

Reflections in the Rear View Mirror

Curated by Amy CharlesChiu

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*Two
Sei
Do
Kai*

students at the third Canadian Open Iaido Championships, 2007

Riai

Everyone who does iaido knows the meaning of riai right? Sure we do. The first kata of the kendo iai (seitei) or the znir iai or Muso Shinden or Muso Jikiden is Mae/shohatto.

Sitting in seiza you draw and cut across the opponent horizontally then cut down vertically, shake the blood off and put it away. Add appropriate fillips and foofaws for each school or teacher and there you have the movements.

The riai? Usually I'm told it's "there's a guy sitting in front of you and he starts to draw and you beat him to it". Those guys tend to draw and swing really fast. On the other hand I also hear "you sense the opponent's ill will and you forestall his attack with one of your own". Those guys tend to draw more slowly since the other guy hasn't even started moving yet.

Is that the riai? I don't think so, I think that's still part of the technique, the situation of the kata, it's just the story we're telling at the moment. The riai has to be the meaning of the story, the principles of the school you're studying. What's the principle of "sensing the bad intent of the person in front of you, you draw your sword and cut him down"? I think that principle is "preventative self-defence" or whatever excuse the superpowers of the world are using these days to go into an area and bomb it back to stones... if it isn't already just stones. On a personal level I'd call that murder and I'm convinced that those who developed iai as a method of self-improvement (as opposed to a really, really poor way to deal with combat in a modern world of easily obtainable firearms) did not intend that their first instruction to us was "go kill someone who hasn't done anything yet".

I know we have folks who claim to be able to read minds using FMRI but really, those machines are huge and folks sitting in front of you with a sword in their belt aren't going to be thinking about killing you, they're going to be thinking about the pain in their hip as the sword mashes them into the wall of the chamber. Or so I believe after seeing guns go whipping out of hands when the fancy lab machine is turned on in the movies.

We don't "sense the start of an attack" we see it. A good swordsman won't telegraph an attack and a poor swordsman probably doesn't need to be killed, you ought to be able to prevent him from drawing.

How to do that? Well you might listen to your sensei when he says things like "saya no uchi no kachi" and rather than ignoring it (because it won't help you pass your next grade) you might think about it. Just how do you win in the scabbard? I can think of about a dozen ways you could apply the saying in various ways such as driving forward and knocking the poor fellow backward over his insteps while you drive your knee into his hands, or not being there in the first place. You come up with some other stuff in between where you don't draw your sword and kill him and you will be approaching the principle of not drawing your sword and killing him. Saya no uchi.

Does this apply to Mae? Sure it does, next time you are drawing the sword in kata think very hard in your head "Don't Draw! Don't Draw that Sword!" Right up to the point where you reach saya banari and you absolutely have to cut him. Does this change your draw? Do you look a bit more like sensei?

This is not murder, this is not pre-emptive self-defence, or even self-defence. It's giving the fellow a chance to change his mind while you demonstrate the superiority of your position.

Whip it out fast? Counter-intuitive to giving him time to back down. Sloppy movements, leaving big gaps in your defence so that your opponent thinks he can get in and cut you? "But Marshall, he drew first!"

The riai of teaching Mae is to instill the basic movement patterns, then the basic philosophical viewpoint, and finally to provide a method of continuing challenge to the student. Basic patterns? Horizontal draw and cut, vertical finishing cut (the rest is getting ready for the next kata). Basic philosophy? Be a good person not a murderer, your role as the man with the sword, (or the police badge, military grade rifle and armour), is that of the armed agent of the government toward the citizens. A duty of protection rather than conflict. You don't use iaido on the battlefield unless you're a poor soldier. You are a peacekeeper, not a "peacemaker" as the euphemism puts it. When the policeman becomes a soldier the country is already deep into civil war.

To learn this responsibility to protect we teach the beginners that their imaginary opponent is just a bit less skillful. He may also be all the bad things the student knows about himself, those bad things that have to be defeated every day just as the imaginary opponent is defeated every kata.

That is well and good while the student is learning. He can see that his opponent is a poor swordsman indeed, but with practice the imaginary fellow eventually becomes as skilled as most of the senior students around. Now what? Why would anyone continue to practice when the result is so predictable, victory after victory?

Now is the time for the teacher to reveal the secret, the opponent has been holding back, he is actually a bit better than the student and now the student must do several things. He must work harder, sweat more to keep surviving. The opponent must still be beaten so the student must watch his own movements closely. No longer can he rely on his superior ability and just watch the opponent, he must stay ahead, close the gaps, increase the pressure, struggle. He must do all this without becoming a brute, he must not forget his responsibility to forgive, to refrain from killing no matter the provocation short of being killed himself. It is this training for control that becomes the path to wisdom, this willingness to sacrifice, to take the hard way rather than the easy, to refrain from using the nuclear option when challenged by a child. Yet having that option, training to have that option, killing only on the point of being killed, this teaches an iron will and a gentle manner which seeks to avoid the conflict altogether.

This is the riai of the first kata. There are others, some not so full of sweetness and light but this is the first, the basic.

Beginners figure the kata is the art and the riai is the story. A kata is a story, there are many. Riai is the moral of the story, and all stories have a moral.

Oct 20, 2014

Big pies and little guys

Big Pies

I almost wish Faceplant hadn't thrown up a reminder of the Guelph School of Japanese Sword Arts this morning. It reminds me that at one point we had folks who believed we had a big pie, and that we could make it bigger. That meant that we didn't have to compete with each other that we could talk with each other and get together and make bigger gatherings that would allow all of us, small and small, to exist. We were all small groups, but together we were bigger.

Back in 1980 I attended the introductory workshop for Aikido at the University of Guelph. That club has continued ever since. In 1983 I attended a summer camp where I was introduced to iaido by Takeshi Mitsuzuka sensei. Later (1987) I met my iaido sensei, Goyo Ohmi and my budo practice expanded. I had done a bit of communication work at the University, putting out a photocopied Zine (ask your grandpa what those were) on the various martial arts at the school. This I expanded to "The Iaido Newsletter" when I realized that Ohmi sensei wanted some instruction for himself. In 1990 (I may have these dates wrong) we sent him to England where he met Haruna sensei and in 1991, with an iaido population from as far as The Iaido Newsletter could reach (it reached the world, it was mailed to folks who photocopied it and mailed it on) we held the first of the Guelph Seminars with a delegation headed by Haruna sensei. That seminar was open, inclusive, welcoming and we had people from several different federations attend. All that let us present the instruction for everyone.

If you ask carefully you may find that your current "big shots" may have been in attendance at some of these early seminars.

Not long after this, a couple of us (Doug Blain, a sword polisher and I) realized that we had developed quite a bit of expertise in Japanese sword arts so we went to the University Open Learning department and proposed the Guelph School of Japanese Martial Arts. Why? Mostly because we could. We got it, there was sword polishing, sword smithing, bokken making, academic presentations, and a lot of different iai and kenjutsu schools. Being an official school there were salaries (not for Doug and I) to be paid and we didn't get quite big enough, but we took it over as an athletic department event similar to the May seminar. This was when we were all "members" of the department rather than "clients" which meant we were allowed to use the rooms for free. The GSJSA went on for another ten years maybe? Close to it at least. Over that time we continued with the swordsmithing, the academic program and such arts as Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, Muso Shinden Ryu, Tamiya ryu, Hoki ryu, Jigen ryu, Kashima Shinryu, Niten Ichiryu, and many more. We also had a Saturday evening demonstration each year that was fun. Eventually the numbers dwindled and events split off into their own little world and the school is no more.

The internet. My barista and I just talked about that. At first it was a great help, we could find more folks. The Iaido Newsletter (Zine) morphed into a magazine, the Journal of Japanese Sword Arts. That lasted until the internet age when it morphed into the Electronic Journals of Martial Arts and Sciences (EJMAS.com). You can find it out there still. Along with that came the list servers (before the WWW kids) and iaido-L. Like I said, it was inclusive, there was a karate list, Aikido-L and Iaido-L. With the sword users on iaido-l we had sword collectors. I loved that era, the clash of culture was pretty interesting and we all learned a lot. The archives still exist at the U. Guelph by the way, if anyone wants to research this stuff. Eventually the collectors started their own list to get away from us annoying "sword scratchers" and then the WWW arrived. That was the end of the big pie, now everyone could be the chief of his own little kingdom and oh boy the kingdoms multiplied. Groups and forums of ten and twelve people.

The internet was supposed to be the great unifying force of communication in the world. It has become the opposite. It is the realm of the little-minded clique, the "custom-tailored-news feed", the cloud of confirmation bias. It has never been easier to find like-minded folks to reinforce our own idiocy.

The more I write the more I remember. We did a lot with big welcoming hearts. I loved it, and I've lived long enough to watch as it is starting to contract. I don't think this is really just an old guy at the end of his run being grumpy with his creaky joints. I really do believe that the era of the tinpot dictator, the small-pie grubbing egotist is here.

Little Guys

Maybe I've been around too long. Things build up, the pioneers work their asses off to build the structures then those structures get taken over by the next generation who figure it will always be there because it always was. Or maybe that happens in the third generation, like money in families. The robber baron makes it, the kids preserve it, and the grandkids lose it. It's a matter of perspective. Founders and builders look outward to the possibilities. Spenders and wasters look inward to their own selfish pleasures. They are little guys, remembered as such.

These days, we seem to have little guys, little minded folks who want as much of what exists as possible. There is a fellow who has recently stated that the Guelph May Seminar has served its purpose. Privately he tells folks that "it has to go". Presumably if there is no May Seminar, his seminar will be better attended.

Oh wait, what seminar?

By all means, replace the seminar with something that grows into something better. But grow it, don't just shut down the one that is working and assume something else will appear. It may not.

The Guelph seminar still runs, and will run for quite a while yet I hope. Over the years we've had little guys mess around with it. There were those who told me that it was a kendo federation only event. It wasn't, and it isn't. The kendo federation isn't interested in financing the thing, it's expensive. It is sanctioned, it is official, it is approved, but it is not sponsored. It requires an effort, every single year, to get enough folks to attend in order not to lose money. Yet there are those who are pleased to say that a 30 year long event is being run incorrectly. Small minds with little information, some of which really ought to know better. Many of which ought to know it's none of their business.

When Haruna sensei died we continued to call it the Haruna Seminar until a hanshi showed up one year and his entourage told us that we were being very disrespectful calling it that, while this "great sensei" was attending. There will be those of you out there that, like me, will roll your eyes at such small-mindedness, and there will be those of you who will say "of course".

I could go on and on but life is short. It's just that I was reminded of the old GSJSA and all the other work we old farts did over the years. These days we seem to be inundated with kids who do a little and expect to be praised a lot. We did a lot and didn't expect a damned thing, we hoped to be able to continue doing what we did, and to do that, we needed a bigger pie for everyone.

Not a bigger share of a tiny pie. We talked recently about empire building and I think this is exactly what is happening, the pie is shrinking, even in Japan, and there are people who are grubbing for a bigger slice of a smaller pie. Look, it's always easier to grab at the pie that remains, than to go bake another one. It's not hard to understand at all.

A definite clash of cultures. Big pies and little guys.

Jan 10, 2019

Origins of Modern Budo I

Today I'm going to consider a paper entitled "Physical Education in the Meiji Education for Women" by Simona Lukminaitė. The citation is in Japanese but it's from Osaka University Knowledge Archive and the URL is <http://hdl.handle.net/11094/68058>

The paper talks about phys-ed at Meiji Jogakko (1885-1907), a Protestant girls school. This is in the very early modern period and the school was run by "samurai intelligentsia". The author states that women and girls at this time were being educated so that they could take a greater role in Japan, and that all citizens of that time were considered as cultural representatives of a modern society. This was mainly to establish Japan in the wider world as an independent and advanced country.

This was the era of eugenics and so women were seen as the mothers of future generations, critical to a vigorous population, and the idea of "ryosai kenbo" (good wife, wise mother) came into being. Physical Education was seen as important in this respect, to create healthy mothers.

PE was, along with much else, being imported from the west. The author points out that the western conception of PE was strictly "technical", aimed only at physical fitness. On the other hand, there were those in Japan who considered that all categories of education overlapped, so PE was incomplete without intellectual and moral instruction. Lukminaitė suggests this might have been an extension of the "bunbu ryudo" (martial and civil practice) which existed from the early 1600s. We would call this the "pen and sword" ideal of the Tokugawa samurai class, and it spread toward the end of the Tokugawa when budo became more widely available in the society.

Something we need to keep in mind whenever we are considering the history of budo is that it was generally restricted to a single class until very recently (a bit over a hundred years). I suspect fighting arts were always available to the commoners in some form, wrestling perhaps, but the sword arts would be of little interest beyond the samurai class which, in the main, probably practised sword because they wore swords. If it's on your hip, why not learn how to use it.

That budo was "more widely available" toward the end of the Tokugawa, was likely due to instructors needing to make a living. I know of no legal restrictions on teaching budo to the non-samurai classes.

With the Meiji it wasn't so much that budo suddenly became widely practised, but rather that it was considered, old-fashioned, quaint and useless, as the author of this paper mentions.

Bunbu ryudo, by the end of the Tokugawa was, according to Lukminaitė, almost a religious practice. It is this idea of a more complete physical activity that led some to recommend budo as PE at the time, as compared to the western "taiso" which were strictly technical. The idea that budo would promote "Yamato Damashii" a Japanese spirit, was also considered a good thing by some. "Samurai spirit" becoming "Japanese spirit".

The government, however, was concerned that budo in schools was dangerous, and promoted competitiveness which would lead to problems with students of different sizes and strength. The lack of protective equipment was also a concern. There was also a lack of a tradition of budo outside the samurai classes, and so introducing it to the school system was not a natural inclination.

In 1895 the Dainippon Butokukai was established and budo came more into the mainstream. The author states "Thus, by the late 1890s, without much correlation to the actual spread of budo within Edo society, budo, to a large extent, came to be increasingly more commonly seen as one of the main signifiers of uniting the Japanese men under a native form of physical and moral instruction".

Remember that prior to the Meiji period, the idea of "Japan the country" was not common. One was from a particular domain, rather than from Japan. It was in this era that budo started to be seen as a unifying force in Japan, and the Butokukai with its various branches around the country, along with its standardization of the arts, was a part of this unifying impulse. By the early 1900s there were suggestions that budo might be a good idea for women and girls as well.

Budo has had a few "pinch points" in its history, and the end of Samurai rule, if I can call it that, in the Meiji is one of those. One can perhaps make a case for the end of the Sengoku Jidai being the "release point" of budo as general education, as opposed to simply teaching warriors which end of the spear to point at the enemy. Yes there are schools who claim history back to the beginnings of the Samurai classes, but the arts as arts, as schools, mostly developed after the wars ended in the early 1600s. From then through the Edo the arts had a place in society, not huge, perhaps, but steady. A large part of this was probably the idea of bunbu ryudo, of budo being a vehicle to teach character and morality to the ruling classes, along with the techniques.

The Meiji restoration eliminated the idea of a Samurai class, if not the former samurai themselves. The former leaders remained largely in power (as ruling classes tend to do in governmental changes) and so the impulse to use budo to teach character and morality persisted while the schools themselves shrank drastically.

It was the education of children which led the way out of this "pinch", I am suggesting here. Eventually the school system, toward the mid-century as the Imperial wars erupted, embraced budo as a way of instilling Yamato Damashii, the "Japanese Spirit". Budo went from being a local affair for the Samurai to being a way of unifying the country behind the Emperor (and against the rest of the world), and eventually a way of training the youth for the military.

Was this the aim from the beginning of the Meiji? Later I will continue through this paper and we will see what the instructors at Meiji Jogakko thought of budo instruction as PE in school.

Sept 11, 2018

Origins of Modern Budo II

Today I'm going to continue reading a paper entitled "Physical Education in the Meiji Education for Women" by Simona Lukminaitė. The citation is in Japanese but it's from Osaka University Knowledge Archive and the URL is <http://hdl.handle.net/11094/68058>

Regarding the school itself, the Meiji Jogakko, a private girls school.

PE was called Taiso, and it was newly introduced from the west, was calisthenics, group stretching, often with music. In other schools at the time budo, shushin (deportment) and reigi saho (etiquette) was taught to girls. Lukminaitė states that the introduction of taiso changed how manners, should be taught. A new manual was produced, co-authored by Ogasawara Seimu in 1881 updating the manners as would have been taught one on one, through the Edo in the traditional arts.

The principal of Meiji Jogakko was Iwamoto Yoshiharu and he developed a three-fold approach to PE with taiso (western calisthenics), budo and jorei (etiquette). Naginata was to be taught to provide exercise, a persevering spirit, and appearance. Regarding etiquette, "Is it not the essence of jorei to get the body adjusted to the principles of how to maintain good appearance when running or falling over?" The three activities were to support each other and include each other. Budo and taiso would prepare for and include jorei.

It's important to note that PE in general was a new thing for women in 1885, it was a way to liberate women's bodies as they were traditionally kept from physical activity, especially in wealthy families.

Regarding etiquette, Iwamoto suggested that those teaching rei should acknowledge a split between ceremony (shiki) and mentality/spirit (seishin). The ceremony type of rei included how to walk, sit, stand and fall down. Since there were so many forms (tai) they were hard to remember without constant practice.

"However, no matter how many expressions of ceremony there are, the mentality is single. Thus, even though mentality has a boundless number of forms, its essence is one, constant from beginning to end. It peacefully and naturally adjusts itself to the needs of time. Therefore it should not be questioned how many different forms are there to carry out the etiquette; rather, even if it contradicts the teachings of Ogasawara, it does not contradict the right manners (rei) if one stands up when one should be lying or lies down when one should be sitting. Just like in the case of learning a martial art like kendo, the instruction of etiquette only becomes beneficial if one has attained the secret teachings, or in the case of a monk who has reached spiritual enlightenment. When one is not yet at such an advanced stage, the teaching of forms stands for no benefit. That is why, those who are instructing in etiquette and manners should be instructing in mentality and spirituality. That entails not to be distracted by things, not to be scared by places or situations, not to be surprised by people, not to look down on matters, and, when the students'

daily routines change, to constantly carry themselves around as they are, calmly enjoying the inner peace."

Does this not sound like that mysterious *kigurai* we are searching for in our quest to get our 7dan in *iaido*? Be comfortable, composed, calm in any situation, even when you are contradicting the forms of etiquette. To be very explicit, practice the mentality of etiquette, not the outer shell. If you are a Japanese in the West and the people you are greeting shake hands, shake hands. Do not inform them that they are using the incorrect form. Similarly if you are a westerner and you go to Japan, bow. Or as seems the current correct form, bow and shake hands.

When you go to a new dojo look around you. What is the etiquette for that place? Is it different from what you learned? If you think like that, you will become uncomfortable, you will spend your time thinking "this is not correct". Ultimately you may commit an act of rudeness and tell the people in that dojo that they are "doing it wrong". Correct etiquette, the mentality of etiquette, means being comfortable with strange actions, and making those around you comfortable. If they bow out of order, bow out of order with them and be comfortable with doing that.

The paper goes on to say "The mentality thus seems to be treated as an indispensable element to all education, *jorei* being the means to instruct it, and thus likewise being indispensable. It is separated from the ceremony, or the sequences of movements that have to be memorized and applied when expected to, and thus the sets of rules to follow do not need to be specified."

You learn the *kata*, the *tai*, the form in order to learn the spirituality/mentality (*seishin*). What form is used is not particularly important, as long as you learn the mentality which underlies the form. The author suggests that Iwamoto is admonishing against a "shape only" education.

Iwamoto explains that traditionally *bun bu* was used to teach this mentality. *Bun* being the soft, gentle way of the civil arts, politics, ethics, literature, etiquette, and *bu* being the hard, tough way, the martial arts of fighting and strategy. They work together and all of them train the mentality, so it is fine to use them sparingly. However, if not practised correctly or enough, one can get surprised or shocked, it is crucial to learn the mentality.

Thus "etiquette has power only because it is an important part in mental training (*seishin shuyo*)".

The coffee cup is empty so I will wrap this up for today. The take-away lesson here would seem to be that martial arts without education in civil arts like ethics, literature and all the other is unbalanced. That forms without understanding are hollow, whether *reiho* or *budo*. What is the stated difference between 7dan and 8dan in the kendo federation? A jump that we are told is double, each grade being on a log scale, each grade being twice the one before. The difference is stated as "*riai*" an understanding of the principles. This is what Iwamoto is stating here as well, in 1885.

When looking at senior grades, 6dan and above, is it important to pass or fail challengers on more and more polished form, or to examine the mentality, the substance, the understanding of rei? As we get older we naturally become less vigorous, our physical abilities become challenged, but does this mean our mentality becomes less as well?

An empty coffee cup is a shape without substance. It has potential use to contain coffee but without the coffee it is just something to take up space on the table. It may be very beautiful, contain wabi-sabi, have excellent proportions, but there is no coffee. Does it matter if I turn it three times around? No, there is nothing to drink in three sips after I have done that. It is an empty form and no matter how well I turn the cup, I cannot drink from it.

Yet if my host is blind and has missed the cup with the coffee, politeness may indicate that I will pretend to drink. Kindness and politeness will mean I clean up the spilled coffee when I get the chance.

The mentality of rei would seem to require putting yourself in the place of others. The principles of budo would also seem to require putting yourself in the place of your opponent, in order to know what he will do next.

Empathy.

Sept 12, 2018

Origins of Modern Budo III

Today I'm going to continue reading a paper entitled "Physical Education in the Meiji Education for Women" by Simona Lukminaitė. The citation is in Japanese but it's from Osaka University Knowledge Archive and the URL is <http://hdl.handle.net/11094/68058>

Returning to the function of jorei (etiquette) once more, Lukminaitė mentions a book from 1887 which explains that, "at the moment, the men and women have not developed their gender-based qualities and there is nearly no differentiation in male and female principles in education". This was fine at an early age but by puberty girls should be taught painting, music and etiquette to cultivate elegance (yuga) and gentleness (onwa).

It is interesting that the education of girls seemed to have gone from none to the same as boys, to a concern for gender-based qualities. A simple explanation may have been that the girls were simply thrown in with the boys and their curriculum, and then were provided their own, sewing and such, which, as the author points out, could provide them with employment.

If we pay attention to history we find that the pendulum swings but generally on the same arc. Where are we today on the education of girls, same as boys or their own curriculum? Does it matter or are these gender based topics intended to provide the same thing to both, the mentality/spirituality mentioned in the previous essays? If you're going to the same place, does the route actually matter?

The author notes that "While PE by itself was commonly criticized as opposite of feminine, by supplementing it with jorei, it could have been made so..." Is etiquette a feminine concern? Does education in jorei make one feminine? Should us men be picking our nose and farting right about now to avoid cultural appropriation of women's culture? You may laugh but the idea of a feminine man or a manly woman is not uncommon in our own culture, and usually mentioned with disapproval.

Iwamoto, the principle of Meiji Jogakko, was criticizing Western learning, especially PE, by 1890 as having no moral instruction.

"The Westerners carry out their moral education at church and do not encourage it at school. Just the same way, they emphasize the religious spiritual development and teach the etiquette (rei) as a way to embellish the association with others. That is why, just like the martial instruction of the West deals with technical skills only and cannot be compared to the Japanese martial arts, the Western etiquette is a shallow false adornment that does not stand on par to the Japanese etiquette. That is why it is acceptable if a girls' school skips a day in teaching the Western manners, but not the Japanese ones."

Oh those barbaric gaijin and their immoral secular schools with their lack of moral/religious aspects. It was budo that was supposed to put those aspects back into the education system. Budo was intended, from this beginning (and earlier, the Edo, where these ideas came from), to be the

place where one learned seishin while getting some exercise at the same time. Remember that budo survived and recovered from the Meiji restoration largely by its inclusion in the school system, and this was the reason. Those who feel martial arts should be about the techniques are actually arguing, with Iwamoto, that their martial art is "western", without moral instruction.

Iwamoto, according to the author of this paper, had a slightly different usage of "jorei" than the education ministry, coming down on the seishin (mentality) side of jorei, rather than on the ceremonial (shiki) side.

He is quoted:

"Education in martial arts (budo)"

"Civil education and martial arts constitute a whole. Even so, civil/literary education is superior when it comes to the acquisition of knowledge, and martial arts are superior when building up character. ... Thus, when educating in the matters of religion, if used as a supplement, martial arts can help to attain faster spiritual development."

Iwamoto was principle from 1887 to 1904 at Meiji Jogakko and so set the tone for PE, advocating for a Japanese orientation rather than the strictly calisthenic-based western style of exercise. The man who taught martial arts, Eastern philosophy, Western and Chinese literature, and Sunday school at the time, from 1890 to 1897, was Hoshino Tenchi.

