Improved Judo performance through the Application of Taiji Principles and Training Methods

By Shane LeGros

Background

I began my training in Chinese martial arts in Canada in 1989 at the age of seventeen, specializing in various forms of traditional Chinese Gung-fu. In 1996, I began my training in taiji under Liang Bao-Sen, the director of the Richmond Hill and Etobicoke branches of the Ji Hong Taiji College, from whom I learned the Chen, Yang, and Wu styles of taiji in addition to push hands, and weapons. Through my study with Master Liang, I met the founder of the Ji Hong Taiji College, Master Luo Hong-Yuan, who also instructed me and helped to further refine my taiji. Both of these men have been instrumental in my development as a martial artist. Through their patience and love of taiji, they have introduced me to a part of my life I dearly cherish. My appreciation for their efforts cannot be understated. My accomplishments include, among others, being a former Canadian national team member, six-time gold medalist at the Canadian championships, USAWKF (United States of America Wushu-Kungfu Federation) weapons sparring champion, bronze medalist at the USAWKF Sanshou championships in the 80-85 kg division, and multiple medalist at the Biennial Taiji Conference; Jiazou China. I continue to practice taiji almost daily.

My judo training began in 1984 where I attended classes at the Hatashita dojo in Toronto for a period of about two to three years. In 2000, I found myself growing tired of practicing taiji push hands with the same group within the Ji Hong school; I wanted to test and refine my skills against a wider variety of opponents. Much to my dismay, I could find few. Because I was married to a Japanese woman, I was attending Japanese classes at the Japanese Cultural Center in Toronto where I observed a judo class. I started noting some similarities between judo and taiji push hands, which I will discuss later. I was also attracted to the large group of potential opponents and regular sparring practice within the judo dojo, and thought it would be a far more useful and less boring method of cross-training for my taiji as opposed to weight lifting and endurance training. It was shortly thereafter that I resumed my judo training. I received excellent instruction in Canada and I owe a great debt and give thanks to my many teachers and friends in Canada.

In early 2004, my wife and I took advantage of an opportunity to move to Japan. I was curious to see firsthand what martial arts training was like in Japan, and began to research training methods and facilities.

Judo in Japan

One of the first observations I made when arriving in Japan was how widespread judo is in Japan. As not only a national sport, but also an Olympic sport; the training system, resources and infrastructure are extremely impressive. Children often start their study of judo upon entry to elementary school and continue through university. Post-university, the opportunity exists to practice judo professionally through the police and correctional services. Many members of the Japanese Olympic judo teams have in fact been police officers and prison guards. The support system, combined with the large number of people practicing judo, develops incredible athletes. I have been lucky to be able to train within this system at two excellent facilities (Mie Budokan and Tsu Prison Dojo) for the past four and a half years.

Mie Budokan

The Mie Budokan is the primary martial arts college for Mie prefecture in central Japan, and has a teaching staff consisting of many 7th and 8th Dan judo instructors with impressive resumes. As a Kodokan certified black belt, I also act as an assistant instructor assisting the staff with teaching duties.

Tsu Prison Dojo

This facility located at the prefecture’s largest prison is the primary training facility for prison guards in the prefecture. The practitioners here are professional level, many of whom were former university and provincial champions who sought to pursue judo as a professional career. Among those training here, are four former provincial champions, an Olympic team alternate, and one judoka who was sent as a special emissary of the Japanese government to instruct the Indonesian police in hand-to-hand combat. This facility is typical of many police and corrections training facilities at which judo is conducted at the professional level; it offers some of the most intense training I have ever encountered in any martial art. These men are exceptional athletes and true professionals. It has been a fantastic experience training here; I have had the chance to refine my skills against some of the best in Japan and my athletic performance has improved greatly.

Competition Record

Upon my arrival in Japan, the administration at the Mie Budokan suggested I qualify myself in Japan to Japanese standards. As such, I was required to participate in judo tournaments in order to amass competition points toward increasing
my ranking. What follows are the results and my observations.

