

# Martial Arts and Psi

A tradition within the martial arts claims that by means of strenuous training an adept may develop supernormal abilities, such as the power to dominate opponents by means of ESP and psychokinesis, and to heal by means similarly unknown to medical science. These abilities are said to arise from *chi*, a subtle energy that permeates the body and the universe at large, specifically from the *dantien*, an area approximately three inches below the navel and two inches into the body. From there it is said to be released by *kiai*, a particular kind of shout, for the purpose of healing or harming.

Such claims are mainly anecdotal, and investigation has often exposed trickery or self-deception. There remain some indications, as yet unproven, that training in martial arts can be conducive to the development of psi phenomena found in other contexts such as altered states of consciousness.

## Early Origins of Martial Arts

The precise origins of the martial arts are hard to determine, placed variously at the time of the Xia Dynasty (c 2000 BCE) and the reign of the 'Yellow Emperor' Huangdi (c 2600 BCE).<sup>1</sup> Many stories are associated with the Indian Buddhist monk Bhodidharma, who sometime during the sixth century arrived at the Shaolin Temple in Song Shan in the Henan Province of Northern China, and is said there to have established martial arts after a long period of meditation.

In medieval Japan legends arose concerning the prowess of the *samurai*, said often to have the ability to overcome apparently insurmountable odds to vanquish enemies. Similar legends relate to their *ninja* rivals, who were said to have supplemented a dazzling array of weaponry with the use of hypnosis, magic, intuition and clairvoyance. The *ninja* are said also to have been able to cover three hundred miles on foot in as little as three days, exploiting this power for political and military gain. Such claims are naturally controversial today, but they are widely promulgated in contemporary pop culture, notably in films such as *American Ninja* and *Revenge of the Ninjas*.

Today martial arts with different names, forms and characteristics are to be found throughout the world. They are perhaps best-known through sport and the media from China and Japan; however, flourishing traditions exist also in India, Sri Lanka, Korea, Thailand, Burma, Brazil, Israel and Russia.

Name	Origin	Characteristics
Aikido	Japan	Philosophical emphasis and defensive
Capoeira	Brazil	Dance orientation and very energetic

Eskrima	Philippines	Mainly using sticks and weapons
Hapkido	Korea	Similar to Aikido but with kicks/ punches
Judo	Japan	Sport orientation and very flexible
Jujutsu	Japan	Combat version of judo also using weapons
Kalaripayit	India	Eclectic with emphasis on prana
Karate	Japan	Powerful striking art – many styles
Kendo	Japan	The way of the sword – ritualistic
Krav Maga	Israel	Extreme combat style with little philosophy
Kung Fu	China	Shaolin monks' boxing style
Kyudo	Japan	The way of archery – ritualistic
Muay Thai	Thailand	Combat sport using music
Ninjutsu	Japan	Using weapons and much deception
Sumo	Japan	Strict Shinto code of wrestling
Systema	Russia	Used by military and similar to Krav Maga
Taekwondo	Korea	Dance-like with emphasis on kicks
Tai Chi	China	Healing and smooth movement important
Wing Chun	China	Fast punching and kicks

## Claims of Supernormal Feats

Formal experiments have been undertaken to explore claims of psychic powers in terms of 'human energy fields'. Reports are to be found in the publications of the International Society of Life Information Science (ISLIS) in Japan, the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, and elsewhere. Kevin Chen, associate professor of the University of Maryland, has published extensively in this field. However, the results remain controversial, with doubts cast on the scientific methodology.<sup>2</sup>

In relatively recent times, claims of supernormal feats were associated with Morihei Ueshiba, the Japanese founder of *aikido*, following his achievement of spiritual enlightenment in 1925. A demonstration is said to have been caught on film, showing the Master as an old man of about 75, no more than 5ft tall, being charged from both sides by two large judo black belts. Projected in slow motion, successive frames show the Master standing calmly while his attackers inch their way forward. But, just as they are about to grab him, between two frames he has moved several feet out of the way and is facing in the other direction. The two black belts continue their rush, to collide violently into each other, while the Master watches. This movement, which from the film testimony must have taken less than one-eighteenth of a second, appears to demonstrate transcendence of the normal laws of time and space ...<sup>3</sup>

Ueshiba's other feats are said to have included an ability to knock down students by the force of his shout, or by using *fajing* (a psychic discharge of body force); becoming unmovable when under attack by as many as six *aikido* black belts; dodging bullets fired at him; and the demonstration of telepathic powers.<sup>4</sup>