The author describes Hoshino's examples of how the public saw budo as demonstrated by his girls.

"There were three commonly-observed reactions: foreign journalists saw it as a performance of magic and tricks; the Japanese journalists sneered at the school for doing something so outdated; and the traditionalists encouraged him for augmenting the spirit of old. He summarizes the situation by stating 'It was clear that society knew next to nothing about the martial arts'".

Ah the more things change...

Why have I gone on so long about the rei stuff? Why didn't I start here, with Hoshino? Because what we're talking about isn't budo or etiquette or calisthenics, it's about hollow practice vs practice with meaning, with a goal. It's about form vs function, and that applies to all things. People wonder why I rant so much about senior level gradings that are judged by how accurately or smoothly the challengers do their forms, or about gradings that are dictated by percentages to be passed. It is simply about form vs function. Etiquette without meaning, kata without understanding.

Hoshino states

"If a martial arts instructor concentrates only on the moments of the body, the arts are menial and there is no progress on the mental (seishin) level. By instructing in etiquette (reigi saho), it is possible to purge the mind of anxieties, and lead toward morality. However, as students advance,

it becomes important to lead them by mental principles (seishinjo no kyori). To make the necessary preparations, I undertook the Psychology course. At the beginning, there was no reference to the Will (ishi) in Psychology, thus I chose to interpret it via Martial Arts."

Teach the forms first, then as the students acquire morale and self-control, introduce the higher principles. What was Hoshino teaching along with kata? Confucian classics such as Mencius, Han Feizi, Wang Yangming, Tau Yuanming, Xhuangzi, and Laozi.

Hoshino stressed "I also approached the teachers to point out that we were doing this to develop the student's skills and not for the purpose of augmenting nationalism (yamato damashii)".

At this stage of the Meiji the efforts to create "Japan" from the old "feudal Edo" were gaining speed. Hoshino resisted this, opting to teach in order to produce students who could think for themselves, this was his bunbu ryudo.

It would seem that our Western ideas of Asian education, the "shut up and copy the kanji until you learn how to read", and "shut up and do the kata until you learn the riai" may, at least after 150 years ago, be somewhat out of date. Here was a budo instructor that was teaching his students how to learn.

If we look for simple explanations and answers we usually find that we are being a bit simple. Those who want the schools to teach the three 'rs, reading, writing and 'rithmetic, are usually looking for the simple versions of all three. They are looking for form without function, memorizing the times table rather than learning what multiplication is. However, as Barbie says "Math is hard".

Hoshino states:

"First, when moving, it is necessary to relax, know your enemy, and search for self. When still, it is necessary to train your willpower and sensitivity by being exposed to literature harboring aesthetic, moral, and religious sentiments. Thinking thus, I have created a special style of martial arts for women out of two styles of naginata, took techniques of self-defence from the yagyu style, and matched it with bojutsu and jujutsu."

Horror of horrors, taking forms from different martial arts and teaching them together, along with things like literature and philosophy! Remember though, this was at the beginning of the standardization movement in budo, when it was not unusual for students of budo to learn several different arts in the same dojo. The idea that you have to stick with a single art for 30 years to learn something may have been absent at this time. And why should it take 30 years to learn something from a single art? Can we learn "ground and pound" from seitei iaido? Eventually perhaps, but maybe studying a jujutsu art would help cut some of that practice time?

Here is Hoshino's curriculum.

Shodan level:

31 moves of itto-style naginata for a year.

Yagyu style bojutsu and 18 moves of self-defence jujutsu.

Chudan level:

10 more naginata moves from various styles

12 moves of jujutsu facing the opponent

10 more moves of bojutsu

7 moves of yagyu style naginata

10 moves using a dagger, including a permission to kill when protecting life

When these moves became second nature they were given a completion license with the list of gained skills (mokuroku kyojo). This course took 5 years to complete. 26 students got the first and second level, three the license, in the 7 years Hoshino taught the course.

98 kata in five years. Does this seem impossible? The Pamurai says she made a list of the main kata she knows and went over 200 for the ten years she's been practising.

Permission to kill? Hoshino was giving girls permission to kill?

Five years to full license? When we demand a study of over 30 years to learn 12 seitei iai kata to the highest level? Think about that for a moment, and look back in history to some of our "giants" of the arts, how long did it take them to achieve full license? Are we just stupid today? Did those early folks practice 15 hours a day? Go look into it, that's what the study of history is for, to answer questions and provide the background to understand today.

The author of this paper summarizes the movement from PE (taiso) to budo in this girls' school, in order to incorporate moral/spiritual training. This was echoed by the ministry of education in 1911 when they made martial arts, elective classes in middle schools, followed by the normal schools. In 1917 kendo and judo became required subjects in middle schools.

From an old fashioned and quaint practice of a specific social class in a previous era (the Edo), martial arts had, by the early 20th century, been assured of its survival by its inclusion in the education system. A few years later budo for moral/spiritual (seishin) uplift had become budo for the nationalism of yamato damashii (Japanese spirit) as the country headed into the Imperial wars of expansion.

The forms of budo are a tool. They can be hung on a wall (empty performances good only for losing weight), used to build better people (as Hoshino and Iwamoto wished) or used to build fences (as the Japanese military did during the 20th century wars).

How do you teach them today?

Sept 13, 2018

What you know, what you teach.

Here's a question from one of my students:

"How long have you been doing each art? For instance, when did you start iai, then niten, then jo?"

You've been doing iaido for much longer correct? Or are you better at iai because you had a non-seminar teacher?

I'm just wondering because you always have so much more to say about iaido, so much more to teach beyond which foot goes where, in iai comparatively to jodo."

We discussed this a bit in the bar last evening but I promised to write about it with a coffee in my hand so here it is. I started Aikido with Bruce Stiles in 1980, I first saw a class in Iaido in 1983 with Mitsuzuka Takeshi but consider my current iai to be from 1987 when I met Ohmi sensei. I began Niten Ichiryu with Haruna sensei in 1992 and my jodo a few years after that, probably mid-late '90s since the book was written in 2000. I had done Aiki Jo and Ken since 1980.

Do I know more in the arts where I had a local teacher? I don't know, how do you know how much you know? What do we define as knowledge? I will be so egotistical as to say that I have seldom been "wrong" when listening to my seminar teachers tell me something I had worked out for myself. Mostly that stuff concerned the back story to a move in a kata. For instance, being told that the opponent in Soete Zuki is walking beside rather than in a doorway. Mind you, I was taught one, then the other by different teachers so which one is "correct"? What would be "wrong" anyway? What would a seminar teacher omit that a local teacher would fill in? Different teachers teach different things, the elephant and the blind men.

Knowing the shape of lots of kata?

I know a lot of kata in many schools, probably as much or more than most folks, but that's not a big deal. If we take something like Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, if you know the first set you pretty much know the rest of the school. That is, you can pick up the rest of the kata quite fast, the basic movements are repeated through the school. If you know the kihon of Shindo Muso Ryu, you can quickly learn most of the kata in the school. Add Ran Ai, and you're pretty much there. If you know one Japanese martial art you will find that you can pick up another quickly.

In other words, the shapes are what you learn first, and once learned you can get into the details, but even 200 shapes is simply a matter of memorization. Lots of people can memorize a lot more than we do. The number of kata you know is, more or less, a reflection of how long you've been practising. You tend to accumulate them rather than learn them intentionally. Knowing more than one art is not a bad thing, comparative study allows more insight.

Knowing lots of detail?

After learning the "dance steps" we tend to start picking up detail, more and more detail, lots of detail. Especially in iai, where there is no partner to direct and correct your movements. I don't mean you are being taught by your partner, but that they are physically present so you have a target to strike to. There it is. Get to the correct place at the correct time and cut or strike at the angle and with the grip that works. No need for words.

In Iai we tend to say "the riai of this kata is that there is an opponent there, and one there, and this one does this and then that one does that". That's not riai, that's the kata, and in partner practice you have a body in space that is doing things which you can see. The "riai" mentioned above is the starting point of partner practice. It's no secret to learn what is happening in an iaido kata, it just seems like it, and sensei telling you what your invisible opponent is doing is more words than sensei telling you what is happening in a partner art, but it's not "more detail", it's not deeper instruction, it's just setting up the kata for you to learn. As we discussed in the bar, you don't have to say/teach as much while doing jodo because the explanation is obvious, here comes the cut, get out of the way.

If we're talking a partner koryu, even less talking is needed. Here's the big shape of the kata, get out of the way. "How do I do that?" "I don't care, just get out of the way". What if there is more than one way to get out of the way? Pick one. How do I know it's the right one? Are you alive, if so that's the right one. There is more than one right one. If you want to go to a seminar and someone tells you a different way, try it out. Do you want to be my student? Do it my way, or do it the way I tell you to do it. If you want to do it the way someone else does it, you're their student. I don't care, it's koryu, I'm not interested in clones of me and you can do what you like in class.

Now, if you're following someone else and you want me to "correct" you, I have a problem, I'll probably be telling you to do something that contradicts what your sensei says. Mostly I'll correct you anyway, I'll suggest ways to improve what you're doing, but I won't ever know if that's what your sensei would have said. I may be telling you a big fat lie.

When we get to Seitei Iai or Jo we have a different animal, if you want to pass your exam you do it like your panel wants to see it. There is, in fact, a right way and a wrong way to do it. You will know what that is because you have feedback in the form of pass or fail. Unless some other criteria comes in like quotas, then you have confused feedback if those quotas are not actually stated as part of the exam. Secret criteria are secret, unwritten rules are unwritten, they are therefore useless as learning or teaching tools. Don't apply the standards and secrets of Seitei to koryu, they don't apply. Different goals to the training.

Being able to "fix" a student?

This is more like it. Can I "fix" you in iai? How about jo? I can fix you in both, but again, jodo is more or less self-correcting. So is Aikido, it works or it doesn't. You can force either of them but you know you're forcing it. The presence of a partner means that you can fix yourself quite easily, you can feel the balance, you can feel the timing, and you don't have to be told. The

absence of words doesn't mean you are being taught less quickly in jo, it just means you need more words to correct iaido because there's an absence of feedback except sensei's voice yapping in your ear. "Stand up straighter" needs to be said in iaido, the stick hitting your head means it doesn't have to be said in jodo.

But can I fix better in iai, where I've studied longer and had a local instructor? Considering that I make stuff up, I "lie to beginners" to keep them moving forward in their studies, I invent exercises and ways to see things, I'd say that in all of it, I'm equally skilled in my lies and inventions. Can you feel your imbalance at this place? No? Try this, feel it now? Yes? Good, I just lied to you, I just made something up that I wasn't taught. I did that so you could feel the imbalance, now fix it and move on from my lies.

Does my lying bother you? They are stories then, don't think of them as lies, think of them as approximations to reality, think of them as "good enough". Newtonian physics is "good enough" but it's a lie that we now know is a lie.

The thing is, I can handle that lie, I can't get my head around Quantum physics. I don't have the background, I don't know the little lies well enough to understand the bigger lie of string theory or multiple worlds or whatever that stuff is that leaks out of the LHC.

Knowing the underlying principles such as Jo Ha Kyu?

This is the Hyo Ho, it's the stuff you can read about in the Go Rin no Sho, its the strategy and the riai you are meant to extract from the kata. It's also, to a large extent, something grafted onto the budo from places like Noh. Zeami was one of the biggest influences on budo, seriously, a lot of our terminology came from his writings.

Is it me or is it you?

Is it that I don't know as much in some arts as in others and so can't teach you the details rather than just the dance steps, or is it that you're at the level of dance steps in some arts and beyond that in others? Do you know a LOT about Seitei iai so that I can teach you much more? Do you have less of the basics in Seitei Jo, are you still working on the steps and timing of Midari Dome and Ran Ai? Will I have learned more about those so that I can teach you more detail when you're ready for it?

Or does the partner you have in Midari Dome and Ran Ai mean I don't have to natter at you? That I can see you learning stuff well enough without me filling your head with more words?

Can you trust that I will make up a lie when you stall? That I will come up with some way to push you forward when you need a push? Can you trust that I teach different principles in different arts? That I tend to tell you stuff in the places where I learned that stuff? Can you believe that all the "good stuff" crosses over from one art to another?

In Jodo we have been blasting through lots of kata because we've been preparing for seminars. Same with Niten Ichiryu. Few of us are preparing for gradings so the Seitei Gata sets can be done with details added.

Questions. If you want words and details and in depth noodling about anything, just ask. You know how easy it is to get me nattering, how hard it is to stop me. That's why the secret code phrase of our dojo is "kuchi waza". This means "shut up sensei and let us get on with our practice".

I'm calling kuchi waza now.

Oct 3, 2018

Seminar teaching, dojo teaching

This is a topic Ohmi sensei mentions often at seminars. When learning at a seminar the instructor will be speaking to the entire group, so don't expect individual attention.

To this I'd add, don't expect a lot of practice. This means, for those of advanced age, don't be afraid that you are going to be driving yourself for two days straight. For those who are young and genki, don't get all set to drive yourself for two days straight.

A visiting Sensei is parachuted in to give your practice a boost, to give you something to chew on for the next year, to reveal the latest fashions from Paris, or simply to chum around with your sensei and others for a couple of days.

I have to admit, the seminar last weekend was a big part "chum around with buddies". It was also to introduce Jodo (fashions from Paris), to remind folks of Niten Ichiryu (something all three generations of instructors, me, Carole and Dave, and Dave's student Bill, our host, have practised) and to remind all, by the agreement of those three generations on how it's done, that the participants, the students are firmly on the right path. This is a reminder those in the hinterland sometimes need. We are all sincere and want to learn this stuff properly and if we are out of touch with the sources for a while we can start to doubt our own practice and even that of our local sensei. Dave Green sensei once said that he brings in outside sensei so that they will say the same thing he says to his students. That way they won't think he's lying to them.

As a visiting sensei I try to keep things moving along, a mix of talking to the group and practice of what I just spoke about. Too much yapping and people fall asleep, too much practice and people are more worried about their legs than their brains.

One thing a visiting sensei won't, or shouldn't do a lot of is correction on a one to one level. This sometimes creates doubt in a student, doubt in what they have been taught and doubt of the person who taught them. If sensei says "sink your weight" and your local sensei says "drop your shoulders" you may think, (if sinking the weight feels right), that your sensei isn't very good or that he is teaching something different. You may not know that they have both told you the same thing. Visiting sensei has a fresh voice and you may be paying attention, or you may have responded to his suggestion because of the preparation work by your own sensei. Now, you may think that none of that matters as long as you got the correction and you're better now than ten minutes ago.

You are, but how about next week when you are doubting everything your sensei is telling you. For ten minutes improvement you are now stalled for months, until you can come to trust your sensei again.

This doesn't mean visiting sensei won't correct you, perhaps you asked a question, the answer goes to the whole class, its not really one on one. Perhaps sensei made a general correction and is coming around making sure everyone understood, and you get corrected. Maybe sensei even

whispered something to you one on one despite his best efforts not to do that. The urge to correct is powerful. For your own good, assume what he just told you is what your own sensei has been telling you for months. It's a good bet he has been.

What you get in the dojo is a lot of personal attention, even if it doesn't feel like it. Sensei is watching you and will let you get on with what you're doing well. He steps in when you need help. Now, he may also just leave you to it if you are unteachable, or if he simply doesn't want to deal with you today. Keep that seed of doubt in your head when being left alone. When sensei is shouting in your face demanding you fix what you haven't fixed for the last two years, that's when you know he hasn't given up on you. That he's yelling is a hint that maybe you ought to fix it instead of being lazy and relying on him to fix you.

How would it go in a seminar if sensei tried to make sure everyone there had a perfect understanding and could do what he was teaching you? Yeah, not much would get covered. So sensei is going to explain something, let you do it a couple of times and if most of the class has got it, even if you haven't, he's moving on. Too bad you were talking to your buddy when he demonstrated. You're just a slow learner? Perhaps you are, but can you think of other reasons you take a long time to "get" something?

Confession time. When I was learning iai I copied Ohmi sensei as closely as I could. When Haruna sensei came to teach at a seminar his style was somewhat different. I would continue to do things my sensei's way until I was explicitly told, by Ohmi sensei, to do things Haruna's way. This slowed my progress but I knew that, I followed my sensei even when changing my style to something not quite the same as his. We have all sorts of reasons why we are slow to learn.

Now, what if a visiting sensei was good enough and had time enough to make sure everyone "got" all he taught at the seminar. What would you do until he comes back to visit? Be happy if he moves along and you're still struggling. Someone in the class will have got some of it, others will have the rest, all of you will be able to put it together given enough time and effort back in the dojo.

Oct 7, 2018

Smarter than Dad

Around about 16 to 20 years old, we figure we're smarter than our old dad. As Mark Twain was supposed to have said "at 18 my dad was quite stupid, I was amazed at how much he had learned by the time I was 24". Or as my own Grandfather said "There's nobody as smart as a 15 year old boy. Except a 14 year old girl." He was doubtless speaking to my mother, who told me the story.

With this in mind, how do we know when we're smarter than our sensei? What signs should we look for to let us know that we are now "good to go". Maybe the best way to know is when sensei tells us we're smarter than he is. This happens when he stops giving us corrections. If he were smarter than us he'd be able to get us to the next level but if he's not trying we must be there.

Sensei might also be telling us we're smarter than he, when he tells us to go teach the beginners, or to go out and start a dojo on our own.

Maybe sensei tells us to make some change in our movement and we tell him that "so and so" does it our way, if he then says "OK do it that way" and walks away, we're there.

Maybe sensei asks us what the next kata is, not as a test but because he can't remember. We're there.

Or if he starts to tell a zen story and we can tell him who first invented the story, we're there. Maybe we stomp on the punch line and say it first just to demonstrate to him, and the rest of the class, that we know.

In budo we should always be looking at ourselves, so how do we know we're smarter than sensei by watching our own actions?

A good sign is when we start to pick and choose which instructions we follow. After all, being able to know what we need and what is useless is a really good indication that we know things beyond what sensei is telling us. We know enough to know what's good for us and what's not.

Another sign is when we start to look for a different sensei. When we know better than sensei what we need we'll naturally look for another sensei who can take us further. Or maybe we find several sensei and pick and choose what they are telling us to make a superior style for ourselves. Did not Bruce Lee say "keep the best and leave the rest".

It's a sure bet we know more than sensei when we find ourselves correcting our partners. Sensei says "do this" and we say "OK try it this way" because we know better than sensei what they need. Or maybe we just fill in the stuff sensei forgot to tell them in his old age. Just like forgetting what kata comes next, sometimes the old fellows need help telling the beginners what they need to know.

What do we do when sensei says "demonstrate such and such a kata" to the class? Do we demonstrate the same old kata he teaches or do we demonstrate a variation he's never seen before? If we demonstrate the variation and get him to say "what the hell was that" it's a good indication that we're getting smarter than him.

If we visit another country, Japan for choice, and get praised for our excellent skills, while sensei back home is telling us we're crap, that's a really good indication that we know more than sensei. After all, we just got confirmation of our skills from strangers, folks who are unbiased, who see us as we are, not as some remembered beginner. Japan is where this stuff comes from, right? It's obvious their praise is proof of superior understanding.

Maybe we visit some other organization and they offer us a jump in rank to switch or to teach them. They obviously know who's the smarter one because they could have given our sensei the same offer but didn't.

As you can see, there are loads of ways we can know we're smarter than sensei. Make sure you recognize the signs because there's no sense wasting time on someone who can't get us to the next level. Maybe we need to do it for ourselves, or maybe we need to find someone smarter to learn with.

Even if we're not sure we're smarter than sensei, maybe we need to switch to someone who is better connected, more powerful in the organization, if we want to get our next rank. But that's another lesson.

For now, just make sure you know when you're "smarter than dad".

Oct 9, 2018

Commodities Trading

Musashi once wrote that modern day (first half of the 17th century) budo teachers were selling their art as if they were merchants. I think he probably meant it literally, as in selling a technique at a time.

Supposedly, Sokaku Takeda sold techniques in the early 20th century, so many yen apiece, sign the book here. Morihei Ueshiba was one of his patrons, we read.

And why not? I don't get the impression that Musashi was against getting paid, he was employed by many people. He also sold commodities, his artwork to be specific. He was commissioned to paint screens and design castles. You need to earn a living and he earned his by being a *hyohosha*, a budo strategist. Now reportedly, he refused a large stipend at least once, for a smaller one, which might have had something to do with what was asked for the large one. I don't know if I actually read that, I seem to be suffering from "fibro fog" at the moment, the inability to focus and think clearly because of a massive amount of pain across the back due to fibromyalgia. Sure, whatever, or it may be that I'm really, really annoyed because my son phoned and said the batteries were low (could just be that his friends drained them, I dunno, wasn't there) and then while I was talking him through hooking up the generator, after I said "now don't break the starter pulley" he told me they broke the starter pulley..... aaaargh, yet another thing it's my job to fix. (Post Script: The son fixed the cord and the batteries seemed to be recharging. Happy, happy)

Where was I? Musashi and why he didn't have a big stipend and fancy job. It may be that he preferred the freedom to work on his craft, taking enough to live on and practising his budo. I know people who do this today, The Pamurai works at a job where she can take off to go to seminars and still pay the rent. She could probably get a big accounting job and afford to buy a house, but she prefers to practice budo instead. Yes, instead, too much job gets you money, not time to do stuff. With a big job comes hiring people to do the stuff you have no time to do, and you can't hire someone to learn budo for you. You may have the money to purchase one of those fancy techniques from the famous teacher, but you won't have time to do much more than memorize the steps.

From one thing, ten thousand things.

That's something else Musashi said, although I suspect strongly that he didn't invent it. Sounds a bit Taoist to me. You've heard the same thing from your sensei, in the form of "you can learn everything you need to learn from Mae", or "all of iaido is contained within Mae". That's the first kata of Seitei iai and Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu. Absolutely it's all there, so buy one technique (Mae) and think all the rest of it, out of it. What? No time to do that? Too much job and family and not enough hours in the day? Well get the wallet out and buy the next dozen kata because... wait for it... money is time. No wait, other way around, never mind, it's literally true for most of

us who aren't banks where money is money by some sort of magical thinking on the part of everyone.... Fog.

What is this ten thousand things you can get from one kata? Can you get the other kata from the first kata in a set? I suppose if infinite monkeys in a cage can type out a BBC science show script, you could, but it would be pretty spooky. To get Suigetsu from Tsuki Zue when learning Seitei Jo might be a bit of a stretch, although getting Migi, Hidari and Ushiro from Mae in Omori Ryu iai could be done with a simple question. "Where is he now".

Is it more kata that you're supposed to get from one kata? Which kata are you supposed to get? The one where you step back starting with the right foot or the one where you start back with the left at the end of the thing when you're going back to the starting point?

Flowers and Fruit.

I think we need to consider this other phrase Musashi wrote down for us. I think we might want to consider kata and principle (riai) are like flower and fruit (seed? Tomato / Potato). What can you derive from a kata, a technique? Probably not specific kata, but maybe the principle behind the technique. If we look at the first kata in Niten Ichiryu (as the school is practised today) you are looking at Sasen. Buddy swings his sword at you as you approach each other, you step aside and stick him in the throat. More a technique than a kata right? Very short story. Let's see what we can learn by way of principle. (Go look it up on youtube sensei if you're curious about what it looks like.)

Distance and timing seem obvious, but aren't, not really. Invitation is there (look, my sword is down in gedan, you're in hasso, here's my head). Sen no sen is what we're talking about. Which angle for the sword as it pierces, does it matter? Posture, this is a one handed thrust, where are your hips? Your back foot? Mushin vs muscular tension, which one is best? The relationship of sutemi to courage, what is that?

We could spend a very long time squeezing the meaning out of this single kata, and from those meanings we could derive our own kata. What happens is we're a bit late on the approach, he strikes faster? We may have to deflect and then strike, let's call that Uke Nagashi, invent your own version. Call it Go no Sen. (Musashi didn't use the kendo terminology but, fog, I can never remember his terms.) Can we get in there before? Sen sen no sen, a kata stopper by definition, invent it and call it Uke Nagashi? OK call it Moji Gamae since the back half of Uke Nagashi is the completion of go no sen. Does go no sen always include a sen sen no sen moment?

Can we do this sort of thinking? Sure if we have the time and inclination to noodle around with what we know. If we aren't going to be tested on both the answer and the way we get there. "Show your work", like guessing the correct number is a thing in a complex algebra question on a math test.

Should we? Depends on whether we're looking for fruit or flowers I suppose, whether we've got a job, family and mortgage or a job with flexible work hours. Are we in this for the woo woo, the saving of Japanese culture or the learning how to kill people with swords?

Depends on whether we figure we can buy more techniques and finally get the secret decoder ring in the last box.

Maybe.

