



INTERNAL TRAINING

Avoiding Misconceptions

INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of interest in “Internal” training amongst the Aikidō community over the last five years, largely due to the efforts of Ellis Amdur in highlighting approaches to training that could explain Ueshiba’s great physical power. Ellis spent great effort also in getting “outsiders” like Mike Sigman and Dan Harden to share their views and experience, and provide training opportunities for interested members of the broader budō community. Often at odds with one another, the public discourse has often been fraught, and onlookers often contribute by making the ego statement of “Me too! I practice internal too!” especially when internal training is conflated with the concept of *aiki* or even simply being good at martial arts. This essay contains some reflections on this discourse and observations on what might be useful to be considered by those invested in developing skill in their *taijutsu* practice.

In my own travels, I have transited from practicing a modern form of jujutsu to learning *Bāguàzhǎng*, *Xíngyìquán*, and *Tàijíquán*. I have maintained an interest in authentic Japanese swordsmanship as well, largely in an effort to correct improper instruction I received while a student of modern jujutsu. As a result, fellow sword enthusiasts sometimes ask me about where best to go for “internal” training while continuing to pursue their current practice in an unmodified form. In these discussions, the word internal is usually left undefined except as a proper noun to refer to something being “good” or “other” – almost in a semiotic sense. As a result, people often approach the question of pursuing internal training almost as a spice or flavor they can add to their practice, without fundamentally changing it or requiring them to leave it.

There is a problem with that perspective, but I do not blame the people who hold it entirely. Instead, I believe it is a result of much of the current dialogue on the topic of internal training being much too vague. The use of the word internal can be defined in the context at least of the martial culture that adopted its use (e.g., Chinese martial arts) and it may be helpful to explore some thoughts on the term itself. Because the term is often left undefined, or taken to be a synonym for “mysterious” or “better”, I think it is of some value to attempt to clarify its use. Recent efforts of skilled practitioners offering seminars in the subject sometimes may do little to correct mistaken assumptions that equates internal with being a superlative adjective, especially when one focuses on teachers’ hard-won skill and not the path required to get to a similar place in one’s own practice.

So, when approached, I usually answer such questions with a question:

“What do you want to accomplish with internal training?”

Understanding that will often go a long way towards clarifying the choices one should make in approaching teachers and training. In this discussion, I will first focus on some ideas that point towards what the word internal might mean, at least in its original sense in Chinese martial arts. I hope then to propose that one should have a decision procedure for examining one’s training to determine when the internal applies:

1. Understand the deficiencies in a given approach.
2. Determine if internal (or another) practice will address those deficiencies.
3. Determine if the investment required to do so is worth the potential reward.

Without some kind of process to evaluate the investment required by training and the benefits resulting from doing so, it is hard to make a meaningful shift in one’s current training to make room for a practice as deep and fundamentally unique as internal training may be.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL: SO WHAT?

In Chinese martial arts, the perspective of arts being “internal” as opposed to “external” likely was developed in the 19th century, when instructors of *Tàijíquán*, *Bāguàzhǎng*, and *Xíngyìquán* decided that their arts shared similar underlying ideas and organizing principles, even though outwardly they appeared different. They wanted to distinguish themselves from arts directly derived from Shaolin martial arts, whom they felt were

organized differently at a foundational level. Specifically, they referred to their arts as *nèijiā* (internal) and the Shaolin-derived arts as *waijiā* (external).

The *nèijiā* are often not as old as *waijiā* – precisely because they are generally a **reaction** to the existing practices prevalent during their time as opposed to the culmination or epitome of them. The term *waijiā* should, however, not be taken immediately as being pejorative. The subject of what is internal versus what is external is a complex one, but always it is a mistake to conflate the dialectic of good vs. bad with internal vs. external in discussions of martial arts. Indeed, there are skilled and mediocre practitioners of *nèijiā* and *waijiā* both.

