

Half a Century I

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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Liam Taylor cleaning the old man's sword, 2005

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Kim Taylor is a long time martial artist living in Guelph Ontario. He has written a couple dozen books on the subject, several scholarly articles, edited several magazines and generally done what he can to spread the word.

(Out, out, third person, it's too hard.)

Having tried all that, I also post short essays on the 'net and these have been collected here for your convenience. Since I'm only offering these in ebook form the formatting is pretty simple, one might even say "default".

Most of these will cover the martial arts that I am concerned with, Aikido, Iaido, Jodo, Niten Ichiryu and a couple more which will probably get mentioned along the way. If you don't know about them there are loads of resources available on the 'net.

You will also find a lot of martial arts jargon. Again I refer you to the 'net where you will find definitions of most of the words I use. I don't expect there will be many non-budo types reading this so I'm not going to worry about defining the foreign words or even identifying them as foreign by, for instance, putting them in italics. My book, my rules.

If someone out there figures this stuff could be edited into a proper book and published, get in touch if you've got the editor, I thought about it once but would rather write something new than edit something already written.

If you want to check out any of those books you can do so at <http://sdksupplies.com/> where you might also find more of these Half a Century ebooks.

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Why do we do what we do?

A good question, one that used to concern me a lot when I was younger. You get a fellow who asks "why do you practice that old weapons stuff, it isn't any use in modern life or for self defence"?

Here's all the reasons I used to go through,

- It does actually have a great self defence component, after all if I can deal with a sword I can probably deal with a punch.
- I don't want to practice self defence, I want to practice something that can't be confused with self defence so I can concentrate on other things beside "effectiveness" and all the silly arguments associated with that discussion.
- These arts are actually a form of meditation, you've got to concentrate and put aside excess rational thought when someone's swinging lumber at your head or you get hurt.
- It's great for keeping the body limber, my shoulders have never been so mobile.
- Forearms like Popeye.
- It's a way of interacting with the world, a creative act in an aimless and pointless universe.
- I'm preserving a dying cultural heritage. (OK I never used that one but I've heard it a lot).

I can probably think of dozens of others that have crossed my mind over the years but now I'm starting to understand what many of my instructors have told me over the years.

I do it because I've always done it. It's what I do.

Some time a lot of years ago this stuff became a part of what I am. I've been doing one form of Japanese martial art or another for well over half my life and I can't picture myself not doing it, any more than I can picture myself not walking around and breathing. In other words, the question has stopped having any meaning, it's just confusing. Q. Why do I do it? A. Of course I do it. See, doesn't make sense any more

What's this kiai stuff?

I occasionally have to explain the need to yell during various classes, especially to beginners who are a bit shy. The fastest answer of course is "because we tell you to". If that doesn't work I can explain a bit about breathing out on exertion and how a sensei can tell how you're breathing by the sounds.

As far as partner practice is concerned, I have noticed that you can control, to a large extent, how the kata proceeds by the volume, intensity and direction of your kiai. Aim a good blast right at your partner and his concentration levels pick right up. I don't usually try to use kiai to disrupt my partner but I have no doubt it can be done.

I also teach kiai in my women's self defence classes and there it works very well to disrupt an opponent. Let someone get a good grip on you, make sure they can anticipate your movements and maintain control, then suddenly let fly right at their face with your voice (or your hand) and their grip is suddenly gone.

In kendo, or any other art where you kiai a lot you can get used to the volume and the shock, so that you can start wondering if kiai is being "overdone" or useful at all. Then you start thinking about all sorts of things like varying the pitch, "projecting ki" and other suchlike. But the point in class would seem to be to get to just that stage, where your voice is powerful, you can project it well, and you yourself are not affected.

Now go use it against someone who's not used to it.

A bit more yelling

You'll find that different schools kiai in different ways and with different specific kiai. Niten Ichiryu has three kiai sounds but they are only done on the Shidachi side in the nito seiho (two sword side). They are Zu Tan Feh

MJER tachi uchi no kurai has ya ei to

Kendo no kata has ya to, and so on. You'll even find that iaido "has kiai" it's usually silent but it's there in many lines. I often find my jaw dropping although my mouth isn't open when I'm doing iai.

Years ago I read an account of Morihei Ueshiba's involvement with kotodama, the study of sounds. Don't ask me which was which, it really was several years ago, but there were three examples, a sound that pierced, one that cleaved in two and one that suppressed or smothered.



1990 Don Harvey Seminar in Guelph

Combat Effectiveness: Training "with the intent to kill"

Getting interested in the idea of training with the intent to kill, without actually killing, sort of reminds me of when I was 17 and I used to say to the girls "let's go all the way but we won't get you pregnant OK?"

Here's one possible way to train like that, it's a comment on a session of sharps swordplay in England in 1710 as quoted from Terry Brown's "English Martial Arts" page 52 (Anglo Saxon Books, 1997)

"They began the fight with broadswords. The Moor got the first wound, above the breast, which bled not a little. Then the onlookers began to cheer and call for Wood; they threw down vast quantities of shilling and crowns, which were picked up by his second... In the second round the Englishman, Wood, took a blow above the loins of such force that, not only did his shirt hang in tatters, but his sword was knocked out of his hand, and all the buttons on one side of his open breeches he wore were cut away.

"Then they went for each other with sword and dagger, and the Moor got a nasty wound in the hand, which bled freely. It was probably due to this that, when they attacked each other twice with "sword and buckler", that is to say with broadsword and shield, the good Moor recieved such a dreadful blow that he could not fight any longer. He was slashed from the left eye right down his cheek to his chin and jaw with such force that one could hear the sword grating against his teeth. Straightaway not only the whole of his shirt front but the platform too was covered with blood. the wound gaped open as wide as a thumb, and I cannot tell you how ghastly it looked on the black face. A barber-surgeon immediately sprang towards him and sewed up the wound, while the moor stood there without flinching. When this had been done and a cloth bound round his head, the Moor would have liked to continue the fight, but since he had bled so profusely, neither the surgeon nor the seconds, who act as umpires, would allow this. So the combatants shook hands (as they did after each round) and prepared to get down. "

Brown includes a similar passage on female combatants with like results. Another bout, on the previous page ended when one master had his "sinues split" and could not hold his blade any longer. Granted these were theatre displays and not normal everyday training (which was done with dull blades so you got bruises and broken bones but usually not maimed or dead) but they do show the logical result of training for "reality" and effectiveness. How else could one possibly know if what one is learning is effective without such full-bore tests of skill. All else is just play-fighting.

Here's another reason why I don't defend iaido's "combative effectiveness" when asked about it. I would very much prefer that any potential student who wants to learn how to kill people go to a "kenjutsu" school or a "ninja" school to learn such things. Far from contradicting the idea that iaido is combatively ineffective, I would encourage this belief wherever it occurs and I thank those who repeat

it. It's not a new thought by the way, I just tripped over something I wrote around 1990 which is on the exact same topic.

Please, if you want to learn how to kill and maim people, avoid my sissy sword school and go to a place where they are willing to teach you such things, let them worry about the liability and insurance problems. If, after you've learned how to kill people effectively, on the battlefield and off, you then want to study iaido, by all means give me a call. I'll be here next week, year, decade, and so will the other sissy sensei.

By the way, I'd be interested to hear from those who have participated in armed combat with sharps such as described by Mr. Brown to test their battlefield-effective sword skills. If you'd like to do an article on the bouts I'd be happy to publish it. Photos would also be good.



Colin Watkin giving it to Kim Taylor in Calgary 2008 perhaps.

Koryu changes

I received the following questions and figured I'd give my thoughts about them here, for what they're worth.

I'd like to hear what you've got to say about "modifying koryu". What are your thoughts on it? At what point does somebody have the right to change what they've learned? Koryu purists would say "never" and go on believing that any changes that occurred in their lineage prior to them were the result of divine inspiration, done with the blessing of the koryu gods ... What do you think?

I think it's a pretty common assumption that the koryu never change, and a corollary I've often heard is that the ZNKR iai kata (Seitei Gata) change every time the committee gets together for beer.

As far as I'm concerned, that's exactly opposite to the reality. The ZKR iai is "written down", it's well described and practised according to that written (on paper if not in stone) description. When it does occasionally change or get additions, those need to be debated and passed by, yes, the committee. Anybody who has ever done committee work will know instantly just how easy it is to get things changed through that method.

The koryu are much easier to change. Small schools of a single headmaster and dojo change hour by hour as sensei picks and chooses what to practise. By emphasizing some things and not others the students obtain different arts. By getting older sensei changes in the way he can perform the techniques, and again, the students obtain different arts.

In schools that are very large, with many different lineages, again you'll see drift as some lines emphasize some things and others, others.

None of these changes are intentional, they are natural and inevitable.

Headmasters can of course change the art intentionally, they can add and drop kata, change the way the kata are practised, and re-write the history if they choose. Even headmasters learn, longer and deeper practise, more experience with other arts, or just longer experience in life itself will change what sensei wants to pass along, this can result in subtle or major changes in the art which accordingly get passed along to the current crop of students.

Each time a headmaster changes the school, you'll get branches as the old guys leave to preserve the old ways... which will then drift in their own way.

You'll get students who leave to make their own changes, perhaps because they practise two or three arts and want to add one to another, or don't have time, or lose a sensei or get booted out. They will use what they know and carry on in their own way, changing the art as they do.

