

Philosophy on the Realities of Martial Arts Fighting

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What makes a technique effective or not is how well we perceive the reality. Of course our 'reality' may not be the same as that of an opponent due to differences in experience and perception. In practice this boils down to how one should engage an opponent and how one should perceive the opponent's moves. One can conceptualise the opponent's moves, for example, by categorising their strike as a hook, a jab or a round house kick. The danger with such conceptualization (illusion) is the built-in (erroneous) assumptions about the energy, direction and speed of the strikes which may not be in line with reality. Moreover what if the opponent does not attack in a predictable way or if he fakes his moves? We can only experience the reality of the strikes by engaging with them in a dynamic fashion. In the Ancestors System this in part is done through a concept called Teng Lik which means Listening Power. It is through Teng Lik that we are able to participate and interact with the reality of the opponent's strikes by directly experiencing the varying energies in order to appropriate an effective reaction.

Thus in reality strikes are not fixed or concrete but are instead dynamic and inconstant. Therefore the mind in martial arts should also not be fixed and rigid but should flow freely. This brings up an anecdotal account of a famous Shogun sword master named Yagyu Tajima No Kami who lived in Japan in the mid 17th century. Iemitsu once asked Yagyu the secret of his swordsmanship. Yagyu replied that he mastered the art through the practice of Zen under Takuan (a Zen monk). The Zen monk explained to the Shogun:

Where should a swordsman fix his mind? If he puts his mind on the physical movement of his opponent, it will be seized by the movement; if he places it on the sword of his opponent, it will be arrested by the sword; if he focuses his mind on the thought of striking his opponent, it will be carried away by the very thought; if the mind stays on his own sword, it will be captured by his sword; if he centres it on the thought of not being killed by his opponent, his mind will be overtaken by this very thought; if he keeps his mind firmly on his own or on his opponent's posture, likewise it will be blocked by them. Thus the mind should not be fixed anywhere.

This advice related to a passage in the Buddhist sutra, the Vajracchedika Sutra which states 'the mind should operate without abiding anywhere'. An expert in the arts is someone whose mind works fully yet whose mind is bound to no particular thought or object (Ibid).

True wisdom is seeing things as they really are.