

Yesterday's Tomorrow

Curated by Amy CharlesChiu

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A set of musings about investing in the art, yourself, others. And a warning not to let yesterday's tomorrow pass before they sow the seeds for the future. So pick up the broom and sweep.

2019 New Year Resolutions

After a bit of a run around town looking for coffee, we found a Starbucks. Could have walked, but I suppose I'll get my exercise later in the day. Hah, famous last words.

Today is the day of resolutions, and as usual, I have nothing that I should be doing that I'm not already doing. I had a bit of a talk with the boy yesterday where he asked for some help in improving. I said "do you know what you need to do?" and he said he did. "So do it". Not a very nice dad am I? I more or less do the same thing with students, I don't have a lot of patience with correcting the same thing a thousand times while they "are working on it". Just fix it.

One resolution I might make is that, since I've seen 2019, I'm going to try to see 2020. In fact, maybe I'll try to be one of the 30% and try to see 2024. Not really a resolution, just a matter of waiting for news and probably more tests. So more of a wish than a resolution.

I have lots of wishes. It looks like I will continue as your Jodo Chief Examiner, Pam will total up the votes that came in, far fewer than I would have liked (involvement folks, more of it, that's a wish right there). She will also put some of the suggestions and requests together and I'll report it all here. As Jodo CE I'd like to wish everyone a happy and productive new year.

And.

This year I'd like to see more local initiatives to get the word out on our art. More demonstrations in malls would be one way to do it, we did that for a few years and it actually worked a bit. We gave out posters and pamphlets. What worked better was participation in College Royal, our yearly open house at the University. All the martial arts worked on that one for several years but it gradually came down to "the Kim show" where I was organizing the whole thing and headlining the demonstrations to boot. Yeah I'm a hero, but it wasn't doing any good and I stopped. If nobody wants to help, nobody wants, period. I'm not saying don't demonstrate in your mall or your open house, I'm saying don't count on someone else (the CE for example) to do it for you. Do it yourself. Four or five martial arts were relying on me to do it and that's not the way it's done.

You know what needs doing? So do it.

But better than finding brand new customers is to add from a pre-existing pool of customers. You are reading the world's largest example of exactly that technique. FB offers targeted advertising, that's why they want your information, to sell it to those who want to target your desires. It works, it's the entire basis of the commercial internet. Offer free content in exchange for getting served ads. Mind you sometimes it's idiotic, why offer you cars when you just bought a car, but never mind that. Here's our version of the technique.

Many of you out there, most I'd guess, have come to jodo from another martial art. Many of you are in a position to offer demonstrations of jodo to your other dojo, or even to offer classes in the same space, or even add it to the dojo mix. So do it.

Jodo (and iaido for that matter) are not particularly good stand-alone arts. Some places work, those where you're not struggling to pay rent on a space for instance, but they aren't exactly mass-market arts. Kids want kick and punch and rolling around on the floor. If a stick is involved they want kendo. Jodo means too much control which is absolutely what they need but not what they want. However, jodo works really well "with" other arts. We have a lot of classes in karate dojo for instance, and a lot of karate folks who have settled down from the high kicks to the force multipliers instead. Jodo is a natural addition to other arts, so offer it that way. It's a great way to get up off your knees and down from the clouds as you get older, so offer it that way. Demonstrate and teach. If you need help, ask, we'll get you some assistance.

As an example, we've seen jodo go into Montreal and New Brunswick in 2018, not to brand new dojo but to established CKF groups. These dojo are being supported "from a near" (nearby instructors) and plans are being made for the future. Another template is the Pamurai's group at Kitchener Kicks, a kung fu dojo. She teaches there weekly for free to a group of students of that dojo, it was easier than them trying to make it to Guelph each week. Financially, they simply join the dojo and Pam has nothing further to worry about.

Thus I declare 2019 the year of the local initiative. I'd like to offer wider support to all your efforts, which means sharing our experiences and our plans, so please, get in touch and let me know what you are doing for the year.

We have just had an email from Quebec City expressing some interest in jodo. Anyone else in Quebec City interested? Any dojo want a demonstration? A seminar for your students? Get in touch, a group is easier to support than individuals. I've added an event in planning to the list below, a seminar in Montreal for August. I'm not supposed to put anything there that's To Be Determined but this is the year of local initiatives so why not get them in there to encourage others to plan as well. Send them now.

Once again, best wishes for your new year.

Kim Taylor

CKF Jodo Chief Examiner

Learning

Brenda and I watch NHK world on the new Roku TV while we eat our steel cut oats with yoghurt, pumpkin seeds and blueberries each morning. Life is good. NHK is the only live feed I've found so far but it's nice. The pacing is restful, world news from an Asian perspective each half hour with long interviews and tourist stuff in between. So much less frantic than the desperate search for anything to fill up a 24 hour news channel where EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT AND SCARY. Just looking at some of those feeds in the bar is enough to make me turn my back on the screen. Not enough happens in the world to justify six segments of news at the same time. News crawls and weather and traffic cams and video with another feed underneath and..... OMG put the cricket on!

This morning on NHK there was an interview with a chef from Taiwan who trained in France and ran a restaurant that was named 15 in the top 100 restaurants in the world.

Keep your ears open and you will find out about budo (learning) anywhere, and this morning I listened to a sensei. Not that he was all woo woo philosophical, far from it. He went to Southern France to learn to cook. For the first six months he studied the techniques, how to cook, but he eventually realized that looking at the techniques is only good enough to be an apprentice.

He realized that cooking is more than technique. He started to look at where cooking came from. He started to eat what the French ate, even if he didn't like the taste. He recommends that you eat what the locals say is tasty until you can understand why they like it. Then you will begin to understand cooking.

He ran a 2-star restaurant and then shut it down to go back to Taiwan to start another. He moved forward and continued to challenge himself, to continue learning. He wants to invent a cuisine for Taiwan, or rather, to explore it. He states that there is nothing permanent about "delicious". What "tastes good" changes from place to place and over time in the same place. You must pay attention to what is delicious now. This is cooking.

His menu changes with the seasons, he explores, he uses ingredients that are in season, and he challenges himself by thinking about street food stalls. Three flavours to create several dishes that take little time to make... go.

I return again to the question Ohmi sensei asked me on the way over to England so many years ago. "I'm Japanese, I have to spend hours on my knees, but you're Canadian, you don't. So why do you do it?" I did it, I do it, because I find value in the practice. Because I learn through, beyond, the techniques, the traditions, by applying the lessons, the method of learning to my own life and my own culture.

I have the desire to learn, and the techniques of budo allow me to learn, they can be applied beyond their "apprentice" level. If only you can get beyond the techniques.

Those who want to be a samurai, who want to "preserve the culture of Japan" who want to collect paper, to be a soke or some other big shot holder of specialized (and ignored by all but a few dozen people) knowledge, can stick with their practice for the five or ten years it takes them to get bored and wander off. I've been in this for 40 years and will continue until the cancer takes me, I will continue trying to be a chef instead of an apprentice, a cook.