When can you change what you've learned? Good question and of course there's no answer, or rather there's no one answer. When can you change the colour of your bedroom walls? When you want to, when you have to, never if you don't have to, why would you want to? On and on.

You WILL change the art, right from the beginning, simply by practising it and being a different person than your sensei. It is impossible to perform the art as your sensei did, and your students will perform it differently than you. There may come a time when you have to change the art, for instance when you damage a knee, or your shoulder stiffens up, your technique must be adapted. You can tell your students not to do it like you now do it, but of course they will. The eye-body link is stronger than the brain-body link when you're doing these arts.

By the way, the only way you can actually change an art is to pass it along to your students in an altered form. If you do the art differently and don't pass it along, it is as if you made no changes at all.

It is entirely conceivable that you will add exercises to your class, extract bits from kata, add bits to kata, combine kata, to help your students get some point or other. These additions to the art may, in their turn be passed along by your students and the line will eventually contain these extra kata.

You may have little time to practise various sections of your art, and pass along only a core of techniques, this will also change the lineage that passes through you.

Any school that lives is changing. Life is change. My personal advice is to accept that you can't do it like sensei, that you aren't the same person. Practise what sensei teaches you, try to perform it that way as well as you can, try to understand what he says, and then try to understand what you can on your own. Eventually the art will become yours, when sensei dies it IS yours. Shu ha ri.

Another related thought: you've learned any number of "styles" of Jikiden, so how do you decide which one(s) you're personally going to do? How do you feel about mixing and matching? ("This is the noto from X-sensei; this is the cut from Y-sensei; this is the nukitsuke of Z-sensei...")

It's not that uncommon now to be able to practise with several sensei. This can be a problem for many students and should likely not be undertaken by beginners since it will only confuse things. A single clear voice is best when you're starting out, and beginners absolutely want to be told the "right way" to do a kata. There is only one way to do it correctly when you're learning... if you're lucky.

For those who have moved along and may have many years experience it's a good thing to be able to practise with different lines and sensei, it gives a more nuanced idea of what's out there. You may also be doing a bit of forensic genealogy/archaeology. By learning from three or four sensei you may take what's common to all of them and assume that the common bits come from when those sensei branched off from each other. So the common practices of four students of a single sensei should be what that sensei taught. If the four students learned at different periods of sensei's life their common practices ought to be what sensei never changed over the years. Is this an infallible way to get at the past? Who knows, but it's all we may have in the age before video.

Now, to your question, should you mix and match? Yes and no. The first thing you have to do is understand for yourself what the underlying assumptions are for your line. What is core to the meaning of your practise. When you can do that you can make changes, pick this or that way of doing things, that don't change the underlying core meaning.

For example, one sensei may do a final cut with a very long low stance, the back foot flat on the ground

and the hips well sunk down, the tip almost to the ground. Another sensei may finish the kata with a cut that is much more upright, stance shorter, back foot pressing forward, tip up, body square to the front. If the first line assumes that there are no more possible opponents in the room when you finish the kata, and the second line assumes that there are, these two ways of finishing a kata are not interchangeable. One says "finish it!!!" and the other says "finish it but watch out, his buddy may have ideas".

So some choices are not possible without changing the underlying meaning of your lineage. Others you may make for various reasons; you want to remember a sensei, you feel this way is stronger or smoother than the one you originally learned, you can't physically do something your original way but you find a new way from another sensei.

A poor way to make those choices is "to be different". It's seldom a good idea to do something because you're the only one who does it in your line. "Ha, I did a seminar with Y-sensei and you didn't so I'm doing my sageo control this way to show you guys that I know a secret and you don't" or some such rationalization. Not very useful in the end.

The bottom line is that change is inevitable, but it is not inevitable that we push that change along just for the sake of changing things. "Dance with the one that brung ya." Your sensei's instruction got you to where you are now, why would you think that the same instruction would not bring your students to the same place? Why change?



Kim Taylor being sent to the mat by Bruce Stiles, Toronto 1982

Cleaning the Tsuka Ito

I've been getting a few questions on how to maintain this and that. Here's my take on your sword hilt, more specifically the wrap and how to clean all that oil, grime and dead skin that gets packed in there over the years.

There's nothing all that difficult about cleaning the tsukaito. Warm soapy water and a toothbrush is what's usually recommended. Just don't drop the tsuka in the sink and let it soak. The water might swell the paper padding in the wrap but it won't do much more than that. Clean, wrap dry with a towel and let air dry for a day or so.

Or you could use what I use, 70% isopropanol (rubbing alcohol) which is just as good at getting out the dead skin and oil and dries much faster than soapy water. You can clean the ito in place using a toothbrush. If some of it gets a bit loose, glue it down, if the knot starts to come undone, glue it down. If the wrap is loosening you can try watering down some white carpenter's glue and injecting it under the ito to stiffen it up a bit. There are all sorts of these kinds of tricks

When you clean the tsuka it's a good time to check out the rest of the fittings and to remove and re-shim it if necessary, so that when you put it all back together it's tight again. Just don't unwrap the ito, there's never any reason to do that unless the wrap comes undone by itself (well, usually by you twisting your hands around while you use the blade). I've never ever had to re-wrap a tsuka because I don't move my hands much since my beginner days when I ended up with blood running down my wrist from one hand. Too much rubbing back and forth over a rough wrap job led to a blister then to no skin, all in the course of a half hour's suburi exercise.

If you unwrap the ito you'll never get it wrapped up again because when the wrap is done, the knot is tied and the ends are cut off short. There's nothing left to re-tie that knot... unless you stitched a couple of inches on to each end... hmm.

Japonics

Here's something that I'm starting to notice, the constant explanations by folks who have traveled to Japan and post on the internet all about how the Japanese pronounce adopted words. "The Japanese, who play basuboru (that's Japanese for baseball)..."

It's starting to irritate me, maybe because I live in multicultural Canada, or because we've got lots of Japanese around here, or because I occasionally edit academic papers by Japanese scientists for their English content. Whatever the reason, it's making a language out of an accent which isn't very useful to anyone.

"Hey I picked up my yard today and my Pakistani neighbour said he thought it was "beddy goood" (that's Pakistani for very good)..."

"When he saw his friend the fellow from Brooklyn said "yo mo fo" (that's ghetto for..."

You get the idea, a bit too condescending for my taste.

Of course I realize it's a way of saying "Hey I've been to Japan and know how they talk over there" but honestly, can't we find a less obvious way to brag?

How many ranks are there?

I get asked what rank I am quite a bit, and it seems to be a big concern to many folks. I'd like to say a little bit about meaningful ranks and how many there are.

As far as I can remember in the Aikikai there were two ranks, 1. When you could teach (shodan), and 2. when you could award rank (shihan). Everything else is just placeholder and an encouragement to the kids to keep moving along in their practice.

In other arts those two ranks happen at different times, for instance in the kendo federation you can't teach independantly until 5dan and you can't ever award rank by yourself but you can start sitting on panels at the same rank.

I can't actually think of any other "real" grades in the arts.

So what are the uses of all the other dan ranks, shogo (renshi, kyoshi, hanshi), instructor levels (fukushido-in, shido-in), and koryu papers like oku iri and mokuroku and menkyo and meister and provost and all that other stuff? Well as Joe Svinth once said, Ego boosting, student bragging (my sensei's belt is scruffier than yours), and advertising value (who wouldn't want to study with a soke rather than a sensei?).

It's also a good way to do a fast check on where people's priorities lie, just like in academia. If someone is a full professor and insists on being called "Professor Jones", while another full professor says, "call me Jimmy"... or if one guy in the department is constantly angling for that "assistant professor" title (which carries absolutely no extra administrative weight or money at all) while another is simply working away in the office at his grant applications so that his techs and grad students can do good work for him...

In other words confusing the title with the man, or on the personal level, confusing the title for the accomplishment.

As my Aikido sensei used to say, "rank is a measure of how long you've been hanging around".

Just what does a "Black Belt" mean?

In Aikido I spent 11 years getting to black belt (shodan), and that isn't all that unusual in Canada, the bare minimum was about 5 years. While this seems standard in the West, I suspect this isn't the case in Japan, where teaching ranks would come in around 5-6dan, but at Shodan you can teach in an independant dojo under the Canadian Aikido Federation. In the Canadian Kendo Federation the system is coordinated with Japan, and you can teach at 5dan, which in Canada would take a minimum of 12 years after getting a shodan rank (6 months to a year to shodan for most adults), which equates pretty closely to my experience getting a shodan in Aikido.

Although 5dan is ZenKenRen teaching rank, I would be willing to bet there aren't all that many godan in Japan with their own dojo, I suspect the actual rank to begin teaching there would be somewhere between 6 and 7dan on average). In other words, in ZenKenRen the ranks from ikkyu to sandan or so would be equivalent to about 5kyu to 3kyu in Aikido in seriousness and difficulty.

Put in your time and get the rank until you start getting near the place where you can officially start teaching, then the judges start looking closely at you. If you ignore differences in the actual rank this happens, I suspect most organizations act pretty much the same way.

Contrary then, to the common thinking in the west, a "black belt" is not equivalent between different arts, or between different countries, but time to teaching rank may actually be more consistent than one suspects.

