

# SPACE AND TIME IN TAIDO

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*“You’re late!”*

*“A Wizard is never late, Frodo Baggins, nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to!”*

Taido is a modern Japanese martial art with roots in Okinawan karate-do. It was founded by Seiken Shukumine (1925-2002) who studied karate and kendo during his childhood in Okinawa. Towards the end of World War II, Shukumine joined the marine division of the Kamikaze corps and trained as a kaiten (human torpedo) pilot. According to legend, his martial arts philosophy grew from a consideration of how to avoid enemy attacks and manoeuvre his small submarine through anti-torpedo nets. From these roots Shukumine developed a dynamic martial art, characterised by the turning, twisting and rolling of the body used to deliver each technique. Taido (way of the body) was unveiled in 1965 and has since gained a strong global following, with some 9000 practitioners worldwide.

Wolfson College is home to the only taido club in Britain, founded in 2001 by Lars Larm, a graduate student who has since been promoted to the grade of 6th Dan Kyoshi. As such, he is one of the four highest ranked *taidoka*<sup>1</sup> in Europe.

Taido’s strength lies in its ability to change according to the situation, to adapt technique to circumstance, even to the point of inventing new techniques in response to novel situations. Nonetheless, taido is founded on a simple principle – that every punch or kick incorporates a change in the body’s axis. A technique, performed in congress with a change in body-axis, will tend to have defensive and offensive components, enabling a defender<sup>2</sup> to simultaneously evade an attack and launch a counterattack. Five such body-axis changes have so far been discovered:

sen	–	rotate like a spinning-top
un	–	ascend and descend in a wave-like motion
hen	–	move like a whirlpool
nen	–	collapse like a falling tree
ten	–	roll like a ball

The question of the existence of further changes in body-axis is largely open.

The study of martial arts is a slow and stuttering journey inwards – away from the physical and towards the spiritual – and in his lifetime a *taidoka* can expect to proceed through several overlapping phases of study which affect this shift of emphasis. To a great extent the journey inwards is determined by the changing capabilities of the human body over time: the physical gives way to the

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<sup>1</sup> Taidoka is the name given to a student of taido.

<sup>2</sup> *Karate ni sente nashi* (there is no first attack in karate) is a central tenet of contemporary martial arts, attributed to several sources, which emphasises the wholly defensive nature of the art. As such the taidoka will always assume the defensive role in combative scenarios.

mental as the ageing body becomes less amenable to the demands of rigorous training. The experienced *taidoka* must learn to replace physical prowess with strategy and economy of movement. All martial arts are a study of body mechanics – the expression of the body in space, through time – and an effective martial artist must learn to control his own body and, by extension, the body of an opponent.

### **Understanding space and time: *yoyuu* and *ma-ai***

With many lifetimes of men in which to hone his skills, not to mention the fact that, unlike Frodo, he was born onto the page with all of his skills already more or less in place, Gandalf had a considerable advantage over most of his friends and enemies. It is fair to say, therefore, that Frodo had little conception of what went into the riposte with which Gandalf opened this article. Were it possible to conceive of an apprenticeship for Gandalf at some distant time in the past, it would have involved a lot of hard training in the control of space and time. Had Tolkien been Japanese, it might just be possible that his philological passion would have led him to explore how these concepts came to be articulated in the codes of a remarkable class of people, who were still socially extant until only 140 years ago: the samurai. In particular, he might have spent some time considering the implications for the martial abilities of his heroes of concepts like *yoyuu* and *ma-ai*.

*Yoyuu* and *ma-ai* are related concepts in the same way that space and time are related, but they do not simply translate ‘space’ and ‘time’. Rather they both combine elements of ‘space’ and ‘time’ to express different aspects of a dimension we might more profitably call space-time. As such, they rely on a form of training which dynamically integrates two spheres of the same experience which in a western framework tend to fall apart irreparably. When a fencing master tells his student to ‘keep his distance’, the image that tends to form in the pupil’s mind is of a line, measurable in feet, between him and his opponent. Again, when we say of a fencing champion that he has good timing, we refer to a vaguely formulated but extremely effective ‘know-when’, an instinct to act at the right moment, *diem carpere*. In both cases, the formulation is unclear and incomplete, and a large part of the problem is that they are seen as two different skills, not instances of the same skill.