You can be "a cook", you are always learning to be a chef. Do you understand the difference?

It's learning.

Mar 29, 2019

Send in the crowds

Yesterday on the way to class we had to walk through a quite large crowd of munchkins doing who knows what, in the gym. Dozens of kids all hopping over plastic hurdles or hanging around waiting for something, along with their parents.

It made me happy, to see a big crowd was somehow comforting on the way to our Sunday session of Jodo and Niten where we actually had a large class compared to our usual. Now we've never had more than about 14 people in the club at any one time, with a third of those being in any one class. It's just the way of the world for a University club so a large class is comforting, we've always been on the edge of "too few to run".

Later at the pub the place was inundated with old folks, probably three dozen, the men all wearing the same tie so probably a meeting of some type. Two folks on the bar and one cook made for some scrambling around "wait until everyone has a pint and then we'll come get your food orders". Must have been a management meeting, want... food... now!

Nevertheless, seeing that many people in our normally empty pub also made me feel good. I like my pub, I don't want it to go under. Everyone was being jolly, crowding around the bar for their pints of Guinness being pulled as fast as Adele and Satish could pull them. I commented that it made me happy to see crowds of people not the Pamurai's age (because they are usually happy crowds, kids and oldsters, as opposed to those stressed out by school or work). She answered that she was probably getting old enough to be likeable. True that.

But all these crowds got me thinking about the martial arts where we absolutely do not have crowds. Yes, they've never been particularly popular, especially the ones I practice, but we used to get 30 or 40 people starting Aikido and as many in the Women's self-defence classes. Now we've got 6 in a crowded Aikido class and the self-defence course, which is down to a single 3 hour class, is usually cancelled.

There's a CKF board meeting coming up, I'd be interested to know how our membership numbers have been going for the last five years or so in the three arts. Judging by seminar attendance, I worry about it. I worry because the All Japan Kendo Federation has been making noises about falling revenues (which are pretty much directly linked to membership). If Japan is fading, what is happening in the rest of the world?

I know that small arts like Niten Ichiryu have been down to very few people recently, my line being, not so long ago, down to three people actively practising. This has improved by a growth overseas, but still, next weekend's seminar with the headmaster is not looking to be crowded. Denis will lose money, no question.

The same thing is happening with the Koryu iaido seminar the next weekend. Registrations are behind previous years. Now, in the jodo section we can point to several seminars this fall and say people don't have the time or money to go to them all, but the last weekend seminar for iaido was last May. We are down to 2 major seminars per year in iai around here and if they can't get enough attendance to run I'm getting worried about the survival of the art.

Where are the missionaries? Where are the recruiters? Where is the publicity machine? Back when we had 40 students in Aikido I was one of those out there talking my classmates into joining. Today the students are asking me where everyone else is, and suggesting that I need to do some advertising. That's not the way it works, not really. I'm some old fart with a white beard, there's no peer pressure that I can apply to students, even if I could get access to them. Which I can't. Best that could be done by me is some signs around the building. Demonstrations? You have to book space on the grass these days at the University. You have to apply for permission to put up posters and I'm not the guy to arrange that.

No, students recruiting their friends is how it was always done.

With a wider public organization like the CKF or the CAF I'd really like to see some advertising, or at least a nice website (the CKF website has been a month away from finished for over a year now, yes I am complaining, Neil and Pam, I wrote the thing that is up there now and aside from some fiddling around it's still the same, still WWW 1.0). People can't join an art unless they know it exists, it's as simple as that. Where is the google ad campaign, where is the local press release strategy? No I'm not volunteering, I'm hooked in, and you need to get the newbies hooked in to the system and ride herd on them to finish what they promise to do. Without burning them out of course. Can that be done?

Crowds solve a lot of problems, including the survival of the arts. You need 100 new students to get that 10% who will go on to take the art into the next generation. Where are the crowds?

Kids and old folks? I wonder. Most of the martial art vibe is dictated by the movie and entertainment business, by the high kickers and back flippers. Young adult males for the most part. That's not who we get in class. It's a rare session where the women don't outnumber the men in our dojo. We're a University club, all our potential members are young adults, yet we tend to run toward grad students and graduates, older folk.

Are we targeting the wrong groups with whatever targeting we have? Kids ought to love kendo, as they go through their young adult years competing and having a blast they can continue with the kendo. As they get older they often branch out to iaido and then, when the knees start getting creaky, to jodo. Why not? As the jodo guy I think the CKF ought to make this an official strategy for life-long involvement. Selfishly, it provides the jodo section with a primed and trained source of participants, what's not to like.

Kids have energy and love to bang around on the floors and the mats. Retired folk have time to learn and to teach and to administer. Seems to make sense, and with a declining birth rate the crowds are going to be getting older and older.

Ah the crowds, we need to go there and tell them about our arts, all the arts. Make the pie bigger and we all have a bigger slice. Even the MMA crowd will be getting older and looking for something else once they get too old for the backflips. Maybe they will find us.

I'd like to see crowded floors again.

Oct 22, 2018

Ryuha investment

It's so gratifying to know that things don't change over the years. There are still places on the net where folks look out for the koryu, all the koryu, whether or not they have any connection. Specifically, someone (and full disclosure here, I just glanced at the title and didn't read the article) was saying that recreated arts should not be shown publicly as it is "fraud". Someone else pointed out that in the West it's all recreated and it's really good stuff.

If this sounds familiar, it's been going around and around for the entire history of the internet. The response to the comment about western arts was "The west isn't as invested in the ryu-ha system".

Japan is? When 100 percent of people on a Tokyo street are unable to identify Jodo, I would suspect that 110% of them would not care much about Ryuha, recreated or not.

Who cares about this stuff are the 300 of us who have a clue what it is. When 0.33% of us (that's one of us) has an opinion, it's not representative in any way of general attitudes in the wider population. In the age of social media it's easier than it used to be to have an opinion on something you know nothing about, but not that much easier.

Social Media. Is that, like, friendly newspapers? NewSpeak for gossip, isn't it?

So and so doesn't have a full license to teach, OMG fraud! So he might not teach a twitch correctly and some kid will get killed in the war? What's the actual problem here? The public doesn't care. About all the western world cares about is that you have a "black belt" and they'll take your word for that. You have to educate them to ask you what level of black belt, from which accreditation agency. Just like you have to look closely at your dentist's degree on the wall to see if he graduated from a school that actually exists and might have drills on site. As opposed to the place where a buddy of mine was gifted with a preacher's degree by another buddy.

Oh but those students who study with the fraud are disappointed and traumatized when they learn their teacher is a fraud! Only if they choose to be. Let's face it, the frauds may be teaching out of a book, but the information in the book is part way to the "real stuff", whatever that is. Most teachers, real and fraudulent, teach the same basic stuff. By the time you get to the super-secret stuff that only the Menkyo Kaiden know, you've got a pretty good idea of what your teacher is.

