



The tai chi rough stuff

Interview by Robin Gamble

David Rogers has trained in Chinese martial arts since 1984. He is a disciple of master Deng Jan Gong, one of the most renowned kung fu masters in Southern China. Fluent in Cantonese, he regularly returns to further his studies in hap kune, tai chi, and hung kune. In 1995, he opened the Rising Crane Centre where he taught for 25 years until recently moving his teaching online and to teach international seminars. He tells Robin Gamble some of his combat secrets

David Rogers has coached both national MMA and tai chi champions. I was curious to know how this came about. He told me: “I started a full time kung fu academy (Rising Crane) in the 90s and was a member of BCCMA. I was teaching hop gar and tai chi and we would go to regional and national competitions. Over time we had a national forms champion and national push hands champion. But the format of forms competition shifted to more acrobatic/gymnastic movements which was not the direction I was interested in.

“Then MMA hit in the ‘90s and I got into it pretty early on and when I restarted competitions with my guys rather than the san shou (Chinese full contact) we tried MM. It was difficult at first. We went to some venues where there were often more fights in the stands than the cage.

“But it was a terrific chance for us to test our skills. Over some years, we developed a method that worked. I trained four-five amateur national champions, regional champions and even a guy who competed in a world amateur championship and won. I must add, I’ve never coached pro fighters or genetic freaks, I’ve always been interested in

taking normal people and in a reasonable time frame teaching them how to fight. It worked, we did it repeatedly and successfully.”

There is always controversy about whether it is necessary for a tai chi practitioner only interested in health benefits to learn the fighting aspects of tai chi chuan. When I asked him whether he feels it is necessary he was unequivocal: “You absolutely should learn the meaning behind the postures, especially if you are training for health. If you are doing movements without any intent, you are not even going to get the real health benefits. The health benefits largely come from the unity of intention, consciousness and physical movement. It is guided by the intention first.

“If you don’t know the intention of the movement and don’t know what it is for how can there be any real intention? You won’t lead the qi, you won’t get the health benefits from it. However, that doesn’t mean you have to fight or compete – absolutely not. Most people have no

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reason to compete if they are training for health but you should have some sense of the basic movements being punch, kick, takedown etc. If you don’t, it is too abstract, you can’t have a feeling or sense of the movement.”

So what is the problem that impedes the combat efficiency of so many tai chi practitioners?

“Trying to make their fighting look like a form,” says David. “Trying to use the postures of the form as a literal movement within the chaotic environment of a sparring scenario. You have to look at the form as being an ideal structure for the body for the development of force and you make the movement fit as best as you can to that ideal in terms of timing and distance.



Pictures show page 28-29 : an applications of cloud hands. Page 30 bend bow to strike tiger

“For example, if you're doing applications from the form and the person is taller or shorter the form will be higher or lower but tai chi people spend a lot of time saying “no, the hand has to be exactly here or there’. You can become obsessed over the detail, instead of asking ‘Why?. Well, this is going to hit someone’s face,’ so you are practising hitting something. Always come back to the form and say: ‘Why is the hand there, what was the idea of that? What’s open? What’s mechanically efficient about it?’ And then ask: ‘Well in the real world if I can’t get that position, how can I optimise it?’

Trying to make the fighting look like a form, or for kung

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fu people trying to make it look like a Shaw Brothers movie is a big mistake. If you think ‘I’m going to try and use single whip, or play the lute.’ It’s completely backwards, the technique comes spontaneously in relation to your opponent, you can’t force that. But if you trained right, it will happen, it will come out. So get out of the way and stop trying to ‘make’ it happen would be my advice.”

If that is the case I asked, will it help tai chi practitioners to improve their combat efficiency or is there something else they should be doing? David’s response might put off some people: “You probably know what I’m going to say.

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It would be sparring. But people have the wrong idea about sparring. They think sparring is fighting. The ego takes over, they tense up and people get injured. No, you have to learn how to play.

“Tai chi is supposed to be based on animal movements, right? Well, animals play fight. Tiger clubs roll around. Animals learn by play. Human beings are the same. The reason that it is fun is that there are neurotransmitters that make us happy in play, our brains are rewarding us for being in the learning zone. So, my philosophy is that playful fighting is the best way to learn and then occasional pressure testing to make sure it is not veering far off the path of reality. You don't need to do lots of hard or full contact sparring. Say you are doing push hands. Start off by taking away the routine, and freely move, try and take each other's balance, allow your partner to come in a bit more freestyle, a bit harder, and learn to deal with that. Then maybe mix some strikes in. If you are lucky enough to have some protective equipment you add more striking. If you've got mats, you can add the takedowns.