Name: Shane LeGros  
D.O.B. 13/10/1973  
Class: 81kg  
Record: 22 wins, 0 losses, 4 draws  
All Japan competition #: 248187310130  
Kodokan Membership #: 731013080

To *Ikkyu* (brown belt)

Result: 1 win  
Win by Ippon, no points lost.

Rank of Ikkyu immediately granted following the match.

Notes:  
In terms of insight, little was gained from this match; I was able to win my match quickly and easily because my opponent's skills were substandard.

To *Shodan* (black belt 1st degree)

Results: 10 wins, 0 losses, 0 draws  
10 matches won by *Ippon* and *Osaekomi* with 0 points scored against me.

Rank of Shodan (black belt 1st degree) granted following the completion of a technical exam.

Notes:  
I was paired against a variety of opponents of different ages, ranging from eighteen years to adult and different weight classes. The skills of some were respectable and the largest of the opponents weighed in excess of 100kg. I did not lose a single point of any kind during these matches and won by throw (*Ippon*), pin (*Osaekomi*), or submission hold. I successfully won ten matches in one day thus completing my points requirements for Shodan.

To *Nidan* (black belt 2nd degree)

Results:  
08/07/2007  
Versus Takanori Matsuda, scoreless draw  
Versus Naoki Okawa, scoreless draw  
Rematch vs. Matsuda, scoreless draw  
Rematch vs. Okawa, scoreless draw

02/09/2007  
Versus Atsushi Saito, win by *Ippon* (*Osaekomi*)  
Versus Shohei Sase, win by *Ippon*  
Versus Daiki Besho, win by *Ippon*  
Versus Teruhiko Kusui, win by *Ippon* (*Osaekomi*)  
Versus Yuuto Mitsui, win by *Ippon*  
Versus Yuya Hosokawa, win by *Ippon* (*Osaekomi*)

Rank of Nidan (Black Belt 2nd degree) granted following completion of a technical exam.

**Open Tournament**

5 - 0 record versus members of the Mie Prefectural Police College to win the division.

Observations:
Scoreless draws were achieved on both occasions versus Matsuda and Okawa. No match points of any kind were scored by either them or me. I was able to control all matches and take both opponents down in each match; however, I did so using techniques that were very compact and based upon taiji and as a result, I was not able to score using them. It was a very educational experience because I realized that while I could control the opponent, in order to win I must also be able to score. In that sense, tournament judo differs slightly from open combat. While I found my methods highly effective in training at the local prison, I realized that while able to control and defeat my opponents in a more open situation, I was not scoring points. This experience led me to the understanding that I must keep my techniques within the judo framework in order to score and ensure match victories. (0.5 match points were awarded to each competitor.)

In the open tournament on September 2, 2007, I was able to refine my technique further and easily won against opponents of varying weight classes and ranks. No points were scored against me of any kind.

In the tournament on November 11, 2007, I was able to go 5-0 to win the open Black Belt class versus members of the Mie Prefectural police college. My success in that tournament confirmed that my methods could work well in competition.

Summary

My competition and training experience at the Mie Budokan, and Tsu Prison dojo, have led me to several observations and an understanding that the application of taiji principles and training methods can yield exceptional results when applied to the sport of judo.

For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to concepts and terms outlined in the book The Ji Hong Taiji System. For additional information and explanation of these terms and concepts, please consult this text.

Taiji as Cross Training for Judo

I have a great respect and love for judo and taiji. I have made many friends and had many great experiences in both arts. I have also learned many things from my experiences in judo that have improved my taiji and vice versa; it has certainly been a two-way street. However, for the purpose of this essay I will only look at how my taiji training has improved and influenced my judo.