Those who are in anguish about this stuff have a lot invested in it, (or are just re-tweeting memes). Most of the world hasn't a clue there's a problem, and even those who do know what we're talking about, mostly aren't all that bothered. Frauds come and go, usually they go when someone exposes them as frauds and they can't yell Fake News loud enough to start counter-memes.

It's imaginary. Consider the art world. What is a painting? A print? Something you like, something you put on the wall behind the couch because it matches the colour? Good, be happy. But what if it's a forgery? A forgery of what? Why is a forgery a problem?

It's a forgery if the artist is famous, expensive, and it's sold as being from the "real guy". The problem is the money you pay for it. Everyone who pays big money in anticipation of getting bigger money is invested in keeping the market going. Paintings have no intrinsic value, you can't eat them, and they make really crappy blankets. The best you can say is that they have an aesthetic appeal. Or that their actual value is as an investment which you can sell later for more than you paid for it. Just like shares in a company, I bought them to sell them later for more money, not to own a piece of the company.

Does this sound like budo? Oh no, budo is for fighting, like your gun and sword collection it's there to save your life from the hoards attacking your house. You could hit them with the frame of your million dollar picture. You could burn the Warhol for warmth come the zombie apocalypse. You can stretch for value but a stretch is a stretch. My TKD instructor used to tell us that you don't train for ten years on the off chance you might get into a bar fight.

What the fraud teaches you is probably going to be as useful to fighting the mob, as what the properly licensed guy teaches you. Maybe more so, consider what most frauds teach and claim to teach, their focus is usually on the combative effectiveness of this stuff. Take the best and lose the rest. They are young and genki. They will fill in the gaps with "what works" which is what you want in a fight, not "what's correct" but "what works".

The problem is one of provenance. Is it the real thing? Who has owned it? (Famous owners bump the price of a painting.) Budo is an art in the same way as a painting, a sculpture. The value is for those who have been educated to see value in it. Collectors of art will say they don't really own the painting, they are just preserving it for future generations. Just like us Western guys are preserving these Japanese cultural treasures for those Japanese on the street in Tokyo.

Budo provenance is the same as for painting. Was there a famous martial artist in your lineage? For sure you're going to know that and tell that to your students. I certainly do, I cite my teachers and their teachers to my students who are mostly staring at me with blank faces, waiting for the crazy old guy to get to the kata.

I'm invested, they need to be educated before they will become invested.

Nov 15, 2018

Borrowing trouble

This morning the BBC is carrying a story on athletes who diet themselves into bone density problems. There are always athletes, young people in the prime of life and the peak of health, who participate in physically damaging sports. Always have been. There are also those who participate in life threatening sports. To add to this, steroid or other drug use, or to diet until sickness, seems very much less understandable to me than it ever has been.

Why would you want to create problems that will arrive soon enough? I sit here in the coffee shop hoping that the pain-killer will kick in and damp down a throbbing shoulder, while kicking myself for forgetting to take my medicines last evening so that my blood sugar went from mid-8 to mid-10 this morning. Meanwhile I'm down another pound in weight to mid 217s. How much less do I have to eat?

You want health problems? Just wait, they will show up. We have to die of something and if we live long enough it's going to be cancer. Don't borrow troubles by blowing through healthy behaviour to unhealthy. Do, by all means, eat properly to become a better athlete. Everyone ought to be an athlete, you will live better and maybe even longer. Take it too far and you go through to unhealthy. You round the circle and come back on the stuff you sought to avoid. A big circle with healthy on one side and unhealthy on the other, with working on one side and broken on the other.

As you get older the "broken" half gets bigger (that will irritate the "no such thing as a bigger half" types).

My budo point? Isn't that obvious? As an example, I often hear people saying that they practice their Seitei Iai for four or five hours a day, every day.

Can we say repetitive strain injury? If you were in a unionized workplace there would be serious discussions about forcing workers to repeat the same 12 movements on the line for 35 hours a week. It's dumb, it's unhealthy, it's borrowing trouble.

You want to be at the elite level of your activity, you need to be full time, no doubt about it, but professional boxers don't get hit in the face constantly, sprinters don't just sprint. They cross train or they borrow trouble. If you want to be an elite iaidoka you first need to figure out what that is, I suppose. There is no world championships like in other sports so you will have to content yourself with being top dog in the neighbourhood.

Nothing wrong with being an iaido champion, there's high jump champions, I used to be a high jumper at the county level. Javelin, discus, running from 400m to cross country too. Never any good as a specialist because it was a country county and there was lots going on, none of it at the elite level. Badminton, basketball, a year of football (still got a bum knee) volleyball... pretty much active year-round at something. A generalist. I'm still coasting on that fitness reserve. I hope.

Iaido as a specialist sport? It's like high-jumping, it's a skill extracted from a set of skills. Jumping over fences during a battle is a thing. Jumping over fences to jump over fences is something we do for fun, it's a sport, a way to acquire beers from those you can out-jump. (Or to get bags of money from those who sit at home drinking beer and pay to watch?)

Iaido was something that was part of learning how to use your sword in general. It's in a scabbard most of the time, to fight with it you need to take it out, why not learn how to cut with it as you take it out? Seems a good idea. But to make it an entire martial art? To further reduce that to 12 kata which you do in the Kendo Federation iai? OK if that floats your fune but OMG don't go overboard and borrow trouble. Do something else like go for a run once in a while, give your elbows a break.

Get off of your young knees before you make them old knees.

I have three weapons practices a week for 7 hours in total, much less than I used to do, but even that is a bit of a strain on the shoulders. Trust me, you'll get there, you just have to wait long enough, get old enough. Know what keeps me going? Jodo keeps me going, I do much more jodo than iaido in my personal practice these days. It's done with a partner and off of the knees, it's done with two hands on the weapon most of the time instead of one. It's more balanced than iai. It still hurts, wait long enough, get old enough and it will hurt for you too.

Don't borrow trouble.

Dec 9, 2018

Don't rehearse your mistakes.

Last class of the year turned out to be a repeat of the second last class, 1.5 hours of kihon and 20 minutes on Midare Dome and Ran Ai. Featuring the Pamurai and the Badger.

There were things to work on for both "names" but one thing stood out. At one point I said "2 steps!" and the Badger said "Which? Two feet or two arm movements?"

This was during a kihon that was supposed to be from a one-step distance. It was being done from a two-step distance and often done with a two-part cut, as in lift, wait for partner to start moving, cut.

No and no. Part of the problem was too much distance between partners and the two arm movements are almost inevitably the problem of beginners. When there are beginners around attacks tend to be more "suggestions" than assertions. Start to attack, wait for beginner to sort out their heads, finish attack. Fine, but not with these two, not in this class. My back hurts, I'm grumpy, and we could be having a beer if you don't want to get serious about practice.

So some yelling, some explanation, "get closer, its one step distance and don't wind up! Cut!" Here, take the shinai, crack her on the head, see, she isn't dead, now GET IN THERE.