As with many concepts in the martial arts, they are universally applicable, across different disciplines, but also in a full range of experiential contexts. In fact, a large part of the information contained in this section comes from an attempt to understand what these concepts mean to Japanese people who are not connected to martial arts in any special way. This should serve as a general presentation. How they apply to *taido* in particular will be the subject of the following section.

The dictionary tells us that *yoyuu* (余裕) indicates ‘margin, leeway’. The kanji for *yo* (余) appears in words such as *yo-bun*, ‘extra, spare, redundant’, *yo-chi*, ‘room, scope’, *yo-dan*, ‘padding (in speech, meaning ‘extra chat’ or ‘p.s.’ at the end of a letter), *yo-jo*, ‘surplus’, *yo-kei*, ‘unnecessary, superfluous’; but also *yo-haku*, ‘blank space, margin’, and *yo-ka*, ‘leisure time, spare time’. The kanji for *yuu* (裕) appears in the word *yuufuku*, meaning ‘wealthy, well-off’. One possible translation of *yoyuu*, therefore, is ‘wealthy in terms of space’, where wealth can be thought of along similar lines as ‘power’. If I have *yoyuu*, what we might translate as ‘mental space’, I can afford the time to accommodate any type of contingency. I am wealthy in space and time, or space-time. Typical everyday conversations in which this word might occur are such as the following:

“Do you have time to telephone the electricity board about that phoney bill?”

“I really must prepare my lessons! I haven’t got time (*yoyuu*) now.”

Or

“I never have time (*yoyuu*) to tidy my desk!”  
“Make a plan, and you will have time for everything.”

Clearly the perceived lack of time is not in terms of the number of minutes available in the day to perform these simple tasks, but in terms of some inner scale on the basis of which I decide whether or not to perform certain actions. Further, it is clear that poverty of *yoyuu* is also a matter of lack of preparation. It is indeed a form of resistance which results from not knowing how to go about things.

*Ma-ai* (間合) is easier to describe because it receives a lot of coverage in the literature dedicated to martial arts. Generally speaking, it is translated in reference to the theory of distance, but the kanji for *ma* (間) is used to talk about ‘interval, pause’ as well as ‘space’. The origin can be traced back to the space between the doors of a gate. In later times it took on meanings such as ‘space between things’, ‘place’, ‘room’, but also ‘period of time’, ‘free time’, as well as, interestingly, ‘reasonable’ and, intriguingly, ‘secretly’. The kanji for *ai* (合), on the other hand, has had some elevated applications in recent martial arts’ history. It represents the first sound of the word *aikido* (the way of harmony), the name given to the martial art developed during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Morihei Ueshiba. Its original meaning was ‘to respond to someone’, and later it came to include the meanings of ‘to join’, ‘to match’, ‘to gather’, ‘to exchange’, ‘to moderate’. It would seem to combine, therefore, the notions of space *and* exchange between two opponents.

But how does all this fit together? One example of how *yoyuu* and *ma-ai* work together can be found on a web-board dedicated to kendo, the latter-day art of Japanese sword-fighting. In answer to a question during the written part of a grading examination, in which the student was asked to describe *ma-ai*, the student describes a situation in which he or she loses the initiative and therefore the advantage in the attack. The way it is expressed is roughly as follows: ‘If you lose out to your opponent at any particular moment (*uwate-o-torareru*), your mental *ma-ai* is taken (*torareru*) from you, and if it is a situation in which you are attacking, you will be hit, because *yoyuu* belongs to the opponent. You have given *yoyuu* to your opponent (*yoyuu-o-motareru*)’ This statement is glossed (presumably by the teacher) in the following terms: ‘When you are not strong, you feel distance to be great, but when you are strong distance becomes small. The distance in reality is the same, but the difference is whether or not you have mental *ma-ai*.’ From these comments, it may be possible to say that *yoyuu*, if not actually translatable as ‘initiative’, leads to having ‘initiative’, that which belongs to the one who has the tactical edge (power) over an opponent; *ma-ai*, on the other hand, leads to ‘control’, that which determines your ability to influence the outcome of events. If you lose the initiative, then you also lose control, with the result that your action will end up in confusion and defeat.