Although there are many competing views about the relative merits of one style of martial art versus another, it is not the purpose of this essay to compare the relative merits of taiji and judo. Taiji should not be thought of solely as a system of combat techniques but as a system of principles and training methods that can be applied to improve athletic performance. Within this definition, taiji and judo can be seen as not being mutually exclusive but more accurately as complements. The principles and theories of taiji can be directly applied to the techniques of judo. The application of taiji theories and principles does not require any significant changes to judo. The use of and training in these methods should not be thought of as re-inventing or altering the judo in any way, but thought of more as an effective method of cross-training used to enhance performance in targeted areas. Much in the same manner that weight training and running are used to improve strength and endurance, taiji training simply develops physiological characteristics in specific areas that enhance and improve the athlete’s performance, which can then be applied to the techniques of judo. From my experience, judo practitioners with greater expertise tend to know, understand, and use many similar methods to those found in taiji. They have developed these techniques and skills as a result of many years of general judo training, and not as a result of specific targeted training in those methods. Taiji training includes methods which, when applied to judo, offer the judo practitioner a way to improve their skills in a shorter period of time. Through this type of cross-training, I feel it is possible to introduce these skills and develop them at a younger age, and accelerate the development process. Taiji methods, which are directly applicable to judo, can be categorized several ways:

Self Control

Proper body structure and skeletal alignment are not taught specifically as part of traditional judo training in the same manner that they are specifically targeted in taiji. After many years of training, judo practitioners gain a greater awareness of their postural adjustments and body structure, and these postural adjustments become automatic. As a result of an increased body awareness, judo practitioners develop a ‘toughness’ or resistance to any forces trying to unbalance or alter their body structure.

In taiji, proper body structure and skeletal alignment are fundamentals that are specifically taught in the initial stages of training. Because taiji develops these fundamentals through specific training, results in the area of gaining postural awareness can be achieved in a shorter period, and ultimately taken to a higher level. In their book The Ji Hong Tai Chi System, authors Luo and Gu clearly define this process and expand upon it beyond the scope of what is taught through judo training. They refer to this ‘toughness’ as “Air bag-like elasticity (ABLE).” Air bag like elasticity in taijiquan is defined by Luo and Gu as “an elastic solid body, created in an orderly, purposeful and closely-knit manner as a result of the inter-workings of the three taiji elements yi [mind], qi [internal energy], and body” (74).

Luo and Gu describe the basic stage of this ABLE process as the “mind directing body” with “the objective of adjusting the body structure by applying certain pre-determined guidelines and requirements” (75). In this sense, the first step of this training process seeks specifically to develop the body structure characteristics that typically take judo practitioners a longer time to develop. Taiji’s systematic training of the principles of this stage is something that is lacking in judo, but it is a
process that judo practitioners could find very useful. In taiji, this is merely the first stage of the development of ABLE.

“Body directing qi is the second stage in the formation of ABLE. After the body parts are well adjusted and aligned, ... the mind can now direct the flow and distribution of qi in an orderly fashion inside the body, which, in conjunction with the movements of the body parts, will result in the ideal form or Taiji Readiness” (77).

“The third stage in the formation of ... ABLE,... is the creation of an energy field outside the physical confines of the body when the mind directs the internal energy or qi to act or react on the air space enclosed by the body parts” (79).

As I mentioned above, high-level judo practitioners seem to develop these characteristics, but they do so as a result of years of general training and the necessities of combat rather than specific training. I have never encountered any judo training that discusses the use of qi, body structure, or specific training in these methods in the same manner or to the same extent as found in taiji. Top judo practitioners, however, have very similar characteristics to top taiji practitioners. It is quite simple, if you are fighting against opponents of a similar skill level or better, you will need to make the postural and body structure adjustments out of necessity. Once the adjustments become ingrained, practitioners are able to take their skills to a higher level leading others of lesser ability to be awestruck. Ultimately, I believe that taiji offers avenues that accelerate this development process; by the means of training specificity, a shorter path to a higher level of proficiency is created.