Aaargh, "2 STEPS". "Which two steps?"

This is my point for today, my next words were "What do you care which? You made a mistake, move on, it doesn't matter which two steps, you shouldn't think about which two steps".

You shouldn't. You didn't do what you were asked to do, sensei just made a noise that amounts to "do it again", so do it again. If you ask for details of the mistake you will be mentally rehearsing that mistake which, believe it or not, is pretty close to doing the mistake once more. Do not review or rehearse mistakes if you want to stop making them. Just don't. When sensei tells you what you're doing wrong and shows what you're doing wrong it isn't so that you can review and rehearse it to do it "wronger" next time. It's to show you that you're doing it wrong, to prove it to you, to make you feel the mistake in your muscles so that you can identify it the next time you do it. Once he's done that, you need to forget rehearsing the mistake, you need to start listening even harder to what he says or shows next, the correction.

You need to focus on the correction, to get that into the muscle memory. Concentrate only on the correction. For the next few times you do this movement sensei is going to yell when you make the mistake. Stop, reset and do the correct movement as soon as you can, as often as you can. DO NOT stand around and talk about the mistake, do not say "oh am I still doing that". Sensei just told you to reset and re-do from start. Reset and do again, shut the damned brain off, stop rehearsing the mistake. Do the correct movement NOW. "Two steps" means no, do it again, can't you feel that you're making two moves instead of one? Do it again as one move, try. Now.

If you stop and ask which mistake you made, you will run through it in your head, then you will try to do the correction and that means you've done one of each and that means we MAY AS WELL GO FOR BEER! Oh, that last ended up in caps.

Yes, one needs to know that one has made a mistake in order not to make it any more. As one goes from beginner to senior, some things that were fine become things that are mistakes. As you can make the correction, the mistake is identified by sensei and you are asked to correct it. Until you can make the correction there's no point in identifying the mistake one way or the other. To say "you're making a mistake but you can't fix it now" is simply to stick that in the beginner's head and force them to obsess about it. That's why beginners ought to be careful about wanting senior level instruction, or even listening too closely while seniors are being corrected. Sensei will tell you when you need to know, if you haven't heard it from sensei but you recognize you do the same mistake as that senior, don't worry about it. Maybe try to fix it but if you can't, forget it for now and work on what you're supposed to be working on.

Some things need other things done first.

On the other hand, if, as a senior you hear a correction to a junior and you recognize you do it. Fix it. Now. Don't waste sensei's time by waiting for him to tell you what he just told the junior.

"Oh do I still do that?"

OMG shut up and just fix it will you please. Stop rehearsing mistakes.

Over beers with a couple extra members, I mentioned that we might want to do a seminar in the winter and the request came back that we do a day of kihon "even if the beginners don't want to do it". I'm good with that, we'll see what happens, it was left with "see what dates are available at the hall" which is often quite similar in effect to "pick a date that everyone can attend".

Dec 12, 2018

Retain or Retrain

It has become obvious from discussions over the last few days that the arts are not growing, anywhere. Almost none of them. This is not restricted to budo, the hunting and fishing folks from the USA were complaining that those sports are becoming less popular, with consequent concerns for wildlife preservation. If you don't have hunters and fishers why would you need wilderness? Seriously.

Social clubs are already in trouble, the Masons, the Odd Fellows, who are they today? We have an Army Navy club in Guelph with a sign outside that says "we've got a big hall to rent".

Some small areas may give the impression of growth, mega-churches exist in Guelph, but I suspect if you took a poll of all the churches in town you'd find that overall participation has gone down.

What has replaced all this? Facebook likely.

And our response, as a non-online, a non-media social group? My advice to those in charge is to concentrate on retaining the members you have. This is not easy to grasp, we live in a growth paradigm, and our economic well-being is assumed to require growth. The very idea of inflation comes from growth, and "we need inflation". Well, governments do, without inflation they would never, ever pay off their debts. Nor would we for that matter. Buy a house for \$80,000 and sell it for \$500,000 fifty years later. Preservation, as in buy something well-made and repair it. Who does that? We buy cheap stuff and get rid of it before it starts to show wear, or when it breaks the first time we try using it. I buy stuff in thrift shops, for those who do also, you know what I mean.

So we rely on new membership, even if unconsciously, we ignore the members we have, we don't consult, we dictate. We change the rules, we spend next year's money. No problems, new members are coming in. The money is in the turnover.

But it's not. For the CKF I've done the maths while I was secretary for the board. We get more money from gradings than membership fees, or we did. It's evening out a bit now that we charge back-dues at grading time, but we still need the gradings to collect the membership dues. The insurance is more or less the only incentive other than gradings, to pay those dues. gradings and insurance, what else do we get? As I've mentioned before, the instruction comes from below the national organization, from the dojo level, so do most tournaments, seminars and, in fact, grading organization. Some of this is done by the federation of course, I'm not suggesting otherwise, but for the general membership things are seen to happen at the local level unless we're talking about the national team. Optics matter.

Gradings, one would think, make more money at the lower ranks, where they are done more often and there are more members grading. That wasn't true five or ten years ago, probably less so now. Grading fees go up with rank, as expected (why?) and membership isn't growing, so the money earned per grade is actually fairly evenly distributed. We make roughly as much from 6dan gradings as we do from shodans, in other words.

All of which tells me that we had really better focus on our current membership, on retaining them, rather than counting on new bodies coming in through the door. They aren't arriving.

If we don't retain the membership, most specifically the senior ranks, we are going to have to retrain those ranks. If the guys who sit on the panel decide it's too much trouble, that they are not respected or appreciated, and leave, the organization is going to have to replace them, that means retraining the cadre, and that also means a loss of income while that is done. To get from 6dan to 7dan you need to wait 6 years. If you stop doing 7dan gradings you will have to wait 6 years and hope your 6dans are willing to go somewhere else, on their own dime, to obtain their 7dan. At 6dan you can sit a 4dan panel, at 7dan you can sit a 7dan panel.

Think about that, to do gradings from 5 to 7dan you need 7dan panelists. To take a new member and train them to that level requires 7dans to be present, and some time. Over 20 years to be precise. The alternative is to fly in panellists or hope someone goes somewhere else, both of which cost the members money and benefit the organization more than those members. A third alternative would simply be to create the rank you need. What, you think that is impossible, that it never happens? Stick around, look around, of course it happens, always has.

Regardless, and assuming one doesn't want to simply recreate the rank, it's a lot more efficient to retain rather than retrain. The primary goal of the organization ought to be service to the membership. Anything else is counter-survival.

If you agree, how about some suggestions of how to retain the membership we have? Or alternatively, what NOT to do, assuming you'd like people to stick around. Here's your chance to both explain and complain.

It's Saturday and it's winter, why not?

Dec 15, 2018

Legacy

Do you ever wonder about your legacy? I don't, not really, I sort of took to heart what my mother said decades ago. "When you're dead, you're dead, they put you in the ground and the worms eat you". I'm pretty sure she said that. In any case, when I'm dead I am not going to care about my legacy. I'll let my students worry about that.

