan. In utero, every child rapidly re-enacts this evolutionary growth sequence, forming modern brain sections over ancient ones. The end result is a brain that is three times the size of our closest primate relative and carrying 2 distinct operating systems: The first, the brain stem, is our oldest and most basic structure. Sometimes called our “reptilian brain” given its similarity to these, this is the seat of instinctual survival functions. The second, the neo-cortex, was developed quite recently in evolutionary terms and directs comprehension and meta-cognition.

Both of these structures exist in a delicate balance. While the cognitive brain ponders decisions, most often, it is the reptilian brain which ultimately makes them and takes action. When there is no time for contemplation, our primal brain hijacks control of the body, through a host of basic reflexes. The Reptilian brain collects thousands of generations of experience to equip us with a database of generalized over-reactions designed to keep us alive. In the words of Michael Friedman: “the scientific name for an animal that doesn’t either run from or fight its enemies is lunch”. This duality is essential to the very birth of combat systems. Our most primal survival urges, from reproduction to self-defence, are dangerously blended along with more complex emotions like love, hate, friendship and jealousy. Evolution has left us with relatively under-developed prefrontal lobes and oversized adrenal glands, which in itself, is a recipe for “unhappiness and disorder”. This duality gives us both the need and the ability to rationalize our environments. From creating myths, developing philosophies or designing combative systems, the meta-cognitive portions of our brain are constantly battling to make sense of our darker urges. Carlos Rota’s observations of boxing express this beautifully: “It takes constant effort to keep the slippery, naked, near-formless fact of hitting swaddled in layers of sense and form. Because hitting wants to shake off all encumbering import and just be hitting, because boxing incompletely frames elemental chaos, the capacity of the fights to mean is rivaled by their incapacity to mean anything at all.”

This duality is more than just an attribute of our consciousness. As Noble Prize winner Gerald Edelman discovered, consciousness doesn’t actually emerge from a particular part of the brain. Rather, it comes from the trillions of interactions that take place between the brain’s various sections. Consciousness, as crucial as it may be to our identity and to our survival, Edelman asserts, is an evolutionary by-product. Making matters more complex, that very same consciousness has at its disposal, the newest parts of our brain to jealously imagine the worst case scenario, to agitate our most primal brain centers into an emotionally-fueled feedback loop of paranoia, ego and hyper-vigilance. The end result is that we fight one another for territory, we fight for food and we fight for mates. Xenophobia comes naturally to our species, because unlike other dominant predators, we can recognize members of other cultural groups at a glance, by clothing and by hair style. The next great innovation we must consider is the birth of agriculture. As John Keegan observed, agriculture freed early humans from the day-to-day obligations of hunting for survival. At this point, skills previously reserved for hunting, began to make their way into sport and war. Even the importance of the hunt itself began to change. Evidence suggests that the hunt became as much a ritual as it was a process of food gathering. As a natural extension of this, early warfare was similarly ritualistic. This idealization of killing is the last key component we must examine to understand the origins of martial traditions. It is the transformation of hunting and murder into sacrifice that turned the simple act of killing into a psychological release for the conflicted human brain. Sacrifice likely served to lessen aggressive energies within a community by directing pressures towards an external focus, whether a sacrificial victim or foreign enemy. Barbara Ehrenreich notes: “War…is too complex and collective an activity to be accounted for by a single warlike instinct within the individual psyche. Instinct may, or may not, inspire a man to bayonet the first enemy he encounters in battle. But instinct does not mobilize supply lines, manufacture rifles, issue uniforms, or move an army of thousands from point ‘a’ to point ‘b’ on a map.”

As Ehrenreich illustrates, this process of “sacralization” is not repeated to any similar degree anywhere else in the animal kingdom. Does this support the notion of us being marked as vicious predators, or does this need for ritual point to the contrary—to a deep instinctive morality as Lorenz would have us believe? Ehrenreich believes that this ambivalence towards violence is rooted in a very particular aspect of
acts and spectacles of violence—the hunt, the sacrifice, the initiatory ordeal, and eventually the war—that our ancestors were able to reassure themselves that they were, in fact, no longer prey.”