Should rank be standard around the world? In the International Kendo Federation, sure, since FIK rank from Indonesia is good in Holland. But koryu rank is going to vary from menkyo to menkyo, and there's no reason for it not to do so. Each of those grading systems is independant of the other. In the FIK you have multiple 8dans and multiple menkyo holders so it CAN be standardized since they all look at each other.

It's impossible that grades would ever be coordinated across several organizations of course, who would enforce that, and how?

"Black belt" vs "classical grades", which are better?

Talking about the virtues of grading in a modern organization such as the ZenKenRen which gives dan grades or in a koryu system with its own certification system may be rather a moot point given that people training for the same period of time are likely to have the same skill level. If you put in your time seriously and you've got an instructor that has a minimum level of skill in teaching then you will get to a certain level after a certain time. So what's the problem? If you like koryu licenses better than ZenKen licenses, do those. The licenses don't magically provide the skill level, nor do they even indicate it except in a very rough way, that level is only demonstrated when you get on the floor and start swinging lumber.

In ZenKenRen you have to please a panel of several instructors, the majority (if not all) of whom are not your instructor (after, of course, you please your instructor who puts you up for the grade). In koryu you just have to please your instructor and maybe his boss. Either way you get or don't get your rank depending on both your skill and who you've pissed off lately. If you piss off your instructor you don't get a grade. If your instructor pissed off the guys above him (in either system) you don't get the grade (provided the guys above are petty and vindictive, and that too I suggest is organization independent).

I'll leave it up to others to debate which system (committee or direct instructor) is most objective or maintains the most objective standards or whatever. I suspect the important point to take home is that you put in the time and you gain the skill (unless you're hopeless).

What do Grades Mean Anyway?

There are some smaller arts out there that don't have any grading system at all. If it's one dojo with 10 or 20 people than what's the point of any kind of grading or certification? Everyone knows who came into the dojo first, who's spent the most time training, and what skill level each has. It's only when you get into larger organizations that you need some way to compare skill levels, or time in, or permission to teach etc. If you don't know the fellow who just walked in the door, it's handy to have some way to peg where to put him in the class before you start.

If you are in a grading system, such as the ZenKenRen, the demands of the grading increase as you go up in grade. By the time you start to challenge 8dan, very very few people pass, and even fewer pass on their first try. I have heard a story from a member of the grading panel on the iaido side that a soke of one of the iaido schools has tried the exam many times but been failed each time. He puts too much of his school into the ZenKenRen iaido kata and refuses to do them the "kendo" way since that would mess up his koryu. Everyone understands the situation, and he doesn't seem to mind attempting the exams and failing. Why? Perhaps the process may be more important than the result. I can think of several other reasons for doing it, including exposing the top grading people in the ZenKen to his style of iai, which is one of the smaller styles.

At the lower rank levels grades may seem to be more or less automatic as I mentioned above. In the CKF we do fail people starting at ikkyu, but we aren't grading hundreds of people per grade level (more like scores at the kyu and shodan levels). In Aikido I used to go to summer camp and was quite offended that on a three year cycle everyone, the whole group from kyu to yondan/godan or so, passed two years, then on the third everyone failed and we got a lecture about slipping standards. I argue instead for looking at the individual and what he does on the day of the exam. I've passed students of mine who do a good job on the day but don't seem quite up to it in class, and I've failed students of mine who blew their exam but do quite well in class. I dunno if that's fair or not but it's the way I figure it should be done. The other four or five people on the panel have their own ways of looking at things I'm sure but it's surprising just how consistent the passes and fails are.

What do I get with my Dan rank?

In some dojo the students line up according to rank, in others it's according to seniority. My dojo seems to have people who sometimes compete to sit in the low spot in the dojo, all the most senior people jockey to see who can be the most humble. Occasionally I need to rearrange them so that there are people spread across the floor. Mostly though they come in and sit down wherever they happen to be.

I can't think of much else that one gets with one's rank. Perhaps in a more commercialized organization one's pay scale might be related to rank, but for us it seems that the more rank, the more crappy organizational jobs you get to take on.

As I have often said, rank is a punishment, not a reward.



Kim Taylor in Calgary, always wear your hat.

Teacheritis

Over the years in several martial arts I've had a thought or two about teaching, who wants to, who should, even who should not.

Here's a typical scenerio that illustrates the different attitudes to teaching and, by extension, to the character of the participating students. Big teacher comes to town for a seminar. Students line up, who's at the front and who's at the back? Now the class starts, who's "helping" and who's practicing?

There's two ways to line up in a class, at the front and at the back. Seniors get to pick where they go because they can tell their juniors to bump over. So here you have the, perhaps only once a year, chance to learn a bit. Where are the seniors? I know where I am, and it's not because I'm told to be there, I figure you've got a better chance to learn, a better chance to be called forward and ripped apart, if you're down front. Not only that but if you're down front you don't have to watch any of the juniors behind you, for a while they're SOP, someone else's problem and you can concentrate on your own problems. When you're near the beginners they are very likely to turn to you and say "what's he mean by that?" every 12 seconds instead of being silent and watching the front.

On the other hand, you get some seniors who want to hide, who don't want to be embarassed, humiliated and belittled by the visiting teacher. Call me a masochist but I love that stuff. Then again I don't much care what my students think of me either.

Once the class starts you get even more insight on who's what in their own minds. It can start as early as two or three weeks practice, and you see the teacheritis bug hit. Nothing better than a beginner who wants to tell you what sensei really means since his own sensei has told him how to do this technique.

But there's the seniors too, still hiding out but now they're doing it by "helping" the juniors instead of working on their own practice. It's easier to avoid the hard work of learning by assuming you know it already and can assist sensei by teaching instead. Wrong wrong wrong. Unless sensei tells you to help, take the chance to learn. The time to disappear is when sensei is looking for someone to take the absolute beginners off to one side so the rest of the class can move along. Me, I'm shrinking back into the shadows and letting someone else step forward. There's always someone who wants to be picked by sensei to teach the beginners isn't there? Someone who can then say "sensei picked me to teach the beginners".

Pah, I don't want to teach them, I want to learn from sensei.

Now I may be a bit misleading here, there are some folks who have physical problems, who can't practice as hard as they used to when they were young but you know, sensei can see that. Get down front and do as much as you can for as long as you can and rest when you have to but keep your butt on the floor and listen hard. If you have to drag a chair up to the side of the room you can still sit and listen and learn. Teaching is a lousy way to rest... or rather, someone who is resting is a lousy teacher.

Teaching can be one of the fastest ways to stop a student in his tracks. You have to be very careful who you assign a teaching role because for many people that's it for their learning. "I'm a teacher so I've got nothing left to learn, now I teach". Ouch. Not only do those guys make lousy teachers, they can also

pass on that attitude to the students. The best students to assign as assistants are the ones who hate it, who beg to be let off, who don't want to teach, but want only to learn. Those are the ones who will keep learning while they're teaching.

As I've said before, rank is a punishment, and so's teaching. Anything that takes you away from learning is to be avoided by all good students.



A couple of buff Sei Do Kai students doing some outdoor jodo practice

How to get a style

One of my students mentioned that my sensei had corrected something I said to her. Fair enough, I'm often corrected, but when I looked into it I found that what was really happening was that she had taken a comment from me and exaggerated it past where I would have wanted it myself.

Or as I said, "made it a fetish". I have noticed this many times actually, there are entire lines of MJER that seem to have taken a single written comment from an old book and made it a fetish, in this case pushing the hips so far into the chiburi that they are almost unbalanced.

I wonder how many differences in "style" can be tracked back to something that sensei once said. While we look and copy it's not easy to go too far from what sensei does, but when, on occasion, sensei says something to us, or even more potent, when he writes it down, the rational mind can take over and suddenly that offhand correction or simple instruction becomes the most important point in the lineage.

Without the correction of our eyes, and without sensei making darned sure he's doing what he says and saying only what he does, students can move far beyond what was intended. If sensei is old, or injured and needs to tell students to "do what I say and not what I do" he needs to be especially clear and watch for any exaggeration from the students.

Similarly, if sensei has said "do this" as an over-correction to a problem, he needs to make sure that the students pull it back again at some time in the future or they're likely to carry that exaggeration on for the rest of their career.

Don't make comments into a fetish, remember that the keyword is "natural". If it feels too far from natural there's a good chance you've overshot the mark.

Alice in Budoland

I do a fair bit of wandering around in the Wonderland that is organization. I have to deal with school administration, several levels of budo organization, photo studio co-ops and at one time, the pit of despair that was a job with a large employer.

For 30 years I've felt like Alice, running as hard as I can to stay in the same spot.

While thinking about things like teaching, and who's going to carry on with the budo stuff in our organization it occurred to me that I haven't seen much forward progress in the last few years... running hard for the same spot as I said. This is unfortunate because I can see where we could be further along, and on a personal level, I could be a lot further... I have projects that have been on hold for 15 years hanging around the place.

Then I flashed on my problem, and it relates to how I treat my kids 'er students 'er kids too. While I truly believe in making it easier for the next generation, I think I've been a bit slack in the responsibility department. Maybe it's time to ask some of those coming up to hold the ladder, so I can get a bit further along myself.