Oct 15, 2018

Iai as abstraction

One of the tenets of practising iai, as far as I'm concerned, is to get rid of as much as you can. This is abstraction, to take what you have as an image or a performance and to start getting rid of everything you don't need. What you are left with is no more than you need, and no less.

I don't call it minimalism because there you add only enough to provide the meaning you intend, but some may believe this is a better description. After all, when most people think of abstraction they think of abstract expressionism, Pollock's drip paintings which are anything but minimalism, crowded with paint. This is not the abstraction (non-realism) I'm thinking of, in fact, I can't think of an art movement that took a scene and reduced it to the absolute minimum of lines and colour until the meaning remained. Icons on signage, kids' drawings perhaps. How much can you take away from what you see and still convey what you see. Two lines and it's a tree?

Why do this in iai, or any other martial art? Why strip everything away except what you need? After all, there are lots of performances out there just chock full of frilly bits, decorative flourishes that catch the eye and amuse the spectators. Look them up, there are the kids in flag-print keikogi spinning and kicking and throwing their swords into the air while doing backflips to loud music. Quite impressive.

Why would I want to go the other way? No music, monochrome outfit, minimal sword movement? It's because I want to disappear. I want those watching to miss what I'm doing, I want it to be done short and sharp.

A few days ago I was asking a couple of seniors to relax, stop winding up, to go faster while doing an already short Niten Ichiryu kata. From that quiet place where there is nothing to attract and hold the attention, the movements disappeared. I mean that I, with my trained eye, started to miss the cuts. That's what I'm talking about. No posing, no samurai face, no growling, shaking, muscles-straining announcement that "something is about to happen". Just walk up and kill him.

This was always my ideal for an iai performance, to sit in front of a class and do a kata and have the class ask to see it again because they didn't know which kata I had just done. To become so abstract, so bereft of sharp edges, of things to catch the eye, that the whole thing becomes invisible. It would need an educated eye to miss it of course, someone who had never seen iaido before would see the whole thing. All of it would catch their eye, this is why people get quiet during good iaido demonstrations.

On the other side, on the watching side, a performance like that, a partner like that, would require an un-distracted mind to catch what was happening. The looker would need intense concentration not to miss the movement. This is what Ohmi sensei used to describe to us when talking about the draw in iai, Jo Ha Kyu, to put a hose in a barrel and turn on the water. You don't see anything happening at all, you look down and see a little bit of water. You look again, nothing, (Jo), then you look and suddenly you see the water rising toward the rim (Ha) and you run for the tap but too late, the water floods over the sides (Kyu). By the time you notice something is happening, it's too late.

Have the hose bounce around in the barrel, have water spraying around during the time you're filling it up and there's no problem seeing that things are happening. No problem getting to the tap to turn it off. Lots of rough edges for the eye to catch.

I take this stuff too far sometimes. I really dislike brand new outfits at gradings, "look at me, all torted up to ask you for a pass." We notice new clothes, so don't wear them to a grading. A tournament, sure, where you want the judges to notice you, to give you the flag, but not a grading where you want the judges' eyes to slide off you. Wear a clean, well-used outfit in good repair. Something that's invisible.

How does it go again? Slow = smooth, smooth = fast. Something like that. You want smooth? Get rid of all the extra bits and pieces, everything you don't need, everything that doesn't belong, that's out of place.

Abstraction as budo.

Oct 16, 2018

The Golden Age

Living in the past is one of the great modes of martial art. The story goes that there was a time when giants roamed the earth, generally unbeatable heroes who founded the various martial arts. We have been, presumably, going downhill ever since.

It's not just martial arts, I hear it about sports teams too. Around here, I suppose a lot of it comes from the fact that I'm one of the few people still alive to remember the last time the Maple Leafs won a Stanley Cup. (Bet they're still near the top if not the winners of making money off the game).

Society was better back then, more polite, kids did chores around the house. Women didn't have to work outside the house, the lower classes knew their place, stuff like that.

In the case of budo, we're probably thinking about the founders of our arts, and one of the Ur-stories from modern Japanese literature has to be Miyamoto Musashi who by all accounts was actually undefeated.

Not so long ago we discussed the teaching of sensei, as in how to correct our teachers when they are going the wrong way. One suggestion was that we should not do that unless to point out from the histories, a teacher back in the lineage that said something different. A correction from the past.

I once did a weekend seminar with Pan Ching Fu, a rather famous Wushu teacher who immigrated to this area. He said at one point that "even the greatest masters had stairs in their houses". Me, I took that to mean they didn't actually jump up to the second floor windows when they wanted to go to bed. Some others might suggest that the stairs were for the other members of their family, or maybe to keep up the resale value of the house.

I saw a headline the other day, didn't follow up and read because it looked like click-bait, but it suggested that maybe athletic records weren't actually improving over the years. I dunno how that might happen, time getting a bit longer for some reason so that a second today is the same as half a second a hundred years ago? That would explain sprint times dropping without sprinters getting any faster.

It's hard to argue a golden age of sports without explaining objective standards being non-objective. Really, today's Maple Leafs would probably clean up in 1968 (the next year after the last championship). Of course all that protective equipment would get them laughed at.

I've heard lots of people tell me that teachers like Shimizu sensei of Shindo Muso Ryu got his Menkyo Kaiden in seven years (did I remember that right?) because they practised for fifteen hours a day back then. (I want one of those sponsors so I can practice that much without having to worry about food.)

Assuming it takes 30 years these days (just going by hanshi hachidan) to reach the highest level of the Dan-I system in Kendo, let's see how many hours we need. Assume 3 practices a week of 2 hours apiece. That's 6 times 52 times 30 or roughly ten thousand hours. Hah, cool.

For seven years? That's 26 hours a week or 13 practices of 2 hours each. Hmm, 26 hours in 7 days is (rounding up) 4 hours a day. Not fifteen, and when I was in my 20s I easily worked out 4 hours a day. So not impossible to get to the highest levels in 7 years.

But wait, I hear some rumbling out there, do hanshi hachidan average out to 6 hours a week? Not by their own writings, 3-4 hours a day would be more like it. So we're back to comparing 7 years to 30. Someone is going to poke holes in my math I'm sure.

It takes four times as long to get to the highest level today than it did two or three generations ago? Does a seven year menkyo kaiden actually equate with a hanshi hachidan? Or does 30 years equate to 30 years?

You can't compare can you? We don't know what was required for Menkyo Kaiden, or for Soke, or for hanshi hachidan in 1972 for that matter. By extension, can we actually compare the skills of the golden age (pick one) to today? What was "the best" in 1610 compared to "the best" today? How about 1750? 1950? Better than everyone at that time? Better to everyone then and since right up to today?

Ah, we may have film from the 1950s, what does that look like? Better than today? Better by what standard, ours or theirs? Which standard? Technician, teacher, tournaments?

Me? I think the golden age was when I was 28, working out 4 hours a day, doing 4 martial arts, back when injuries healed and I wasn't in pain for months at a time.

That was golden.

On the other hand, I probably know a bit more now than I did then.

Oct 19, 2018

Make it to break it

No I'm not talking about a career in movie props, making furniture out of balsa so the hero can crash through it. I have, however, seen the skids of balsa at AM wood where I buy my supplies. Good people, great stuff.

I'm speaking of timing in kata, of making the opponent's timing so that you can break it. You can't break someone's timing if you can't match it, how could you? So you practice matching it.

This came up over the weekend when I asked Kajiya sensei if he had any special exercises to anticipate uchidachi's (attacker) cut. In Niten the cut is already pretty much at the top of the swing before we start moving to cut. This is cutting from jodan in kendo, not a lot of time to react, so how do we practice to get that done? Sensei said start with a kata like hasso, both sides are essentially doing the same thing, shidachi (defender) is simply stepping to the side rather than to the front so that uchi misses and shi hits the neck.

The exercise? Match uchidachi exactly, copy his movements, do what he's doing exactly at the same time. Excellent, you should try this at home folks.

You can use this through the entire kata, and also when the kata sides aren't identical, for instance when uchi moves to hasso and shi moves to gedan. We say that uchidachi leads and shidachi follows, but at what separation of time? Shidachi should make sure he follows, but at the same time. How do you follow at the same time? Wait for uchidachi to decide to move, see this, move with him.

But, but... This is the exercise, the way you learn how to anticipate uchidachi's cut so that you can avoid it. You learn to follow your partner exactly, and the only way you can do this is to anticipate his movement. Like most of Niten Ichiryu, or any other budo for that matter, it's simple. Not easy, but simple.

With these little essays I usually take items out of the seminars and think about them, examine and expand them. With this seminar I'm having a bit of trouble with that. Sort of like a fish discussing water or us discussing air. Niten is where I think about budo, it's simple, but not easy to do, you get past the "this foot there" stage in about five minutes and then you're done unless you start thinking. So during a seminar with Soke I hear something and a bell rings in my head. It gets hard to remember something that's already there. I really should have been making notes.

I noticed several people were doing just that, which is something I love to see. I suspect that once again I will be making notes next weekend when Ohmi sensei is talking about iai. This is one of the best times to hear what he is thinking about.

Short side note: If you think next weekend's koryu seminar is about doing lots of kata so you can learn the dance steps, you are not practising koryu iai. Yes we will do lots of kata, yes we will make general corrections, but as Ohmi sensei has said many times, getting personal correction from sensei is not the function of a seminar. Do that in class. Next weekend you will quite likely (if we are lucky) hear Ohmi sensei lecture at length about the meaning of iai. Sure you hear that in your regular classes "all the time", but you really do not. There are three of us scheduled to teach, Carole or I may, at some point, say exactly what Ohmi sensei has said, but in slightly different words. This may suddenly make clear a point that you thought you understood.

There are levels of understanding beyond "this foot goes there". There are levels of understanding of the same statement.

To get back to Niten, it is really hard on beginners. The kata are so simple that it's easy to assume you know what's going on, especially if you bring the attitude that learning the shape is all there is. Niten is a partner practice that seems to act like a solo practice, kenjutsu that seems to act like iai. It can be done in a hollow way, each side does its bit and we're done.

The approach starts to take on extra importance, the etiquette, and the things you wear to practice and how you wear them can become exaggerated because you can't keep your attention on the meat of the kata. If you don't like the fiddly bits or the emphasis on dress and you've learned how to step to the right and cut your partner's neck when he cuts for your head, you're done. It's too simple. You quit.

I have seen a lot of people start Niten because Musashi was such a kick-ass guy, and then leave a year or two later because "it's not what I need". The translation is "it's boring, I've learned it, I want to learn kata that are harder to remember". Some folks make an effort to stay, they make a fetish of which foot to start on, or how to flourish the sword as you go into a kamae but that only lasts so long. Once that becomes a habit there's not much else to do.

When your budo becomes about what you're wearing and where you put your sageo when you bow to your sword, it really is time to quit and do something else that makes you think rather than memorize. Being able to recite Jabberwacky (T'was brillig, and the slithy troves did gyre and gimble in the wabe...) does not mean you could write the thing. You could transcribe it but that's not the same as writing it.

One thing that Kajiya sensei said many times over the weekend was "there's lots of ways to do this". I noticed a few blinks and some frustration at certain points when he showed three or four variations of a movement. "But sensei, which one is the correct one?" Sensei's answer at one point was "remember to cut him". I seem to have heard that somewhere before, from the writings of Musashi perhaps?

Those who do get hooked on Niten had better resign themselves to being bored during discussions of which shade of gray is correct for your montsuki when you're doing your 6dan test.

To avoid that, repeat after me "make it to break it". (Learn it to leave it).

Oct 30, 2018

Trust me, I know what's good for you.

Driving to the cafe I heard a news item and a clip from our current government. If I were not paying attention to nuance I'd have been pretty happy. "We can do better, we can provide people on social assistance with..." Nice, but of course several words were mentioned that leads me to think this is the same old 1984 doublespeak we've become used to. In other words "lies to citizens". Words and phrases like "cost" and "reform" and "return to the workforce". All perfectly innocent, positive even, on their own, but deadly in combination because of the way they have been used everywhere for a decade or two.

It is getting quite difficult to trust what a government says, which is, of course, the point. It is of benefit to certain "reform minded" power groups to have a population that doesn't trust government. So much easier to then guide the course of legislation and perhaps even manipulate the rights to vote so that more money and power flows to fewer people.

Trust is destroyed, but it is replaced with cynicism, with "what can you do, they're all crooks" rather than with a desire to do the work of thinking and defending what we are about to lose. If we throw out the crooks we have to elect yet another bunch of crooks right? So much easier to turn to the strongman who will fix the problems. What problems? THE problems. There must be problems right? You're unhappy, you don't have what you want, so that must mean there are problems.

May I suggest a course of Comparative Problemology, which in a nutshell consists of saying to yourself "I was unhappy because I had no feet until I met a man who had no legs". Look, if you don't like foreigners (and who does, they eat smelly food) just compare your life to that of your grandfather. Are you better off? Stop complaining. Are you worse off? Define worse, if you mean you're more unhappy than the old guy, please consider why. And consider whether the strong man you're looking at can make you happier. Worse monetarily? Did the forestry industry you joined right out of grade 10 disappear? I'm sorry about that, did the invading caravan of Middle Eastern Terrorists from Guatamala cause the Spruce Budworm invasion? Oops, head hurts with all this thinking, let's have a simple slogan instead. How about "Make it like the golden age again". You know, the one where it was so much better than it is now.

If you can't think of a golden age, and I can't except maybe that 15 or 20 years of rebuilding and unionism right after the second world war when women could afford to be oppressed by staying at home to raise the kids, an era where wages were high enough that one manufacturing-based income could be enough to raise a family, maybe think about what you can do to make this current age golden. (Small caveat here, my family seems to have missed that golden age of the 1950s, as did most others, today is definitely more golden than then).

So run for office and don't be a crook. "That works in systems that aren't based entirely on how much money you have to buy advertisements right?" Umm, you're reading this aren't you? How

much do you think I paid to publish this where anyone in the world with access to faceplant could read it?

That's one of the problems we are starting to figure out isn't it? Social media means anyone can publish. Good. But that means our "friends" might be chatbots from countries or groups with an "agenda". Bad. So think before you share, and remember that "memes are for morons". There's a bit of a trick you can use, up there on the right hand corner somewhere is a drop down menu that will let you cancel all posts from whatever group your friend just shared a meme. About once a week I do that and suddenly the meme-pollution of my feed has dropped by 90 percent. My friends and my facebook-friends are still there, their posts still show up, but the knee-jerk confirmation-biased memes do not. I must admit that for some of my friends of both types that means I don't see anything from them for weeks.

I also don't get the vague impression that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, or that a single elected leader is responsible for world-wide hell-in-a-handbasketry.

In fact, the absence of obvious lies tends to allow me to trust certain of my friends once again. The absence of a constant barrage of hell-in-a-handbasketry (HIH, hell in handbasket) allows me a little breathing space that lets me think that maybe life isn't really so bad and maybe we could think about leaving the place a little more tidy than we found it. You know, pick up around the place, and leave it in good repair for the kids when we finally go off to HIH.

Trust. Listening to people in power who do nothing but lie to you, obvious, clumsy, easily disproven lies, tends to make you cynical, it makes you throw up your hands and say "what can you do". Just like it's supposed to do.

Just don't stop long enough to think "What can I do"?

What can you do? Start small, start local, and improve things in your corner of the world. Just like our budo training has taught us. Pay attention, fix the little things, "from one thing ten thousand things come". Don't facilitate the liars, don't leave them in power because "what can you do?"

What can YOU do?

Nov 1, 2018

Jodo is hard

If Barbie were a martial artist that's what she would say (go look up "math is hard" Barbie if you aren't old enough to remember the early '90s).

Over the last few months I've had the chance to see beginners work on several Japanese weapon arts and I've come to believe that Jodo is the most difficult to start with. There is just too much going on with hand switches and end switches and odd footwork. Niten Ichiryu is probably the easiest to get folks started, if you're talking partner practice (I haven't started raw beginners with Nito Seiho for many years but it is not quite as complex as jodo).

Iaido isn't really as difficult to do as some would have you believe, two of our beginners (three or four classes of various things) were picking up the Seitei kata very well on the first try, as the seniors went through them at the end of the session. When you get down to it, with the sword the grip doesn't change, it's mostly footwork after learning that.

And yet, I've got a couple of 4dans who are challenging iai gradings who are both better at jodo than iai. I mean they perform jodo better than they do iai, they are 4dan in both arts and there is no question that they earned their rank in each, it's just that when it comes to Seitei they get "the disease".

There's a thing I decided last evening is "Seitei sickness", it's the constant, continuing search for checkpoints. The desire to collect the latest corrections from around the world, maybe to use them to pass the next grading. It's the placing of the sword from one position to another long past the time one should be doing such a thing.

It's the idea that being a perpetual beginner is a good thing. It isn't. The beginners last evening were placing their swords and their feet in the correct positions quite well, after seeing some of the kata for the first time... AS they were seeing the kata for the first time. There are 12 Seitei kata, they aren't long, so why would anyone think that, after 10 or 15 years practice, there were angles and footwork to be learned? Unless they are bad students or their teachers are garbage.

Is it that people continue to confuse corrections with changes? Seitei hasn't changed much in the 30 years I've been around it. More kata were added but I can think of a cutting angle change in Kesa Giri and that's about it. What I do see is someone getting a correction and immediately sharing this with everyone else as a big change. Now you must do it this way.

Secret handshakes? Perhaps the constant search for the latest changes might also be a search for the formula to pass the next grading. If you haven't gone to the latest seminar you won't have heard of the latest way to do something or other and so you are "behind", you have demonstrated you aren't working at it, so you will fail. I'm seeing part of this thing with the advice I'm hearing for the seniors, you must have a new hakama and montsuki. I have asked if this is a new rule for the CKF and been told that the grading rules haven't changed since the latest bylaws. That was well before these "new rules" showed up. They aren't new, I was told I needed to have a

montsuki for my 7dan test over a decade ago. I smiled and nodded and did my test in my same old outfit. Clean, but not new by any means.

To explain what I mean by Seitei sickness, whatever its cause, I watched one of the 4dans place the sword upward then down again in Kesa Giri. They were by no definition whatsoever, cuts. Just move the sword to the positions that felt correct (they weren't). I got angry, grabbed a jo and a bokuto and said, "hit this thing as hard as you can on the way up and the way down". After two or three goes at that, the kata was repeated with the iaito and it was a lot closer to iaido. Somehow the brain and all the chattering little worries about exact this and precise that had disappeared. What was left was the feeling of actually hitting something.

Which is why, I think, that the jodo these two students do is better than their iai, despite jodo being a harder art to learn. With Jo you have a partner you have to at least somewhat pay attention to, or even just look at. It tends to get you out of your head. After 10 or 15 years of practising 12 Seitei jo kata you know the hand switches and body twitches but the presence of an actual body "makes it real". Sure there are tweaks to be done with the Jodo movements, but they can easily be seen as tweaks and not changes to the kata. After all, a change requires two people to change, if your partner isn't doing something different, you aren't changing the kata, you're tweaking your kihon by moving the jo through a different angle.

The complexity of the movement in jo is something you can work on for a decade or more, which also helps I suppose. In any art there can be a "false change" that can distract you and ruin what you should be working on. If you are told that your grip should be 3mm further back from the tsuba, or your "stopping position" (my favourite thing to complain about) 3mm higher, you will continue to have a beginner's mind and be looking for the "correct" whatever it is. If you're actually struggling with the right elbow on honte uchi, it's not a change, it's "still trying to strike correctly on the other side".

We really and truly don't... let me start that again. We should not put a "perfect form" up as our ideal. If we do, we ought to video tape all our kata so that when we achieve that one perfect form we can stop training and just look at that tape whenever we get the urge to swing our sword.

You are about to tell me the goal is to achieve that perfect kata repeatedly? So that it's always perfect? How is that different than doing situps? What does that teach you? Where do you go after perfect?

What is the point?

The doing of situps every day will be enough to train your "stick to itiveness" with a lot less expense than \$10,000 swords and \$2000 montsuki for gradings. And you don't have to join a dojo.

It's not the destination it's the journey? Sure, I'm fine with that, but is the journey aimless? What's your goal?

I can't tell you how many people I've met through the years who once said "I'll never stop training", who have stopped training without any feelings of guilt or loss. Is aimless wandering aimless? Can you wander aimlessly?

The goal of much "walkabout" is mental isn't it? To find some sort of balance in the brain. Why would budo training be any different? How do we find balance? Not with perfection that's for sure. You can't understand balance by repeating the same perfect kata forever, all you do is get repetitive strain injury and have a balance that's a razor's edge on top of a cliff. Balance is fleeting, it's momentary, it's dynamic. The world constantly works against balance, there's wind up on that cliff, and if you want to know how to maintain your own balance, learn how to catch it over and over again.

We train past that perfect kata because of the imperfections that continue to show up. Those imperfections are our training, they allow us to understand balance. In jodo our partners give us imperfections a-plenty, so many that we have to pay attention all the time. In iai there's only ourselves, if we don't accept that we're "there" in the movements that we make, the angles, the grip, that sort of thing, we may spend all our time trying to catch up with the changes and never get around to understanding the balance we should be working on.

If we don't allow ourselves to be perfect, or at least "good enough" we can't get on with the real work of wandering around aimlessly.

Can you go too far with this "good enough"? Of course you can. Niten Ichiryu is simple, it's easily learned in a few hours. If you apply the "seitei sickness" of one, ideal, perfect form you might quickly get to the place where you think you "know this stuff". You might allow the ego to set you up as an expert and you may miss the point of the practice altogether. Even without the ego I've heard "It's too easy". Niten is easy? It's simple, but never confuse simple with easy. Should we have long, complex kata? Is that better? Should we introduce multiple weapons so that we can spend our whole career memorizing dances? Jodo is hard, Niten is easy? Should we go the route of constant changes in Niten? Tweak the angles, the timing, regularly? Some complain about that, some love it because it means they're "up to date".

Today I think that Jodo is hard, but constantly looking for changes is impossible.

Nov 10, 2018

Kihon concerns

Typing on this little system in the cafe seems to be possible for me, but not at home, not even with a brand new fancy chair. So if you are looking for emails and whatnot that I usually send from there, they may be delayed.

Last evening was our first jodo class of the New Year and it was well attended. We did kihon all class, just the first six of them. I hurt myself trying to keep up but what can you expect.

At one point I got onto a rant about just what the kihon are, so I thought I'd share. I see much too much "going through the motions", too much messing around, going faster and faster "to get through them", and too little attention to partners. The kihon are for working on the techniques, they are amazing for that. They are not for competition, or challenging, or changing things up. Not really. They can be, but only with someone of your own ability and only by mutual consent.

Let's take the first one, honte uchi. This is pretty simple, drive the tip of the jo into your opponent's face. Doing it solo you can just windmill your arms and shoot the stick out front any old way, it doesn't make much difference if you're too short or too long or off to one side, there's no target out there. Go to the partner kihon and it's something else again. For one thing, you've got a target and if you don't hit it, you're in trouble. You must aim to stop the jo an inch inside your partner's face, right between his eyes. Shouldn't be a problem, really, there's the target, hit it.

But you need both sides working on this. If your partner steps back the instant you start your movement, how will you know if you hit the target or not? Do you stretch out, off balance forward, while trying to hit him? Do you just stop wherever, as if you're doing the solo kihon? Your partner must remain in place until you know that you have reached the proper place.

Its cooperative, it's all set up precisely so that you can wear some movements into your bones. There's no aspect of competition here. You are working on crisp movement, on timing and distance, on sharp eyes, proper feet, strong hips, efficient hands. All the things you can't really work on if you're blasting through a kata or, heaven forbid, in an actual fight.

Both sides have their jobs in the partner kihon, and those jobs don't need to make sense combatively. This isn't combat, its practice. Take maki otoshi, one swings at the sword, misses, lifts the jo from beneath to catch the sword as it attacks in turn, and throws it away to the rear in order to get inside the sword's defence. The very first move is the sword stepping in to cut, and the jo sliding back to catch. The kihon are the opposite. We move the other way, don't ask me why, I don't know, but we do. If you understand its practice, not combat, it doesn't matter. The most common statement is "I can't reach jo's head when I step back to cut". This is true, you can't. You're not supposed to. You are putting the sword in front of jo's face so that he can lift his jo into the position you both would reach if you were stepping forward to cut his head and he was stepping back to receive. Sword is "resetting" the practice by stepping back and cutting, that's it, he's not trying to knock the jo aside and attack, he's simply providing the conditions for jo to do maki otoshi.

If it's done correctly, jo will be able to study the movement. If you're both moving at random times, random distances, you will both be more worried about actually staying in touch than practising the movements.

Think about what you're doing, think about why you're doing it, and work from there.