### **Applications of *yoyuu* and *ma-ai***

“Best way to avoid punch, no be there.” exclaims Mr. Miyagi in a line from *The Karate Kid*, whose cult status belies the fact that it is only partly correct. It is true that violence should only be used as a last resort, but, if conflict is inevitable, a dogmatic application of this rule results in the continual retreat of a defender from the advances of an attacker. The more a defender moves away the more time he spends defending himself. A more appropriate action is for the defender to move into a position from which he is able to attack but unable to be attacked. In this context, correct *ma-ai* is achieved when a defender moves into a defensible position from which a counterattack can be launched. This suggests that, rather than retreating, it is more profitable to shift slightly from the line of the attack, simultaneously causing

the attack to miss, and positioning the defender in his opponent's blind-spot, poised to counterattack. In this situation the Goldilocks principle applies to the highest degree. To move too little is to under-react; to move so far from the line that a counterattack becomes impossible is to over-react. To achieve correct *ma-ai* requires a degree of movement which is just right. Nonetheless, this simple explanation masks the fundamental difficulty of reacting in a way which preserves good *ma-ai*, since it requires the *taidoka* to override a stubborn instinct: the tendency to move backwards when attacked. This, in turn, requires a mastery of one's own fear of attack<sup>3</sup>.

In practical terms *yoyuu* can be interpreted as the space that a *taidoka* creates by means of movement in order to gain a strategic advantage. *Yoyuu* can also be viewed as a metric whose measurement can be used to determine a profitable course of action. A defender who has a lot of *yoyuu* (space) can evade an attack using foot movements, one who has a moderate amount of *yoyuu* can evade attack by changing the body-axis (such as by ducking below a kick), and one who has very little *yoyuu* (if, for example, he is pressed against a wall) can evade an attack by blocking. Blocking an attack – meeting force with force – is considered only as a last resort. *Yoyuu* (space) and *ma-ai* (distance) have a clear bearing on one another since an estimation of space is used to determine how correct distance can be achieved, if at all.

In certain styles of karate, particularly the *wado-ryu* (school of the way of peace), there exists a concept called *tai-sabaki*. A literal translation means to channel the body's power efficiently; in karate this manifests itself as the natural way to use an opponent's momentum and power against him. *Tai-sabaki* can be seen as a product of correct *ma-ai* and a proper assessment of *yoyuu*. One can imagine the body as being at the centre of a circle whose circumference is described by raising a leg to horizontal and pivoting on the standing leg 360 degrees. The raised foot travels a circular path, and marks the edge of the range at which an (unarmed) attacker poses a threat. If the attacker is inside the circle then he can attack; if he is outside the circle, he cannot attack. However, the same distancing rules which constrain the attacker also constrain the defender. *Tai-sabaki* is often called the karate of the inner circle, since it actually teaches that the opponent should be kept *within* this range. At this distance correct *ma-ai* can be achieved by moving from the centreline of an attack but without allowing the attacker to vacate the circle.