If Isaac Newton "stood on the shoulders of giants" to produce his great works, meaning he built on the work of the great thinkers who came before him, it is just as important to "stand on the shoulders of the next giants". In other words, for leaders, or mom and dad, to get ahead, it's important for those who are coming along behind to provide a solid base, to hold the ladder, so that the entire organization can move on up.

As a kid I should have been taking care of the housework, or at least my share of it so that Mom could make a bit more money for the family. As a grad student I did the lab work so that my supervisor could make the connections, get the grant money and dream up the lab's direction. As a budo student I should be taking care of the organizational details, fending off the bureaucracy, organizing the seminar details and all that other stuff so that sensei can work on his own practice, deepen his insights, produce those instructional videos and manuals and generally get along with pulling my butt up the ladder after him.

Now up to today I had always had the idea that the organization / family / human race goes ahead by flinging the younger members out ahead of the older ones. "Here kid, hold this string and I'll throw you across the gap, then you pull a larger rope over and we make a bridge", but that's only one way to do it. If the "top guys" are going to be up there for several years it's a bit of a waste of time for everyone to wait until the kids get skillful enough to move over them. Better to push from below in the meantime so that when it is time to do the leapfrog we're all further along the path. "Here old man, we've built this ladder and you climb up, then we push it over and you drop onto the other side and we've got our bridge already. We'll shove your fat arse up the rungs, just hang on when you get to the top".

If the guy on top of the ladder has to constantly come back down to repair the broken rungs nobody is going to get very far.

Do what you say you're going to do

I believe that the martial arts have many lessons that are radically different than what is found in society. I also think this may be as true in their countries of origin as in their adopted lands.

Today I found myself talking about "doing what you say you're going to do" in relation to some comment or other. This seems such a blindingly obvious thing to me, but it may not be so obvious in the general attitude of the day so perhaps I will expand a bit here.

To "do what you say you're going to do" is something that I learned back in my earliest days... in the late '50s and early '60s. It was part of growing up to be a man and was included with such other ideas as personal responsibility and service to others. You did what you said you would, you took responsibility for what you did, and you thought about others before you thought about yourself.

I don't think much of that is taught now. In fact, after the "me generation" years of the '80s, and the morphing of "the personal is political" into "whatever I feel is what should be enshrined in law" I think the idea of personal responsibility is as weak as it has ever been. It's now the age of suing a company because their coffee is hot, the idea that we may be responsible for our own happiness is just starting to reappear as a radical new idea in the self help business after years of blaming anyone, everyone else for our unhappiness.

Where did the "manly virtues" come from in the first place? Well "do what you say you're going to do" is pretty easy to explain in a martial context. If you're planning a battle and one officer says "I'll be here with my men and we'll attack this position so that you can attack that one", you'd better be able to believe the fellow will be there or you and your men are going to die.

It's a matter of trust, and it still is. If you want your friends, employers or kids to trust you, you'd better deliver on your promises.

It doesn't cut it to say to yourself "it's easier to say I'll do this and avoid an argument" and then not do it. There are whole societies out there that smile and say yes no matter what, but this is not being polite, this is not consensus building, this is sheer personal laziness. Go along with the crowd and agree but don't do it later. Tell someone you'll do a job and then don't do it because your boss, girlfriend, father tells you to do something else? Lazy. Say you'll do some unpleasant chore to avoid getting yelled at and then not do it? Lazy.

Lazy, lazy and worse. In our age of non-confrontation and zero tolerance for arguments and conformity to the politically correct we have become plain and simple liars.

Once upon a time we believed that "all a man has is his word". What does a man have now? Not even his word... perhaps money, a job for a few more months until the company goes under anyway. A kid that's happy for a few days until he finds out you really didn't mean you were going to the beach with him. Eventually what you have is a whole community of people who don't trust you any more than they trust themselves.

Do what you say you're going to do, and don't promise things you can't deliver. If you don't want to do

something, say so and have the argument. You may be surprised at how different you feel about yourself.

Sometimes the hard way is the right way.



Iaido Grading 2001 in Toronto with Bill Mears

Who Owns the School

You own the ryu you practice. You own it in two different ways, first by sinking so deep into the teachings you go beyond habit, beyond rational analysis into a knowledge of the teachings that resembles your knowledge of your native language.

At that point you no longer recite nursery rhymes and graduate to writing poetry. To be plain, you can make new kata which are in fact, wholly of the school.

The other way you own the school is in a very physical and literal way. As a student you start a payment plan, for each hour you pay in, you receive a certain amount of knowledge from your teachers. Stick around 30 or 40 years and you have quite an investment in the real estate that is the school.

When your teachers eventually pass on they leave you with what they owned, the school. You have as much as they will ever be able to give you now, what you have learned they can no longer correct, add to or take away from, it's wholly yours from that moment on.

Everyone who has been in the school owns as much of it as they've paid for, with those who have paid longest owning the most of course.

What about the soke you say, the menkyo kaiden? Aren't they the owners? Well they are usually those who have been around the longest and so are naturally those who "speak the language" best. Those folks own and are owned most by the school. On the other hand, there may be times when a soke is named by the previous headmaster who may not be the longest studying student. This can happen for various good or bad reasons but always the success of the new leader will depend entirely on the acceptance of those who "own" the school.

Without the students, without the many owners, there is no school. Without you the students there is no language to speak, no real estate to build houses on, no school to learn in.

The Power of Thought

Recently a meta-analysis (analysing multiple data sets from multiple studies) of anti-depressant drugs was done using studies obtained through the freedom of information act and the authors found that anti-depressant drugs were not, in most cases, any more effective than placebos. What is important for us here is the finding that the mere taking of a pill, whether drug or placebo (fake) did in fact produce real benefits.

The placebo effect has been well known for many years, it works. It also explains all sorts of alternative medicine which doesn't seem to have any other explanation for it's effectiveness.

Negative and positive self-talk is also something that we need to pay attention to as martial artists if we want to get the best performance out of ourselves. Positive self-talk has as many names as there are authors who want to make a buck or two on a book and program. Psycho-Cybernetics (1960) was one of the first books I read on the subject, and "The Secret" is the latest incarnation I've heard about. All you really need to know is that a mood / happiness increase will come with happy thoughts and positive actions. Act happy and you will become happy.

In a more focused way, to improve your skills in the martial arts you should visualize yourself successfully doing the particular skill you're working on.

Negative self-talk comes in as many flavours as the self-help stuff does, but it's a bit more "underground" since nobody is touting their failure program on Oprah. "I can't" is one of the most common ways a beginner starts a sentence and as teachers we spend a very large portion of each class trying to prove otherwise. I can't do a front roll, I can't kick over my head, I can't grip the sword like that... So we spend hours and days trying to convince the students otherwise before we can even begin the physical steps toward the skill. It is almost impossible to perform a complex skill by accident, and if you believe you can't do it, the only way to actually do it would be by accident. When you change your tune and believe you actually can perform it you will be able to work toward it.

Another, more subtle form of negative self talk is the opposite of personal responsibility, it's the "reasons why" something won't work. In this wonder-filled age of litigation and laziness we have trained entire generations to believe that it's not their fault. Lean out over a railing on a hiking trail and it breaks... sue the parks service. Drive with hot coffee in your lap and spill it... sue the restaurant for not warning you it's hot. Don't learn the times tables in school... blame the teachers. Unhappy relationship... blame your partner. Car accident... couldn't see out the window. Anything but "yeah, I screwed up, I should have known better.... it's my fault".

The problem with that attitude is several-fold. First of all it removes personal responsibility, which may seem like a good thing... it's not my fault. But along with a loss of personal responsibility comes a big loss of perceived self-efficacy, a loss of the feeling that you can control your life. If it's never your fault, it's also never your accomplishment. You have no control over what happens to you, it's all external. Your safety depends not on your own good judgement, but on some government approved safety test.

It makes you incapable of helping yourself, it prevents you from achieving, it makes you unhappy. In

order to improve your life, to acquire a new skill, to fix something, you often have to start with "it's my fault".

Once there you can move on to "I can fix it" and with that statement you really can.



Jeff Broderick giving it to Kim Taylor in 2000

The Power of the Body

I spoke about thoughts and their effect on the body below, but I also said "Act happy and you will become happy". That brings up the idea of the body's influence on the mind.

We all do physical activities, we work out at a martial art or go lift weights or run or something. How do you feel afterward? I feel good. If you believe in chemicals you call it endorphins... when you run your body releases endorphins which are natural opiates and these make you feel good. Believe in meditation? Your exercise time breaks the depressive cycles of thought because you're concentrating on the exercise and not on what you should have said when he said.

Here's an exercise to try right now, stand up straight, lock your knees, clench your fists, hunch your shoulders and breath fast and shallow while looking right and left. Check out how you're feeling after a few moments.

Now unclench, drop the shoulders and shake out the arms a bit, unlock the knees and breath deep into your stomach rather than high in your chest. Any change in feelings?

Does the second body position remind you of anything your sensei said to you?

No matter how you think about it, what mechanism you assume is happening, using the body affects the mind.

Sensei is Laughing at me Again

The martial arts are strange things. Educationally they often don't seem to make any sense at all. For instance, if you screw up a technique or get smacked on the head with a stick it's a pretty good bet that sensei will laugh at you.