Jan 9, 2019

Spoiled clubs

A random phrase in my notebook that hasn't been crossed out so presumably I haven't written about it. I can see why, it would make folks angry to call them spoiled. Fortunately, when I speak of this or that, nobody figures I'm talking about them. Human nature, it's some other club, some other schlub.

The first thing that came into my head was an image of some sort of spalting, a fungus in wood that will eventually weaken it to the point where it will break. Obviously I didn't mean that. I meant, I suspect, a club that has a very highly ranked instructor and lots of rank underneath. These are great places to begin your martial arts training, one would think. Lots of potential instruction, lots of skill to live up to.

Yet it often doesn't work out that way, it depends almost entirely on the people in the club, specifically, it depends on a few of the seniors and on the sensei. The culture of a club is largely independent of rank, but a concentrated pool of rank can have an effect.

Example 1: A club with lots of rank, a kindly sensei and a comfortable influx of beginners. This is your ideal, from the sensei on down is a sense of responsibility and caring for the beginners. These guys tend to hang around together outside the dojo, certainly going for beers after class. The place is more like a social club than a place to learn how to beat people up. The technique can be very high-class but it's applied without competition, even when sparring. They like to share the skills with the new folks.

2: The same club, but the seniors have become a bit obsessed with "getting good". They may be good, maybe not, but the presence of beginners seems to slow things down. Why are we taking so much class time to teach this simple stuff when we could be getting to the advanced stuff? The seniors seem a bit more self-absorbed.

3: A club where the seniors and perhaps the sensei are in it for ego satisfaction, they have lots of rank and are looking for more. Most of the time is spent trying to prove how much better they are than the other guys. Not much joy for beginners coming into this place.

You can make up your own situations but mostly the idea is that a club is welcoming or not depending on the people in it, rather than on the rank. Rank doesn't necessarily chase out beginners.

Nice, but spoiled? Where was that? I don't think I caught what I was thinking when I wrote those two words. Let's not look at it from the senior point of view but from the beginner side. You walk into a club that has bags of rank and they don't just chase you back out the door. Good, now you have constant feedback and every question is answered instantly, fully and accurately. There you go, now you're a banana on the counter top, next to the oven. You're in a hothouse, you are going to ripen and mature very quickly. You're going to get to the sweet spot in half a day.

And then spoil.

Too fast, too easy. Is that all there is to this stuff? Fine I know what I need to know and I'm gone. Moving somewhere else to learn something worth learning, something I need to try a bit to understand.

Too fast, too easy, I'm now an expert, I know bags of stuff these new beginners don't know, and I learned it in half a year. I'm wonderful, I'm a teacher and I'm going to teach them stuff. Never mind trying to tell me anything, I'm busy teaching and sharing my expertise. What do you mean there's more? Nobody ever told me there was more, and what more could there be? Punch at this angle, cut at that direction. They said do that, I did that, we're done, right? So back off and let me teach these new guys.

Too fast and too easy can mean that a student, by being spoon-fed, never learns how to learn. Learning how to learn is tough, teaching someone how to learn is tough, much tougher in a "spoiled dojo" a dojo that is spoiled for skill, spoiled for choice of highly ranked instructors. Got a question? Ask and it's answered immediately and by six people tripping all over themselves to tell you.

Nothing that comes easy is worth much.

Then there's the attitude of the senior who grew up in this club. "It's easy" so those who don't find physical skills easy to acquire are treated as lazy. "It's difficult" we seniors can do this stuff at an amazingly high technical level and so we are going to keep moving along this path. The skill required is going to be higher and higher so that you beginners are going to be AMAZING. Or so that I can say "look at that, you can't do that, give me respect".

You know, I keep harping on this, but budo is a bit more than technique. Those who have trouble learning physical technique can be some of the most stubborn, determined, and hard to defeat people around. Who do you want beside you on the battlefield? The hothouse flower who has never been tested, the guy who can twirl a stick really prettily, or the guy who is going to plant his feet, grit his teeth and stand his ground because that's all he's ever done.

You don't know if you haven't been tested. When it all comes easily you don't know if it's going to be strong enough. Is it lipstick on a pig? Apparently guys are getting calf implants these days, does that mean they can drive strongly when attacking? Or does it just look like they can, because they've got thick calves?

There's no strength without stress. There's no skill without effort. No resilience without resistance.

We all spoil, it's just that we do it faster under ideal conditions.

Jan 3, 2019

What iaido is for

Friday was a class of two, the Pamurai and I. She wanted to do some iaido so away we went. I can still see, and let's face it, you don't get in there and mix it up when teaching iai, and you just point and grunt so I was of some use.

Seitei and Omori Ryu mostly, and I was looking for some and to smooth out what is already a pretty smooth performance, but everything can be improved.

Which brought me to the major value of iai as far as I'm concerned. The ability to teach us to know what we're doing. I started iai to work on my posture and it hasn't changed as far as I'm concerned. Pam has some twitching in her right thumb and forefinger between the cut and chiburi. Not the sort of thing that most would notice or that I'd correct before 4dan or so, but time to fix it. Typically for students who get this correction, she didn't know she was doing it, she couldn't feel it.

And that's the thing, with nobody else swinging stuff at us, or bumping into us, we can pay attention to our position in space, and look out for small shifts in weight and balance. The other things we were working on. For instance, moving back after the foot switch after chiburi. If you aim for a balanced weight between your two feet, you'll often end up rocking back a bit too far and then the front toes pop up off the ground. Again, something most won't see or feel, but something that needs fixing.

You can't fix it if you can't feel it. Once you feel it, iai is the place where you can fix it.

Of course that's the trap of iai, falling down the rabbit hole of perfection. You can believe that there is a perfect performance if it's solo. With a partner hanging off your arm there's not the same temptation, although Aikido types do fall into the anxiety of throwing without any sort of "muscle" at all. It's the same trap.

What's beyond perfection of technique? The opponent of course. What opponent? Kasso Teki, the invisible one.

So how did I teach about him last evening? I asked the Pamurai to do Seitei Mae, Omori Mae and Yoko gumo. Then I asked her to tell me what was going on in each. I didn't teach what was happening, she's too senior for that, but I made her think about it. She needs her own story for each and every kata she does, when the story is there and she's "dancing it" the opponent will appear. If you are trying to place your sword here and there in the air, you have no chance of showing anyone what's happening beyond "wow you're really good at putting your sword here and there, I bet you could close your eyes and touch your nose!"

My story? I do teach it, and reminded Pam (when she seemed to be waiting for me to tell her what to think) that I have told her before, it's part of learning the kata, to be told sensei's story. Seitei Mae cuts the eyes or forehead. Work that out and it means you are reaching forward and doing that first cut while your opponent is still sitting in seiza. He hasn't got his sword out so you

can take your time sliding your back foot up and cutting again. Distance and timing, yes they matter in iai, even if you can't see them yet.

Omori Mae? We cut across the chest or the neck, that means that he's rising and drawing, it means he's closer, so the little shift that you do when cutting vertically? Not for distance, make the shift all about putting your hips into the cut, not going from point A to B.

Yoku Gumo? Same kata, just from tate hiza (one knee up). But Eishin Ryu is about close range, it's about shoto range if you want to experiment some time. So what's happening with that first draw and cut? Are you reaching across the floor to cut your opponent? If you reach as far as Mae you may be cutting with the tsuba moto rather than the monouchi. Look that up, it's your homework.

Three situations with three ranges, and because of that, three timings.

All from waving a stick around in the air... sweet.

Feb 16, 2019

See what is there

Terry Pratchett has said that witches and wizards can see what is actually there. This is a talent most people do not share, and that includes students of the martial arts.

I will demonstrate an exercise to the class, and if it is not something that they have done 15 times before, I find myself saying what it is that I want them to do. Very few people in any of my classes has ever been able to look and do, most people can't see what is really there, what they see is what they expect. This is a mixture of what they have been taught previously and what they think I am trying to do. Of course quite often it is simply them wandering off into their own head and who knows what they're thinking. Regardless of what is happening in their heads, what is happening in their eyes is not what is happening. They look but do not see, they are using what Musashi called Ken instead of Kan, and Sensei must put audio into their head to override the video that is somehow corrupted between eyes and brain. Well okay that's not actually true, it's corrupted in the brain. What I said about Ken and Kan and Musashi is also not quite true, but I leave that to you to go research. It will do you good.

A very simple example of not seeing what is really there, is when I walk across the dojo stepping left foot forward then right foot forward and cutting with my sword. Inevitably even with this simple exercise, I find myself telling some of the students that I was stepping right foot then left foot and not shuffling right foot forward all the time.

This is an excellent example of how students turn their brain and eyes off when doing basic practice. Let me say right now there is no such thing as basic practice. I have been trying to get this point across to my class for the last several weeks. It is in the basic practice that one learns the secrets of the martial arts. This I mean to be the ultimate techniques. Yes I suppose I am saying there are such things, they entail such astronomically important things as timing and distance. Best of them all, the most secret, the highest, is to pay attention.

For this reason alone, it is best not to resist sensei too much when you think he is doing something stupid. Just keep quiet and do the exercise in the way that he means you to do it, as practice for watching closely. Perhaps it really is a stupid exercise, perhaps it does contradict something he said last week. That is no reason not to give it a try, as accurately as you can see. His idea may simply be to give you something that you can see. The practice thus becomes a practice in seeing rather than a practice in technique. Perhaps he has contradicted himself, is this something that you have never experienced? Perhaps he has done this to see if you are paying attention and to see what you will do. Try it or argue.

You know, I do say contradictory things. Students have pointed this out. In Canada you look left, right and left before crossing the street. In England you look right, left then right. A contradiction, a mystery.

Did I say above that there are ultimate techniques in the martial arts? Perhaps the one that I should mention is the one which is also practised in Zen Buddhism, and most of the older arts of Japan. This is of course meditation. Meditation is a technique to quiet the mind so that you can see more clearly. When you are doing basic practice in the martial arts, when you are performing partner practice or a solo practice which you have done many times before, exercises that you know very well how to do, you can repeat them just as you repeat your breathing in zazen, and just as you focus your mind to arrange flowers or to practice your calligraphy.

Too woo woo? OK let me just point out that no amount of technique, no matter how good, will win a fight if you're not paying attention. You can't accidentally learn how to pay attention by learning new stuff, or by doing solo exercise with your eyeballs focused inside your head. You have to turn your eyes outward and see what is really there.

Most beginners believe that the martial arts are about learning new techniques. This may be for some people, perhaps even for some dojo, but the problem with thinking this way is that learning new techniques is at best a distraction. It does not calm the mind, it simply gives you something to focus on, to worry about memorizing. When you want to calm your mind a distraction is not useful, it is more of the same. A distraction is really no better than staying at home and playing video games. Video games are a lot less effort than going to the dojo and if one wants exercise, one might even set up ones game controller on the bicycle so that one could get exercise while being distracted. Just like being in the dojo learning new techniques, or being at the gym with loud music and some instructor yelling at you.

When Sensei gives you a simple exercise, it would not hurt to watch carefully and do exactly what he says. Your learning phase will be over more quickly and you can get down to the meditative aspect of working on this new exercise, which may also be teaching you something that you don't really need to think about.

This is an important point. Your teacher may be giving you a chance to learn something new without distracting or disturbing your brain. Just do what he tells you to do. Even better, just do it as he shows you. If you don't understand what he wants, don't ask, give it a chance. You may understand within the first two or three repetitions. At a certain point in their career most of my students who have gone on to high rank, have doubted what I was telling them to do in class. They argued, or they worried that they don't understand what I'm saying. This is simply a distraction in their brain, I try not to indulge this too much, because it is a phase to get over. While your brain is distracted while you are thinking about whether sensei is correct or not, you are really not working on the art.

Some of my students can become quite upset if I don't explain or allow them to work on something which they have been distracted by. This is a phase that they must overcome, move past, or they will be slowed down. The sooner they can simply do as they are asked without question, the sooner they can move on. The simple fact of the matter is that there are some things that I cannot explain, some things that I must show, and there are some things that the student

must work out for themselves. Anything I say will distract them from getting to the correct conclusion.

If you do not trust sensei you really should not be in class. Learning in the martial arts does indeed require a certain amount of trust. At the very minimum, trust that sensei is not going to hurt you. If on the other hand things like pride show up in your head and you demand to know ahead of time what sensei is demonstrating with you, so that the rest of the class will not laugh at you for looking like a fool, you will not learn. I cannot count the number of times one of my sensei has made me look stupid, not because they want me to look stupid, far from it, but I look stupid because the lesson they were teaching is necessary. If you do not look stupid in class, sensei is not doing his job. If you do not feel stupid in class, sensei is not doing his job. Your desire should be to look and feel foolish, if this is not happening in class, and you are paying for class, sensei is wasting your money.

I say this about myself, but I have never worried about looking foolish or stupid in front of anyone. It has never been a problem for me. I do understand that some others have a problem with this. I try to to make allowance, but I actually have little patience for people who cannot look at themselves and the art dispassionately. When we realize that it is not important to look good in the eyes of our fellow students, we let go of a lot of baggage. But then again there are those who seem to take pride in being slow learners, who somehow enjoy letting everyone know that they cannot get this stuff. This too is a distraction.

Once again I am in the sauna on a Saturday afternoon listening to the Opera and sweating. It has now become difficult for me to see what is here, so it's time to close this essay.

Mar 31, 2019

Music and budo.

My daughter Lauren came home the other day to make sure that her dad and his broken neck were okay. We had a pretty good talk, and as a matter of fact we talked a lot about music. We got onto the topic of composers and their notation to musicians, Baroque music, modern music and period music which has happened for in the last few decades. I love chatting with my daughter because what she is thinking about is generally what I'm thinking about, except that she's thinking in music and I'm thinking in budo.

For instance with period music, the kind with older instruments and gut strings, there is some controversy over whether it is being played exactly the way it was being played as the music was written. In the same way, people can wonder whether or not the music of Mozart is being played the way Mozart intended it to be played. The problem is, you have written music but no actual experience of how the man who wrote it, wanted it played. I find this quite similar to the arguments that are given toward budo, in other words is a kata being performed exactly the way that it was intended to be performed by the originator of that kata, or even more, is the reconstructed art of the West, for instance the German longsword, is it what was actually being done during the time it was created.

There is no way that we can know, we don't have video from that time. We don't have the audio from that video, we have nothing except written records and written records are only as good as the man who wrote them.

These arguments are the same for music and for budo almost word-for-word. In budo, in the martial arts world, we have the argument that Japanese martial arts or Chinese martial arts, have a continuous practice. This would be the same as the continuous practice of Mozart's work by musicians over the years. You can see the argument, do we know that Mozart is being played exactly as Mozart intended or as it was played in his time, or has it drifted and have the instruments changed. For iaido we now use very light swords of aluminum alloy. This changes the way in which they can be used.

In the western reconstructed sword, this type of continuous practice is not present. Does this make a difference? To some absolutely, to others perhaps not. My daughter pointed out that in music, when dealing with contemporary composers, she was most surprised with the composer's willingness to cut out phrases or even whole passages should the musicians playing the music complain about it. In other words they were quite happy to modify their work on the spot, to meet the needs or desires of those who would be performing it. Do we dare to think that those who created the classical kata are somehow above this sort of willingness to change? I would suggest not. Age brings preciousness or perhaps fossilization. Things made by a man even if a long time ago, kata or music, may be less important, no, less fixed, less inflexible in the eyes of the author, than we think they are.

The idea here is that we really should beware of music notation or of the performance of a kata even if we are convinced that the little notes in the margins or the verbal instructions of our sensei are precise, or are as they were intended by the authors. Notations on scores and half remembered verbal instructions from three generations back, even if accurate in and of themselves, may not be what was meant 300 years ago. Incidentally I tried to pin my music educated daughter down to an exact date when modern or current classical music started. She refused to pin it to anything specific, like I would refuse to pin down the exact date that the modern sword schools began. Having said that, we agreed that the classical music that Lauren plays is roughly as old as the old sword schools that I practice. Neither of us are convinced that we know what was intended by those who created the Arts that we practice from 400 years ago.

Something that surprised me was what Lauren said when comparing her time at Laurier in Waterloo with that at the Glenn Gould School in Toronto. She mentioned that the repertoire in Waterloo was, oh not so much wider, but more eclectic than that at the Glenn Gould. What she tried to express was that at the Glenn Gould the repertoire was more standard, not quite that, more homogeneous and the reason was that the expectation of performance was much higher. From this we went on to discuss the difference between the ideals of today and those of even one or two generations back. Lauren mentioned that many of the instructors that come to speak at Glenn Gould, lament that the ideals of today are accuracy, perfection, precision, and technical brilliance.

What are we saying? We are saying that the older generation of speakers may perhaps remember a time when there was more emotion and passion in the performance, not quite that, when there was an expectation of emotion and passion, when that was the ideal, rather than technical accuracy. Now perhaps these days it is easier to ask for technical brilliance and precision and accuracy because students start their schooling in music so much earlier and there are so many more of them, all being given a technical education. The other factor that we discussed was quite simply, the recording of these music arts. Today we can hear performances from thousands and thousands of Symphonies and individuals who are playing music. This is not something that a musician in the 17th century would have a chance to review. As a result it may be easier to go for accuracy today, then to go for emotion. It is certainly easier to teach accuracy than to teach emotion. One has a metronome one has an electronic tuner and one can test whether a note is exactly on pitch or not. Of course, Lauren pointed out, that A note may not be the same frequency for two people, two pieces, or two times in history, let alone two places.

Does anyone think that this is something that I am going to agree with when talking about budo? Of course it is. I have nothing against technical accuracy in a kata, a martial arts performance, but it damn well better not be boring. The best that one can say about the highest technical / proficiency in a martial arts performance is that it's robotic. I said that to Lauren and she laughed, she had heard that same term applied to music.

So let's get right down to it. My thoughts while we were talking were of iaido and were of the comparison between old schools, the koryu, and of the more modern seitei gata. The old schools are eclectic and contain a lot of somewhat unexpected twists and turns for a student. The seitei gata are few in number, which means they are familiar and they are somewhat consistent. If you know how to do one, you tend to know how to do another. I know, I know, I have stated that the seitei iai techniques are not particularly consistent but since there are only 12 of them, they are certainly familiar and expected. As a result one can easily get caught up for 20 or 30 years trying to quote perfect unquote them. This to the cost of interest and emotion to those who are watching.

Today we don't know if we are performing the way the authors of 400 years ago intended us to perform. If we work to perfect accuracy how do we know we are accurate to what the original author intended. The admission that we don't know what the authors wanted, would seem to make searching for accuracy to their intent rather a hopeless effort. Perhaps we should be looking to communicate from ourselves, through our performances, to those who are watching or listening.

I don't know about you but I don't get as excited over a perfectly played violin note as I do over a violin piece that is played with love, affection and gusto. I feel the same way over the performance of an iaido kata.

Mar 17, 2019

Details and the big picture

It's been quite some time since I wrote an essay. I've been under the weather you might say. Turns out I have stage 4 prostate cancer and part of what I have been dealing with is a crippled left arm which is the result of a pinched nerve up in my neck, the cancer is in my bones. Fortunately in the last week or so I have been medicated to the point where I can function somewhat normally. As I said the arm is crippled so what I'm doing now is typing by voice.

I have been seen by four doctors and I am now scheduled for radiation treatment on the spine hopefully the arm will recover after that, if not I will deal with it. One thing I can say with no doubt whatsoever is that I am quite pleased to live in Canada with the health system that we have.

As for today's topic, details and the big picture, we had a jodo class on Friday which I was able to supervise if not participate in very fully. During the class the subject of details came up as it always does in a class when one of the students asked for specifics. For some reason, at that moment I was trying to think of the big picture rather than the small detail. This is a thing that happens quite a bit to me when I'm teaching a class. A balance has to be kept in mind for both the instructor and for the student when talking about Kata. Kata are full of detail and they are to teach specific things perhaps a waza, perhaps a principal, but they are to teach, they're not really there to show you what happens in a real life situation.

In fact, this class had exactly two Kata in it for the evening, for the two hours that we practised. We started with number 10 of touchy-touchy No Cry (you know I'm going to leave that the way it is, Tachi Uchi no Kurai). The class started quite regularly, normally I would say, with one way to do the Kata, the thing is, I explained its meaning about four different ways in other words. What I said was that many different interpretations could be given as to the riai of this technique, from a simple demonstration of distance and timing, to a way to prove that students had learned something from the rest of the Kata from number 1 to 9, as they have been done before.

When we got to kata number 9, otherwise known as Shin myo ken, we practised two or three different versions. Okay we practised version 1, called it with its subsets ai, aii, aiii, bi, bii, and c, so what does that make, six different versions. Now you can see why we could spend 2 hours on two kata quite easily.

What were these six different versions of one Kata, were they six different things? Absolutely not, they were 6 ways of doing ukenagashi. Now if you're not in my dojo you probably are frowning right now, but look at the shape, look at the way the sword moves in your version of this technique. Does this not look like ukenagashi? No, well perhaps not. Regardless the point I am trying to make is that these six versions of the technique, which look quite different externally, are the same. They look like three different Kata but are in fact the same thing. So how much value is there in worrying about an angle or the timing of a movement within one of these Kata as compared to the underlying principal which it is trying to teach.

When you are learning the dance steps at the beginning of a practice, yes, The Details Matter, but if you are working on this kata 10 minutes after being taught it, 10 minutes after you have learned the dance steps, then asking further questions is a bit off the point. Remember we're talking about koryu here, so details aren't really the point. What you really should be looking for is how it works, what the lesson is, and how it works best for you. Yet it is so much easier to simply ask for another detail.

This is budo after all, so we should be looking for a balance. Your balance as both instructor and as student should be an attempt to weigh the details against the big picture. Now, I'm writing this in the sauna with my tablet connected to the hotspot on my phone, which is a little strange to begin with, and I am starting to sweat, so I think this is going to be the extent of this essay. I hope people did not worry too much at my absence from posting and I hope I can get used to doing this on a little more regular basis. Now that it has come out of the Deep Freeze in Southern Ontario I think maybe the sauna will be hot enough to justify trying to walk out in the slippery snow.

For those boys out there who are approaching 50, get your PSA test done, at least one for a Baseline.

Trust unka Kim on this.

Mar 10, 2019

Nothing special

Class last evening was nothing special, which was pretty special for me. I got changed, I picked up a jo, I think I taught the class as well as I have for the past couple of years. Demonstrated quite a bit, enough that my shoulders were a bit sore. If my arm would stop tingling and going numb I could believe things were back to normal. I am beginning to think it's a problem with leaning back on chairs. That it's in my shoulder and not all in my neck.

I had a little bit of self-pressure to pass things along "before it's too late" but I've been in that mode for about five years now, so nothing special. I'm certain I'm not psychic, that I didn't know mystically that I had cancer, but I can count. The years have been upon me for a while.

Hmm, the Johnny Cash channel at the cafe. Nice. "Johnny is dead". I've found myself saying that sort of thing quite a bit, naming the club members I guess, and sometimes adding "and I'm not".

Class was the first three kihon and then the ikkyu test kata (1, 2, 4) for the mkyu in the class. At the end the seniors did 8 to 11 with the mkyu following the jo side.

I think that is useful practice, to try and copy a kata you don't know and haven't seen while watching a senior do it at speed. No time to try and memorize it, your only chance, the meaning of the exercise, is to let the connection of the eyes to the muscles happen without the brain getting in the way. You don't bother trying to "learn" it, remember it, or understand it, just do what you can catch. The kihon show up to help, and eventually, without you knowing it, the kata seeps into your body. If you do it often enough you find the kata feel familiar when you are eventually "taught" them.

It's also a way to let the seniors have a bit of a go after a couple hours of helping their juniors. We have always had mixed classes, I'm not a fan of beginner classes taught mechanically by someone who has become robotic from the chore. Here's the class notes, make sure your students know them for the exam. Yeah I slept through enough of those classes in my academic career. I liked the classes I was hanging on by my fingernails, taught by profs who didn't care what you thought about them, who enjoyed their subject. Mind you that was before the students and their parents got to dictate the curriculum and the climate. These days I advise my professorial type students to entertain their students, to get those nice end of year assessments. The purpose of budo gradings is to pass gradings and the purpose of tournaments is to win tournaments. The purpose of student assessments is to get good student assessments. When you have tenure and are two years from retirement and are chair of the department, then consider turning out great students (and just turning out the idiots).

Class notes:

Tips and hips. That's an old one, applicable to last evening. We tried to clean up our cuts from *hasso*, working on understanding the movement of the sword tip, of the hips moving under the sword. The sword in *Jodo* is influenced by the *jo*. The right hand isn't a disinterested passenger in the strikes with the *jo*, and the same goes for the sword. Ask about this at the seminar this weekend if I don't remember to show it. Oh, and the cut from *hasso* in our *koryu* is not some "little men" or "little *kote*" done by beginners. Not our *koryu*, not if you don't want to lose an eye.