It is precisely this need for affirmation and reassurance that fueled the development of the martial arts. When an opossum rolls onto its back, its prone legs curled tightly in the air, it seeks to fool its predator into thinking its dead. When a “Puffer Fish” fills its elastic stomach with sea water to blot into a sphere it hopes to become too large for its opponent’s jaws. When a human crouches in a Southern Kung Fu stance however, clenching its fanned fingers like mock tiger claws, weaving its arms in complex patterns and grimacing ferociously, is it simply seeking to fool and intimidate its attacker into believing it is a tiger, or is it in fact fooling itself with what Bruce Lee called the “dust waiving” of the Oriental arts? Arguably, these tactics may be effective, but unlike the Opossum or the Puffer Fish, the human’s actions are designed not only to convince the opponent, but also to convince the practitioners themselves.

Separating Predator From Prey

Fighting arts are constantly trying to crawl back to their most primal essence. They are just waiting to erode into a brawl, to give way to the insecure desires of our inner prey and feelings of vengeance and malice rather than what we might term “objective” survival drives. In their intrinsic design, the fighting arts are a product of this duality. They reveal the scientific capacities of our minds along with our most primal emotional fears of personal safety. As a result, the martial arts carry the potential to be either purely predatory, or else to easily stumble into the trap of becoming mystical insulation for the ego’s of our inner prey. How can we be sure what we are training is driven by logic rather than dominated by fearful emotion?

The simple answer is that we must test ourselves. This occurs through openly sharing our knowledge with others and submitting ourselves to empirical measurement and observation. Logically, there can be only one strongest way to throw a punch or one safest way to impact with the knuckles. Once we’ve melted away the opinions, traditions, sentimentality and mysticism through open-minded testing, the correct method should reveal itself. Some arts simply must be more effective than others, yet in our modern climate of political correctness, it often seems sacrilegious and taboo to even suggest this. Granted, to some extent, what’s not right for one may be right for another, but by the same measure, what is need-
man, “biology is not destiny”. Grossman notes that the modern professional warrior must use the intellect to harness and to some extent re-engineer its most ancient instincts. He cites hostage negotiators, Special Forces operatives and snipers as perfect examples of individuals who are placed in extremely strenuous circumstance which otherwise would seek to erode and deteriorate their performance levels. Through training however, these professionals are able to learn how to maintain precision motor skill and mental clarity.68

A wide variety of training methods are used to inoculate the modern warrior against stress. Often termed “stress inoculation” or “acclimatization”, the modern training approach carefully includes repeating cycles of precisely measured doses of stress, followed by waves of recovery. This constant sequence of exposure and cognitive deconstruction allows the individual to adapt, by slowly taking the surprise out of combat and raising their sense of familiarity and confidence.69

In terms of the martial arts, many systems have begun to integrate the latest research on combat stress into their approach. The first major wave of modern combative training arose in response to the reality that combat stress erodes precision and motor control. These so-called “flinch-based” methods, sought to reduce combat down to its simplest common denominators. Techniques were drastically simplified into a small arsenal of gross motor movements which were both easily taught and through repetition, more likely to be repeated under the stress of combat. In most cases, techniques also served to integrate basic startle reflexes, like ducking, reaching and cowering, using these reflexes as their starting point for their trained responses, in the hopes that through repetition, these trained responses would be fused with their inherent startle-flinch response. When a crisis triggered a defensive reflex, it was hoped it would then in turn also trigger a domino effect of trained responses from their refined arsenal.

The next wave of training sought to teach the martial artist how to maximize their cognitive threshold and to replace fear with familiarity. The so-called “flow approach” often employs extremely slow initial training to carefully guide the individual practitioner through increments of increased resistance. Emphasis is placed on identifying reflexes and then consciously slowing or altering them to create new, more beneficial habits. Contact and stress are increased before speed, allowing the practitioner to process and analyze their responses. Group discussion and hands on guidance by instructors are also used to carefully “debrief” students according to a military model, so that they can make sense of their inherent fear responses and learn to better identify the symptoms of their onset. Flow based systems represent the current pinnacle of cognitively guided training of instincts.70