On the other hand, I worry about my legacy now, while I'm alive. I have spent a very large portion of my life in the martial arts. I have, since the middle 1980s worked to establish iaido and jodo in this region of Canada. I would like to see them both strong, healthy and happy, but for different reasons. Jodo of course is "my baby", I started practicing Zen Ken Ren Jo with the specific purpose of adding it to the CKF. For this I had the permission and encouragement of Asa sensei, the President of the federation. For several years I only practiced the kendo federation jodo (seitei) because I already had two other koryu, Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and Niten Ichiryu. My intent was always clear, as is my ultimate goal, to complete the section, to have a complete set of ranks so that CKF jodo will be self-sustaining.

Jodo was my student thing, I didn't study it like I did my koryu, I simply practiced what I was taught, it was relaxing, no pressure, it was my practice "for me". Today it's a bit different, as I predicted to myself there is pressure from the membership to add koryu to our practice, so we have done that, but in several different lines as I have encouraged people to practice it "for themselves". In other words, find a sensei and practice selfishly, for yourself, without worrying about what everyone else is doing. We have the standard practice, seitei, to keep us moving along together.

The legacy I think about in Jodo is a strong, independent-minded, self-sufficient bunch of folks who are confident in their own practice. Confident enough not to argue and snipe at each other. It is those allowed, permitted, differences that make this possible. The biggest weapon in the budobitching arsenal is "you're not doing it right". Take that away and you are forced back on personal insults like "you need a bath". With multiple authorities to appeal to we can't point to one and say "I have special knowledge of what's correct".

It also helps that jodo is an art where you can say "Oh? Show me how that works". It makes a difference.

In iai, it's a different legacy that I worry about, it's the legacy of my sensei. My part in the iaido story is fairly superficial, it was as a support player to Ohmi sensei. It was always his vision that I followed as we built from nothing at all to a section that was self-sufficient. One that could go its own way with a strong, independent style of practice. One that was recognized as being worthwhile around the world.

The principle was fairly simple from the beginning. Do it for the students. Whatever we did, it was for the students. Ohmi sensei never looked upward, never looked to his own advancement except where it would help the students. He looked, instead, toward those students, worrying about their instruction, worrying about gradings for them. It fell to me to organize the spring seminar so that Ohmi sensei could get some instruction for himself. Instruction he wanted so that he could teach the students correctly. It was, and remains, his seminar. It will always be his section, his iaido group that practices in this region. You only have to trace his lineage and see just how many dojo and sensei are "his".

Do you wonder that I worry about his legacy? Without him the section might not have existed. Yes there were independently developing groups in Vancouver and Montreal at the same time, but it fell to Ohmi sensei to organize the centre, to organize the section into existence as a national entity. To organize Canadian gradings from zero to 7dan. "We made it" as he would say, to where a few students went from ikkyu to 6dan entirely under the CKF. Ohmi sensei and I took 7dan under the CKF (with Japanese panelists of course) but we started with jump grades.

I would very much like to see one of our CKF 6dans make it to 7dan under a CKF panel and grading. I really think that would make my sensei's legacy. Will I live that long? Once I'm dead I'm not going to care, that will fall to someone else, someone who does care.

One day I hope to see the jodo section do the same? While I may take 7dan in jodo under the CKF (there's no way I'm doing it elsewhere) it would, again be with a jump grade start. Now I need to go figure out who has done all their jodo gradings under the CKF so I can figure out when to brag. One of our 6dans? Did we all jump grade that first time? Hmm I wish my memory was better. Surely one of our 5dans.

Who is going to fulfill my legacy?

No pressure.

Dec 19, 2018

One more step back

I didn't get changed for class last evening. One more step back. I was also in a pretty foul mood, the neck is so bad that I can't look down at the weigh scales. This is just not on.

The class caught it big time, the first five kata of seitei jo and we pulled kihon out of the movements which I then had a hard time believing could not be done. We obviously need to do more of that sort of thing. It was all I could do to not scream at them "don't waste what time I've got left!"

Don't.

Seriously, for those who have a hard time learning what sensei wants you to learn, try harder. None of us have forever, even if it feels like you've got forever to learn this stuff, we don't have infinite time to teach you. Maybe it's the weather, maybe the drugs making me depressed, but I can feel myself slipping away. If I can't get the pain under control I may not be around to see the spring. After almost a year of continuous pain, and several bad years before that, I'm tired of it. To have to repeat myself week after week, class after class, saying the same thing, having the student demonstrate what I want to see, and then watching the same old poor habits show up three kata later.... well it's exhausting.

We can't learn this stuff for you folks. Don't ask us to do it for you by telling you to fix it every.... single.... Time you do it. Have pity on the sick and the infirm, make an effort, if we say "do it like that" what should you do?

We had a couple of visitors show up just as class was ending, wanting the chat, what's this stuff, why should I join? Talk me into it. I couldn't face it, I pointed at the Pamurai and said "talk to her". No more beginners, I just want to get my seniors and middlings somewhat further along while I still can. Some people like beginners because they are easy to teach, they know nothing, they are a blank slate, and you can get them far along, fast.

Sure, but so can just about anyone, it doesn't have to be me. I want those who are difficult to teach, not because they refuse to pay attention and learn, but because they are far enough along they don't know how to go further. There I can spend some profitable time.

Because that's the crux of it, isn't it? I have no interest in living, only in working and if I can't work what's the point? That's the bottom line, I can't hit the shop (too cold), can't sew (can't look down), certainly can't work on the house, I can sit in a chair and watch TV with a heating pad on my neck or I can lie still on the couch.

Waste of space and resources. Candidate for the ice floe. Don't convince me that I am also useless in the dojo, make the effort to 1. be there and 2. do what I'm asking you to do. In other words, improve, because if you're not improving I need to send you to someone else who can push you along. That's also part of my job.

Boy this neck is really ticking my boxes, I'm seriously frustrated and depressed.

Jan 30, 2019

Teaching what can't be taught

Jiki Tsu, Mushin, Kigurai, I've been talking about wanting to pass those things along to my students. The problem is how to teach it. Do we just repeat the kata for years and assume that somehow deeper understanding will appear? Emergent properties do exist, but no matter how many kata I've added to a curriculum, nothing novel shows up. What happens is that the kata get polished, the movements get smoother, but it all remains superficial.

Tournaments? They are supposed to provide pressure to the student, they are supposed to provide an opportunity for character development. That may be, tournaments are a game and sportsmanship is a good thing, fair play and all that. The thing is, I'm not talking about being a good sport, learning how to follow rules. Playing a game often has no consequences except winning or losing. Certainly iai and jo tournaments, which are judged, have no real-world consequences. Some sports do, boxing comes to mind, and I have met some kendoka who have an iron core. Kendo sport is "full contact", it can hurt.