The thrust to *suigetsu* in kata number 4 (*shamen*) is the same feeling as the thrust in number 2 (*suigetsu*). Go out to meet your partner, don't be passive, and welcome him kindly.

Don't think about how to move your stick, think about the target and the strike to that target. The entire point of repeating kata forever is to train your body to move the stick into position to strike the target. Don't step on your own stick (*st=d*), don't get in your own way, don't let your brain start its jabbering. Just hit the target, if you do something "else" and hit the target well, but break the kata, I'll still pat you on the head and say "again". When I see you thinking (yes I can, from across the dojo), I'm likely to yell at you.

If I can do stuff (maybe a different style of *hiki otoshi uchi*, as last evening) and you're a senior, don't assume you can do it. I'm sure you can, with enough time and repetition, but why should you spend as much time as I did working it out? I'm right here, say "Show me how to do that" and I probably will. Why not? I have no interest in stories being told 30 years from now of how I could do things that you can't. All dead men, all dead ages, are better than today, by the way our memories work, we smooth out the rough edges, we don't remember like video, we tell ourselves stories, and they get better each time we repeat them. Why would I want to encourage that sort of thing? There's a good epitaph, "not as good as you think he was".

Never forget that both sides of *kihon* are working on things. *Jo* on getting there efficiently, sword on tickling around the edges of the timing and the distances. Do you need to think about this? No, each side needs to concentrate on the target at hand, and the next one. Let the body take care of the distances and timings, stop adding to the technique, stop fidgeting.

If you can't fix a problem by adjusting your arm and hand, look somewhere else, look at your legs. If you have a wind-up, forcing your hand to stay in one place might not help if you have locked your legs. The wind-up twitch may be coming from unlocking your knees and loading your weight onto the leg you're going to use to push off. The beauty of a kata, of *kihon*, is that you know what you're going to do, so cheat, do the wind-up before the sword begins to swing toward your head.

Hiki Otoshi Uchi. To get the feeling of sliding the stick down the sword, hold your jo with both hands at the end and strike down the sword with just your wrists. This lets you know it's the angle and not the strength (both hands at the end and hitting with your wrists is strengthless). One thing I'm learning with a mostly dead left hand is that there is still a lot of power in gravity. Relax and let the arms drop, now let the hips drop too. Again, like I tried to show a few classes ago, think about the angle and visualize the contact between the stick and the sword. Let your body do that without worrying about all the awkward-looking contortions before that contact.

In other words, don't do anything special, don't get distracted by doing anything special, just hit the target without being hit.

Nothing special.

Apr 3, 2019

Minimalism

We had pretty good aikido and jodo classes last evening, there must be something in there that I can write on, but there's been snow on the ground for two days. Ugh. Went home cold last evening and didn't even have the ambition to hit the sauna. I'm just hoping that when we hit the cottage next weekend I don't find broken water pipes all over the place. Apparently there's been a lot of snow up that way. Also apparently I was thinking we could get through winter without some freezing weather.

We had seven of us at each class, midterms must be winding down. Everyone is working on their grading techniques so I have been rather quiet. Let them get on with it.

One thing we did in Aikido was "walk like a samurai". We warmed up and then I showed them the Ogasawara Ryu knee walking. Rather elegant but also rather difficult to do in wrestling mats, they're too sticky. I had no particular reason to show them, except to provide an example of how we don't do it in Aikido. Those examples are often quite useful as a lot of "mistakes" in doing something are simply drifting toward some other way of doing it. Showing two separate techniques can separate both from the muddy middle.

At that point one of the girls showed me a third way of moving around on the knees. Her feet went out in circles sort of like a reptile shuffle and I just about jumped out of my skin. The inside of her knees were taking tremendous strain. Oh to be as young as these guys again, if I'd tried that I'd be in hospital right now.

Which brought us to the samurai walking where we kept the same hand and foot moving forward, "to keep your hands close to the hilt of your sword" I said. We tried it a bit, we walked like penguins a bit (rock back and forth and then turn the hips to move on your stubby little legs made stubby by locking your knees) and then I asked where the hands were. "In front all the time they said". So we worked on unifying the footwork, hips, shoulders and hands during our 5 and 4 kyu techniques.

The discussion, and corrections when arms got left behind and "it isn't working" "because you're pulling instead of pushing" got me thinking about how I have managed to continue doing this stuff as long as I have. It's technique, its posture, it's moving the joints so that any force that comes through them is within the correct range of movement. I get into trouble every time I try to demonstrate how to "do it wrong".

It used to be that I was proud of being able to figure out "wrong" by analyzing vectors and joint movements. Now all I have to do is move into the pain. It's wrong because it hurts like hell.

Maybe this is the benefit of old men who teach budo, they are really sensitive to the most efficient way to move. Sort of like Cohen the Barbarian and the Silver Horde, they don't jump around a lot, they're just not there when the sword cut comes. (Terry Pratchett, Interesting Times).

Minimalism, cut out the extra stuff, the back flips, the flourishes, just use the body as little as you can to get as much done as you can. Wait a minute, didn't Jigoro Kano sensei say something like that?

Take it into your lifestyle, make only as much money as you need, eat only as much as it takes to stop the grumbling in your stomach, have only as many clothes as you need to get to the next laundry day, only as many dishes as will fit in your sink. Use only as much fossil fuel as gets you from point A to B.

Write only as much as it takes to get the point across.

Nov 14, 2018

The problem of iaido

This is something that has come up fairly often over my career in iaido. That's over 35 years now, long enough that you would have thought I'd solved it. Well, in fact I have, for myself, but it keeps coming up.

The problem of iaido is feedback. There is none. On its most basic level, the problem comes down to an invisible opponent. "As I was going down the stair, I met a man who wasn't there". No wonder we have to swing at him three or four times during Sodome.

The problem may seem obvious to you, but it didn't occur to me, because I was coming from partner practices, from Aikido and Tae Kwon Do. From boxing and Kung Fu and team sports and individual sports. Feedback was plentiful and immediate, you won or lost, you beat the clock or not, you got hit or thrown or you hit or threw. Feedback in iaido wasn't something I thought about.

Not at first, not for years. Not until I started to meet people whose entire martial arts career was iaido.

My reason for practising iaido was to get away from that physical feedback, to do a solo practice that had no competitive or cooperative aspects at all. I wanted a place to work on my posture, to work on all the internal linkages and movements that I needed for my other martial arts. Iaido was and remains perfect for that. In other words, the problem is the virtue. It is a place where I can work out the other questions of budo. All, except the problem of iaido of course.

What about others? What about students who do only iaido, what do they want? What do they get from it?

Unfortunately, all too often they get a place where they can pet their own ego, stroke their own delusions, and reinforce their own demons. They get an absence of real-world feedback. Now of course I'm not talking to any of you who are reading this, but surely you know fellow students who are convinced they are the greatest swordsman in the world. Do they listen when you tell them they are not?

Want to ruin any chance for an iaido-only student to improve as a human being? So simple. Tell them they are good at iaido. Tell them they've "got it". You will have removed their last chance for feedback, the only real feedback there is in iaido, the belief in their sensei. Remove their trust in the one who tells them they "aren't getting it", pat their head and tell them they are wonderful, and they will go deaf.

The only thing to be done at that point is to ignore them. They can't be taught, they can't be guided, they can only teach from then on. That special, stunted sort of teaching that consists of "polishing a brick".

Once a student is convinced he knows more than his sensei he becomes the teacher. Those of you in aikido, karate, judo, kendo, will be frowning, that sort of thing doesn't happen does it? Sensei takes you out behind the woodpile and beats the hell out of you when you get feeling a bit full of yourself. Those in competitive sports (the objective ones, the ones with clocks) never really get to that point. There's always someone out there that will beat you. But iaido? What can your sensei do to knock the pride out of you? To kill your ego?

Tell you that you're crap?

In Jodo the "spare the rod and spoil the child" rule can apply but can you skewer your students in iaido? No you can't. The problem of iaido is that the student must trust his sensei and that means the student must have his ego under control before he moves into the dojo. He must submit to the authority of his teacher. He must submit to the judgment of those who are above him in the "pecking order" during gradings.

With no way to check the reality, the iaido student must never allow himself to believe he knows as much or more than his seniors. This is a real problem.

It is a problem because a student will confuse technical precision for budo. The very thing that I started and continue to use iaido for is the trap. To work on posture, on the internal precision of applying force from the floor to the tip of the sword, is to step into the trap of the solo kata. I can do it faster, sharper, and stronger than sensei so I must be better.

How do you confirm that? How do you check? Get a couple of shinai out and have sensei crack you on the ear a few times? If you're faster maybe you don't get hit, maybe you hit sensei instead? Now you're really and truly done... well, you were done the moment you actually sat down in front of sensei to try this. You have questioned sensei's authority, you have rejected his instruction already.

Time to go start your own dojo.

Are there other ways to get feedback? What about videotaping yourself and looking? If you are brutally honest, this can be a shock, it can work. On the other hand, if you hear yourself say "oh I slipped there, oh I got distracted there by someone opening the door", you are done. Oh I slipped in the mud on the battlefield, can I get a do-over please.

Musashi wrote that when he was 30 or so, after 60 duels won, he realized that he was lucky or the other guys were crap. Think carefully about that for a moment. Think about the mind-set required to write that.

How about tournaments? Can we not test our iaido there? What did Musashi just say? A tournament win means you are better than the guy beside you, and that's if the judging is fair and honest. Is Olympic skating or gymnastics fair and honest? They try, they really do, but it's side by side, subjective comparisons. How about kendo? That ought to be clear yes? You beat the guy

or you don't. Yes? Olympic fencing went to electric scoring to avoid the sort of subjectivity that comes with a "proper hit".

Tournaments tell you if you beat the guy beside you on that day, not much else. You lose, not much happens. Musashi fought 60 times with "consequences", sometimes death, always and the risk of it. He never lost but came up with the conclusion that at best, he was best on the day.

Gradings? Surely gradings are an accurate measure of your skill level? How did we get to "skill level", we have slipped into the trap of technique, the trap of kata haven't we? We were talking about feedback for budo, not feedback for skill. Yes there is a difference. Do gradings give us feedback on how we're doing in our quest to become better people (as per budo) or as technicians and fighters and tough guys?

Gradings at the lower levels are about technique, this is stated quite clearly. At the higher levels they are about that plus other things. What other things? We hope good things. Someone asked about my reference to "gaming the system" the other day. Yes you can game the system when grading. In the kendo federation you can go anywhere in the world to grade, you can pick and choose your panel. If the panels are not looking for the same thing everywhere, you can find one for you. If they are looking for the same thing everywhere, what are they looking for? It has to be technique doesn't it? Nothing wrong with technique, but I have already stated that technique is a trap if you're looking for things other than that.

Can a panel tell what sort of person you are if they are looking at a stranger, someone who has just popped up in front of them? This is how it's supposed to be, this is why the judges only see numbers and not a list of names, dojo and sensei. The instant you get into "whose student is this" you are into something else, you are into "gaming the system". You are into "oh it's Joe Blow, he'll win this match". Surprise! He did.

Do you change sensei so that "he can get you through your next grading"? You're gaming the system and why not? If that's honestly how you see it, a game.

Again, I come back to the iaido problem and the only solution I can think of. You must forget "objective measures" completely. You must forget technique, you must forget and submit.

Submit to your sensei (be DAMNED careful who you pick for a sensei) and submit to your local panel if you're in an organization that has such things. If you have no local panel and you must go elsewhere to obtain a rank, be clear in your own mind what it is you are getting. And why.

Like all budo, you get out of iaido what you take into it. Are you there to become a better person? Are you there to look flash in your fancy new duds and your shiny sword? Are you there to become a big sensei without the broken noses and bruised ribs most sensei collect over the years? These are different goals and different paths.

If you claim one and pursue another you will be a liar to yourself. You will be defeated from the beginning, regardless of the paper on your wall or the trophies on your shelf.

The problem of iaido is the same as for all budo.

Why do you practice?

Dec 6, 2018

Losing interest

Motivation, zest for life, whatever. Have been in constant, sleep-disturbing pain since before last May. Can't seem to get my blood sugar down to normal levels, despite losing a pound a day on a radically changed diet.

It's not so much the back and arm as the damned neck. I really, really hate having a sore neck. So yesterday I bit the bullet and said "go to get an x-ray to start the medical process of looking at your back".

Sure. Walked down to a clinic, got some bloodwork done and discovered that the imaging place had moved to the outskirts of town without changing their website. No sweat, another place a bit further downtown so I walked over there, walking is good to burn off glucose right?

Get there, sign on the door says "we've moved to such and such" this was scratched out and another address I think (no glasses so I couldn't read it) with a number saying "call first". Supposed to be two of the places in the mall so I dropped into a doctor's office to ask the girls. Totally, completely, ignored. Thanks for reinforcing the stereotype ladies. Just walked home and took yet another Tylenol so I could be in moderate pain without punching walls in fury at being in acute pain.

At least I was at 8.0 blood sugar yesterday, at least it is dropping a bit.

This morning I needed three attempts to get enough blood out of my finger to measure and my blood sugar was up to 9.4. No extra food yesterday, no beer, a big walk and it's bloody going the wrong way.

I can't tell, without the monitor, what my blood sugar is. I can make guesses by how much my toes go dead or how much my fingers tingle but that's just guessing and I'm sure the fingers aren't diabetic, I'm sure they're tingling from the back. So does a monitor help? Does access to numbers help?

We all assume that numbers are good, measurements are good, and mileposts so that we know we are progressing are to be embraced. I'm talking about gradings in budo of course. You must do gradings to know where you are. You must do tournaments to know how good you are.

Must you? After 40 years of numbers, of doing gradings and competing in sports I have learned that I'm worse than I used to be. I feel worse, my skills are worse, my ability to improve is worse. I know that because I watch people who are better than I was fail their gradings. I know it because my blood sugar numbers aren't improving, despite a diet that makes me feel sick all the time.

What keeps me going? Sheer bloody-mindedness that's what. Grit the teeth and move through the pain. Drive the body out the door to do something. This is what kept me in the budo for 40 years, not the fun, not the gradings, not the fantasy but the sheer bloody-minded impulse that drove me to the class for no other reason than to go to the class. It would have been so easy to stop when it wasn't fun anymore, when I started to slide backward, but that's not what I was taught in the budo or as a kid by a bunch of folks who went through poverty and war.

But I bitch all the time. Yep, I do, I'm doing it now, it helps. I certainly don't do it because "sharing my experience" may help someone else. The hell with that, my example is "put up with it" which is not the current fashion. Nor is "drive it until it gets better or it breaks". I would recommend the current fashion, recommend using the medical system we have here in Canada, it's pretty good. If I'd got a blood test four years ago I'd probably have a lot less trouble and pain than I do now.

At the moment I'm up and about because "I have to come write this essay every morning because it's the only advertising we do for the business". So I get up, take the pain killer, and walk gingerly out the door, hoping it kicks in before I need to snap my head around to catch some crappy driver doing something crappy.

Tonight we have our last class of the year. I'm not looking forward to no classes for a few weeks, even though you'd think the break would be "good for me". It isn't. I will get worse, I will become less motivated to return to class next year. I have long since repaid any instruction I received in the past, my balance is good, it's just momentum that keeps me going now.

Momentum, just get up and do it. Go to work, go to class, go to the gym, tie the running shoes on and get out the door. Does it hurt? Too bad, move.

Stop moving and you lose interest. Sit at home and wait for it to get better and you watch it get worse. It gets worse. Entropy is aging. Stuff gets worse, it needs constant energy to stay the same. The Red Queen had it right, you have to run to stay in the same place.

This applies to everything, I listen to people say "I don't like the way things are now but we'll wait to see what happens". What happens is that it gets worse. Worse becomes entrenched, it is the new normal and then it gets worse from there. At least our bodies will try to heal if we ignore them, but physical structures fall apart when left alone. Organizations become useless when left to drift. Whole countries can be infected by "what can you do", by ennui, by non-engagement.

Use it or lose it. Speak up, vote, whatever you need to do or you are part of the breakdown. If you don't fight the entropy you approve the entropy. You "enable" the entropy.

Grit your teeth, get up, drive through the pain and do something, anything. If there's nothing for you to do, find something.

Or kiss your rear end goodbye.

Dec 11, 2018

Leader and follower

Are you a sensei in a larger organization? Most of us are, unless we just invented a new martial art or a new organization and we stuck ourselves the top of the chain. If we are in an organization we were taught by someone and we teach. We are in the administrative structure so we are supervised by someone and supervise. That's the usual situation.

So there you are, Joe sensei, somewhere in the middle. What do you "do" in your day to day? What is your primary job? Is it to follow orders and pass those along to your underlings? Pass the techniques along as you were taught them, and as they are changed by those above you, to your students?

"Your students", what's that mean? Are they yours or do they belong to those above you?

Is it your job to perpetuate the organization and the powers of those who gave you your position, who taught you and gave you your rank, or do you look after the best interests of your students? What is the best interest of your students? Who decides that?

All this depends on where you are in the chain, in the hierarchy, doesn't it? The further up the chain the more invested you are in the top-down authority system. Makes sense, it works to your benefit. The lower you are, the more powerless, the less invested you are. This is the way of the world, this is how it works.

Is this budo? Is this the world of the ideal ruler? The benevolent prince, the Confucian leader who acts like the loving parent toward his subjects? No, it's the usual "dog eat dog" predictable, boring, selfish, ego-driven world of most of humanity. It's the world of those who say "I inherited a bag of money so God loves me and he doesn't love you because you're poor". I was elected (actually the other guys were booted out by those holding their noses and voting for you) and so I can do whatever I want because I have the "mandate of the people". Sure you do pal. I just read in the editorial letters, a fellow who said "I'm one of those who held my nose and voted for these clowns because the old guys had to be removed, but" and I love this "how did we get to this situation?" Seriously dude?

Time for a change? Maybe look to see what that change is going to be. Still want to change it? People don't change their tune when they get into power. Abusive boyfriends don't become loving husbands just because they got married.

Is there another way to be sensei? To be a boss? Is it all about taking it from above and dishing it out below? When do you turn around and say "no" to power? When do you protect your students or underlings from abuse? I would argue that you do it when you see it. Forget such fripperies as changing kata because the guys at the top want to exert their control by telling everyone to "do it their way", that stuff is trivial. I'm talking about orders that are bad for the organization, bad for everyone in the chain, bad for the survival of what you've built up during your career. What do you do then? Do you speak up?

I know what I do, I'm known as Mr. Troublemaker, but I speak up about my martial arts, which aren't part of the real world. I know others who are better men than I, who have spoken up and been fired from well-paying jobs for protecting their underlings. This without fanfare, without lawyers, without the press, simply because it was the right thing to do.

But what about the underlings, you ask? What happened to them? Did they get fired too, because they were associated with the trouble-makers? Quite likely. Quite likely they didn't thank the guy who stood up for them, after all most people will take an awful lot of abuse just to keep things the same. We don't want freedom, not really, we want stability. When, in the last 50 years, has it been better for a country to have a dictator thrown out of power? Sure those guys abuse the population, that's the definition of dictator, but "the trains ran on time".

So I ask again, what sort of sensei do you think you should be? The one who has, stands by, and teaches principles, or the one who keeps the status quo no matter what? The one who demands thought, or who demands obedience?

"Well we should do what's best for the students, obviously." Of course, so tell me what's best for them? What's best for the underlings who you "got fired" by standing up for them? To be fired or to be allowed to keep being abused? It's not as easy as we think.

Fortunately, in the budo we're never talking about families starving for lack of income, of kids being killed in the civil war that always follows the removal of a dictator without the addition of that country to an empire. Seriously, go in and destroy the governing system of a country and then leave, what do you think is going to happen? Oh democracy will happen, after an interim government of our pet leaders who have been in our country for the last 20 years. Yeah, in your dreams.

In the budo, to get back to it, what happens to our students if we object to abusive directions from above? What happens if we rebuff the power-play of the petty tyrant?

Nothing of consequence. I mean, what are we talking about here in the martial arts? What is good for the students? That we "leave things as they are" or that we object to the scoundrels, that we object to arbitrary orders that benefit only the ego of those giving them? I ask again, what are you teaching? You do know that we teach by example right?

And the consequences to our students? They don't pass their next grading? They aren't allowed to challenge their next grading? The gradings are removed "until everyone comes into line"? This is a problem for our students? Have we asked?

You get kicked out? I've seen that, and it has never, ever been much of a punishment. You can "declare hamon" but the decision only reflects the situation, at least to those who think. If a tyrant kicks you out, it proves he's a tyrant. If you're a bad person and were kicked out for being a bad person, good. Stripped rank is not stripped knowledge by the way, and John Q. Public doesn't care, should "disgraced guy" wish to keep teaching. Honestly, those above who figure being kicked out is a threat are revealing more about themselves and what they care about, than anything else.

Maybe the offended guys beat the hell out of our students in the next match? That is a real possibility and I've seen it happen. Make sure your students are prepared, even for the dirty stuff that happens inside the legitimate stuff, or warn them not to be there. (If it's assault, it's time for the police.) If it's you that the beating is aimed at, well, what do you expect for speaking up, step up and take your medicine. I've never backed down from a beating. Oh sure, big guy who can absorb a lot of punishment and who was trained as an Aikido rag-doll. Well yes, what can I say?

Drama much? Look, we're talking martial arts here, it's all metaphor, it's all drama, it's teaching life lessons by acting out stories, so yes, drama much.

I ask my students to decide what they want out of budo because what they bring in is what they get out. I'm asking those who teach to decide what it is they are teaching for the same reasons. You teach what you bring in. You teach what you figure is best for your students.

What's that?

Dec 16, 2018

No Praise

Frank Sinatra playing at the Cafe. So nice to have old blue eyes in my ear instead of the damned red nose.

I'm trying very hard to find neutral topics for the holiday season so that nobody gets an eyeful of blue, or even red. Looking through my notebook I find a reference to "no praise" so that's what we'll talk about today as I'm half way through a coffee.

The first half? I started a journal in the very lovely Italian hand-made leather bound notebook that Jim Wilson gave me at the last Koryu iai seminar. I write too slow, slower than I type so maybe it will become some place for some poetry rather than prose. That I'll type. Sketches too? I dunno, I'm feeling the need for yet another project?

No, back on track Eddie Shack. Why is it that sensei never praises you? Some kids "live" for praise, they absolutely crave it, complain if they don't get it. You know the type, the ones that repeat, endlessly, all the amazing things they are doing, and then look at you with big eyes. Puppies wanting praise for not peeing on the rug. Some will even create situations where they can earn/win praise, they need it so much. Look at this thing I made for you! Oh, isn't that, um, lovely and just what we need for the last two square inches of space on the fridge.

For those kids, maybe you give them the praise they crave. It won't do them any good, but it will make them happy and what's wrong with that? A bit of praise, a pat on the back that sort of steers them out of the way and we all get on with the business at hand, which is learning, changing, improving.

Notice I didn't say "achieving the goal". You see, that's the difference between those who want to win the trophy, collect the ribbon, be awarded the scroll, and those who just work at it.

There is no goal, there's only do, doodily do what we must muddily must until we bust, bodily bust as Vonnegut once said... was it him? Yep, praise the internet, who needs memory.

What do you get praise for? It's for achieving something. What happens when you achieve something? Nothing, you are there, you achieved it. You're done. This is the trap of "milestones", each is a place you could quit, and they are markers on the way to somewhere, which is another excuse you need/use to quit practising. I got my black belt, I'm done. I got my 5dan, I'm now a sensei, and I'm done. I got my hanshi, I'm the biggest shot there is, nothing to do now.

Praise is for achievement, achievements mean goals, and goals mean you're done. I've never had a goal in my life, I've just done that '60s thing and "gone with the flow". You go with the flow, you live in the moment, not the past (should-a, would-a, could-a), not the future (it will be so much better once I have a million dollars/ a black belt/ a shiny red car). What are you doing now?

Now you're swinging a stick, sensei says "nope, do it again" so you do. You do this for your entire life and it's not a waste of time. If sensei says "good, that's great" it can be a block, a big red sign that says "you're there, you can stop now". No, it says "you MUST stop now" because that's what stop signs mean, and that's what "getting there" means. Don't go further or you might mess something up, you might slip from praise to critique and you don't want that do you?

You do?

Dec 24, 2018

Too many cooks

There's a very good reason why we tell folks that they ought to have a single sensei, even for Seitei Gata, the standard set of the kendo federation, where we assume that anyone in the world can teach us, because it's "standard". Actually, an iaido hanshi mentioned, not too many years ago at the May seminar that up to about 3dan you could have several sensei, and you could pick and choose from amongst many teachers, which way you do your movement. Your noto from Fred and your kiri tsuke from George.

