

Mike Polioudakis

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My Background in Martial Arts.

I went to the University of Oregon in Eugene from 1973 to 1976. From about 1974 until 1976, I think over two years, I trained under Sensei Robert Graves, in Japanese karate ("Shotokan"), in the early morning, at his Dojo (studio), not through the University. In 1976, I had to go away to graduate school suddenly, so I had to stop training there.

"Sensei" is a Japanese term that means "person who points the way" and so "teacher" or "mentor". The equivalent role in China is called "sifu". I don't know what "sifu" literally translates to in English.

Sensei Graves trained entirely in Japan, before karate was popular in the United States, directly under Mr. Nishiyama, Mr. Nakayama, and their students. Thus Sensei Graves was two steps or two-and-a-half steps removed from Mr. Funakoshi. (Funakoshi-NN-Graves or Funakoshi-Gigo-NN-Graves). His approach was Japanese. Karate originally came from Okinawa where it was called "Toti", or "toh tee"; the Japanese often say it "toh teh". Sensei Graves also was well grounded in Okinawan ideas. He explained the ideas and history of karate to me while he taught the practice, such as differences between various kata (stylized forms of sequential moves), the role of the I Ching (Book of Changes) in forming karate techniques and karate strategies, and the fact that nobody teaches you martial arts but you have to teach yourself. There were never more than three people in the morning class, often only me, so, in effect, often I got personal instruction from Sensei Graves. His style was "no nonsense": karate is a martial art; it is about not getting hurt; it is about hurting other people when you have to; but it requires spirit, heart, and intelligence. Because of the conditions of the morning class, I think Sensei Graves experimented on me. I was very lucky to have met Sensei Graves.

Without going into the details about the history, use, and meaning of colored belts and black belts, I need to say something about my lack of a belt. I took one test, for white belt. Toward the end of my time with Sensei Graves, he told me I had to start testing for more belts, but, shortly after, suddenly, I had to leave to go to grad school, so I never had a chance. I have no idea where I rank. I am pretty sure that Sensei Graves taught me material beyond white belt level.

For graduate school, I wound up in Ann Arbor, MI in 1977. There, I found an evening Tai Chi class in the town of Ann Arbor, not through the University of Michigan. I attended that class until I left in 1981. There is no difference between "Tai Chi" and Tai Chi Chuan"; for the meaning of the terms, see another note on Tai Chi. I loved Tai Chi right away, and could see links to karate immediately. I have always mixed karate and Tai Chi.

The class in Ann Arbor had begun in the early 1970s when Philip Ho taught Steve Harrigan and some other people. When I got there, of the original group, besides Steve Harrigan, only one other person remained, and he attended only sporadically. Steve Harrigan was the core of the group and he directed the class. Mr. Ho did not teach Tai Chi in the sense that a Westerner would expect. Mr. Ho did Tai Chi with Steve; Steve learned it through interaction with Mr. Ho; Steve also consulted the book by Uni K.

Chen and other books; Steve verified with Mr. Ho what he learned from Ho and from any source including Chen; and then Steve taught what he had learned to other people, with their participation. People taught each other under the leadership of Steve. Steve did an excellent job. Mr. Ho came once every-other-month or so. Women made up about half the class. People who had taken Tai Chi elsewhere also often showed up to that class. We learned Yang family style, including the 108 step solo form and the 88 step two-person combat form. Mr. Ho taught Steve a form for the long staff from Pakua which Steve taught us. There were never belts or levels in Tai Chi until recently when Americans introduced them following other martial arts. I never got a certificate. Nobody then got a certificate. We taught each other. I was very lucky to find this group too.

Steve's class wasn't heavy on martial applications other than what we learned in the 88. People who had taken Tai Chi elsewhere often had learned some applications and taught us. People had backgrounds in martial arts other than Tai Chi, and we saw how their moves might correspond to Tai Chi, might counter Tai Chi moves, or might be countered by Tai Chi moves. Some of us saw martial applications directly in the moves of the 108 and 88. A few of us trained ourselves to see that way. There was little free sparring at that time. Mostly we learned the forms and let the forms teach us.