I was reminded of this last weekend when demonstrating a point at a seminar with one of my oldest students. I hadn't practiced with him regularly for quite a while and forgot what a good student he is. To make a point about how a particular movement is actually a block to a sword strike I waved at him to cut at my head before turning my attention fully to him. My little finger is still pretty black today but I don't think it's any more crooked than it was before the "block". I've even got most of the feeling back in it.

After that class had ended, I showed my student the nice bruise that was still changing colour minute by minute and he just laughed and told me not to be such a whiner. Like I said, a good student who is now a good teacher, someone who laughs at his students if they screw up I'm sure.

While not so good by the old self esteem theory of pedagogy, laughing at your students is pretty effective for what it is intended to do. I may have mentioned before that the martial arts are about self-reliance and personal responsibility. If you missed that earlier, consider it said now. They are also about how to behave during an emergency.

Now when confronted by something like an accident, or an injury (like maybe the loss of a little finger during a swordfight) there are a several things you can do. Flinch, yell, freeze, cry, or simply carry on with what you're doing. Only one of those is actually appropriate in a life and death situation.

The laughter you hear from sensei when you get smacked may seem a bit harsh. In fact it may seem downright cruel if you're the delicate type (physically or psychologically) and it is if you're that type. That laughter is also a lesson in just what failure, pain and loss should feel like. It's the opposite of taking your misfortune seriously, and a chance for you to react somewhat less like a whining, flinching, potentially dying person each class.

So remember the next time sensei laughs and says "We're not laughing with you, we're laughing at you", someday, in front of lots of people, you may get the chance to smack him really hard on the hand and laugh right back at him.

And someday, when the car in front of you gets hit from the side in an intersection and you can either dive for the floor or steer through the mess, you may find yourself laughing as you pull safely to the side of the road.

You get what you pay for?

Not a chance.

In the martial arts it seems that the more you pay the less you expect. What I mean is that for students who are paying high monthly fees to a commercial dojo, the expectation of pampering and service is at a rather healthy low. Students who pay a lot tend to make sure they show up for class, on time and without asking for much else than to be taught full-bore for those hours they're there.

On the other hand, in those arts where the tradition is that teaching is free, students seem to expect a lot more than a sensei who just shows up and teaches them some sort of skill. Sensei has to be there on time... while the students tend to show up any time at all. Sensei has to foot the bills and clean the dojo. Sensei has to solve the life problems of the students... you know the drill.

Why do you suppose that is? You'd think that if students were paying nothing at all for a class that they'd appreciate it more, and ask for less from the instructor. That they'd help with the cleaning, be at class on time, chip in for expenses, that sort of thing. Nope.

Here's the reasoning as I see it.

I paid for this class so I'm going to be on time and work hard to get my money's worth. This is the instructor's job so I'm not going to ask him to do extra stuff since I don't like people asking me to do extra stuff for nothing in my job.

I'm not paying for this class so I don't really care if I'm on time or not, and I'm doing this guy a favour by being around so he should be trying to keep me here by working his ass off. Beside which he wants to do this so he should be happy to give me all this extra help.

You don't "get what you pay for", you "appreciate something according to what you paid for it". How else do you explain a four thousand dollar designer bag that's mass produced in China? Or students who can't be bothered to show up for free classes and then complain when sensei isn't there?

Out of the way old man

A question was raised about practicing jodo, specifically practicing jodo against a teacher who scares the stuffing out of you. How do you get to that mental point where you can wait for his attack and then counter with your jo when you're petrified?

The answer of course is that you can't. You will hit a wall until you get past your sensei, until you can forget that he's your teacher, better than you, and all that other stuff.

It's his job to get you past that point, sometimes it takes a bit of a challenge, sometimes you just have to wait until sensei is so old and feeble that it's obvious to a beginner... sometimes the old guy has to die to get you past it but in any case, you have to get to the point where you challenge him ... at that point in time, for that kata, you have to believe you're capable of taking him.

I hear "I'll never be as good as sensei" all the time, and I honestly think that it's well intentioned, we all respect our sensei, and sensei will always be sensei of course, but it promotes laziness.

You would never say "I'll never be as good as coach" when you're practicing a sport, if you did you'd be coasting, playing beneath your ability... then you'd be off the team. You are expected to be better than your coach, just as you're expected to be better than your sensei in the martial arts.

Many years ago I was told that the greatest pride a sensei can have is to have students ranked higher than he is. I believe it. I want my students to be better than I am, to get past me, if they don't, I've wasted a lot of years learning what I know, and I'm a poor teacher.

I've got enough ego left to want to have students who can kick my butt.

Every Day in Every Way

"How do I know I am making progress?" Or, "Am I making progress? Or, perhaps somehow tied with it, the idea of corrections...Good? Bad? Personally, I like getting corrected because it gives me something to work on. If I work on it, it will get better and I will have made progress.....

How does one know one is making progress? Automatically the question goes back to why you're practicing martial arts. You will know you're making progress when you get closer to the goals you assumed when you started practice. For some that's "getting a black belt" for others "becoming a teacher", "being the baddest, kick-ass dude around". Some may even start the martial arts to "become a better person".

The reason for practice gives the assumed goals and you will make progress or not toward those goals.

Iaido and Jodo are closed/semi-closed arts, Let's get simple and just assume we're talking technically, as in "am I getting better at the physical skills of jodo or iaido?" This is possible for these arts since they have an ideal form that one can move toward. The question of progress then becomes "am I getting closer to the ideal form as demonstrated by my sensei"? You can check this by filming yourself, having sensei tell you you're getting better, or if you're further along the path, checking your own form internally, comparing the position of your body to what you know it should be through being put there by sensei. You progress through being corrected and incorporating those corrections, at which time you get more corrections.

With something like Jodo you have a partner, so you have another comparison to make, "am I better or worse than my partner today"? You can measure your progress through matching yourself to the other guy. For more open sports like boxing, kendo or wrestling the measurement of progress becomes whether or not you beat the other fellow. Fairly simple... well perhaps not, what if you're not getting better, what if your competition is getting worse?

What if you change instructors and the new guy isn't as good as the old one, do you suddenly get better (closer to what sensei can do) or is the comparison suddenly different? OK too obvious, what if your instructor gets older, more feeble, more injured? Are you improving then?

In every case the idea of progress requires some sort of comparison, to myself yesterday, to someone else, to an ideal form. Without something to measure ourselves against we can't have any notion of progress. Without some sort of "here" and a "there" to get to, you won't progress at all, you'll simply be "here".

Even self-improvement is difficult since we're actually comparing ourselves to what we remember of our skills yesterday. Memory isn't always very accurate, one's skills as a beginner tend to rise as one acquires more skill, I seem to recall I was pretty good at about 2 years into practice... but I've seen video...

Now before you pounce and say "yes, video! That's the ticket" just remember that a single performance laid down on a video isn't always accurate either. Your current skill is quite variable, some days are better than others, some minutes are better than others, a video captures one of those.

What happens when you get so good you achieve your goal? Is there anywhere to go, any progress beyond that? Ever wonder about the black belt dropout rate? There's anecdotal evidence of a massive loss of students as they reach black belt, could it be that they see nothing beyond their goal and once they arrive there they have no reason to stay?

Now, what happens if you suddenly lose the idea of progress, think only of what you are doing now, only of what sensei is telling you this instant, and focus on change rather than progress. Only change, not good or bad change, not caring about where you're going, only participating in where you are?

With noplacement to go what might you do here? With no worries about last week's corrections or next month's gradings, how much concentration can you give to what you're doing today? With nothing to accomplish, what might you achieve?

"Every day in every way I'm getting better and better". Compared to what?



Kim Taylor about to get even with Jeff Broderick

You Are Where You Think You Are

This is sort of a follow-on to the post yesterday. I made the point that progress is a bit of an illusion, that one only "progresses" in comparison to someone, someplace, some time or ideal. I also suggested that one could stop worrying about progress by not worrying about the past or the future and living in the present. It's also sometimes a good idea not to live in comparison to other people or in reference to things they say.

In the present there is only what exists now, which, somewhat paradoxically, leaves room for massive and sudden change. If we aren't caught up in the idea that the past/present is permanent and that change is gradual we can simply change.

I have taught women's self defence for the last 20 years at the University of Guelph and one thing we discuss in each class is a rather interesting change I noticed in the rape literature over time. In the beginning researchers would ask women if they had ever been raped and the women would answer no. "Well have you ever had this or this happen to you"

"Yes"

"But we define that as rape, have you ever been raped?"

"No"

So the researchers simply stopped asking whether or not women had been raped and asked what happened, then labeled that as rape when they made their conclusions and reports.

I have always found that fascinating and ask the class to explain it. Personally, I think the women being studied simply didn't want to take on the baggage that comes with "being raped". There is a large set of expectations and assumptions that are put onto women who are "raped", and many women don't want any part of it.

From here we go on to a discussion of what women (and men) should think about anything that happens to them. We usually get to a point where I start on one of my rants and it goes something like this.

You, and only you, get to decide what you think about what happens to you in this world. Nobody else, no movie of the week, no magazine, no school psychologist gets to decide how you react to the world around you. Only you get to do that. Good things happen. Bad things happen. You sometimes get injured, sometimes by rocks falling from the sky, sometimes by people who hate you. Good things also happen in equally random ways.