In general, however, one can think of internal training as developing a different or non-intuitive reaction or reflex or quality in a specific domain (e.g., strength, speed, balance) whereas external training is concerned with taking the normative expression of a quality and developing it to its logical conclusion. For example, developing the speed of a punch or kick is an external skill, whereas developing relaxation and sensitivity so that one's own punch is quicker than an opponent's, no matter what their speeds are in of itself, would be an internal skill. There is generally, in internal training, a focus on inner awareness and awareness in relation to the world that a skill is measured within (e.g., how hard can I punch a moving, reacting, opponent, and what effect does that punch have on him) rather than only its effect in of itself (e.g., how hard I can punch a stationary object).

Often in *Tàijíquán* practice we are reminded that besting someone is not enough. If the method by which an opponent is defeated does not respect *tàijí* principles, the result was not a proper expression of *Tàijíquán*, even if we can push the other person off-balance. Also, body development in of itself is not necessarily external or internal – one may develop skill at *Tàijíquán* or *Bāguàzhǎng*, but when you strike someone, the result will depend on your body, its development and organization, irrespective of the art whose tactic you used to do so. So, body development methods drawn from various *qigong* have their place in **both** internal and external martial arts. However, training methodologies and intent may differ between the two. Regardless of methodology, different levels of body development and organization provide some of the key discriminators between high-level and low-level skill, irrespective of a particular style.

A question remains, and I believe is an open one, whether there is one “correct” form of body development that once informed many styles of martial arts, and is now largely lost in many circles of practice. I am of the personal opinion, and open to correction on this point, that development has to be defined with respect to a goal – strength should be developed to be sufficient for accomplishing a component of a result (e.g., throwing someone, hitting someone, cutting someone), but simply possessing strength alone does not remove the necessity for proper strategy and tactics. To amplify that statement, while body development, especially the kind advocated by the internal martial arts, can be of great benefit to a practitioner, it alone does not complete a curriculum of study. It has to express itself through a martial practice. An open question that should be examined (in another essay, perhaps) is what the differences are in *qigong* between internal and external styles of practice, and how that develops the quality of force (*jin*) they express in their practice.

CHINESE INFLUENCE ON JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTS

When looking at Chinese influences on Japanese martial arts, there are two primary time periods of relevance for jujutsu: pre or early Tokugawa influences, and post-Meiji influences. First, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, travel between China and Japan led to historical examples of Chinese influence on Japanese martial arts, beyond the general import of philosophy and culture from China to Japan. One example is the teaching of Chen Genpin in Edo, which led to the genesis or modification of several forms of koryū jujutsu. Another is the travel the swordsman Ogasawara Genshinsai Minamoto no Nagaharu (小笠原源信斎源長冶, 1574–1644), seventh headmaster of the Jikishinkage-ryū to China, where he is reputed to have been exposed to contemporary Chinese teachings. However, both these famous examples **pre-date** the development of *nèijiā*. The Chinese methods introduced to Japan during this time period, even if they involve body development, breath practice, sensitivity and balance, are most likely Shaolin-derived practices that would be considered largely *waijiā* by practitioners of *Tàijíquán*, *Bāguàzhǎng*, and *Xíngyìquán*. If not *waijiā*, they may be akin to practices derived from Taoist *qìgōng* such as *Bāduànjīn* (Eight Brocade), which dates from at least

before 1624.¹ Methods of iron shirt or iron palm training are quite sophisticated, and can lead to the ability of a martial arts practitioner to express great levels of power and rooted stability. However, it would be a mistake to consider them *nèijiā*, simply because they are Taoist. They, instead, are usually considered *waijin* (external trained force).

Discourse is complicated by the fact that the original style of *Tàijíquán* from Chen Village², includes a practice called *pao chui* or “cannon fist”, which is famous for its expressions of short-range explosive power. *Tàijíquán* is a grappling art, and has more overlap with jujutsu methods than strictly pugilistic arts such as *Chángquán* (Long Fist). As a result, the expressions of stability and power generation at short distance demonstrated by advanced Chen Village *Tàijíquán* practitioners have been of great interest to the jujutsu and Aikidō community. This does not mean they influenced jujutsu historically.