But after 3dan you need a teacher. Now, his reasoning was typically "iaido" in that you will have a single sensei so that you develop a recognizable style. That means that the panel knows who your teacher is, and is comfortable passing you because they "know your dad". This assumes that you are testing under a panel that knows your dad, of course, which does not seem to be the way things are going in the iaido world outside Japan these days. The ideal seems to be that you test in front of strangers who will often be seeing you for the very first time. In other words, your style is going to be unrecognizable since your teacher is unrecognizable.

Of course, if you are bringing in panellists from Japan and if you go to Japan, find those panellists, and practice with them, you become a known face. Still, the idea of studying with a single sensei is not applicable here, you must be a seminar student, visiting as many potential panellists as possible and becoming "their student of the moment". Or you should be picking one to copy as far as you can, presumably one who is powerful enough, recognizable enough, and of course, not currently out of favour, to push you through your grading back home, no matter who is on your panel.

I agree with the idea of a single sensei, but for a different reasoning. I'm assuming we are not playing the "great grading game", which is similar to the "great game" of trying to rule Afganistan, a game that brings momentary career advancement for some officers and bureaucrats, to the improvement of absolutely nobody in an ultimately futile war. I'm talking about becoming a better budoka, and for that you need, at a certain time of your career, a single voice, a single cook who will provide you with a consistent "style" of practice.

Not that "style" is important, it's not. But what is it that multiple helpful folks give you when they correct your technique? Mostly, almost always (past 3dan) it's about style. How, specifically, do you do this movement. I've watched 5dans flipflop back and forth between two ways of cutting, or two ways of flipping a jo over, depending on who they have talked to last. They spend all their time "fixing" and forget to actually perform. "Form without perform" if you will.

No, you don't need advice that flips you between cutting at 22.3 degrees or 22.7 degrees. You need a sensei who will say "you missed the damned target you idiot". Who will say "you can't cut at that angle because your shoulder is all ripped up, cut at an angle that you can cut?!"

In other words, the sensei you hope to find isn't one "with a style", but one who has gone past worrying about what style he has. This is why he doesn't look like everyone else, it's because he looks like himself. Someone like that can shape you to look like yourself. You won't have "his style" because you've copied it, but you will have "his style" because it was he who shaped you, into you.

Your "style" will be his understanding of how this stuff works, modified to your body and your experience. Not a clone, but a child.

There, that makes sense doesn't it? Children usually resemble their parents but are never identical to them. Experience (and injury) will eventually make it possible to tell identical twins apart, despite all the dressing them in the same clothes that tends to happen.

It's tempting to go for as much advice as you can get, especially if you consider yourself "outside the mainstream" but after a certain amount of learning which foot goes where, it might just be better to concentrate on a single voice and start thinking instead of "chasing several rabbits".

After all, "too many cooks spoil the broth".

Dec 27, 2018

Shake, hug, shake

Hah, Saturday morning, it's dark out (I wake up early these days) and I walked down to Balzacs for my coffee, may even slip across the street to the market just to get my dose of "I hate people" as I try to walk through the crowds.

I was tempted to post the "old post" that faceplant gives me most days, it was from 2015 and referred to some sort of "bonehead" (as I put it at the time) iaido initiative that I was convinced would never go anywhere. I said I'd be tempted to retire if that happened. Let's see... when did the section shut down the senior gradings? Honestly, I never fail to be surprised by what people will do and what others will follow. At any rate, I didn't retire, didn't have to, I was shunted sideways (to where I wanted to be, as it happens) because I couldn't agree with the decision. No senior gradings, no need for my rank, it's as simple as that. A couple years later and I'm doubly happy, I can barely sit through an hour in front of my computer without having to lie down and let my back stop screaming at me. (Apparently it's a bone thing, I'm rooting for arthritis). The last jodo gradings were tough, I can't imagine trying to satisfy all the etiquette for sitting a tournament.

I've mentioned this before, I have not quit iaido, despite what people are being told. Who is making this stuff up? We're having secret iaido gradings, I have quit doing iaido... honestly, if you hear any of these things just drop me an email and I'll tell you what's actually happening. No need to "find out through back channels and rumour", I've got no secrets. I've still got some use left in me, and as long as I'm of use, I'll be there when asked. Just don't ask me to do things that will damage the jodo section, like approve of "unwritten rules" which I have been recently assured are still in full effect. Despite me asking Japan for a list of them, and being told no such things exist. I also checked with several other countries and again, no such thing.

"I came up over de hill and dere dey were, gone!"

These unwritten rules and "Japan wants us to" stuff is all of a piece. In my notebook I have written down "In Chile they shake, hug and shake again". This is the greeting etiquette up there (famous map of South America with it at the top). This is how I greeted folks when I visited. As a student of etiquette, it was quite a lot of fun watching the various South American countries negotiating the shakes and hugs at the seminar. Which pattern do you use?

My assumption, always, is to use the etiquette the other guy is using, see if you can catch it on the fly, pay attention to him and to what he is doing. Do that. The whole point, especially if you are Mr. Sensei, flown in to be a big shot, is to let the other guy relax, to put him at his ease. From a budo point of view that's to your advantage (for those of you boy scouts who figure you shake left handed to keep your right hand near your knife). From a human point of view it's just obvious that etiquette is to ease the way, and the fastest way to do that is to adopt the etiquette of the folks you're visiting.

Simple yes?

Yet what does the "ugly foreigner" end up doing? Making everyone uncomfortable by insisting on his etiquette and implying that the locals are "doing it wrong". When the foreigner is visiting as a big cheeze this effect can be multiplied, as the locals are made to feel they are somehow inferior for not knowing "how to do it".

I love this stuff in the budo world, you won't get far on the net without reading some "old Japan hand" telling you about how it is done in Japan, how gifts are handed over, how you respond to a question and how to pronounce that response. All great stuff if you're in Japan, or in the dojo in Canada but otherwise?

You see the other way etiquette goes is when you are receiving visitors. In that case, especially if you are higher social status than the visitors, if you are the big sensei who is greeting the visiting students, you do exactly what I've been saying. You do the etiquette that the students seem to want to do, they don't know yours, so you do theirs. Why? I mean you're the big cheeze in your own country, why not teach them the correct way? Because you are the big cheeze, because your job is exactly that, to teach, and you can't teach anyone who is not open and accepting, who is not at ease. Put them on their back foot from the start and they may never recover their balance, they may spend their entire visit worrying about doing something else wrong.

How about using a "third party etiquette"? How about a Canadian going to Chile and using Japanese etiquette to greet people? Umm seems a bit silly outside the dojo doesn't it? And what is Japanese etiquette? My visit to Japan resulted in a lot of western etiquette being exchanged with the sensei there so I don't know how Mr. Manonthestreet is supposed to greet someone.

In the dojo? Oh yes, there's an etiquette there for sure. Bowing, here and there, sword held at a certain angle, how to walk, drilling down into how to bow for goodness sake, which hand goes down first, how deep. Oh yes and I can explain it all to you because it all means something. There is no sense of doing it this or that way because it's the latest fashion and if you don't do it right you're a gaijin. That's how Japanese kids make kids who have been overseas for a while feel like they don't belong any more. It's anti-etiquette. And the ones who say "you have to do it this way now"? That's etiquette as a weapon, as one-upmanship. I know something you don't, so I have power. (I know the unwritten rules and you don't and I'm not going to tell you what they are so you have to listen to me or else.) This is not true etiquette.

Etiquette is like the approach and separation of a kata, to allow the kata to happen, to keep the attention on each other as you begin and end so that nobody gets a wrong signal and nobody gets hit on the head with a stick. It's not silly in the dojo, but it's also not arbitrary, it has to make sense.

Shake, hug and shake again, let's face it, that's somewhat arbitrary and I don't even know if that's universal in Chile, it might just be the crowd I was visiting. Those guys don't use it when they visit Canada, or at least I don't remember using it, just the good old Canadian "make a fake at a handshake and hug like a bear instead" I think. I don't remember, my mind is going.

No such confusion in the dojo.

Now someone is going to mention the several-years-long discussions about the tape during iaido gradings right?

Shake, hug, shake again.

Dec 29, 2018

One size fits all

I'm 62 and diabetic so my doctor put me on all the usual medications because I've also got atrial fibrillation, high blood pressure and my cholesterol is too high for a diabetic.

I felt fine, except for a back that has hurt for half a year.

One of the many consequences of being on those meds is that, because of the "grownup blood thinner" I can't take anti-inflammatory, NSAIDS. Umm, now I feel absolutely hellish, the back freezes up, the muscles splint. I spend as much time on the couch as I do up and about.

It's the holiday season, I'm waiting for the medical profession to get back to work in the next few days to find out just how broken I can be for feeling just fine. Except for the back.

The thing is, all the meds are exactly right for a guy of my age and condition, but they are, as far as I'm concerned, as far as my state of mind, my difficulties, not quite right. I'm not a statistic, I'm getting the best care science can come up with and I'm depressed, angry, suicidal and hopeful, in direct proportion to the amount of pain I am in. I'd pay a lot for a day pain-free, a full night's sleep.

Where am I going with this, besides just bitching about my health? It's the idea that exercise is medicine, that budo techniques are a set of pills that are applied to achieve stated outcomes. If you practice these techniques you will be safe on the back streets from the bullies. If you practice these techniques you will win the next local MMA tournament. If you do iaido as in the book you will pass your next grading. But you have to do all that as prescribed, you can't change things or the outcome won't be as expected.

It's a formula, it's medicine by statistics. From my doctor, who really is a caring guy but doesn't see me all that much, I can understand a certain amount of "ok this is the situation, here's what current practice calls for, shall we do that?" I say yes of course, he's the expert, I trust him to know this stuff so that I don't have to know it. Like my car mechanic, my plumber, my electrician. I go to them so I don't have to know everything, because it's too difficult to be an expert in everything. Not a real expert, I'm not talking about the faceplant expert of course, the one whose buddy told him that...

But there's the electrician who reads the code and wires your place accordingly. Plug every 10 feet, one in each wall, that sort of thing. Works a treat for new houses. Retro-fitting, upgrading? Well you could just go with the book, or you could talk with the house owners and find out what they want. Then adjust what they want with what you need to pass an inspection. It's a bit beyond the formula, it's a bit more work, but why would you not do that? Unless you're new to wiring and only know how to wire to the code.

Same as a teacher of budo. You're the expert, your students rely on you to do what's best for them. You are supposed to know what they want to achieve, what they need, and how to adjust the "standard treatments" to give them that result.

That's not always what happens. I see a lot of instructors, admittedly it's usually the younger ones, the inexperienced ones, who simply teach "from the book". They are young, healthy, and have a certain goal. Everyone else should be young, healthy and have that same goal yes? Obviously. It's easy, it's "how it's supposed to be" and it's damned lazy, especially in a budo teacher who sees his patients, er students regularly. This sort of lazy teaching leads to telling people that they can't do iaido if they can't sit seiza. That those in wheelchairs can't do karate, that the blind can't do kyudo.

What do you think your martial art is? Look, the legless can't run, that's obvious and non-negotiable, but does that mean they can't speed along the road under their own power? Can we adjust, can we make accommodation for that? Of course we can, and we do, and we're talking about sport here. Sports can accommodate to the individual. Olympic sports? Elite sports? Perhaps not, they must be full of rules to make sure the competition is only between those who are equal except in the ability we are distinguishing upon. If it's a sport you exclude those who take performance enhancing drugs, unless you don't. Bodybuilding comes to mind, competitions for those who take drugs and those who don't.

Do you consider your budo a sport? If you figure iaido is something you do to win tournaments then you will need everyone to sit seiza, competing against someone who is not coming out of seiza will be unfair. Are you an MMA guy? You're going to be training to the rules, up to and as close to breaking them as you can get away with. That's how to win. But not beyond the rules, because that's how you lose.

If your budo is not a sport you can forget about those sports rules, you can work toward other goals than beating someone who is artificially slotted into a category with you. Age, rank, weight classes. If you're working in a non-sport environment, you can throw away the book and concentrate on the student in front of you, on making that student as good as they can be.

You can maybe not take the nsaid's away from the poor bastard whose biggest problem is a bad back just because his risk of stroke went up as he passed an age class and you put him on big boy blood thinners.

But what about gradings you say? What happens when we throw away the book and make accommodations? Can you still pass gradings?

OK what are gradings? Are they minimum technical standards? Are they competitions? Or are they something else, something beyond that? In the kata-dominated world of iaido and jodo most people will say they are all about meeting minimum technical standards. Those "most people" are at lower ranks and lower experience levels. Kids figure life should be fair, we just came through a Christmas season, and we saw this as the kids counted their presents to make sure everyone got the same number.

In a situation where judges are being given certain pass percentages to work toward, as in "only 30% should pass at 6dan" or some such, gradings become tournaments. The top 30% pass. That's assuming the grading is being done fairly, on a strictly technical level of course. If other factors come in, like how many years the challengers have been trying the exam (it's his turn) and what age (he may not be around next year) and other factors (we need a 6dan in his area), then it becomes a tournament with extra factors, it's a bodybuilding competition without testing for steroids. A certain level of unfairness comes in because some are taking drugs to get big and some aren't.

Take all those extra considerations into account, and take the restriction on pass percentages away, and you have the last grading type. The one where it isn't a competition, where, to be honest about it, it isn't fair, where one passes because one is at the next level that one can achieve. Where a panel of one's peers is saying "you have worked hard and you have improved to the next level so you are recognized". Or where that same panel says "no dude, you can do better than that, you're being lazy so get out there and work some more on this".

This is not grading to establish classes, to put all those who are the same in the same category, it is a recognition that people will advance at different rates, that individuals are just that, individual. That sometimes you take the risk of stroke as being less important than the quality of life an untreated back gives. It's not statistical, and it's harder to do.

So mostly it's not done... or is it? Do you know anyone who got a grade by being teacher's pet, and another one who worked his rear end off to get there? It's not fair is it?

Is it supposed to be fair, is it a sport? Is it statistical? Categorical? If we accept that rank is not fair, then this stuff ceases to be a problem. Me, I want to cheat on the blood thinners so I can take some NSAIDS. My doctor and I are going to have a conversation at some point.

By the way, things sometimes balance. Bad back, diabetes medicine, all this means loss of appetite and I've gone down to 210 pounds (from 225 not too long ago and 255 at my highest). Guess what has happened to the pain in my knees?

What pain in my knees? Don't expect me to be sitting seiza next time you see me, but you may not see me limping.

Dec 31, 2018

Bunch of Sickies (Lessons from kata)

What a wheezy sneezy bunch in class last evening, and I presume the ones who didn't make it were home sick too. We carried on with the five of us, working through the Tachi Uchi no Kurai kata once more. Time to consolidate that material so that the seniors can move on to learning their own lessons. We have been through the various kata often enough that we talked about the various lessons you can learn.

This is something that short time students may not notice, that the lessons of a kata change over time. The guys in class have been around long enough to remember me saying many different things, all of them correct and none of them true. Yes, more lies to beginners.

Let's take the very first kata, De Ai. Ten or fifteen years ago I might have said that after blocking the cut to the leg, shidachi (the defender/winner) should drop his right hand and crank uchidachi's attacking sword upward, where it flips over into the target position for shidachi to hit it.

Yesterday I said that uchidachi, on being blocked, drops his right hand slightly, pivoting the sword just ahead of the tsuba, to take centreline and stab shidachi but shidachi follows that movement, dropping his own right hand to take centre underneath uchidachi's blade, and sooner, forcing uchidachi back onto the defence.

Did the "riai of the kata" change? Did I discover something newer and truer, did some sensei tell me a different story? None of the above. The riai of the kata has to do with controlling distance and the centreline. How does that work? First, one needs to know how to move the hands into position. By asking shidachi to crank uchidachi's sword up the centre (old instructions) I was forcing shidachi to centre and move from power, otherwise it can't be done. By saying uchidachi is not a fool, and would not fight to stay in a position where he was blocked (new instructions), I was telling those same students, ten years later, that the hand position is critical, you must be there, but not to crank an opponent's sword around, instead to take centre in a timing that prevents that opponent from taking centre.

Incidentally, by getting your sword flipped, uchidachi puts it into the correct position for Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu. If you point the tip the other way you're doing Muso Shinden Ryu, so don't. Some stories help learn the movements and others deal with the principles.

At other times I've suggested that uchidachi got into the centre first, but by dropping the hand, lifting your own sword, you will tap him off centre and use that opening to hit him (suriage men).

There may be a single principle to be learned in a kata (or one main, obvious, principle and a bunch of supporting stuff you could work on) but there are multiple ways to look at that principle. Each way simply requires a different starting point, or a different narrative fork in the story. "And then he does this".

The first stories you are told around this dojo tend to be pretty physical, of the "make it work" type. This sort of movement with resistance helps the beginner to learn correct body position. Later it becomes more subtle. If you start with subtle (clever) you miss a lot of default positioning that you really need, should you come up against an opponent who is bright enough to tap you when you're off balance. It's hard to be clever when you're flying backward across the room.

The movements of the kata don't change, but what you are thinking, what you are practising can change within those movements.

Or you can just assume that going through the motions is the thing. In fact, most people never get beyond that idea, which is why there is such a massive drop-out rate. If you learn all there is to learn in a month, or say a year, and you get your black belt, which proves you learned it, why would you bother hanging around when there is other stuff you could be learning.

The movements are easy. The lessons are endless.

And so, apparently, is this cold. At least the neck is back to almost bearable pain levels. Just so long as I don't try to look sideways or downward... haven't looked upward in months.

Mr. Roboto.

Jan 26, 2019

Competition in Budo

Last evening I read an essay from Chris Mansfield sensei outlining his reasons for competition in budo. In our case it would be in kendo/iaido/jodo.

This morning I thought I'd present my take on the issue.

First, just to reassure everyone, this will not be a rebuttal. I happen to think that competition in budo is a pretty neutral issue. I organized a Guelph Open and then the Canadian Open iaido championships decades ago. It was interesting to be told the recent Canadian National Championships were the first such thing ever. Technically that was accurate, if a bit disingenuous. Oh well, history changes.

My reasoning for the competitions was not in any way because I thought it was necessary for iaido, it was a way to allow the kendo folks to get their heads around what we do. I even participated in one of the tournaments and I'll come back to that later.

Tournaments in kendo are, arguably, the main thing in that art so we won't speak much more about it. For iaido and jodo, it's quite a bit harder to understand why anyone would want to compete. Well, for those youngsters who like to see trophies on their windowsill, it's not hard to understand why they'd want to win contests, but we have few of those in the section.

Competition is mostly justified as character-building, as instilling the 19th century European ideals of fair play and sportsmanship. The ideals of the upper classes, the ideals that led to the belief that WWI would be a glorious romp across the fields and back home for Christmas.

Mansfield sensei mentions the modern and ancient Olympic ideals and I'd like to repeat that here. The modern Olympics are very much the European ideals of amateurism, fair play and sportsmanship. The ancient Olympics were about winning. There were no second and third place prizes, you won or you lost, rather like the "primitive warfare" of that period.

How does this modern idea of sport work to make a better person? This can be summed up in the common injunction "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game".

You see the problem don't you? That only applies if you're a rich upper class fellow with lots of spare time and a tennis racquet. Bring in money, bring in fame (money), bring in professionals whose job it is to get bums on seats (money), and winning becomes something that needs to be done. For most teams and sports that is, there are exceptions such as the teams who have fans regardless of their abilities, or sports, like, frankly, kendo which are of interest only to those who participate. No money means no professionals.

Still, even in the kendo world there is a drive, a desire to win in the overall culture of the art. Korea wants to beat Japan, Japan wants to stay on top. These are considerations that come in beside or on top of the desire to "play the game well, win or lose". Since it is a game, of course one should try to win, that's rather the point of a game. If you have two people who aren't interested in winning you've got practice.

Lest folks tell me I don't understand the inner workings of sport, please let me tell you about my own participation in contests. Starting in public school (pre-high school) I was running races. Through High School and University I participated in individual and team sports. Basketball, Volleyball, Football (one year, long enough to blow a knee that bothers me to this day). Track and field (discus, javelin, footraces from 400 to 3000 metres), Cross country running, oh and badminton. I get sport, I get winning and losing, I won a few trophies, I won 14 intramural volleyball championships in University which I strung up as a macrame that hangs in my shop. People think I stole them.

You may notice that in all of these, there were objective measures of winning and losing. More points than the other team, crossing the line before the other guys, throwing stuff further. What never interested me much were the judged sports, like gymnastics or figure skating, although that wasn't a philosophical objection, just the wrong body shape. With arms like a gorilla one does not attempt an iron cross on the rings... well one does, but one gets one's ears clapped with one's own shoulders.

Let's go back to kendo for a moment. There is a push from Korea to put kendo into the Olympics, and to score it electrically, like western fencing. There is a resistance from Japan to any Olympic inclusion and to electrical scoring, along with an insistence on the idea of a "proper hit" to score a point. The Japanese want to retain their dominance, the Koreans want to knock them off and the point of contention here is the judging of a point.

Do you see the problem? Even though kendo isn't really "corrupt", the scoring methodology is open to criticism. Go to Gymnastics or Figure Skating and anyone who has paid attention over the years will instantly see the problem with judged scores. The sport is only a sport if the judges are fair and impartial. In figure skating you saw, at the very highest levels, some skaters who won because "it was their turn". Or it was their country's turn.

Is that a sport? Is that a case where fair play can be learned and demonstrated? Not at all. If you look at it closely, you can see that it's a situation where the system is set up for the administrators of the sport, rather than for the athletes. Where there is money, there is competition for the money.

To be clear, sports that are timed, measured or otherwise objective (one person submits, one person crosses the line first) the fairness and the appearance of fairness can be seen. At that point the athletes can demonstrate fair play and sportsmanship and all the other things we want them to learn.

Still, who is teaching this sportsmanship? Who is teaching the athletes that it's "how you play the game"? In a very real sense, you bring to the art what you learn from it. Very few coaches and trainers are telling athletes that losing is as good as winning, that losing is character building. Athletes have to figure that out for themselves.

Sports that are judged are much harder to see as fair and unbiased measures of sporting ability. If judges can be bribed, if they can be pressured with "national pride", the entire sport comes under question. Again, it isn't impossible for the individual athlete to learn character-building lessons from these sports (and iaido/jodo are well within this type of sport), but those lessons are not built into the sport.

Another way one is supposed to learn character from competition is the "pressure" the competition puts on the competitor. This pressure makes you work harder, think more clearly, or perhaps develop grit and determination.

Perhaps it does for some. For myself, I never felt much pressure from any of my individual sports, I ran because I loved to run, I ran to run, not to win races. I won races because I ran. The team sports were a bit different, one doesn't want to let the side down, but seriously, unless winning is important to you, and it wasn't to me, the pressure of competition is no more serious than the pressure of showing up for practice every day.

As for grit and determination, well I need more of that right now than I've ever needed through a lifetime of competition. I need it to keep getting out of bed each day, to sit here and write while my back and arm are screaming in pain. The next few months or (hopefully) years will be more of a challenge than any tournament I ever attended. So much so that no sporting event could ever have prepared me. What did help was showing up in the dojo, showing up at work, showing up to do what I needed to do for my entire life.

My iaido tournament career? Let's see, the one tournament I can remember went something like... running around organizing stuff... Kim you're on! Grab sword, enter court, do my thing, exit court and go back to running around. Repeat until the division was done. Later someone told me I came in third out of four I think.

The lesson I learned? None at all, except perhaps that competing was a waste of time. Not in any overarching, philosophical way, but in that it took five or ten minutes out of my real job which was to run around and make sure things were working.

Haruna sensei once told me that practice, gradings and tournaments were "the same". I said something like "you mean you should practice each day as if you're in the All Japan Iaido Championships?" Or "you should have heijoshin for competition like you have for everyday practice?"

No he said, I mean they are all the same.

Because of this, I have no problem with tournaments, or gradings so long as they are useful. In order for them to be useful they need to involve more swinging the sword than marching around listening to national anthems. They absolutely MUST be seen to be fair and unbiased, which puts the focus on the judges. If, at any level in the ranks of judges from your local 1st kyu panel to the hanshi panel in Japan, there is bias, bribery or just plain bungling, the entire system breaks down. No lessons can be learned except, perhaps, that people are people and personal agendas can sneak in anywhere. "It's his turn to pass". "She's his student so pass her". "I've never seen him in my dojo in Japan so he's not serious".

Tournaments and gradings can be wasted time, wasted money and wasted opportunities. One needs to carefully weight the benefits against the costs if one is going to substitute a practice for a tournament. How many times over the last 30 years have I heard kendoka complain that they travel hundreds of miles and spend thousands of dollars only to be knocked out of a tournament in the first round. It's almost the first thing I heard, actually.