Mr. Ho was born in Hong Kong and spent some of his childhood in Indonesia. He began learning Tai Chi around the age of 5. He knew Tai Chi, Pakua ("Bagua"), Hsing I ("Xingyi"), and a style called "Hua Chen" or "martial arts of Hwa Mountain". The first three are "soft" or "internal" while Hwa Chen seemed "hard" or "external". Mr. Ho had seen Indonesian Silat but I don't think he studied it. His two primary arts were Tai Chi and Hwa Chen.

His Tai Chi was not gentle. He stood about six inches away from you, pushed, pulled, twisted, elbowed, shouldered, and pounded you. He could spin away or drift away when needed. He was hard to pin down and hard to hit. Ho said that a Tai Chi practitioner got hit a lot but was never seriously hurt. I found that to be true. Ho said Tai Chi was hard to learn and to use in practice. In practice, it is good also to know a "harder" martial art such as Hua Chen, and to combine them.

Ho said only unusual people become true masters. He did not consider himself a master. I cannot judge. He seemed quite adept to me. Ho said there was no perfect martial art that was always able to defend against any move and that could always find the weakness in an opponent before you were hurt. Not even Tai Chi was perfect.

The class that was run by Steve and Ho should not be confused with another class given in Ann Arbor at the same time by Gabriel Chin. Mr. Chin taught on University grounds but not through the University. His course was famous. By all accounts, his Tai Chi also was excellent, and, from what I saw, the accounts were true. His approach seemed more formal and stylized than Ho and Harrigan. I hope his students did well.

When I went to do field work in Southern Thailand from 1981 to 1984, I had to stop my Tai Chi. The Thai have their own rigorous hard martial art, called "Muay Thai" ("Thai combat skill"), and young men wanted to spar with me. I did well but I could see this would eventually lead to conflict, so I stopped it all. I wish I had not stopped but there was no choice at the time. I saw the basics of Thai boxing but I could not train in it. All Thai school children used to learn the basics of boxing, staff (krabong), and sword (krabii). I

lived in Asia for over 8 years in total (not all at once), but all that I really saw of adult martial arts was Thai boxing, Burmese boxing, a little Malaysian Silat in Southern Thailand, and some Tai Chi done by Chinese in parks. I have seen much more martial arts in the United States.

When I returned to Ann Arbor in late 1984, I was too busy to attend Steve's group again. In retrospect, I deeply regret not making time. I have not been in a regular group since 1981. I have always practiced consistently on my own. Sometimes I work with other groups, including groups in other martial arts if they will have me. Beginning about 2002, I began to practice methodically, for at least an hour a day, both Tai Chi and karate. I re-learned the karate kata that I did in the past and tried to learn all the major Shotokan kata. I learned new ideas on application ("bunkai") from the Internet and books. I don't know how much you can advance by doing it mostly on your own but I feel as if I have advanced considerably.

I am too old now to do rigorous hard martial arts for any length of time. I still practice Shotokan striking and blocking, Shotokan kata, and their applications; but I have to be careful.

I did not read any martial arts books even until about 2011 when I had more time on my hands. Since then I have not read many. I looked carefully at what is available on the Internet, and chose only what seemed high quality and affordable (martial arts books tend to be expensive). The large majority of martial arts books seem not of high quality. Most books that I have read have not been in karate or Tai Chi but in other arts such as Pa Kua (Bagua), Hsing I, Tae Kwan Do, Wing Chun, Krav Maga, Wing Chun, jujitsu, military training, etc. I have found considerable overlap between all the martial arts. Most of what is in other martial arts is also in karate or Tai Chi but sometimes another martial art stresses the idea in a way that makes it clearer and easier to learn.