Only you live in your own head and only you are allowed to decide, and you can decide, how anything effects you. If you choose to have no long term psychological problems due to bad or good things that happen to you, that's OK. If you decide to just forget about it, that's OK. You aren't some kind of unfeeling freak, you're simply someone who chooses to define how you react to the world.

Memories don't get buried to resurface and cripple you decades later, you either remember things or you don't. When you do happen to remember something you get to decide what you feel about it then. You don't have to take on extra baggage because someone tells you that you will, or worse, that you should.

Oh go on, say it, I'm blaming the victim by suggesting that people who are psychologically crippled due to some event in their lives could simply decide that it doesn't cripple them.

I honestly don't know, am I? What I am suggesting is that any "cure" that I've ever heard of amounts to the damaged person deciding, slow or fast, with help or not, due to some talking circle or some psychoactive drug, that they are now fine. The therapist or pharmacist does not declare them cured, only the victim him or herself does that.

The alternative to saying that we get to decide (eventually) how we feel about what happens in our lives is to say that if something bad happens we can't get over it and are crippled for life. There are reasons why people might suggest this but by the very nature of the statement those reasons have nothing to do with helping the victims.

What I'm saying is that we have a choice about how things affect us and that nobody else in the world should presume to tell anyone that they should or will react in any particular way. It's not our right to tell anyone whether they are happy or unhappy, damned or saved, cured or sick.

Not Our Right.

Back to our person in the world. Let's say they have a broken arm. In one case it's from a rock falling down a mountain. Does one start to fret about the reason why the mountain hurt them? Or why the gods don't like them? Or if one was trespassing somehow on sacred ground and was therefore a bad person and deserved to be hit by the rock? How about if one's arm is broken by one's significant other?

Me, for myself, I think it's pretty clear that what needs to be done is that the arm needs to be fixed, a sigh of relief needs to be given that it was an arm and not a neck that got broken, and then one needs to decide whether or not to go back to the rocky slope or the relationship. It doesn't really need to get any more complicated than that.

So, here you are in the now, something happens, you decide and there you are. You are where you think you are.

A Little Help Here...

If you're a serious student there are some things you can do to help sensei find things to complain about.

First, don't say "I know" or explain why you can't do something. Both are really telling sensei to go away and help someone else, you aren't listening or you can't fix it today, try again next class.

On the other hand, if you want some help, here's one method. First try to figure out where sensei is looking during class. This may be harder than you think since every sensei I've ever met has wonky eyes, they tend to correct people who are somewhere they aren't looking.

I suppose that's because when they look at students, those students try to do better, and the ones that aren't getting looked at figure they can be sloppy.

Here's the suggestion: When sensei is looking somewhere else, make the corrections, practice carefully and with your eyes turned inside so that you're checking your body position, the timing, whatever you're trying to fix today.

Then, when sensei is looking your way, forget about corrections and concentrate on doing the technique at as high a level as you can, full concentration, full on. What will happen is that you will show sensei where your ragged edges are, and that lets him tell you what you have to work on next.

In this way the two of you will leapfrog over each other and your skills will improve. You correct things while he's not looking and he corrects things while he is.

On the Other Hand.....

If you're not interested in learning any more. If you know everything you want to know, than there are a few things you can do while at a seminar or in a class.

1. Pick a student and help out by teaching him or her for the class. Sensei will likely ignore both of you.
2. When sensei starts to explain something, remark on how you were told something different by some other sensei. That will tell sensei that you are someone else's student and he'll leave you alone.
3. Make sure that any new students, especially seniors, coming into the class are treated as outsiders. That way, even if they may know more than you, or have some skills to pass on, they will keep it to themselves.
4. Look at the clock more than you look at sensei. He'll get the message.
5. If all that fails and sensei still gives you a comment, maybe suggesting you fix something, immediately tell him you were working on something else. That way he'll know that you have no interest in correcting either one of the mistakes.
6. Of course you should always line up as far away from sensei as you can, preferably in a dark corner of the room.

There you have it, I hope those will help keep you from the inconveniences of new learning.

Merihari

Merihari refers to the overall pacing of a kata, the way that some places are emphasized, some more quiet, and especially how all that ties together. It's what prevents a kata from being mechanical.

Here is a training exercise that we used in class recently to try and demonstrate merihari for ourselves.

We started with "teaching/learning mode" with all sections of the kata (ZenKen iai, seitei mae) done with equal time, at an equal pace while checking that we hit all the points. That means that each part, nuki tsuke, kiri tsuke, chiburi and noto ended up taking pretty much the same time and all the movements were done at about the same speed.

Then we did the kata with the same pacing but added in jo ha kyu on the cuts, chiburi and noto. This means that the movements started slow and accelerated to the finish. The draw and cut showed an acceleration, the final cut, shaking off the blood and the movement to put the sword away all showed a slow to fast section.

Next we added a feeling of seme from the hips to get rid of any sloppiness, and to keep everything pressing forward. This means that we kept our hips pressing forward as if pushing an imaginary enemy back. Without this feeling of pressure the posture can collapse and the body can sway back and forward while doing some of the movements.

Finally we forgot all about what we were doing and instead concentrated on teki, the imaginary opponent, trying to see him move and react to our movements.

Watching the class it was very interesting to see how they went from being robotic to "telling a story" as you could see them catching the opponent in some places, and carefully watching him in others. The timing/pacing of the kata was radically different from the first one of course.

Immediately after the final "teki" kata, I asked them to do the "equal pacing, no effort" teaching/learning mode kata again.

Finally I asked them how they felt about the last kata they did. I won't give their answers but it was pretty apparent that they could feel a difference in their own techniques between a kata with and without merihari.

I doubt they would have been able to do a kata "with merihari" if I'd just explained what it was and let them try to "do it", but there was no problem when we went through these steps and finally "told a story".

Habits vs Learning

One of the truisms on the internet is that you should never practice without a sensei. If you do you will develop bad habits that you won't be able to correct, or that will be much harder to correct than learning them from scratch.

All I can say to this is that if you can't correct a habit, you can't be taught. The martial arts are a life-long process of modifying habits, of changing and refining movements. The problem isn't developing a bad habit, the problem is not practicing enough to develop a habit at all.

So if you're too far from a teacher, or too young for class, or can't afford the lessons, get a book, get a video and work on it by yourself. For iaido that means swinging the sword. Trust me, I've seen enough beginners and even people with years of practice, to know that whatever bad habits you develop, they won't be any worse than if you'd studied only under a sensei. The difference is that you'll have all that swinging behind you and won't have to wear the grooves into your bones like the rest of the class. You'll have a base on which to build.

Happy swinging.

I want to learn the deep secrets

When I was 20 I decided I had to sort some things out. After an "interesting" youth (oh nothing earth shattering, I wasn't a child soldier in Biafra like one of my fellow students... go look it up).

I looked around for a Zen priest and couldn't find one so settled for an Aikido class that was starting up in 1980 at the University. I had read a comic years before, "Judoman" that had a blurb in the back about the spiritual art of Aikido and Ueshiba sensei.

In any case, I spent the next several years... no I spent the next couple of decades devoting myself to the martial arts, Aikido, Tae Kwon Do, Boxing, Iaido, Jodo, Kung Fu and several others.

Several months ago one of my senior students told me he was ready to learn the deeper aspects of the arts. Here's what I told him.

To learn what I learned you have to be willing to do a few things. Get a job that lets you stay close to your sensei, never mind your career or the salary, you just need enough to live on.

Forget relationships... well that's not entirely true, you can have lots of relationships, and the girls will be pretty impressed with you for a while because you're going to be a pretty intense guy, but eventually they are going to realize you're intense about martial arts and not about them. You are going to neglect girlfriends, family, wives and kids because you are training.

Forget vacations, no time to waste relaxing, all that counts is to get to class, every class, as many as there are, and between classes you need to spend at least 3 to 4 hours a day training on your own. No days off. Between workouts and classes you will spend another 10 hours a day thinking about and reading about the martial arts.

Health? Forget it, you're going to have repetitive strain injuries, dislocations, bruises, breaks and migrains from concussions. You'll train through them all.

I can go on but you get the idea. If you want to get the deep secrets (which, it turns out aren't really secrets at all, just a knowledge that comes from 20 years of neglecting everything else) you have to put in the time and pay the price.

My student didn't decide for the martial arts, he decided for his career, and I'm happy he made that choice. I don't regret my own choices, they may have been the only ones that I could have made, and I really do understand some interesting things, but unless you need it, you don't really need it.

By the way, the martial arts aren't particularly special in this regard. If you want to be the best at gymnastics, baseball, chess, what have you. You'll spend the same amount of time getting to the top of the heap, neglect others, and become obsessive in the same way. You'll also find the strength and internal calm that comes with knowing you can drive yourself beyond what most folks could stand.

Up Where the Air is Thin

The most recent 8dan grading results from Japan have been released:

12 new iai 8dans (12 out of 209, pass rate 5.7%)

2 new jodo 8dans. (2 out of 34, pass rate 5.9%)

13 new kendo 8dans

(Day 1: 5 out of 574, pass rate 0.9%)

(Day 2: 8 out of 834, pass rate 1%)

Why so few? At that level there is a lot more to it than who's still practicing and who's good. Although we all like to believe there isn't any "politics" in rank, at the upper levels of course there is. By politics I mean organizational realities and interpersonal relationships rather than "vote for me", although anyone who doesn't believe there is "lobbying" that goes on is naive.