**Controlling the Opponent**

**Kuzushi**

Central to judo technique is the concept of kuzushi or, literally translated, 'unbalancing' the opponent. In practice, this can be defined as gaining control over your opponent's momentum and/or balance for the purpose of executing a technique. Kuzushi must be initiated in order to execute any technique in judo. Kuzushi is taught, almost entirely, as a combination of two methods of control, balance and momentum. Indeed, the popular judo website Judoinfo.com describes kuzushi as follows: "Kuzushi is breaking the balance of an opponent." There is no mention at all of the role that momentum and body structure play.

In taiji, the concept of jing-lu control is similar, but with jing-lu control, a key additional component is added: controlling the opponent's body structure. The concept of effectively controlling the opponent's main bow and attacking by collapsing the opponent's body structure by using the ming-men as a fulcrum are central to taiji. The taiji attack, when executed properly, can be extremely fast, and compact. Many of the more experienced judo practitioners understand the effectiveness of controlling the opponent using a combination of momentum, balance, and body structure control as opposed to using momentum and balance alone. It should be noted though that in order to control an opponent's body structure you must first be in total control of your own. Attacking by this method is almost impossible unless a reasonable amount of self-control has first been developed. It is my belief that the specific training in jing-lu control techniques would give judo practitioners an added dimension to their attack and accelerate their skill development.

**Effects of the Judogi**

The judogi offers an interesting obstacle to the application of taiji attacks to judo because the slack in the judogi effectively removes the attacker's direct link to an opponent’s body structure. This makes it difficult to attack the opponent’s main bow and lock the opponent's spine. There are ways around this. Many of the more experienced judoka use their grip to not only grasp the judogi but also to constrict it enabling them to reduce the slack and gain a more direct connection to the opponent. It is this grip that enables them to attack using momentum, balance, and posture control as opposed to using primarily balance and momentum. Because this grip allows them a more direct link to the body structure, it also increases the compactness and efficiency of the technique by reducing the amount of movement required to execute the technique effectively. The slack in the gi is also used in a similar manner as the taiji technique of fa-jing. Fa-jing is the "sudden, powerful and highly focused 'explosive' force that emanates from the dan tian" and is directed externally (332). In judo, it is common practice to use the slack in the gi to snap the gi against an opponent for the purpose of applying a sudden, sharp force. This varies somewhat from a properly applied fa-jing in the sense that the fa-jing is applied directly to the body structure and has an increased ability ability to penetrate and upset an opponent's posture. Fa-jing can be a very useful technique in instances where a direct link to the opponent's body structure can be made as a result of adjusting and/or altering the grip.

**Defense**

While judo practitioners do develop characteristics similar to the ABLE model outlined by Luo and Gu, the targeted self-control training techniques of taiji seem to yield some slightly different results than those of judo alone. It is my opinion that through the establishment of the proper taiji readiness state as described by Luo and Gu's ABLE model, the practitioner is able to develop a ‘damping effect’. In practice, the establishment of the taiji readiness state allows the practitioner to effectively 'dampen' or lessen the severity of any initial incoming attack making a practitioner who has gained proficiency in these principles exceedingly difficult to throw. In the event that the practitioner is brought to the ground, it is in a very anticlimactic way and in most cases, the type of judo point scored is significantly downgraded. It is extremely difficult to achieve the necessary catastrophic results required to score ippon against a practitioner who is in the correct taiji readiness state. My own competition results are testament to this. In twenty-six judo matches in Japan, I have not had a single point of any kind scored against me. While the more experienced judo practitioners are able to develop body characteristics similar to
those achieved through taiji, there however exist some differences. Most advanced judo practitioners are very difficult to
attack effectively, they have very highly honed skills and are very sensitive and well trained at not allowing themselves to be
brought into a compromising position. If the proper taiji ready state is achieved and the ABLE model is fully realized, a
practitioner is able to effectively dampen out an attempted attack so that the technique is either partially or totally negated. I
attribute this added dimension to my judo practice to the systematic training of taiji methods that focus on correct body
alignment and control of qi.