Some sort of pressure is going to be required, for sure. How about gradings? I don't see much character building in gradings. Nervous? Sure OK, but it's the sort of nervous you get with public speaking. Most of my students are in University, and most of those are post grads, so exams aren't something they have a problem with. Again we're talking real-world consequences and if you fail your 4dan iai grading what's the consequence? Getting too drunk the night before the grading and forgetting to bow is the usual problem with my guys, they don't worry a lot about passing budo ranks, not when they've got PhD comprehensives to look forward to. Those are real-world consequences, 15 or 20 years of post-secondary education on the line.

Even if the first couple of budo gradings are nervous-making, if students are being trained correctly, if they are acquiring kigurai and all that other stuff, their grading pressure ought to fall away.

So what can I come up with?

Maybe a fickle sensei, one who keeps changing his tune, who figures it's his job to be irritating. A sensei who figures he's the sand in the oyster, the irritation that creates the pearl. Make students doubt their own memory "didn't you say something else last year?". Make them ask questions "how is that going to work, seriously, there's no way that can work, you are going to have to show me". Make them think "OK he said one thing last week, and now he's saying something else, I trust him, so how do these things fit?"

Ohmi sensei says his method is 1. Show them, 2. Make them sweat, 3. Criticize them. This is a modification of a famous sensei whose number 3 was "praise them". Praise is over-rated, it's useful if you are looking for a good student evaluation but it can create feelings of "good enough" in a student. You don't want that, you want doubt, you want to create a need, an urge to keep working. It's sensei's job to say "good enough" when it needs to be said, if a student believes it, they are no longer a student.

A second method of teaching this extra-technique stuff is to demand that your senior students be mind readers. At least that's my claim to students who look at me and say "use your words, what the hell do you want me to do". I pull this a lot when using a student to help demonstrate in front of the class. It seldom fails to make them angry, especially if I'm "making them look like an idiot in front of everybody". In point of fact, a lot of the time I don't have words for what I want them to do, I don't know what I want them to do, I've got some vague feeling in my head that right now, if I demonstrate for the class, some sort of lesson will show up. So I say "cut" to see what happens. Honestly, my brain is empty much of the time.

Which is mushin. How can you teach "cutting from the void" if you have no void. Mushin is the spontaneous creation of a technique at need, without rationalization. How do you do that with your head full of words?

How do you learn how to read your opponent if you know what he's about to do? That's what sports are supposed to do, give you the chance to "free style" it, to learn how to react to unpredictable events.

So when teaching don't let the students fall into habits. Partner kata don't look very good when both sides are in their own little world and things are happening separately, with contact being made almost accidentally. Memorizing each side is great for beginners, it's something you have to do, but we're talking about what goes beyond this. How do you force students to pay attention to each other?

Variations, contradictions, forced changes in timing, anything to get them out of their own heads and looking at what their partner is doing.

I don't really have an answer as to how to teach this stuff, but I know that it doesn't happen if all you do is correct footwork and etiquette. That stuff is basic, we all know that you can fail your ikkyu test for a sloppy uniform or a bad bow, the reason for that isn't that uniforms and etiquette are really important, it's that they're really easy to teach.

What I'm talking about is that stuff way down the road that you can get failed for at 7dan. How do you teach students to be the eye of the storm, to have a calm, solid core of self-efficacy (not the same as self-confidence) that will allow them to deal with anything that life throws at them?

Do I know? I guess, mostly. I'm pretty sure it's different for each and every student who arrives at the dojo, and I know it's the same for all of them.

I also know it can't be taught, it has to be uncovered.

Start digging.

Jan 29, 2019

To be of worth

Mr. Nutt of Terry Pratchett's "Unseen Academicals" wanted to be of worth. Me, I have always wanted to be of use. I suppose it's the same thing, although I suspect "worth" is more tied up with self-esteem than "use" might be. It isn't, my being of use is part of my self-image, my ego, what makes me "me". I'm not unique in this, there's a generation or three of us still around who were raised partly by grandparents who went through the depression and "the war". Very little of the "Me Generation" attitude that supposedly came later.

Is this strictly generational? Not at all, my daughter is heading back to school this week and I slipped her a little cash. She felt guilty and I said "just don't spend it on junk food, there's good food in the fridge here". "But I feel guilty eating your food" she said. Bless her heart, and who taught her economics? The thing is, both my kids have not been what you could call deprived, they haven't been exactly pampered, no ponies, no car for the 16th birthday, but they haven't been in a house with no food in the cupboards either. They became adults who can see beyond themselves, who can see that they are "still leeching off of the parents" and will try to be of some use in return.

This is simple. The world does NOT owe you a living. Life is NOT fair. Be appreciative for what you have. The very idea that there are people out there who will thank a god for giving them riches and will assume that the poor are being punished by that same god actually turns my stomach. Born rich? God must have loved your soul before you were born right? You're god's favourite?

Ugh, need more bitter-black dark roast to get the taste of sanctimony out of my mouth.

What are you except a drone, an ant, a waster of resources if you drift through life doing nothing but eating and crapping? There's coming up on 9 billion of us chewing through the planet, how do you justify your presence, your damage to the place? God loves you? You keep the economy going by buying closets full of clothing made in sweatshops overseas and donate it all back to the sonky shop to be shipped back overseas? You buy a pickup truck that's so big you would never be able to get a bag of grain in the back without a ladder? What use? What use?

Think a bit, think about the accident of you being here, and be a bit boggled at the chance you had to be a person. Use that chance for something other than consuming and disposing. Go to school, learn, learn more, graduate, get a job of some use to the rest of humanity, keep learning, become a better person, keep learning.

Be of use.

Learning got us to the point where we could extinguish ourselves from the face of the planet, and take a large chunk of the rest of the species with us. That may be true, but being deliberately stupid, turning away from that education that got us here is NOT going to solve the problem. Not in a way you want it to happen.

Believing in those who say vaccination is a bad thing will simply allow you to watch your children, and other children become sick, crippled and dead. This will not help the population problem, it really won't. It will devalue the lives of children and promote the breeding of more of them. Vaccination = child survival = fewer children. Child mortality = more kids. These maths are not difficult.

What has all this to do with me, personally? Aside from skipping a generation and having two kids when I was in my 40s? When I could afford them?

I believe in the value of the martial arts as methods of instruction in humanity for adults. I believe it because the martial arts made me a better person than I was. They taught me about life and more importantly, about death. I learned, and I will continue to learn and teach for as long as I am of some use. There will come a time when I am not of any use, there may even come a time when I am in the way. At that time I hope that I, or someone else, will gently put me aside with a nice watch so I can listen to my time tick away.

I'm sure my students get tired of me asking, after just about every class, "was that OK?" I'm not looking for an ego stroke, (well not much I hope) I'm checking that I'm still being of some use.

Are you being of some use to anyone but yourself? Have you contributed to the "greater good" beyond you and your tribe lately? There's too many of us to think only of our little hunting group any more, we have to think wider in order to be of genuine use. If not, we're just taking up space.

Be of worth or be of use, both are better than being consumers to make shareholders rich.