“Gradually make it more combative. In modern times we have pads and mats so why the heck wouldn't we use them? The reason there was a focus on push hands was because you didn't get injured doing it. But now we have safety equipment. So, play fight, use as much protective equipment as you can. Keep it safe and enjoy it, get experience.

“Also, don't always play with other tai chi people. If you are fighting against your own style all the time, you only get good at countering yourself. The average boxer is very good at slipping punches, but not good at defending



takedowns. Wrestlers are good at defending takedowns but throw an upper cut and a hook and they're not so used to it.

“By only training in your own system you become over specialised. You're fighting for the same thing, you want the same thing. I think of martial arts as rock, scissors paper or like the five elements. You're always aiming for the thing that counters their method which is not the same thing all the time. Remember, you need to practise with people you can trust because going to a rough gym, if you don't know what you are doing, getting mauled isn't going to be a learning experience it's going to be an unpleasant experience.

“You need to find where your level is and then play at about 10% above your level so that you learn and grow. You can learn to enjoy that challenge, you don't need to jump in at the deep end. You'll find after a couple of years

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of practise, you'll be doing stuff that before you wouldn't have been able to handle. Very natural, very playful.”

Which brought us to which style David practises and how it approaches combat?

“I practise the Yang style,” he says, “and I practise my sifu's own style of tai chi which he calls Deng family tai chi. One of the things about his form is that when he started creating it he thought: ‘What are my favourite moves, what are my most common moves?’

“For example, one of his sets is very self-defence orientated, he's defending a headlock or a bear hug or various things but they are all things that he has used and then he has put them together into the set.

“So now what he is doing with the set is refining the movement, but he already has the movement combatively. The biggest difference is not trying to learn the set and take the movement and try and work out the combative



use, rather learning the combat and then integrating it into the set, which is the opposite of the way people do it now. I think results speak for themselves because there are not many tai chi people competing [in modern combat sports] and I think it is because they are trying to learn the form and hope that the form will make them into a good fighter. No. Become a fighter and then make the form really good. Do it that way round. So that's probably the biggest difference [with Deng family and how I practise tai chi].

“Further to that, if you look at the tai chi postures, they are all very effective, strikes, trips and throws. They are good fighting movements but the reason people can't fight is because they can't fight. They learn some movements but they still can't fight. If you had the combative application and understanding first, and then just did the movements slowly you'd refine it.

“I think of tai chi for fighting like a post-graduate level of



study. You don't learn the form to learn how to fight but you can refine your understanding of combative application through form. That's my opinion. Most, though not all, of the great tai chi fighters had some fighting experience before their tai chi study.

“When it is applied in combat the tai chi form is nothing special. The biggest mistake is people trying to do ‘special stuff’. The person seems to do very little but *oops* you're off balance and *oh* they got you. It almost seems like, they got lucky; it is often very high-level skill at work.

“High level skill masters make things look easy. But someone else tries and it's really difficult. The highest level is natural movement. It's the same in boxing, the boxer slips the punch by a millimetre and counters and it doesn't even look like a hard punch, but the opponent still hits the canvas.”

So I finally asked David to tell me what is the one thing in tai chi fighting that nobody knows or talks about but everybody should know or talk about?

“You will get hit. Your technique won't work first time. You need to have a plan B,” he replied.

He says: “In the 80s, I remember talking to one guy, who was very good at tai chi. He showed me an application and I said, ‘Well it seems to me if this doesn't work you are left in a pretty bad position’. He said, “Well you need to practise so it always works’.

“My Sifu in China thinks differently. He says, ‘Well, try



this, it possibly won't work but then follow with this technique and also be ready with a plan C and D'. The idea that if an opponent attacks you will reply with a perfect technique is wrong.

“Boxers don't land every punch; wrestlers don't land every takedown. BJJ people don't land every submission. Why are tai chi people held to this ridiculous standard of doing this ‘one thing’ that will work perfectly? It's not the real world.

“So, my answer is, it won't work and you will get hit (initially) and if you are not prepared to get used to being hit, you have no business fighting.

“I would say Fa Jin (explosive force) is important. But equally important is resilience and conditioning. So you are going to get hit (be conditioned) and you need a follow up plan for every technique you throw.”



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