Feeling Our Way Through The Dark

In this article, we have glimpsed our evolution, both as humans and as warriors. Triggered by my awe in that New
York City restaurant, I’ve since seen just how pivotal our hands have been, in quite literally gripping our way through the darkness of our ancient emotions and into the light of reason. Our hands have become so essential to our continued transformation into “Cyber sapiens” that it’s impossible to say with any certainty where their influence begins or ends in our continuing journey towards greater self-actualization. The modern martial artist is a mirror of humanity itself. On one extreme, we have at our disposal the groundbreaking research and advances in biomechanics, psychology and a host of other fields. As I’ve said elsewhere, more has been learned about the structure and function of the human brain in the last 25 years than in the rest of human history combined. We have more knowledge at our fingertips than our ancestors could have dreamed possible and countless more discoveries waiting in our immediate futures. On the other end of the spectrum, we’re also standing atop thousands of years of warrior traditions. These most certainly provide us with a deep sense of understanding and belonging, along with the distilled experiences of generations of combat experience, but they are deeply interwoven with cultural norms, superstition and mysticism and must be carefully understood, distilled and integrated. As martial artists, we are searching for, testing and incorporating the most appropriate components for our own unique systems. Measuring the fitness of each new component begins with first recognizing our true goals. We alone are charged with the responsibility of separating faith from science, fashion from function and fantasy from fact. Given the wealth of modern understanding at our disposal, blind faith in long-standing traditions can not be defended as a responsible decision, particularly when our lives hang in the balance of our training. Even once you have satisfied your own burden of proof in testing each component, the greater challenge remains how to meld those diverse elements into a functional system. As Henri Poincare said in those diverse elements into a function greater challenge remains how to meld proof in testing each component, the balance of our training. Even our need to test and refine our combative systems becomes a ritual in its own right. The significant difference is that testing and refinement unlike simple obedience attempts to minimize the influence of our baser emotional reflexes and to encourage a more logical assessment of our progress. It invests greater value in those same cognitive traits that initially allowed us to achieve our dominance rather than in the primal instincts which would have otherwise kept us prey. The modern warrior not only has the capacity but also the responsibility to build their combative systems on evidence rather than simply on faith. And as we continue to feel our ways towards self-realization, it will be our hands that will be eagerly seizing, testing and leading the way.

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Kevin Secours, B.Ed. is a 27-year veteran of the martial arts. A senior instructor in Russian Systema under Master Vladimir Vasiliev and Grand Master Mikhail Ryabko, he also holds a 6th Degree black belt in Russki Goshinbudo under Sali Azem, a 3rd Degree black belt in Modern Kempo Jujitsu, a 1st Degree black belt in Aikai-ryu Jujitsu and Full Instructorship in Five Animal Shaolin Chuanhus. He is a certified instructor in defensive tactics and a educator with the Quebec Ministry of Education and is the director of the Montreal Systema Academy.

About the Author
Morithei Ueshiba was born in Western Japan in 1883. After mastering classical styles of judo, kendo, and jujutsu, he created Aikido, an entirely original martial art, based on the spiritual teachings of the Omoto-kyo religion. After the Second World War, Morithei established the Aikikai Foundation in Tokyo to promote the dissemination of Aikido throughout the world. Morithei died in 1969. Kisshomaru Ueshiba, the second Aikido Dishu (leader), after the founder and his father, Morithei Ueshiba.

Masters of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts
This book is a collection of the life’s work and essential teachings of Jigoro Kano, who founded Kodokan Judo in Tokyo in 1882. Kodokan Judo was for Kano the culmination of a lifelong devotion to the jujutsu of the past, which he reorganized along educational lines while taking great care to retain its classical traditions. In doing so, he opened the path from jutsu (skill) to do (way), and broadened the horizons of knowledge until he reached the point at which he began to advocate seiryoku zenyu (maximum efficiency) and jita kyoei (mutual prosperity), which represent the universality and ideal of human existence, and are the core values of judo.

Throughout his life, Kano repeatedly emphasized grasping the correct meaning of judo and putting it into practice. That is to say, one must understand that judo is the way by which one can make the best use of one’s mental and physical energy, and put that into use for the good of society. Because judo was defined in this way, what had once merely fallen under the category of martial art—a fighting skill used to defend against an attack—became subsumed into an altogether richer, more complex, and universal judo, which in turn evolved into a principle that can be applied across the spectrum of human life.

The circumstances surrounding the development of judo are described throughout this book, as are its underlying principles, which the author believes have universal applicability to everyday life.

This book will be an invaluable addition to the libraries of all judo practitioners around the world.