So let's look at it from a practical point of view, with no 9 or 10dan ranks being awarded for many years (and none planned for the future as far as I've heard) there is a backlog of 8dans that will be created. In other words the operative principle switches from "he deserves it" to "we've got enough".

Hence in the last several years we've seen a reduction in areas that will do jump grades, and an increase in the requirements for grading. Things get stricter "because they can" and also "because they must". Too many people at the top makes things more complicated than they need be.

Looking at it another way, if there are 10 levels between bottom and top you'll get a certain spread of numbers and age. If you reduce that to 8 levels you will still get a similar spread but with fewer levels you'll get a constriction lower down, the difference in "pass qualification" gets tougher at each level.

So for iaido and jodo I see a pass rate of close to 6%, while for kendo it's 1%. Kendo is by far the larger art and has been promoting people up the ladder longer than either iai or jo, so their manageable quota of 8dans must be pretty much filled.

With 1400 challengers to 8dan you can see how "backed up" the system is for kendo. Compare that to 34 in jodo and 200 in iai and I'm surprised the pass rate isn't a bit higher in those arts.

So the reason for such low pass rates is quite likely a small need for new 8dans rather than a low level of skill.

I did mention politics, and before anyone starts assuming that I mean something distasteful by that, let me explain the term as I see it.

Up to a certain level you are going to be graded purely on technical skills. In fact, the criteria for awarding dan grades in the ZNKR state that at 1-3dan the central concern is the level of kihon, of basic (kendo) skills. These criteria apply to iai and jo as well.

For 4-5dan the central concern is the level of basic (kendo) techniques and advanced techniques. At these levels it's "skill", not theoretical knowledge, and you're not expected to be teaching (at 5dan you can start). There isn't anything else expected of you except that you're working hard and getting better so really, who cares what you think of the curriculum or whether or not you get along with the other children in the schoolyard.

From here on up there are further expectations. Now, instead of listing the "political" things that come into play let me put it another way.

In those ranks where you are expected to start teaching, leading and promoting the arts and the organization would it be wise to quickly promote up the ladder into more and more responsible positions someone who:

1. Doesn't work hard at the organizational skills required to keep the system running
2. Doesn't work hard at teaching those under him
3. Doesn't give back to the organization by way of extra work times
4. Doesn't show up at seminars
5. Doesn't show up in his teacher's dojo
6. Can't get along with the other folks in the organization
7. Complains constantly about the organization

Don't all those things up there sound like a bunch of brown-nosing and "buying" the grades? In other words don't all those things sound like "office politics"? Sure they do.

If you aren't willing to "play the game" don't expect to be promoted as quickly as those who are working hard for the organization.

The rest of the criteria, by the way, from 6dan on up all make explicit mention of the continuing need for basic and advanced skills, and an increasing understanding of the theory and practice of those skills. They do not mention all those extra "political" things above because there's usually no need to invoke those considerations. Most of those who can't get along and don't like the organization will leave before they get to a senior position of authority.

The considerations would only need to come into play when someone does something damaging to the organization, or when you get the "jam-up" we were talking about at 7-8dan, in which case the positives and negatives will start to count in considerations for pass. Does this person give extra to the organization? If so, and in a choice between him and someone who complains constantly and does nothing useful, who do we promote???

I believe you can probably advance by skill alone, but honestly, is it good for the organization to push troublemakers and complainers quickly to the top, no matter how good their technique?

It is not a good thing.

Instead, it might be useful to give those folks another year to think about it and see if their attitude changes.

It's not good to have shirkers and whiners at the top, but it's also not good to have toadies and yes-men up there either. One thing I've noticed about the top folks in the organization that I've met over the years is that they are very, very good judges of character and they can very quickly size up any troublesome situation. Contrary to the usual assumption of "consensus" and shilly-shallying and avoidance of decisions, these guys can make decisions, make them stick, and suggest, in very blunt manner, some pretty ruthless solutions to difficult problems.

Am I privy to the discussions and mind-set of the senior levels of the ZNKR? No of course I'm not, but this makes sense to me and when I say politics this is what I mean. The reality of any organization is that you need people at the top who can get things done and bring people together more than you need people with massively impressive technical skills. That's why you may see the technicians out in the field teaching and the "politicians" in the office making the decisions.

Sometimes it's the same people, sometimes it's not. It has been said that Oe Masamichi was not the most skilled iaidoka of his generation. Think about the implications of that.

Who does What?

It is an interesting assumption in the martial arts that the best technician becomes the highest ranked person in the organization, and the top instructor as well. Even more strange is to automatically assume that the top folks are the best technicians.

Rather feudal actually, where the strongest arm gets the biggest chunk of land.

Consider any other activity involving physical skill, soccer perhaps. Is the head of FIFA the best soccer player? Is the top coach the best soccer player? Sounds silly doesn't it? Some folks are going to be good at organization and some are going to be good coaches and younger folks who don't have the experience and don't have the time for either organization or coaching are going to be the best players.

In fact, the whole idea of an organization is to put those who are best at certain jobs into those jobs. This means that one person doesn't have to do everything, which is a good thing since, if you're doing everything, you're doing everything poorly.

Even Musashi, that archetypal loner, thought that was a good idea. Consider his parable of the carpenter. The top fellow is best and most useful at knowing how to organize the folks under him, each according to which job he most suits.

So where did this idea in the martial arts come from, that the top guy has to be the top technician and the top instructor?

Consider the image of the wizened old codger living in a hut on the hill, and the eager young student who shows up for instruction. In a situation where there's a single teacher, two or three students and nothing else, the old fellow is going to end up doing all the jobs. He's going to organize the day's schedule, teach the youngsters, and of course, be better than they are at what he's teaching them. When they get as good or better than the teacher, they leave to go study or teach somewhere else.

Fine and good for one dojo or small schools but not so efficient for the big organizations. Once teacher gets 10 or 12 sub-dojos with his students teaching there he may decide it's time to hire a secretary, maybe someone to keep the books, maybe even get someone to run the business who likes doing that sort of thing. Meanwhile, since sensei has not been getting any younger, maybe he becomes the technical advisor and lets the younger teachers do the heavy lifting and throwing back down again of the students.

Bowing Out Over Not Bowing... Yes.

"My religion doesn't allow me to bow, can I substitute another form of etiquette for the bows in the martial arts?"

My answer to this is fairly standard, and has been since my days of Aikido.

For me, and for most people in the Japanese arts the bowing isn't a big deal, but for anyone who is worried about the bowing, it IS a big deal.

As such, if you cannot do the bowing in Iaido, you should think very long and very hard about doing iai. There are other cultural aspects of the practice that will also conflict with your religious views as well, the bowing is simply an external representation of a whole series of assumptions and cultural meanings. If bowing is something that is important in your own religion (to bow or not to bow) then not bowing, doing something else, will not remove the underlying meanings of those bows.

The bowing isn't the point, it's just an external representation of the cultural assumptions, of respect, humility, openness, acceptance etc. Not bowing does not negate those assumptions, you still must accept them to do proper iai, and if you can't accommodate the assumptions to your own religion, you shouldn't be doing iai.

Simply put, if your religion won't let you bow in iaido, your religion likely won't let you do iaido (or any other Japanese art).

While we may say "sure put hand over heart" or whatever instead of bowing, that's because we don't have a problem with bowing (and thus with not bowing) but if your religion has a problem with bowing your own religion has a problem with the rest of it.

Ai Ki and I Ai both have to do with accommodating to the situation (bowing is that accommodation in this case). If there can be no accommodation for religious reasons, there is no point doing the arts, there's nothing to get out of it except an external form. If all you want is an external movement form, there is likely a traditional dance in your own culture that you can safely do without worrying about religious sanctions.

Now if the religious problem is the simple act of bowing, the mechanical act of bending from the waist, then what's the problem in the first place? Just bow when god and the grannies are not looking. Of course the bow means more than folding your body. It could mean subjugation to a single supreme authority, to god. But is it the mechanical act or the intent behind the act? If it's the intent, the act itself can probably be performed without offence to an all-knowing god.

But let's say, for instance, that god is all-seeing but can't tell the difference between you bowing to a supreme being or as a sign of respect to a teacher or the art. In this case, and this case only I suppose it would be OK to do the hand over heart thing instead of bowing. This assumes of course that your god doesn't mind you being respectful to the sword or the teacher, just that he's confused about the meaning behind the bow so forbids the mechanical act to be on the safe side.

If your religion forbids you from bowing for some reason other than that physical act, for instance if respecting your martial art teachers etc. IS a problem, it's only if your god cannot see beyond physical actions that not bowing will fool him, assuming of course that the hand on heart thing will mean the same as the bow it substitutes for.

If you will do hand on heart to mollify your martial arts teacher without actually feeling respect, or being open to instruction, why practice?

In my opinion, and this is why I don't mind you not bowing, a god that can see beyond physical actions to the intent behind that action will not have a problem with bowing to a sword, it has nothing to do with worship of an object or another god, it doesn't concern him/her at all. As your teacher I will assume that the hand on heart has the same intent as a bow, so I've got no problem with it, but then again, if we're on the same page, you've got no problem with bowing. And there's the problem.