By the way, fair disclosure, I have been a shareholder for decades, since I was in University, I looked at the economics and said to myself "do what the rich people do because they are in power and will do whatever they can to stay there". The rich are actually lousy consumers when you look at income vs spending, compared to the poor.

Think about that.

Jan 15, 2019

Two Kilometers of Thread

or To be of worth II

Some days these little essays twist away from me and go in a different direction, and that happened yesterday. I was going to write about making stuff. I try not to stop these little twists and turns, I usually learn something by reading what is showing up on my screen.

Some of it gets erased.

The second kilometre of black thread is now gone, stitched into weapon bags of various sizes, designs and patterns. I apologize that I keep talking about them but haven't shown them on the website yet. They will eventually get there, they don't go bad. I continue to make them because I want to be of use, rather than be "dad on the couch". To that end I'm also converting some of the exotic lumber in the shop into bokuto. Again, they will accumulate but they don't expire, eventually they will be sold to help the family finances.

I am SO glad Brenda went back to work at the University, the shot I got yesterday was worth \$1500.00. Yes that's fifteen hundred dollars. One shot. I can't remember how many union members, while I was on the exec, told me that they'd rather have the money in their paycheque than go toward benefits. Insane. "I'd rather have an extra carton of cigarettes now than a drug plan at 60".

Mr. Nutt, the character in Unseen Academicals (Terry Pratchett) that I mentioned yesterday wants to be of worth. That was defined in the book more or less as "leaving the place better than you found it".

Are you of worth? Do you feel that you have contributed to your world (the one I live in these days is the martial arts, but there have been many others). There are many ways to contribute, but some of the best, the most clear, the most immediate, involve making things. Now, is this being of use or being worthy? It depends a bit on what you do with what you make I suppose. I make wooden weapons for a living, that's of use, but occasionally I donate weapons to new dojo to help out. In recent years I've made speakers, dolls, paintings, bag tags and whatnot. Is that use? Not many of those got sold, a lot got given away, do they make the world better? Maybe, if they encourage others to make something or if they amuse people. The coffee shop has quite a few of my weird little wooden dolls hanging around the place. They make people laugh.

Making things. The Pamurai asked to use the shop a while ago, didn't ask for help, didn't tell me what she was doing. A while later she had a big Japanese loom she had seen in a photo and she is now making sageo. I find that admirable, mostly because it's the sort of thing I do, figure out how it's made, make the tools, then make the thing.

Is it worthy? I think it is, actually. There is a buddhist bit of thought that says "make yourself better and thereby make the world better". Non-buddhists will argue that is a very selfish attitude, that one should devote oneself to helping the less fortunate become better rather than spend time on oneself.

Teach me how to fish if you've never fished before, please. How many multi-million dollar chunks of machinery have gone into the "developing world" where a simple tool would have done a better job? Gas powered water pumps where a Mennonite hand pump would do.

Knowing how to make a loom isn't something that a lot of people are going to wish to know, but the Pamurai will now be able to look at her students, some of whom will need to be "realigned" at some point and say "go out and figure out how to do it and then do it". She will know how to teach them to learn because she'd done it, she has acquired that most precious piece of knowledge of all. She knows it is possible.

That is worth. To know it can be done. To be able to teach others to believe it can be done by themselves. If I can do it, so can you. "But you're so talented".... that's what you have to get past, that's what we teach in the budo. Students walk in the door and see what you can do. "I'll never be able to do that". Five years later they are doing what they didn't believe they could do. How much is that worth?

This is the transition from creating something, making something like a bed, or a painting, or a turned plate, and creating something in a student, like a sense of worth. We start with the object, "see you can make this", or "see you can perform this kata" and move on to "see, you can do more than you think you can do, you don't have to be afraid to fail, you have failed many times along the way to producing this thing before you". Go Do Things!

Are you in a moral-destroying, soul-sucking dead end job? That's what you do for money, and we all need money. What else do you do? Why not learn how to knit and knit things, create. Why not join a dojo and create, perform a kata? Paint, write, build, and leave things in the world.

This is worth, and it is worth doing.

Jan 16, 2019

How long is enough

Omori Ryu for class yesterday, just sort of glided through it to (re)introduce the kata to the class but it still took us through a 3 hour class. I wonder how much time I'd need to go through it fully. I had a brief thought that maybe I'd update the book and firmly stomped on it. It's fine, whatever is in it, is enough to get started and that's all you need, really, to get started.

When we were starting the class, Denis presented me with a nice folding chair to rest in, thanks guys, it is appreciated. I then overheard someone saying "you had him for over ten years, I've only had him for three". I know what that is, it's "you can't go away I haven't learned it all". I'm hearing that a lot these days. So what do you need to learn and when do you want to learn it? I'll teach you now, today. Seriously I will. Get your ass in front of me and we'll stuff it into your head, bring a notebook and a video camera, and take pictures. Bring your buddies to help you remember. Let's go.

Ten years ago one of my students was back for the May seminar and said something like "it's hard being so far away from instruction". I looked at him and asked how long he had been with me. Ten years. "In ten years of three times a week classes do you seriously believe that I forgot to say something to you? That I never got around to covering some topic or another?" Go do your own work.

The fellow yesterday, you know who you are, who was complaining he's only had 3 years, caught hell from me too. The deal is, I am at every single class. That's three a week. If you are at all of those classes, every one of them, for the full time of each class, I MAY be sympathetic that you haven't spent enough time with me to learn what I can teach you. Miss 50% of those classes and I'm not going to be very upset that you didn't get as much as you could have.

When you walk into a class with an old man up front teaching, you really need to get it into your head that he isn't going to be around for as long as you are. You don't know how much longer you will be with him, and you may regret the classes you wandered off to go for a beer with your buddies, or couldn't make it off the couch and away from the video game. Do you usually walk in late? You can in my class because I don't care, but if you do you might miss some little gem of instruction that opens up a world of understanding, a cascade of comprehension. I know this because I've experienced it, you never know when a tiny nudge drops you over a cliff into a swamp of knowledge.... OK that's enough.

When you start your martial arts study this may not matter at all, you don't know what you're going to miss, you may figure that all teachers are interchangeable, that they are all equally good, so if one disappears you can simply pick up with another one. This is usually true, no it is, it's true when you're a beginner. At that point you're just learning the techniques and anyone will do, to teach you that. However, if you stay around long enough, there are some guys out there that you will click with. There are some teachers that "get you" and many years into your studies you might just regret missing all those classes.

The Pamurai has been around for over ten years, but she said yesterday that "I could have been here 20 years ago". Yeah, when she was 15, before she knew the class even existed in a different city. It's true, she could have been there, and apparently I was even at her school (Conestoga College, judging a photo contest). Not sure how meeting me at a photo contest would have revealed a martial art class in another city but sure, regrets for opportunities missed.