Demonstrations are often performed within a martial arts context that might be classed as stunts or tricks. They can be found in abundance on YouTube, although their veracity must always be doubted, considering the opportunities for deception inherent in filming. Feats can be summarized as punches:

- smashing solid objects such as wood, bricks, tiles
- smashing the top or bottom of a bottle, leaving the rest intact
- extinguishing a candle flame
- a knock-out punch delivered close to the body
- *dim mak* (death touch), a blow that kills the opponent at a specified later time

endurance of severe pain or physical harm:

- being hit with iron bars or wooden bats, or slashed with sharp blades
- blocks of cement resting on the head or stomach being broken with a sledgehammer
- resisting penetration by spears, nails.
- carrying the weight of a heavy vehicles on the body without harm
- catching or dodging speeding arrows or bullets

other general abilities:

- levitation

- making the body lightweight
- moving without being seen
- using the voice as a weapon
- being imovable under attack
- psychokinetic abilities

## Normal Explanations

Extensive training is clearly sufficient for many of these feats. Karate practitioners may train for years to develop strength in the bones and skin of their hands, enabling apparently abnormal punching feats. A pile of tiles or a block of wood placed at a certain angle facilitates breaking when struck hard in a certain way.<sup>5</sup>

According to researchers at Imperial College and University College:

The karate black belts were able to repeatedly coordinate their punching action with a level of coordination that novices can't produce. We think that ability might be related to fine tuning of neural connections in the cerebellum, allowing them to synchronise their arm and trunk movements very accurately.<sup>6</sup>

Other feats can also be achieved by body and pain management training even when trickery is not being directly employed. Sufi dervishes are well known for an ability to inflict harm on their own bodies, apparently without causing lasting damage.

In an experiment conducted in Baghdad in 1998, Howard Hall, a clinical psychologist from Cleveland University, demonstrated that after a period of meditation and preparation he could withstand severe body piercings without suffering serious damage. This demonstration was recorded for the National Geographic Channel's *Is it Real?* series and broadcast on American television between 2005 and 2007. Hall claimed he did not employ self-hypnosis, but this remains a likely explanation.

No demonstration has been made in controlled conditions of an ability to deflect a speeding bullet. An arrow has been seen to be deflected by the blade of a sword, when fired at three-quarters of its potential strength and in a straight line.<sup>7</sup> However, this may be explained by uncommonly fast reflexes.

Levitation and bi-location is similarly poorly represented in modern scientific studies, despite many Internet videos appearing to offer demonstrations.

Running up a vertical wall and making one's body immovable appear to defy reality, but are both feasible to some extent with sufficient training.

An obvious exception is *dim mak*, a death touch directed by the practitioner that causes the victim's death at a pre-determined time in the future. Insights into its efficacy can be gleaned from Dr Michael Kelly, a learned practitioner of martial arts.<sup>8</sup>

*Kiai-jutsu* is the art of channeling of *chi* in order to achieve psychokinetic and healing powers. It is sometimes described as *noi cun* or 'empty force' (the art of knocking out an opponent without physical contact). It can be seen being demonstrated by Master Sasaki.<sup>9</sup> Derren Brown illustrates this ability in a carefully

scripted television show, putting it down to 'power of the mind'.<sup>10</sup> However, he does not expand on this or reveal possible preparations made before the demonstrations, for instance the concealment of an electrical device to generate a small electrical shock.

The most widely known exponent of the no-touch-punch is the American George Dillman. His chief instructor Leon Jay was not able to move the psychologist Luigi Garlaschelli, an Italian sceptical investigator, for the programme, but Dillman claimed that:

The skeptic was a totally non-believer. Plus – I don't know if I should say that on film – but if the guy had his tongue in the wrong position in the mouth, that can also nullify it [Qi power]. You can nullify it – you can nullify a lot of things. In fact, you can nullify it if you raise those two big toes! If I say I'm going to knock you out, and you raise one toe, and push one toe down ... I can't knock you out. And then, if I go to try again, you reverse it. If you keep doing this, I won't knock you out.<sup>11</sup>

Garlaschelli has said that he was sure nothing would have happened as long as the kung fu master could not touch him.