Of course even if your god can see the difference in intent when you bow, there may be folks in charge of the religion locally that will still have a problem with the outward forms since they don't have a clue about intent. This is usually the real problem, not the god or the religion, but the local leadership, and a student who has a problem with bowing is generally concerned with the grannies, not the gods.

So once more, we come to the same conclusion. While I don't have a problem with you not bowing, if you have a problem with bowing you should likely not do the martial arts. To practice without bowing would be hypocritical and if you can live with that, your religion isn't the problem, it's your concern for what your family or your religious leaders will say.

Unfortunately, living your life without hypocrisy is one of the things you should be learning.

Iaido and the other Japanese martial arts are not overly concerned with outward form, the fact that you could do them without bowing means that there are underlying aspects to that bow that will surely conflict with your religion or, more likely, your culture (the grannies). Frankly, it's about flexibility and accomodation. If you can't bow, you can't accept that kind of accomodation.

Attention

(It's not really funny any more, I expect it, but I'll say it anyway). It's funny how I can think about something and then notice all sorts of connections out there in the zeitgeist. I mentioned attention below, and today I was working my way through the introductory essay of "Reading Photography", the catalogue of a show from 1977, when I read "Attention is creative, as Simone Weil remarked, and attention is what any good, let alone great, photographer deserves."

You could say the same about any martial arts kata or any sensei for that matter. It's assumed that attention is something you pay in order to memorize a movement, or pick up some information that will be on the exam, or just because you might hear a new story. But attention is creative.

When you pay attention to your kata you are creating something that never existed before. You are creating the movements for the first time in history. It doesn't matter if the kata is 400 years old, by paying attention to the motions, you are creating something unique.

By paying attention to your partner when practicing you are creating a brand new dance in the universe.

By simply going through a set of memorized movements, by "making it a habit", you are not creating anything, you're not even recreating something, you are only existing, only moving through time without using it. In other words you're wasting time, yours, your instructor's, your partner's.

I just looked up a bit more of Weil's quote which deals with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Christ taught us that the supernatural love of our neighbor is the exchange of compassion and gratitude which happens in a flash between two beings, one possessing and the other deprived of human personality. One of the two is only a little piece of flesh, naked, inert, and bleeding beside a ditch; he is nameless; no one knows anything about him. Those who pass by this thing scarcely notice it, and a few minutes afterwards do not even know that they saw it. Only one stops and turns his attention towards it The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is a renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist... He who has absolutely no belongings of any kind around which social consideration crystallizes does not exist. - Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 146-149. as quoted here:

<http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/904233grote.html>

So our kata can be thought of as the man who fell amongst thieves, it sits ignored and naked beside a ditch, unreal until someone pays attention to it, gives their energy to it and creates it. We can't obtain the kata, we can't own it, we can only give it reality, create it each time by pouring our energy into it, and then it exists outside of us.

But just as we give attention to the kata, we also, of necessity, give attention to our partners, and they give attention to us. Receiving attention, we become more than we were. Beyond that, the kata also gives attention to us, or rather the tradition within which the kata exists gives attention to us. While we

perform the kata, it moves through us and we learn what it has to teach us.

After reading over this post, I think I need to think a little about the "Zen Sickness" as I may be coming down with a bit myself.



Bruce Stiles carrying Kim Taylor like a rag doll in 1982

Right and Wrong

What if you had the power of life or death? Wait, you do. OK let's say you have the power to kill by pressing a button and there would be no consequences at all, and let's say further that the person killed really "needs to be killed".

Great first year philosophy question here. Should you push the button? What's the right answer?

Of course the mistake is in believing there is a right thing or a wrong thing to do, even if one can know with certainty what someone is going to do in the future. If we can go back in a time machine and kill Adolph Hitler, should we do it? Should we push that button that ends his life before he causes so many others to end the lives of so many others? This implies that there is a right or a wrong answer in this situation.

The problem with the discussion is that by having the discussion we destroy the premise of right and wrong. Unless we put a God or Society or some other authority who defines "right and wrong" above ourselves, there is no right or wrong, there is only what we did and what we do. There is only "what we did/do" and the reasons why we did/do it.

If we have God or Society, and accept either as the definition and designator of right and wrong, there is no need for discussion and thought, the laws are written down, the answer is simple. If we figure there is room for interpretation of those rules, if we point out contradictions or loopholes, we put ourselves above that authority and then we are back to relying on ourselves, and thus are simply left with "what we do".

Life as a law-abiding, God-fearing person is a lot easier. You do what's right or you suffer the consequences. The equation is simple and inevitable. However, the instant you start to debate right or wrong you put yourself into the role of the law-giver, and enter the realm of uncertainty. With that you inevitably come to a place where you decide, and all you're left with is the bare, uncomfortable reasons for that decision.

And that's a very poor and lonely place indeed.

Will this work on the street?

When we practice partner kata with wooden weapons we tend to have spaces and pauses where one person is left hanging around waiting to be hit. It gets pretty easy to avoid that eventual counterattack and attack once more under those conditions, so how do we know that what we're doing really works?

You can make that observation in any paired weapons practice that is not "freestyle". It's the way we have to practice for 1. safety and 2. the ability to study more than a couple of different techniques that work really well at full speed.

The way to think about this is to imagine applying any koryu sword or stick-work in a kendo situation. How many of the cool techniques would work if our partner was free to simply move the blade and smack us while we're doing some sort of switching of our hands or shuffling of our feet.

Which of course is a great way to check on the reality of our practice.

In many cases we may try doing a different technique or application of the counter that is faster, or we may try speeding up the technique. May I suggest that any time you have a pause in a kata, followed by the counterattack, you simply don't pause. See if the technique works without that small stop and re-balancing, and see if your partner can still avoid the counter, even if it is performed at the usual speed in the kata. Perhaps a small shift in distance or a small change in target will allow the technique to work without that painful waiting around to be hit.

Have a careful look at all the movements you are making in the kata, are there any extra motions or twitches that you can get rid of? Every one of them takes time so getting rid of them may allow you to react much more quickly without trying to speed up.

To get back to this whole "pause and wait" thing again, I think we're looking at the reason shinai kendo was developed in the first place. It is a simple answer to "what works?"

Here's how it goes. Solo practice is just swinging at the air and where's the target?

Let's go to paired practice (with wooden weapons for safety) so we can find the targets and the distance.

But we can't swing or react at full speed for safety reasons so let's get some padding on our partner so we can react at full speed without worrying too much if we tap them accidentally in our excitement.

But we can't swing at full power through the target which means we're still not at full speed so let's modify the weapon a bit further to make it flexible and now we can swing through and see how things go at full reactive speed.

But we're still anticipating because it's kata practice so let's put both sides in the padding and the safety weapons and remove that foreknowledge of the kata, let's go freestyle but of course we still have to restrict the targets to the areas we have padded.

But now we are having problems because the techniques become severely restricted to things that are very fast and very simple and a lot of the students are only practicing stuff that "works" under our new practice conditions so let's do some solo practice to learn how to grip and cut. Let's also do some paired kata practice to expand the technical repertoire once more... and we'll get out of the hot padding while doing the kata since we don't have to protect ourselves when we both know the pattern, timing and outcome.

Full circle.



Kim Taylor looking for the ground, coming off of Bruce Stiles' shoulders

Hamon Ryu

Over the last ten years I've read a lot of discussion on the internet from a certain ryu that seems to have a fascination with booting people out. It's been quite a lot of fun to watch as headmasters get named, then booted or quit while denouncing their own instructors. I've renamed it Hamon ryu for my own amusement.

This has led me to make this list of some of the items that people feel compelled to share with the world at large through postings on forums or on websites.

- Ours is the only true lineage, the other 4 or 5 lines who derive from our sensei's sensei are all fakes. (Presumably we avoided that fate somehow).
- We have left our headmaster because he's now corrupt/senile/old and sells rank to other people (but not to us, ours is good).
- The headmaster we left was so crooked he was never certified by his sensei in the first place (but of course our claim to that same certification in the line is somehow legitimate).
- Our sensei's sensei may have been kicked out of his sensei's dojo but he's still the headmaster because he was senior/oldest/first/unfairly accused of stealing the coffee money.
- We think it's so important that you know we've hamoned folks we put it right there on the front page of our website. (Presumably you will take this to mean we're serious and pure of intent, rather than hard to get along with and arbitrary and really bad judges of character.)
- The changes that other line made in the techniques prove they are not the mainstream lineage. (Of course the changes our line has made are all in accordance with making the line more pure as we correct past mistakes).
- We practice several arts simultaneously. (Those guys filled in the gaps in their knowledge with other arts so that they aren't doing a legitimate koryu any more).
- Foreigners with permission to teach aren't really licensed to teach and any letters our headmaster might have given suggesting such a thing were really just friendly thank-you notes (but those guys with a seminar's experience that we make shibucho of countries and continents have our full support).
- You can't teach our art because you don't have the experience, rank or paper, but you can form a study group. Just don't call telling your fellow group members how to do a technique "teaching".
- We've trademarked the name of our school so don't even THINK of using the name, even if you do have the same sensei as we do. (But maybe we can talk a licensing deal if there's money to be had).

Is this one ryu I can name for you? Actually there are several out there, all equally fun to watch, go find them for yourself.

And that's the end of the first volume, which takes us up to July, 2008.



Kim with some hair left in 1982