Is it any wonder that people don't bother to show up? Is it any wonder that the same seeded few are there every time? The ones who get to compete all day long?

Which brings us to the debate between spending time and money on the elite or the base. If sport is to build character we're going to look after the base. If competition is about winning, we're going to focus on the elite.

If tournaments are a fact of life, if they are already in existence, why not go compete? All the benefits can occur if you have the right attitude, even with biased judging. On the other hand, if the choice is practice or compete and you get a vote, which will you vote for? Which will do you more good?

Want to be a better person? Go practice. Want to be "one of the elite"? You know what to do. Game the system, play up to and beyond the rules if you can get away with it, that's part of the game. Win!

Me, I'll continue to show up in class for as long as I can, and try to be as useful as is possible. When I'm done, I'm done, no complaints, I did as much as I could for as long as I could.

That's my competition, it happens every moment of every day and it has nothing at all to do with beating someone else at something.

It's "what you do".

Jan 22, 2019

Judging Bias

Yesterday we considered the value of competition iai and jo, with the major note being that Judging must be, and must be seen to be, absolutely fair in such competitions. The merest hint of bias or corruption will bring the entire system down. The same applies to gradings.

The thing is, judges bring bias. They can't help it, bias is the way you look at the world, or the performance you see in front of you. Judges are very much a result of their training and experience. The more training and experience, the less the bias, one hopes. The wider the experience, again, the less the bias. A judge that has been involved in the sport for 30 years is going to see things much differently than your ten year fellow. Especially if he has been a judge for that time, and especially if he has been trained to see, trained to judge.

But regardless of training and experience, bias cannot be eliminated, it can only be acknowledged and compensated for.

How do we try to do this in our world? One good example is to pretend we have anonymized challengers for a grading. In practical terms this means their club patches and name tags are removed, and they are given a number. This can get a bit silly, with challengers turning up covered in tape, including the kanji on their hakama. Maybe one judge of five could read that kanji, if he were three feet away. The thing that makes this process a bit humorous is the presence of lists of names on the judges table.

Someone has read the rule but missed the meaning.

Why should we pretend we don't know who's in front of us? Because it's easier to let bias creep in if we know whose student is in front of us. This is also why I don't like the current demands from Japanese judges that challengers to high grades must visit them in Japan. Sure, this is supposed to show that the student is "serious" that they are "worth the grade", but that sort of "show your face to the judges so they know who you are" creates the sort of "his turn" and "his student" bias in judging that we are specifically trying to avoid. Performance should be judged according to what we see at the grading or the tournament, not what we know before the event. In other words, not biased. (Not pre-judged, prejudiced.)

At a certain level, people become known. This may be simple face recognition, or it may be an actual knowledge of the person and their role in the organization. Face recognition is a comfort level for a judge. "Oh I've seen him the last few years, he's trying hard, I can pass him". If a person is known as the fellow who works hard to make things happen, this may also come into the judgment. In this case I don't actually have a problem while talking about gradings.

Tournaments are another matter, giving someone the win because he organized the tournament is a bit self-defeating for all involved, especially the winner who is then given a false sense of ability. I have heard more than once, the suggestion that "maybe we just give the trophy to Joe and get on with a bit more practice" as yet again, Joe has arranged some sort of competition that he expects to win.

Then there is the expectation that Joe will win. This is a major bias in judges and an excellent example was described to me not very long ago. A judging seminar was happening when two exemplars were brought forward. One of them, Joe, always gets the win but in this case Joe did waza machigai, the wrong kata. This is an automatic fail and the win goes to the other guy. But that didn't happen, the judges awarded the match to Joe. This apparently shocked people but it really should not. The bias to award the match to the expected winner is well known.

Another, similar factor in this situation may be the "junior judge" syndrome where inexperienced judges are, frankly, afraid to make a mistake. They attempt to avoid negative consequences from their decisions and so they may automatically vote for Joe because the senior judges always vote for Joe. In gradings, this may result in low pass rates as judges become afraid of criticism "back home" that they have passed "too many people". This is the.... you know I was going to say "percentage bias" but in fact it's not a bias, judges are often given percentages and told not to pass any more than that. How does one avoid criticism in this case? Fail everyone. You can't be faulted for passing less than the permitted percentage.

Similar to this is the reference to the head judge. This goes beyond bias to the perversion of the judging system itself. It is collusion when the judges defer to the head judge. The vaunted Japanese consensus meeting was once explained to me as "everyone talks until they figure out what the boss wants and then agrees to that". Why would one not simply remove the extra chairs, bodies and expense of a panel and leave the boss to get on with the judging? You think I'm kidding? I listened to a judge once say to a head judge "I'm so glad you have given us the criteria for who to pass and fail". Umm, if you don't know that by now you have been poorly trained, the whole point of standards is that they are standard, worldwide. There are not supposed to be local differences, and even if there are, don't bloody state it!

In our own area I was once sent an email by a quite junior person which said "the head judge is concerned that the panel is not consistent in their decisions during a grading, and your decisions were such and such". There is so much wrong with this. First, it's a panel, there should be variation. The fact that many decisions are 5-0 is simply an indication that decisions are often easy to make. Miss a kata and its 0-5 fail, if it's not, someone is asleep. But other decisions are going to be close, and the panels should be split. They are.

That's the first problem. The second was, of course, the fact that this junior fellow had the judging results in his hands. For those who have read the rules for the kendo federation Chief Examiners (bucho or whatever else you call the head of each section) you will have read that the only person who should be seeing those results is the chief examiner. Of course the secretary will see them but he should become blind. These judging decisions are secret, the reason there are signatures on the judging papers is so that the Chief Examiner can review them to look for bias in the judges. Not so that they can be shared with the world in general. As if anyone would be interested anyway.

This situation goes beyond simple judging bias and brings the entire judging system into disrepute. Judges need to be free to make their decisions without public criticism and second guessing. When I started in our organization we voted on scraps of paper, it really was anonymous and I'm tempted to go back to that system. I will if ever I find out the Jodo panel decisions are being shared around. Again, like covering up name tags, the appearance of the rule (sign the voting papers) is known, while the reasons remain hidden to some.

If you look on the web, you will find a lot of research on judging bias in sport. You should look. Some of the factors listed are as follows:

Patriotism: Judges tend to vote for their own country. This applies directly to our situation, we have been told more than once that our 3dans and below aren't as good as this or that country. How are they not as good? Is it because we don't have kyu grades for them to go through, that the comparison is between those with years vs months of experience? What happens at 4dan that our guys catch up? Is it just that our local budo culture values other things than memorizing the grading kata? I know for a fact that my own students are "garbage" at the lower levels, simply because I do not teach to the test. Have someone practice 5 kata for a year and they are going to look a lot better at those kata than someone who has had a much wider training. Look at those same folks after ten years and you may see something quite different. Judges are going to see their own folks as better than strangers simply because it is their own folks that set their bias.

Patriotism of a sort, can also apply in the case of koryu, as in, if you are of the majority koryu your default actions will be seen as better than those of a different koryu. My own sensei has been told that if he attempts his next grading in Japan he will have to modify his koryu to more closely resemble that of the judging panel. You do not pass if you do not do what the panel demands you do. What they expect to see, according to their bias.

Reputation: We have talked about this, a competitor with a reputation for winning will tend to win because Judges will see their winning points. This is discussed quite a bit in Kendo, where some players seem to have an easier time getting the judges to see their points.

Rank Order: Those who compete earlier in a competition tend to score lower than those who come later. This is well documented and it is suggested that earlier judgments are reserved in case later ones are better, or that each succeeding performance shows the judges something unique, which is then given a higher value than the earlier performances. I have known grading judges who have tried to avoid this bias by not voting for anyone until most of the cohort has demonstrated. This is an attempt to establish the level of the group before sorting the individuals. Personally I don't do this because I try to base my criteria on universal standards. I have sat panels for decades and my criteria are based on what is expected for that level over that entire time. I'm not a believer in shifting standards unless those standards have been introduced in writing and well disseminated. Again, this is grading. Tournament decisions are much simpler, look at 2 people and pick the better one. In this case universal standards aren't relevant except as a way to sort the winner. Who's closer to the standard, you pick a winner even if they are both far from the standard.

Memory: This is very similar to Reputation. It is the "face time" advice, a judge is more comfortable awarding the win or the grade to someone he remembers over a stranger. This bias is also what I was just talking about for myself. My criteria are based on my memory of past gradings.

Conformity: This is peer pressure, plain and simple. A judge with insufficient memory (experience), or who is just timid, will look around to see what all the other judges are doing and follow the crowd. This is a human thing, and it is the reason that judges are taught not to look around the table at how others are voting. Many judges will cover their paper while voting, as do I. In tournaments, the flags should go up instantly, a judge who raises his flag slower than the others will look like he is suffering conformity bias.

Fatigue: It takes a lot of energy and attention to see all that you should be seeing at a grading or a tournament. Especially tournaments. Sit still, upright, correctly, in a chair for fifteen minutes and you are soon more concerned with the cramps in your lower back than you are with who is waving their sword around better than the other guy. Fatigue will exacerbate all the other bias we have discussed here. "Here's a red flag, now get me out of here."

Does this mean that judging is unfair? Not at all, but it does mean that judges must acknowledge that bias exists, and guard against it. They must also make sure the appearance of bias does not occur, either by their own actions or by those of others.

Jan 23, 2019

Perspective is a terrible thing.

The streets are empty, it's March Break, I wonder if there is a connection. I think cities could do a lot for global warming if they made it illegal to drive your kids to school when they live within walking distance.

I do remember, maybe correctly, that our kids had to be met by an adult in order to be let out of public school, which was about three blocks away. I also noted a whole bunch of stumps in a park on the way here. Do I remember something about a branch falling on someone last year? I don't recall many stories of kids stolen by the fairies (or anyone else while on the way to or from school) in the last few years.

There is nothing on earth that we can't find someone to be outraged or fearful of. I think one of the least useful phrases ever invented was "one is too many". As in, even one kid killed by a falling branch is one too many. Even one kid struck by lightning is one too many. Even one kid abducted by fairies is one too many.

But filling the streets with cars to drive the kids to school doesn't seem to be much of a help. Even one kid on a bicycle run over by parents already late for work driving their kids to school is one too many. Even one kid dying from emphysema brought on by car exhaust is one too many.

I call one kid and raise you three.

Who was it who said one is a tragedy, 20 million is a statistic? Oh yeah, good old Joe Stalin, one of the great alt-fact guys. Did I say 20 million? Must have been thinking about central Africa where the UN, that secret world government body, has warned of that many people dying of starvation, while thinking up ways to waste the 17 million or so dollars they have collected from the rest of the world to solve the problem.

Perspective is a terrible thing.

I can't get a really good head of outrage up over the bumper sticker on the car at my neighbours which read "a woman needs two animals, the horse of her dreams and a jackass to pay for it". I suppose I take it more as a warning label for anyone thinking of a relationship with that woman.

And warning labels are good, they cover your butt, lawyers love them. Be it on their own head now, anyone who has a relationship with the owner of that car.

You can't tar a whole political party with the ravings of one member I was told a while ago. But you can tar that party by what they vote for by majority vote, or by what they fail to condemn by majority vote to censure that raving lunatic.

The tyranny of statistics. If the majority of your party votes for something, they support that something. Pointing to the one guy in the party that disagreed doesn't excuse the rest of the party. It really doesn't.

One nice guy is one too few, show me the stats and I'll decide on those. If more kids die in car accidents than are stolen by the fairies maybe we ought to ban cars rather than insist on using them to take the kids three blocks to school. Or am I getting this wrong?

Maybe it's not about doing things that make sense, maybe it's about doing (and saying) things that make you look like you have covered your butt. Invent a problem that you can fix by making everyone else act stupidly and you're good. Talk about being "the people's friend" until they elect you and then be "my cronies' friend" and get stuck into the pig trough as fast as you can. Curiously, I'm not thinking of the Republican party south of the border.

Pah, thinking too much about this stuff is annoying. Best to just stick to the talking points and go for that sound bite.

Is a sound bite the result of a logic blight?

March 13, 2017

What's important

Last class I noticed that the beginners paid equal attention to everything. This is not a new discovery, I've talked about "teaching mode" for a while. That's where you do everything in the kata at the same speed so that the students can see what you're doing. Of course what happens is that they think the kata is like that, the same speed, sort of a monotonous, robotic, boring movement.

But it takes a while to figure out what's important and what just gets you between one important place and another. How do you develop that ability? I think a few things are fairly obvious.

1. Be careful. The first, most important thing to understand is that you need your partner to learn this stuff. If you're doing iaido or some other art where you don't have a partner, you still have to be careful not to cut yourself or to walk into a wall when turning (I've seen it).
2. Hit the target. This is harder than you might think, it seems to contradict rule number one (are we doing the rules of robotics here?).
3. Hmm, what is three? Honestly I think that being careful and hitting the target are probably good for the important parts of a kata, what helps with those is ranked down the scale of importance so no more numbers.

But still coffee in the cup so how about "don't get hit" in other words keep your guard up, make sure that at any moment you have no openings. This is part of number one I suppose, but worth a note. Now I'm tempted to start over and just list things under 1 and 2. Keep the centreline is under both, if you have centre you don't get hit, and you can hit.

How about etiquette? Some would figure it's way far down the line. It isn't, etiquette is paying attention. It's making sure your partner is paying attention. It's in places that you might not think, for instance I insist that when practising Niten Ichiryu kata, both sides must come to chudan before assuming their kamae. This should not be just some sort of prep stuff before we get to the good stuff, it's necessary to the kata. If your head isn't in the game there is no game, you're just wandering around not hitting each other with sticks. Want to hurt your partner, be sloppy with the beginning of the kata and then pay attention at the end.

Aikido kata are like that. If you just slob around until you sort of stand in front of me fiddling around trying to get Nikkyo on, and then when I put it there for you, crank the hell out of my wrist, you're going to get hurt. Maybe not by me (much) but trust me, there are people out there that will hammer you.

Or Jodo, if you are in the middle of a kata and sensei yells your name with a correction you'd better not look away from your partner. These days there are guys out there that will smack you because they're allowed to do it. They really aren't but that's the impression, warnings often become permissions. "You were warned!"

Etiquette is mindset.

But let's drill down a bit, what part of etiquette is important? It isn't the mechanical movements, they can't be since they vary from art to art. Sometimes I get into the discussion of which knee goes down first with aikido or karate folks. If you want to know, ask your sensei, it's what he does. If you want me to talk about weapons I say it's the knee that allows you to use your weapons easiest with one knee down. In other words, etiquette is about safety. Paying attention is about safety, so do what they do in whatever dojo you're in (there, you're practising your "paying attention").

Now, important sometimes depends. Important to what? If you can fail 80% of a junior grading group "for etiquette" then etiquette as a dance, as mechanically doing this or that, is important. So memorize the movements and do them. Sensei ought to be using the "grading etiquette" each and every class so that you can memorize it. We can't fail you for not doing something we don't teach can we? Well yes we can, but we shouldn't.

Posture? It's part of 1 and 2. If you stick body parts where they ought not to be they will be hit, or twisted, or cut. Also, it's hard to stop the swing of a weapon headed for your partner's face if you're not in the proper posture to control that weapon. Wild swinging means what it says, our goal is control.

If you can't stop it, don't start it.

Just full of them today. Is this helping? Or am I heading toward "everything is important"? Can I get at it from the other direction? What's not important? Umm, having your juban exactly one quarter inch showing from under your uwagi? The colour of your sageo? The colour of your uniform? Covering up your tattoos? I suppose it could become important, some of those silk flag outfits from the 70s were actually distracting to the eye. Probably the reason for them. Mostly though, if it's clean and not going to fall apart, hurting someone, it's probably an acceptable outfit.

Minor variations in etiquette? Aside from when it is declared that you "will" fail for etiquette done other than what is prescribed exactly, sure. Dojo to dojo variation is to be expected. The person "failing" a grading for non-required etiquette should be the sensei, not the students who are just doing what they were taught. But if what is taught means way too much focus on the etiquette itself, and not promoting care and safety toward one's partners, maybe that variation becomes important. Or maybe that standardization becomes important, for the wrong reasons.

Yeah, you can say everything is important I suppose, if it wasn't we wouldn't teach it to you, but some things are less important than others at various times and it's up to you to figure out what's happening at any particular time. If we say fix your foot, your foot position IS IMPORTANT at that time. That's simple. If we mention, off-handedly, that you should cut from a bit higher over your head and you then spend the next five years making a fetish of dislocating your elbows shoving your sword as high over your head as possible.... well maybe you misunderstood?

Not everything is always important.

March 7, 2017

Is it a habit or is it a lazy

Yesterday was the Welland iaido seminar and we spent the day on basics, probably 70% or more on kihon and on body mechanics, hardly a kata in sight. Was that announced? There seemed to be a lot of people missing, perhaps nobody wanted to do the work?

Too bad because the seminar is one of the few places where instructors and students can get together and decide how this or that thing actually "goes". No arguing possible when you can just ask the guys you are saying "so and so says".

Maybe we should add a requirement to attend x number of seminars for y rank.

At dinner afterward someone mentioned an iaido "habit" and speculated on how to change it. Being the cynical fellow I am, I suggested that if you have been doing iaido for less than six years, you probably don't have a habit, you've probably got a lazy. You're not trying to change it. Or perhaps you've got a crossover from some other activity, like having a badminton grip or similar.

There are questions that suggest to me that, in general, we have a somewhat enthusiastic definition of a habit. If I say don't step so far forward and a student asks "how do I do that?" I am led to believe that said student just doesn't want to bother paying attention to how his the foot goes forward. Relax your shoulders. But how do I relax my shoulders? How do you relax your shoulders? Relax your shoulders! How many ways can I say that? Don't hunch your shoulders, drop your shoulders, stop trying to cover your ears with your armpits. Yes we say lots of things that come down to the same simple thing. Relax your shoulders. We say it twelve different ways because you didn't respond to the first eleven. Sometimes we send you to another sensei and he says "relax your shoulders" and maybe you do. Yay, that sensei is a genius.

Why would one ask how to do something that is a direct command? "Relax your shoulders" or "don't step so far" are pretty unambiguous. Two reasons come to mind, one is that you didn't actually listen to what was said, the other was that you don't want to do the work of paying attention to your shoulders right now.

I get that, it's easy to assume you know what sensei is saying. I got that way back when in aikido seminars even before I started doing iaido. The sensei teaching would demonstrate something and maybe even say "do this bit this way". We would pair up and the guy I was with would say "oh in our club we do it this way" if he was somewhat the same rank as me. The black belts would simply do whatever they thought they just saw, which was the way they always did the thing that sort of looked somewhat like what sensei just showed us.

It was a rare student who actually did the work of paying attention to what sensei said and tried to do it. How do I know that? Because I'm an arrogant fellow who has always been arrogant enough to believe that I pay attention to things. Because I've watched people for 30 years not paying attention to sensei. Because I was in a seminar one day where three people in a row asked a sensei the same question (obviously they had been taught the other way) when a fourth, after everyone (else) in the room finally nodded and "got it", stepped out from the crowd and began with "but sensei that's not done that....." at which point he was actually dragged away by those around him.

Have I never lost concentration in a class? Guess.

But what about just not wanting to do the work of paying attention to your shoulders right now? I get that, if you're working on your grip or you're working on your hips. My students tell me that all the time. I will say "your tip is dropping" and they'll reply "I'm trying to get my foot straight ahead". In that case I tend to nod and say "carry on". It does no good to tell them to fix two or six things at once. It doesn't help if I say something like "well don't drop your tip while you're fixing your foot". Our attention doesn't work that way. Let them fix the foot and make sure later that you give them hell for the tip.

You're not fixing habits, putting the car's signal lights on when you turn a corner, that's a habit. If you forget, you get a kind of itch in your brain like you forgot to do something. Refining a movement that wanders around is not a habit, it's learning a skill. It's not a habit when your basketball coach says approach the backboard at a different angle when you do your layup shot. You don't say "but coach how do I break that habit".

Just approach the board at a different angle. The "stuff you usually do" is not habit, it's stuff you usually do. If you can demonstrate that you can do that "habit" nine times out of ten in four different classes, maybe I'll admit it's a habit that we have to work to break.

If it's just you not paying attention to something I asked you to do... That's a lazy.

Mar 5, 2017

Taylor's Fallacy

I call it the fallacy of expanding time in kata. It's pretty simple, we do a kata and at some point someone says "what if I do this" and we say "well then I'd do this" and "but then I'd do this" and we say "well then I'd do this".

Pretty soon you've got a kata that's twelve minutes long.

Yesterday we had a nice seminar in Peterborough, iaido in the morning and Niten Ichiryu in the afternoon. The fallacy is never a problem in the iaido class, it would require students to actually see that invisible opponent doing something different, and since we tell them to do just that, to see their invisible opponent, they never do.

But in a partner practice, there's a whole different situation. When students are just starting on a kata they go slow. When they go slow and get confused they stop, but when they learn the steps all the way through they get working on the embellishment. It always begins the same way, the hand goes up and I hear "but what if..." I wander over and sure enough, they've got a good point. If the uchidachi stopped there or didn't swing through past the body in the other place then sure, the kata breaks down.

That's the point, you're supposed to notice those things, that's how the kata teaches you. Why can you step in when he swings at your wrist? Why doesn't it work if he's swinging at your face?

Great questions, great teaching moments.

On the other hand, it's less useful if we figure that we can put in an extra swing at that point where our partner stops for a moment, and then we figure we can block and respond with another swing of our own... It's at that point we have to figure out if the time for that really is there. I mean, the kata has a pause right there, but why? Is it for safety or would you really stop half way through that movement if you were trying to hurt your opponent?

Tricky, but trust the kata and keep doing it the way it was designed. Eventually you will start to see the rhythm, the fast and slow parts, the parts where you stop, then continue on for safety, the parts where you swing through and miss, creating an opening, because you can't do anything else. Then you and your partner will start to wonder why that three step kata is so long, you stop adding in moves because you start to see that in all likelihood, one of you would have been on the ground bleeding after the very first move.

I got all balled up with that yesterday, one kata started with a move that ended a previous kata. I was suddenly trying to explain why the kata didn't end right there, why we were going on to the next bit. I was sure I heard that question from someone. Turns out it was from inside my head and after five minutes of trying to explain that "maybe he did this, or perhaps you're actually doing that" I looked around to see a lot of patient faces waiting for me to get on with it. "You guys really don't care about this do you?" Nope. "I'm talking to myself again aren't I?" Yep.

Yeah.

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Tameshigiri as cultural object

Am half way through a paper on the cultural meaning of Tameshigiri in Japan. The basic analysis is that prior to 1600 there is little written evidence, either due to the loss of records in the wars, or perhaps to tameshigiri not being a formal thing (there being lots of bodies on battlefields to test swords with). Tameshigiri being the cutting up of humans to test swords, rather than a practice to test cutting skills since for those one needed to hit an armoured and moving target.

In the years after 1600 there are many records of Daimyo doing tameshi with a strong sense of approval of the practice as befits a warrior. At this time, and up to the decline of the practice in the 1700s cutting up human bodies was thought to be an essential part of training to prepare for war. Getting used to it and all that.

Since there was no need to be prepared to cut people down, there being no wars to speak of in the Edo period, eventually the practice was discouraged and fell out of favour except as a judicial punishment for the worst of offenders. Later, in the 1800s we come to tameshigiri as a thing one hired a specialist to do in order to test one's sword (during judicial punishment one assumes). This is the era of inscriptions on the tang telling of how many bodies the sword cut through.

Then the author jumps to modern day tameshigiri as a form of cutting rolled mats to test the skills of the swordsman rather than the sword itself.

I have to be fair and mention I'm only half way through the paper and may yet come to the period between the Meiji restoration and today, but so far there seems to be no mention of this period, which is interesting.

Is there no information on tameshigiri during the days of the Imperial Army and the Japanese Empire or is it just rude to mention this period in the history of sword practice? Does one simply drop that part of the story with some sort of "time passes" or "and then stuff happened"?

Without the years from 1870 to 1950 we have a hard time connecting any of our present sword practice with the older traditions. That's a hundred years, are we to believe that someone went to sleep in 1850 and woke up in 1950 to resume teaching the sword arts? What happened in between? It is of some value to know what did. For instance, not so very long ago the opening etiquette of Seitei was explained in part as representing our willingness to defend our country. (Sword edge is out facing your opponent when you bow). A few of the seniors standing around raised their eyebrows at this (it being Canada), but I would bet the majority of the beginners would have no idea this wasn't simply an everyday reference to patriotism as one hears from certain politicians every day.