This distance corresponds to 'moderate' *yoyuu* which requires the defender to avoid an attack by changing the body axis. If all of these components come together with correct timing, *tai-sabaki* can manifest itself in a number of ways. For instance, in the *sen* technique *sentai-no-tsuki* (spinning punch), the *taidoka* rotates along a vertical axis before delivering the punch. The decision to perform a technique (rather than flee or block) will be made by an estimation of space and an assessment of the appropriate distance from which the counterattack should be launched. The body-axis movement (initiated by the hips) also serves to accelerate the punch towards its target, whilst simultaneously moving the *taidoka's* body off the attacking line. Performed correctly, the attack will be parried to one side of the *taidoka's* body as the counter-strike reaches the attacker. The parry does not stop the attack but redirects its energy; in this way the attacker's momentum carries him forward onto the counterattack.

### **Final comments**

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<sup>3</sup> Zen Buddhism (which forms the spiritual basis of many martial arts) reduces fear to a result of attachments, whether those attachments are to possessions, prejudices, or even life itself. Zen teaches that enlightenment can be reached through the attainment of *mushin*, or no-mindedness, in which the Cartesian Duality dissolves. In such a state, time and space cease to exist.

As Gandalf so admirably demonstrates, the successful control of *yoyuu* and *ma-ai* is the aim of all strategy and can only be the result of years of practice. The art of strategy has a venerable pedigree in traditional *bushido*<sup>4</sup>. Possibly the most authoritative treatment of the art of strategy in warfare, which is probably also the most well-known to those with an interest in martial arts, is *The Book of the Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi. Here the swordsman is referred to as ‘the strategist’ and his art is likened to that of the carpenter, whose job in old Japan required him to be architect and builder as well. Just as the carpenter has built the house on paper even before the work has begun, so the swordsman has won the battle even before engaging the enemy. A famous example of the samurai-strategist at work is the defeat of the bandits in Akira Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurai*, where the leader of the famous Seven, Shimada Kanbe, effects victory on paper even before the bandits make their first appearance. What is most striking about Kanbe is his aplomb and good humour throughout a battle that was a desperate and bloody affair.

In this respect, Kanbe reminds one of another quotable source, Inazo Nitobe’s *Bushido*, where the author translates *yoyuu* as ‘capacious mind’, the virtue of the courageous man who is not perturbed by catastrophe, a translation which aptly describes Kanbe’s demeanor. By way of illustration, he tells of Ota Dokan, builder of Tokyo castle, who was run through with a spear. Knowing of his poetical predilections, his assassin composed a couplet to accompany the dying man’s last moments:

Ah! How in moments like these  
Our heart doth grudge the light of life.

Which Ota Dokan completes, thereby proving his composure:

Had not in hours of peace,  
It learned to lightly look on life.

Ceaseless training was an essential part of the samurai’s upbringing, training not only in the use of arms and the composition of verse (the sword and the pen were both symbolic of the samurai’s way of life, if not strictly equal in the scale of values), but also in the tolerance of pain and the confrontation of death.

The control of *yoyuu* and *ma-ai* is what is achieved as a result of training, that wealth of ‘mental space’, or capaciousness, which is at our disposal and under our control at all times, whatever the circumstances, but also that highly developed feel for the complex dynamics of interaction. For a *taidoka*, space-time is the medium upon which he paints his technique. This canvas is seldom blank and never static but evolves over time as techniques are painted and painted over, and attackers appear and fade away. Fear disrupts technique and clouds judgment; a scared *taidoka* may flee, retreat into a corner, or perform ineffective technique. True technique manifests itself when the *taidoka*’s intent – the fusion of body, breath and mind – is bent to a single purpose, and this intent is displayed on the canvas as a single brushstroke of overwhelming beauty, painted with poise and confidence.

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<sup>4</sup> The difference between bushido and budo lies in the difference between what is often termed ‘traditional’ martial arts and martial arts as we know them today. Bushido refers to the code of the samurai warrior and encompasses all the implications and outcomes of violent conflict (warfare, pain, death, etc.), and all the strategies and schools of thought that were developed to manage violent conflict more or less up to the start of the post-WWII period. When we speak of budo, on the other hand, we refer to the competitive martial arts of more recent times, where the dimension of death in particular, and endurance of pain to a lesser degree, have either been eliminated altogether, or have been absorbed into forms and formalities of sport.