So, by “internal development” or “internal practice” in discussions regarding Aikidō and Daitō-ryū, one is likely actually referring to breathing practices and body development practices quite common in Shaolin derived martial arts rather than approaches specific to *nèijiā*. Ellis Amdur has done a great deal of research into the origins of Daitō-ryū Aiki-jujutsu (please purchase his books on the subject of Daitō-ryū, Aikidō, and Koryū), and concludes that Daitō-ryū is likely a derivative of a form of jujutsu associated to Ittō-ryū kenjutsu practiced by Takeda Sokaku’s maternal grandfather. He extends the debunking of the Saigo Tanomo lineage claim of Daitō-ryū that began with Stanley Pranin’s examination of Saigo’s diaries (which make no mention of budō practice) by offering a plausible explanation for the genesis of Daitō-ryū as Takeda’s own creation. Instead, there is a hint that Daitō-ryū may be influenced by Taoist teachings of complementarity preserved in the Ittō-ryū cognate jujutsu practice.

Similarly, Yoshin-ryū (practiced by several of Takeda’s contemporaries and colleagues) includes variants of “iron shirt” and “iron palm” practices of body development common to Shaolin-derived arts, and may be considered a form of *waijin* practice at its higher levels.

¹ Eight brocade qigong is mentioned in the Sineu Changing Classic, published in 1624, and is said to be developed by Yue Fei in the 12th century Song Dynasty, to keep his soldiers strong and well-prepared for battle. Yue Fei is claimed in the lineage several Shaolin-derived martial arts (e.g., Chuōjiāo, Fānziquán).

² No relation to Chen Genpin mentioned above.

Post-Tokugawa, due to Japanese designs on expansion, there was more exposure of Japanese budō practitioners to Chinese martial arts. However, lineal relationships are not generally existent due to the hostile relationship between the two countries during that time. While Ueshiba Morihei did travel to Manchuria, it is unlikely that he would have been able to receive instruction from any martial arts teachers during his travels. At best, he could have crossed hands with some or observed demonstrations or practices. Similarly, while Funakoshi introduced Okinawan Karatedō to Japan, and Takeda Sokaku was known to have travelled to Okinawa and fought at least one bout with a karate practitioner, this is an exposure of southern Shaolin-derived *waijiā* to Japan, as opposed to *nèijiā* typically practiced in Northern China.

A question is then whether the extreme power and stability demonstrated by Ueshiba Morihei was due to a foundation of Yoshin-ryū preserved *qigong* passed down via Daitō-ryū that was not shared by Takeda with the bulk of his students, derived from spear training Takeda was exposed to by his father, or from some other practice. There is a story passed around of one of Takeda's inheritors (Kodo Horikawa of Daitō-ryū Kodokai fame) visiting Shioda Gozo to teach him *aiki* during a few teaching sessions as a capstone of sorts to his practice. This may speak to a body of teachings within Takeda's practice that was not shown as part of the teachings made available on Takeda's seminar-circuits that were later organized into the myriad kata of the Daitō-ryū *hiden mokuroku*. If anything, Ueshiba's distillation of that corpus of 118 techniques into a smaller set that maintains a rich practice can be seen as a signifier of that possibility. Interestingly, the martial ineffectiveness of much of modern Aikidō today may speak to the compression of information by Ueshiba being too severe.

However, the existence of more private training methods within Takeda's teaching does not mean that the "aiki" of Daitō-ryū or Aikidō has a direct relationship with Chinese internal martial arts. As a result, the use of the word "internal" in public discussions may be misleading. It may be better to view Aikidō as a "soft external" style of martial arts, and recognize that the dialectic of hard versus soft does not need to be equated with the dialectic of internal versus external or what *aiki* means as compared to other forms of Japanese jujutsu. For example, *Xíngyìquán* is a very hard style of martial arts, but is considered *nèijiā*. *Tàijíquán* has a number of different variants, each with their own thoughts on how to specialize or organize their practice. Yang, Wu, Chen, and Sun

style practitioners might not agree amongst themselves, when asked, on what proper *tàijí* practice is.