I don't want to be trite and bring up some sort of "those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it" because I'm not a historian. I'm a biologist by training and I'm going to say that to ignore history is to be inhuman. History is the extended memory that our species has been able to develop due to our ability to communicate with one another. It's why the tigers aren't in charge. To ignore history is to become a different type of animal, it's to be someone who can't learn from their mistakes.

If you burn your hand on a hot stove and then do it again you're likely to be taken to a doctor to see what's wrong with your memory. If you ignore history and get involved in wars that are proven to metaphorically burn your hand and bring no benefit to anyone except to a few at the top who make money or get re-elected, you need to think about what is wrong with your collective memory, your ability to access "history". Usually what's wrong is that your education is faulty, your societal memory is mis-wired like your brain is, with a faulty memory for hot stoves. The difference is that stoves can't take advantage of your faulty memory but other "humans" can take advantage of a faulty knowledge of history. There is no malice in a hot stove.

As I said, I'm only half way through the paper so perhaps the author will get to the gap. I hope so.

Apr 8, 2015

Take a stance

Kamae is a Japanese word, it means a vast universe of things because all Japanese words mean a vast universe of things that will forever be just beyond our understanding.

For our purpose here, let's say that kamae means stance, a position of strength from which we can move and with which we can apply power in some direction or another. What direction? It's Japanese budo we're talking about here so two handed sword, so in one direction, the direction of our front, the direction our belly button is facing.

So our stance is strongest forward, that means a long stance, right hand forward on the hilt of the sword, so right foot forward of the left foot. Turn the hip too far off to the left and we lose our power-applying connection with the ground in the left foot, so we keep the hips facing forward, the left heel up off the ground, the left toes dug in.

Or we want to move forward out of this stance, so we shorten it up, bring the left foot up toward the right so that we can launch ourselves forward without preparatory movement. Now we've got the typical kendo stance. Left foot ready to drive to catch the opponent.

But wait you say, my aikido stance is left foot behind right, toes facing outward, or heels lined up and back foot at 90 degrees to the front or.....

Or my Niten Ichiryu koshimi stance, left knee over left toe and facing not quite 90 degrees away from the forward right foot which is facing at my opponent, with the right shin vertical.

Are those initial stances or final stances? Is the aikido stance to turn the hips out of the attack line or do you attack down that line? I know the niten stance is 1. old fashioned (few folks use it any more) and 2. a finishing position rather than a starting position.

Do we make a fetish of a kamae? Yes, we tend to do just that, but I would ask my students to, instead, make a habit of kamae. Stop being all "but I thought we should be 39.7degrees off line with the back foot" and be more "oh, I can blow right through that guy if I put my foot on this angle".

Don't try to understand the mystical meanings of holding your fingers this or that way, let the wizards conjure up the correct state of mind by weaving their spells. Instead, learn how the power runs from your back foot through the tip of the sword. Can you push the tip of your bokuto into a partner's hand without pain in your shoulder? How about driving from your back foot, does your hip want to skitter off to the side? So move things around until you can find the right position. Call that a kamae, give it a fancy name if you want. Now do the same for a cut, does your elbow shudder off to one side? Did the sword? Fix it and name it if you want.

Now move around, move from kamae to kamae if you wish. Do it until you don't have to think about it anymore. Good? Nice, now have someone cut at you while you're moving from position to position. Oh, hmm. Well maybe we need to think about being "in position" even when we're moving into position. (The "kamae of taking kamae", there, a whole new book to write, bring in zen somewhere.) Maybe we figure out how to keep the opponent under control while we move from kamae to kamae toward him. Maybe once we figure out how to do that we give that a name. Some sounds nice. Maybe we don't move into range of our opponent until we put him into a bad position by applying some sort of pressure to him. Get him off balance. What's that? Oh yes, kuzushi.

Hey, now we're getting the hang of this stuff. Now do all that with nobody in front of you, with no feedback at all except maybe someone saying "you're not at exactly 39.7 degrees off line with the back foot". Yeah, iaido is easy because it's all just waving the sword around in the air.

And that's right. If we want to convince ourselves that we're good at it, that's easy to do in iaido. Really easy, especially if we don't ever have a real-body check on what we're doing. In Jodo it's pretty easy to see that your kamae is crap if you stick the end into someone's solar plexus and they walk right through you. So we say "Jodo is hard", because we have to spend a lot of time figuring out how to be in the right position to apply power.

From a different stance, from another position, we can say that iaido is hard and jodo is easy. That's from the stance of eventually doing good budo with an understanding of how to apply power from that back foot to the tip of the weapon.

Just my kamae on this cold, snowy winter Sunday.

Jan 20, 2019

The real woo woo stuff (class notes)

We were getting a bit deep into the principles of Tachi Uchi no Kurai last evening, which are actually pretty fundamental, (distance and timing) but we had a room full of beginners so away we went. In order to keep the seniors involved, we started with an explanation of the very first Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu kata, Mae. I sat in front of the Pamurai and she cut my shoulder and then my head. She didn't need to adjust her distance, just cut and cut, it worked fine. So distance.

We then went to the very last kata, the very last piece of advice you get, the one in the Tetsu no Maki or whatever it's called. As Pam began to draw I drew vertically and cut her wrist. Ha ha! Later in the class we did a bunch of stuff from this position so the seniors could think about it.

We then went on to make a paired seiza kata where she cut for my shoulder and I shifted back to draw vertically and block on the right hand side. You see this in the Tsumi Ai no Kurai so it's OK for me to make up stuff like that. I then moved the bokuto overhead as a target for her to cut down on.

Time to stand up and do the same.

Then, since we're all whacking around our faces with bokuto let's make it a bit more safe, let's cut for the knee and block that. After the block let's go to the standard maai that we all learn, chudan awase, tip to tip swords. This is what I have to call De Ai number "A" because none of our seniors want to do it, they want to go right to B.

The point? The distance, to get to the correct distance. Later we worked on being at the correct distance before we walked in five steps. Hard, it's a long way apart, no swords touching to measure it. Then we walk in 5 steps but on the last one we stop short as well as blocking so that the attacker misses our knee. We talked about how uchidachi (attacker) trains shidachi (junior) by how they set the distances and how the final target should be set above the head rather than out in front. Beginners will aim for the bokuto, not your head underneath of it.

I find this stuff fun. If you can shorten your final step so that the attack misses you don't have to block, you can draw directly into uchidachi's face. (Same as the vertical cut to the wrist we did way back when). Hah, suddenly uchidachi is not leaning in to cut the knee, the sword is swinging in front of your stomach because you just "straightened him up".

Don't do that kata, it's dangerous.

We went to De Ai number B, where uchidachi has to move back from the first attack to the correct maai with the sword overhead for shidachi to hit. Practice for the senior side.

This is where we went a bit into the real woo woo stuff and talked about how maai changes as you move forward or back, as you change from attacking to defensive attitude. We talked about time as well, maai is distance but to cross a distance we need to work with time as well.

In a nutshell, shidachi ought to be hitting uchidachi's bokuto (the final target) just as it gets overhead, otherwise uchidachi will change to the attack. How do you do that? OMG I'm slow, every time I'm slow. I can't move fast enough. "Um, I'm actually moving back and overhead pretty slowly, how come you can't keep up?" This is where we learn that getting angry and frustrated makes our abilities fall to pieces. Especially if sensei doesn't let you off the hook and keeps calmly asking you to "get there".

We went on with our practice and talked about the rule that you must not attack before you are in furi kaburi, you must be at the point of starting the cut before you step "into the meat grinder". Maai changes, so does the place where you can attack.

Uchidachi has attacked, you have blocked, uchidachi (because uchidachi) moves back and gives you the centreline as he lifts the sword overhead. This means that shidachi can take the centreline and is now "inside" uchidachi's defence, shidachi has a clear shot at uchidachi's chest with a thrust. This means that the rules about not stepping in before being ready to cut don't necessarily apply. Uchidachi is going back, shidachi can "stick like glue" and move in with him, thrusting down the centreline (seme), lifting as uchidachi's sword comes further offline, and then striking the target just as it gets overhead.

This stuff is woo woo because you have to feel it more than see it. It's really hard for me to describe this stuff. For instance, the comment I heard was "I'm still too slow". No, you're there, you're hitting just as I get the target overhead. "No, there's still a gap". Um, look, I'm moving back and up, it takes me a moment to switch to forward and down to react to your attack on the target, so you're "there".

"Well why didn't you say that!" Honestly, the beginners probably weren't seeing that gap, you have to be at a certain place, a certain experience level, to even see the gap, so when I say "hit when the target gets there" I mean "hit when the target gets there, within the gap that exists between one movement and the movement going in the other direction, which depends on how fast I'm lifting the sword and how aggressive I'm being and whether I intend to reverse direction or I'm reacting to your attack or....."

You see how this could be easier to feel than to describe? You've got to read movement and weight shifting and balance and hand tension and, just, feel it.

Woo woo.

That was the first half of class, we did the first kata of Tachi Uchi no Kurai or, as I'm NOT fond of saying TUNK. That's as opposed to TANK I suppose, the second partner practice.

We went to kata number three by doing our equivalent of kiri kaeshi, where shidachi strikes alternatively at uchidachi's yokomen (top corners of head) and uchidachi matches the swing and cut, while maintaining the exact distance moving backward.

Once we could do that we introduced the sneaky bit of Uke Nagashi, where shidachi lulls uchidachi into kiri kaeshi practice, then changes to thrusting into uchidachi's throat. Uchidachi must suddenly respond by trying to knock shidachi's bokuto away and thrusting on his own. (Remember our talk about shifting movement in response to changes, is that thrust a surprise or are you jumping ahead in the kata? That changes the speed of the strike down on the thrusting bokuto doesn't it? Are you just swiping at the bokuto or are you knocking it aside and thrusting? That makes a difference in how far shidachi moves doesn't it?)

Shidachi responds with uke nagashi and cuts shidachi on the head. But doesn't because that would hurt.

This, because beginners, switched quickly to the Tachi Uchi no Kata ("the other TUNK") version of the kata where we stop matching on the third step but swords crossed, and then uchidachi thrusts while shidachi moves the hands like uke nagashi and does the technique. Much easier to learn, much safer.

Learning this stuff for the first time while swords are flashing around in front of the face is not easy. It's just not.

We talked a little toward the end of the class about maai at different angles. For the uke nagashi movement if you bring the right foot forward on the same line you get hit on the head. If you take the right foot in front of the left and re-align the left you're out of line of the attack. Take that left (back) foot a tiny bit further, maintaining your sword in proper chudan posture, and no more needs to be done to skewer uchidachi. He cuts, you're offline with the bokuto poking him in the side. He's on the old attack line and you're on the new.

Again, hard to describe, but if you just get into the habit of realigning into correct kamae no matter what you're doing, this becomes easy.

Sort of the point of practice I suppose.

Woo woo!

Jan 19, 2019

Where's the spiritual stuff

The special sauce?

Got asked last evening about the spiritual stuff in iaido. Do we discuss it in class or are there books to read to understand the basis of our various schools?

Want to read? Here are a couple of things intended for my students.

https://sdksupplies.com/cat_manual.htm

But

My automatic response hasn't changed for almost 40 years when I was asking the same thing of Aikido. I eventually decided that the spiritual stuff is contained in the practice itself. Last evening I said that swinging a piece of lumber at someone else's head and not hitting them is an act of compassion, trust, care, openness, community and all the other stuff that you need a couple of chapters to write down in a book.

Is this stuff based on zen or on shinto? Honestly, I haven't a clue what religion the founder of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu followed. If he was like most folks he probably got married shinto and buried buddhist. Or whatever it is. What am I? What are you? If forced to write your religion down on a hospital entry form what do you write? I used to put down Zen Buddhist just to make a mess if I died. Go find a Zen priest to do the last rites! Hah.

Is budo zen? Lots of researchers will grind their teeth and say it was more esoteric this or that buddhism. What's zen? It's just buddhism that says you don't need all the books and stuff, just go back to the origin and meditate, that's all you need. What's Buddhism anyway? It's a seeking to find release from the pain and suffering of the world. To live is to suffer, to be deluded, to be unhappy. How do we escape this suffering? We realize that suffering is in us, not out there in the world. We suffer, the world doesn't. There is no cure, only understanding.

What's the difference between ancient zen and modern existentialism? What is the existential angst? It's what happens when you lose religion, when you realize that Man is "it". We are adrift, we have no purpose in life, we have no god, no dad in the sky, telling us what to do. No paradise after death to reward us for our obedience.

Death. Suffering from desire, from ennui, from hunger and sickness and anxiety and lack of purpose and then death. Wow, the world is pretty scary. What can we do? Can we find someone else to blame? Our neighbour? The strange people from far away? A god who is unfair? Oh if only we can find someone to blame. (Would it be fixed if we did?) Only we never can, so what do we do next?

Meditate, understand all this rises and falls in our own head. Chop wood, carry water, live, eat, sleep, carry on, and if you make it, understand that the rest of it, the suffering, is in your own head.

Sickness too? Physical pain? Sure, emotional pain I get, but physical pain? How is that in my head sensei?

Jab a needle into my foot and I'll flinch, no problem. My back hurts, absolutely. I complain about that back, but do I suffer? Do I rail against the universe? Um, OK sometimes, but not all the time. It's just my life. "Look at those kids in that war-torn area. Look at them laugh and play amongst the rubble, how can they do that?" Because it's their life, because they are kids and kids play. Don't try to drag them into your reality, they don't live there. You don't live in theirs. Do something about their situation if you feel you should, or shut up. Everyone lives in their own world, in their own reality, their own head. Who are you to judge if those kids should be happy or sad? That's your expectation, not their reality. My daughter told me the other day "don't you tell me how I should feel about things". Yep, absolutely. We feel pain, all of it, in our brains, it's not external. Yes we are connected to the world, of course we are, a stick will break a bone and we will feel pain. Where is that pain? In the stick? In the mind of the guy swinging the stick? In our arm? In our brain? In our mind? Our soul? Where!

Where does budo fit into all this? Go to class, practice a kata, if you are the senior side, the attacking side, you lead the other side into the movements, you provide the story for the other side to read, and to learn the lessons (there are always many). At the end of the kata, you die. Each and every time you practice a kata, you practice for your death. Have you lived the kata properly, do you regret anything? No? Good, a good death. Does the other side rejoice in killing you? Not a bit of it, it's really hard to get beginners to swing at your head, they are afraid of touching you with the stick, let alone splitting your skull. We must bring the beginners to accept death as much as we must bring ourselves to do the same. Everything is teaching, even our own death is a teaching moment.

Do we need these words I've written here? Not a bit of it, I'm writing this more to prevent too much reading than to encourage it. Do we need to understand how to wear the kesa, how to kneel in the aisle of the church, how to fall to our knees during prayers, in order to understand the meaning of life (and therefore death)? To be compassionate? No, the zen monks will say sit, breathe, watch. The Trappists will say shut up, listen to what the quiet will tell you, the sufi will say come, dance.

And we swing our sticks.

Jan 12, 2019

Constant improvement

Toyota called it kaisei didn't they? The constant search for improved product and process. Just the thing for budo, we should seek constant improvement through diligent effort.

I'm good with that, but the attitude may not be appropriate for my situation. I may be using the wrong tools, the wrong techniques for my situation. Perhaps I need to apply the techniques of Stoicism, of Zen, an acceptance of circumstance. The new era begins next month, Reiwa, not bow to peace but fortuitous, auspicious peace. Perhaps it holds the key to this phase of my life. Fortuitous, be happy that you are on the right side of the grass. Peace, be content, consigned, resigned, at ease with this. It's a good day, why? Because I woke up.

I'm afraid of my neck, compression fractures in c5 and c7 with radiation treatment to c6. My left arm was withered, my fingers curled, no messages were getting there, a crabbed little thing. I looked at it as if it belonged to someone else. The radiation seems to have worked, the neck healed some, and now the left hand is gaining strength, the nerve impulses getting to the fingers, enough so that I can type this.

Constant improvement! Yet I fear my neck, if I tilt it to the left, if I put weight on my left shoulder, the tingling down my arm increases. I still take meds for the nerve pain. Will it continue to heal? Will it become crippled again? Is my teaching sword helping my recovery or preventing it? I have a seminar this weekend, I hope for two days because my time is short, but will I have the discipline to stop when I need to stop?

The desire for constant improvement, the possibility of constant improvement may be gone for me. Wanting to become better and better may be setting me up for bitterness as the neck heals too narrowly for the nerve, and I lose my left arm once more, or both of them. The cancer is on both sides. The Stoics tell me to imagine, envision the worst. To use this technique, this tool of darkness to become accepting of whatever may be in my future. Whatever is now. Not to despair, but to accept, Reiwa for me is to accept the good fortune of waking up in the morning, but not to expect it.

Some day the cancer will return, perhaps years from now, but perhaps next month. Nobody can tell me, perhaps my prostate has produced an exceptionally good cancer, I am good at many things, why not this? The cancer came from me, not an evil god, not some bad miasma, it is simply my own cells growing fast. This is something that will happen or not, my "fighting the good fight" will make no difference.

Is it wrong that I am somehow proud that my cancer is so aggressive, that my prostate was hardly changed before the cancer went out to the bones? That it killed me before I knew it was there? Like a good budoka.

I looked at the snowfall of yesterday and thought "this may be the last snowfall I ever see". Sentimental claptrap. I don't like snow, it was pretty, but cold, potentially slippery, a danger to my life. Why would I think any different about this snow, even if it is my last? I felt, "nice to see, how pretty, but take your cane when you go to the sauna".

The Buddha told us that life was suffering. This is true, the stoics tell us that we can end that suffering by killing ourselves any time. This is true. You must be alive to suffer. Does it help to wish for something else than what you have, to want what you cannot have? No it leads to bitterness, to suffering. To believe you can have what you cannot, leads to voting for those who promise what you want without the means or intent to give it to you. Emotion wins elections, sex sells.

What we call emotion may well be called delusion. Those who appeal to our emotion will win our support unless we can override our emotion, our delusion, and look at what is really there. This is science, this is reality, this is simply opening our eyes and looking.

How can we end this suffering? By "going with the flow". It's a simple idea, change what you can change, accept what you cannot. One of our Prime Ministers told us that, back when we had educated men to lead, rather than media clowns who promise the moon and give even less than its reflection in a puddle of oil-stained melt-water.

After a lifetime of effort, of trying to be physically better, I must accept that perhaps I have tipped over the inflection point. Maybe from now on I fight to keep what I have. This is hard, this is not "giving up" as those who believe in the lies of the fantasy-merchants might say. It is not giving up, it is struggling, fighting to accept what is real. To see what is really there.

Thankfully, I have had 40 years of practice at dying. 40 years of martial arts that are not about beating people up, of winning battles, of kicking names and taking ass. Every kata balances, someone lives, someone dies. Life balances, if I don't die my kids can't live. We don't need Thanos to snap his fingers to balance the universe, it balances.

Constant improvement is balanced by decline. This is what is there, entropy has guided the universe since the beginning, without entropy there would be no order, but that order becomes scattered. To wish for life beyond life is fantasy, a product of our ability to tell stories to each other. A wonderful ability, but not what is really there.

My cat is old, he meows sometimes, perhaps because he is in pain, perhaps he forgets where he is, perhaps he wants his food. He cannot wish for improvement or a life beyond his inevitable death. He hurts for physical reasons or he does not hurt. He wants his treats and sometimes he gets them and he is happy, but he does not torture himself with thoughts of being a kitten again, of a place of constant treats.

I am human, I can imagine paradise, I can get used to a healthy left arm, one that works. I can, because I can imagine, wish that it didn't tingle, that it will become what it was, perfect. I can forget that it was useless and a mass of agony not very long ago. It is my desire that tortures me late at night as I wake to wish I were 20 again. It is 40 years of stoicism, of zen buddhism that allows me to say "you are not, you will not be 20 again, and you wasted 20 in wishing and dreaming. You are wishing now and thus wasting a perfect chance to sleep. Sleep."

Ah, I see now that I can still improve.

Constant improvement.

Apr 1, 2019

Over to you

Each year around this time I have gathered a bunch of essays into a free book, usually several books, but this year it's impossible to spend any amount of time in front of my computer, so folks, over to you, feel free to gather up anything that I've got written online, and make your own books. I'm assuming nobody is going to want to stick their own name on my writing but you know, if it floats your boat... I'm not giving permission to plagiarize by the way. That's not good for you.

Now, if you want to put yourself down as editor, if you want to actually edit the stuff I write (I just gather it up by date and spit it out) you are most welcome. I'd be happy to stick it on the website so you can share it with everyone. Hah, like asking a photographer to take shots "for the exposure". Years ago I had a kid tell me "you should gather up your writings and make a book!" I said "go ahead". The silence of the enthusiastic.

You can check out what has been done on <https://sdksupplies.com/> in the manuals section, down at the bottom are some free downloads as well as all the other books above those, that you can buy. We are still not rich so feel free not to steal those.

There's a bunch of good stuff there I think, at least for those who like doing the stuff I do. Yesterday afternoon we spent three hours on Nito seiho and got through the first kata. The first 2.5 hours of class were spent on kamae and kihon. I talked quite a bit about the things that make our "style" ours. I hope the students don't forget this stuff, it's worth keeping around for the next generation. It's "over to you" time.

You know, in the last 5 or 6 years the nito movements have been grinding up my shoulders, it's nice to know that I can still do it, but OMG did I ever pay for it last evening and even this morning. Spasms and cramps in the shoulders. Ah well, keep typing and have another coffee. See if it settles down without me having to lie down. I really fear that one day I won't be able to keep my head up. Gimme a neck brace and prop me in the corner.

The guys bought me a folding chair for class and did exactly that. "Sit there and wave a stick at us.". I mentioned a few things from the translation my friend sent and also mentioned that I wasn't going to share it, because I was asked not to, and one of the students said "do you suppose you could let me...." No. Great props for wanting to know all the stuff you can about Musashi, but I'll tell you anything that you don't know already or that isn't in other books.

There are early writings from Musashi out there, other things than the Go Rin no Sho. I've written about a lot of them. Some of them are actually pretty technical, "5 ways to punch and 7 ways to kick" stuff like that. But I don't have the direct translations of those manuscripts and the various authors aren't repeating them. What that tells me is that the authors either don't know what Musashi was talking about, or the instructions are pretty obvious and basic. As in "make a fist and hit him in the face". Wanting to read this stuff is basically wanting to make sure there's nothing we're missing.

I'd like to see the Enmei Ryu, the Musashi Ryu, the Nito Ryu and Musashi's original movements for Niten Ichiryu. I really would, and so would you, but would we learn anything new? Do we suppose there is a secret technique in there that we've lost or missed over the generations?

Isn't this also a case of "over to you" from Musashi to us? A whole chain of "over to you". Our teachers give us everything they know (the Japanese way isn't the kung fu movie way, the teachers don't hold back that super secret technique in case the student turns evil). After they teach us all they know, they say "over to you" make it better. Sometimes we do. We have film of iaido sensei from the 50s and sometimes even earlier. Are we better now? We've got specialists, elite performers who do nothing but practice a subset of iai many hours a day. They compete in tournaments. They'd damned well better be better.

Somewhere I just read of someone getting an 8dan in five years or some such thing. Mentioned it yesterday and have already forgotten... memory going. This was not unusual a few generations ago, you'd get menkyo kaiden at 7 years or some such. That's full transmission, that's "over to you". What do we do now? We require a minimum of 30 years for 8dan and another ten for hanshi. The top guys these days had better be better. Are they? By what criteria are we judging?

Today we like upright, stable postures, fast, light sword and really neat and tidy uniforms. Just after the war there was no material for hakama and montsuki, so by that criteria alone, we're doing better right?

Yesterday I asked the seniors if they should be in front of me or not. As far as I'm concerned "over to you" happened long ago but they're still there. I'm not teaching them the dance steps any more, they know those, but I have to keep teaching them something. Oh, you say, sensei has to keep learning so he can keep teaching the students new stuff. Maybe, that works for a while, but now I'm crippled up, in pain, I can't throw them around the room any more so why are they still there? What's my job now? Yesterday I decided that my job was to somehow find a way to make them better than they are. Better technically, better people.

That was always my job of course, but it gets harder once you've told them "everything". So how do you tell them more than that? Let me know when you figure it out, the best I've got is "show up for class and be there for them".

What about my own training you ask? Hah, I'm done. The last rank I was offered became a joke, a bit of office politics that ended up with a repeated insult to the guy offering the rank. I hadn't asked for it and don't have a use for it. As things stand now I can't challenge again so "call me coach". No more paper to prove I know things.

On the other hand, I learned stuff in the class yesterday, I really did. I watched the students, commented, listened to my comments and said "hey, I'm stealing that". I hope they stole it too.

One day it really will be "over to you" for good, and then they'd better keep getting better somehow.

Jan 28, 2019