Counterattack

Several counterattacks in judo rely upon sensitivity and timing. Techniques such as tsubame gaeshi and deashi
barai are countered with the exact same technique. This is typical of many counterattacks in judo. Because the counter
technique is itself similar in the amount of movement and length of time to execute as the attacking technique, the effective
application of a counterattack is highly dependent upon the practitioner possessing greater timing, sensitivity, and speed than
his/her attacker. In a competition, where both practitioners are highly trained and skilled, it makes consistent application of
this type of counter difficult to achieve. It is in this area where taiji techniques can be highly effective. In my experience,
practitioners often leave a window or hole in a judo attack. For example, in the technique ippon seoi nage the opponent is
first unbalanced and/or the opponent’s forward momentum is capitalized upon. Once the kuzushi or unbalancing force has
been applied, the attacker then rotates into position to throw. It is in this transitional area between initially capitalizing upon
the opponent’s balance and momentum, and the throwing position that the attacker often becomes vulnerable. Often, during
the transition from kuzushi to throwing position, pressure is not maintained, but the judo practitioner seeks to move through
this transition as quickly as possible to execute the technique and minimize the risk of having the technique jammed or
counteracted. Here is where taiji techniques become highly effective. If the correct ready state of taiji is maintained, the initial
kuzushi can be dampened out so that the effect of the attacker’s initial attempt to establish balance and momentum control is
minimized. Once the attacker then enters the transition phase, his/her body structure can be attacked using jing-lu control
techniques. The timing of jing-lu is essential, but because techniques that attack the posture and body structure tend to be
much more economical in terms of both time and movement, the likelihood of an effective jing-lu counter is significantly
increased.

The Role of Taiji in Injury Prevention and Recovery

The health benefits of regular taiji practice have been well documented. Judo training is quite rigorous especially
within Japan because the training is combat based. Judo, perhaps more than any other martial art, uses one-on-one combat
training methods such as randori and nei-waza, and consequently, the occurrence of minor injuries such as sprains, and joint
injuries tends to be quite high. Not only can taiji be beneficial in recovering from injury, but also it is useful in shortening
required rest periods between training sessions, allowing an athlete to train harder and longer. The gentle range of
movements contained in taiji increases circulation and blood flow, and gently stretches and opens up the joints. In practice, it
helps alleviate the stiffness and ‘beaten up’ feeling that often follows a hard judo practice. It also increases vitality and energy
levels allowing the athlete to train with a greater level of intensity, and allows for shorter recovery times. In my experience,
most injuries in judo are the consequence of training without a sufficient recovery period between practices; the athlete
returns to training either not fully recovered or fatigued. Training in such a state leads to sloppy technique and decreased
mental alertness, which in turn leads to injury. Taiji forms training is extremely beneficial in eliminating conditions such as
fatigue, insufficient recovery, muscle soreness and stiffness, which can lead to injury. As taiji increases vitality, it also allows
the athlete to train with greater intensity more often, increasing the potential of the athlete.

Conclusions

While my experiences and observations show that taiji can be used as an effective method to increase the
performance of an athlete competing in judo, I feel its applications can be much wider spread. When the view of taiji is
expanded from that of simply a martial art to one of a comprehensive training system for the maintenance and improvement
of health, well-being, and physical performance, then it can be used to increase overall athletic performance for any athlete in
any sport. As taiji has proven to increase the health and well-being of its practitioners, it stands to reason that it will do
likewise in top athletes, thus giving them better understanding and control of their own body structures, improved health,
vitality, reduced recovery times, and better performance. Where top athletes routinely seek anything in the way of
supplements and new training methods that will allow them to improve their performances, taiji offers many possibilities that
cannot be found elsewhere.

Work Cited

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