INTEGRATION OF INTERNAL IDEAS INTO SOFT EXTERNAL PRACTICE

In the 20th century, there was cross-fertilization between Chinese and Japanese martial arts, from teachers of *nèijiā* who taught in Japan, to American practitioners of Aikidō who have sought out Chinese teachers to inform their practice. In the former case, ideas from *qigong* or *nèijiā* may have in some cases been incorporated into martial practice with varying levels of attribution. In contrast Akuzawa Minoru, is more open about his training influences, and has combined elements of Daitō-ryū, Yagyu Shingan-ryū, *nèijiāquán*, and mixed martial arts into a unique practice he calls Aunkai. Another example, less *en vogue* in contemporary discussion, is the Taikiken of Kenichi Sawai, which was influenced by a variant of *Xíngyìquán* called *Yiquán*.

In the case of contemporary American Aikidō practitioners, the question remains how the efforts of study of other arts (be they *nèijiā* or other approaches such as Systema) will inform their existing practice. Merely attending seminars by a master or advanced practitioner will likely not be enough to transform someone's practice without devoting one's time fully to ideas about body organization that are compatible with high-level *waijiā* or *nèijiā* training. Additionally, within an existing martial arts organization, there may be little room for such expression.

This takes us back to the opening question of this essay, as to what advice is prudent for practitioners seeking the benefits they associate with internal training. I leave it to the reader to choose whether the misconceptions I allude to in the title of this work are what I write about in observing the martial arts community, or my own...

First: I think an examination of whether one is conflating external versus internal with bad versus good is in order. Arts can be taken to a high level *within* their own practice, and if an art has declined and cannot, is it the responsibility or place of a mid-level practitioner to correct that, or to recognize that fact and abandon his or her practice instead, for more fruitful avenues of exploration and discovery? This was a conundrum I faced as a modern jujutsu practitioner, and I have come to the conclusion that I was correct to spend a great deal of energy examining other traditions in of themselves instead of trying to incorporate them into my practice before understanding them. Only years later, after spending dedicated time learning *nèijiā*, do I feel somewhat comfortable viewing

an evolved version of a small subset of my former jujutsu practice as a compatible locking and throwing practice that can be integrated with some of the methods and tactics I have since learned. Attempting to integrate ideas from *nèijiā* too early into an external practice may be too challenging to be generally successful.

Second: Exploring posture, balance, relaxation, and efficiency in biomechanics can be of benefit to *any* physical practice, martial or otherwise. One does not need hidden or esoteric teachings to gain a return on that type of investment. If one remains within a practice, improve the quality of the practice through hard work and self-examination and critique instead of simply going through the motions of a practice. Without a basic and proper understanding of these ideas, internal training will not be of much help. If teachers are not readily available, this may be a more profitable avenue of exploration.

Third: There are as many mediocre practitioners of Chinese martial arts as any other class of martial arts, so be careful in your choices as to what you think will improve what you are doing. Because *nèijiā* is a different type of self-development than external methods, you might even find your skill declines before benefits manifest themselves. Without consistent instruction, where a knowledgeable instructor is invested in your progress, developing skill may be more difficult in internal schools than via external methods. Seminars are interesting from an intellectual perspective, and may serve as eye-openers (hence the mantra “it has to be felt”), but I am not sure one can gain a benefit from the *nèijiā* as martial arts without investing the effort to actually learn and practice them with regular correction. The prevalence of *Tàijíquán* practitioners who believe their practice effective but lack martial ability should not be ignored, even if the counter-examples are extremely impressive in their skill.

THE STRENGTH OF SOCIAL NORMS

The social aspect of training becomes important to consider, especially in traditional arts that have a prescribed structure. Unless you are a *shihan* of an art, or have left an art after receiving a portion of its teachings, you may not have the freedom to explore the benefits ideas from *nèijiā* could provide your practice without being corrected away from them by a teacher who does not understand them. Often, it would be wrong to attempt to do so within the context of traditional martial arts practice. Remaining engaged with a practice that is not as sophisticated as another, while trying to infuse it with the latter, and not changing it, simply may not be an option for most people. Be-

cause so much of traditional martial arts practice is in this day and age a social activity, where respect is gained via association versus actually fighting opponents to develop a reputation, this may be too high a price for most students to make. The path is worth the effort, but it will cause change in the perspectives held by a practitioner.