Master Yarragi Ryukerin claimed he could defeat any martial arts practitioner without touching them, and offered a 00 reward for anyone who proved him wrong. He gave an impressive display against his own pupils, but was easily beaten by Iwakura Goh, a black belt martial artist from outside his club.<sup>12</sup>

## ESP Claims

Martial artist Chris Crudelli undertook an experiment in Japan to attempt to increase his awareness of an unseen attack via telepathy. He was tested in his normal state and then again after he had plunged himself in a frozen waterfall for fifteen minutes. His results on the second occasion were considerably improved.<sup>13</sup>

Stanley Pranin, editor of *Aikido News*, and *aikido* master George Leonard concur that there are mental states within martial arts that go 'beyond technique'. However, this is rejected by masters such as Kenji Tomichi and Koichi Tohei.<sup>14</sup> To achieve this altered state of mind, many people enter what in Japan is called *mushin no shin*, or simply *mushin*, meaning 'no conscious mind'. This Zen expression describes a mind which is empty of conscious thoughts or feelings and therefore reacts instinctively and without hesitation (in terms of western psychology this might equate with 'subliminal perception').

## Investigations

SPR member Melvyn Willin attended a workshop in 2013 in London in order to learn more about *chi* energy and *hapkido*. This began with several hours of meditation and muscle flexing. He was then directed to the front of the group by the leader, Grandmaster Gedo Chang. A solid pine wooden board was produced and held by one of the delegates. Willin was told to press his index and second fingers to his thumb and to strongly thrust them into the board, while imagining them

passing through it. Willin had never attempted such a thing before, however when he carried out the instruction the board was chopped into two pieces with a single blow - to his great surprise. Chang used this to demonstrate the power of *chi*, while insisting that it's primary purpose is not to perform circus tricks, but to be the basis of self-development, aiding the maintenance of a positive balance in life.

Willin naturally suspected the board had been weak or had been tampered with prior to the demonstration. However, a professional carpenter subsequently examined the two pieces, which were  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch solid pine, and found no indication that either was the case. The carpenter also pointed out that the board had been broken against the grain, where it was strongest. A natural explanation is that many of us possess more strength than we realize, especially when amplified by mental techniques such as meditation and visualizing. However, for Willin the demonstration left open the possibility that *chi* energy is present, and can be harnessed to perform otherwise inexplicable feats.

Master PB was contacted by the author - a martial arts practitioner - because it was claimed that:

Paul had knocked them [members of his martial arts club] CLEAN out ... without even touching them. In some cases, he'd be close to them (but never touching) to get a knockout. Other times he'd be literally feet away ... and although it took a little while longer to get that 'knockout', the effect was just as devastating - and just as magical to watch and behold. The 'secret' is quite simple, in fact. Paul gets his own body to generate 'energy' - energy which he then 'directs' into the nervous system of his opponents. Hit the right points with your energy... as strange as this sounds ... and the 'nerve interrupts' will work to simply knock out your attacker without even touching him.[15](#)

He invited the author to visit his club to witness a demonstration of his talent. The author asked P to knock him out with a no-touch-punch, but was told it was too dangerous since he was too old and that the author might block the punch by psychological means. It was suggested that he might do the punch on one of his students, but he declined saying it wasn't fair on any of them. The author departed disappointed.

Paul Brecher, founder of the Chinese College of Martial Arts, argues that the no-touch punch is in fact a very fast punch to a meridian point in the body familiar to acupuncturists, and, contrary to what is claimed, makes actual physical contact, disguised by its speed. Brecher speculates that the deep respect accorded to teachers in oriental martial arts might discourage a student from exposing false claims of this nature.

Brecher nevertheless argues that certain phenomena within the context of the martial arts are yet to be understood by contemporary science.[16](#)

Melvyn Willin

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Crudelli (2010).
- [2.](#)
- [3.](#) Green (2001).
- [4.](#) Cited in Willin (2013).
- [5.](#) Matsudo (1986).
- [6.](#) Private correspondence with Antony Cummins 'The Historical Ninjutsu Research Team'.
- [7.](#) Willin (2013).
- [8.](#) Cited in Willin (2013).
- [9.](#) Willin (2013).
- [10.](#) Payne (1981), 32.
- [11.](#) Cited in Willin (2013).
- [12.](#) Feld, McNair, & Wilk (1983), 783-92.
- [13.](#) Roberts et al. (2012).
- [14.](#) Kelly (2001).
- [15.](#) *Mythbusters* (2008). Episode 109, shown October 15th 2008. Ninjas 2. TV series.
- [16.](#) Willin (2013).