Not really missed. She's been to pretty much every class for 10 years. She's been taught and watched me teach and she teaches in a different city herself. That's often 5 classes a week, learning what I have to teach and digesting it to pass along to her own students. She, (and a lot of my other students), "has it", has what I can teach, all of it. The techniques and the way. There is a generation of students out there who are "really nice". Who know their stuff and teach with compassion and humour and, let's face it, love for their students. They may not be content, I hope they aren't because when they are they will stop learning, but they "have it". Everything I can give is there. Plus themselves, and that makes them better than I am. They will continue to grow and improve into their own old age and their students will regret not spending more time with them.

Because of our University status we tend to have students for a decade and then they move along. Ten years is enough time to collect a Masters or a Doctorate, surely it's enough time to learn even the silly large number of sword schools we study.

What we regret, when a teacher dies or retires, is not the lack of "stuff" we are taught, the missed techniques. We can easily pick them up from other instructors. What we miss is the man himself. We may not realize it but we miss the invisible instruction, the stuff we absorb not through the corrections he's giving us, but the way in which he corrects us. We miss learning how to be a good human being, not how to be a kick-ass back-street fighter.

Do you have a teacher like that? Is he old? Maybe even a bit feeble? If you do, understand that you don't have much time with him, no matter how many more years you get, you won't have enough, you will regret every class you miss, every chance you had to sit and talk, every question you didn't ask.

"Practice like your hair is on fire".

Jan 14, 2019

Whenever you're ready

Some time ago I wrote about knowing when you're ready to teach. In my notebook I've got a somewhat cryptic note about "when do you know when to quit", I might have written on that too.

For a few months now, and more so in the last few weeks I've been talking with my students, the ones still at home, about taking over and teaching. It really is getting time to hand things to the next generation, despite what a bunch of Octogenarian Octadans on top of the pile might think. It's not good to hang on to power for so long the next guy is old and feeble when he takes over.

But my students doubt. Last Friday I told Pam and Denis that they both know more now than I did when they first showed up in the dojo. I'm quite serious about that, even though they have the impression that I'm still teaching them things.

I am. I will continue to do so for as long as I can. While they were learning the arts, so was I. When I teach, I watch, I see, I see other things, things I was never told, never taught. I tell them a thing and they figure, maybe, that I knew that thing all along. I didn't, I just saw it, just now.

Pam once said "I remember the class where you figured that out". Smart-ass, my first impulse was to claim I'd always known that, but I didn't. This realization that your sensei "makes shite up" is an important step along the road to teaching. Sooner or later you're going to have to make stuff up for your students. If not, you're going to be one of those teachers who runs out of stuff to teach, and has to teach slowly just to keep students around long enough to pay the rent. "You must do kata number one perfectly before you can go to number 2. No, you were 3mm off! Do it again."

You know enlightenment? How do you know when you're enlightened? When you get inka from your teacher? Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. How would you know if you're enlightened? Why would you care? If you're hungry for enlightenment, maybe you're just hungry for inka.

It's how you react to the world that reveals to others your enlightenment. It's the same with teaching. A lot of what we learn, what we "suddenly understand thankyouverymuchsensei" is what we already know. All things are enlightened, they just don't realize it, and you have to strip away the delusions to uncover it.

With budo, which involves physical techniques, techniques that we always confuse with the thing we are studying, the mistaking of the sizzle for the steak, we do need to learn stuff. We need to add movements like monks need to memorize sutras, we need to learn the koan so we can give them to the junior monks, we need to learn the kata so we can give them to the students. And we need to learn how to poke and prod them into place, so they fit the student.

Student doesn't fit Kata, Kata fits student.

OK all suitably mystical and mystifying. What I mean is that at some time a student comes to you and says "what about this" and you say "I dunno" (the first clue that you are a teacher is to be able to say "I dunno") "try it". So the student tries it and you say "oh, OK that's what". Student goes away dazed and impressed. Sensei says to himself "hmm, must remember that one for the next time".

When you start pulling techniques, exercises, and explanations out of your rear end, when you are comfortable with "lying to beginners", you are more than ready to teach at a high level.

On another level, you can teach what you know a week after you know it. Seriously, I did that for years, a lesson with sensei, back to Guelph to teach the students here, the next week. Chris Nunan just about took my head off when he learned I was doing that. Of course I was teaching iaido (this foot here, move arm there) and I had many years of Aikido to back up what I was passing along, but still, I was a week ahead of the class.

And my students, with over a decade apiece, are saying to me "I need to get into the dojo and clean up some of the things I do, I need to work on some stuff because I know I'm garbage right now".

They'll do just fine.

The ones I worry about are the ones who know it, know they know it, and want others to know they know it. They don't know it.

A good teacher is the guy who is running full out, looking over his shoulder at a bunch of guys running after him. Guys who are catching up. Seriously now, if I'm a week ahead of you every class, what's the problem? When you catch up you can teach, until then, watch my dust.

On the way down this path, just remember that the guy who knows where you are along the path, who knows what you know, isn't some spectator on the sidelines, it's your teacher. If he says you're OK, believe him. If he later says you need work, believe him and figure out how you got so prideful in the meantime.

None of this has anything to do with you being able to surpass your teacher in the physical techniques. By the time you are even thinking of teaching, long before your sensei is thinking of you teaching, you ought to be able to "take him" in class.

Out behind the barn? That's a different dojo entirely. That's the difference between you thinking you can teach and him thinking you can teach.

Jan 13, 2019

Because the Japanese said so

That's something I've heard a lot over the years, and it's always fascinating just how often it's not only "what the Japanese said", but what the guy saying it wants done. Gatekeepers, members of the in crowd, and interpreters of what the great man really wants.

Recently I have been told (again) that the Japanese want a whole slew of "unwritten rules" concerning iaido gradings. I get this from many different sources in several countries and it usually comes down to enough Japanese on the panel to control the results and as a result, going to Japan if you want your 7dan. I've heard it from some Japanese myself. Thing is, I never paid any attention to it. Still have no interest in unwritten rules. Show me the written changes to the rules (which would mean that the changes will apply to kendo and jodo as well) and we can talk. Seriously, I can't see the CKF kendo section having any interest in these rules at all.

Why would anyone follow this sort of argument? (It's called "appeal to authority" by the way.) Inevitably the answer is "because we don't want to lose the support of the Japanese". Look, some of the things "the Japanese want" would result in breaking the law. I can think of two examples right now where this has been the case. Why would your Japanese sensei want you to break the law? I suspect they wouldn't, I suspect they don't know the law, and realistically, why would they. They probably assume that things are "the same as in Japan" and that they ought to be done "like we do it in Japan". The problem is with the local folks who don't say to the Japanese "I'm sorry, we can't do that, it's against the law in this country".

These are just misunderstandings on the Japanese side, they only become problems when the locals insist on acting like children who feel they must obey their parents no matter what.

On the other hand there are those on both sides who have agendas. We have talked about empire building lately, and it can happen. On the Japanese side they have to be careful not to be too obvious about this stuff because, in the Kendo Federation, empires are still frowned upon. However, they are positively embraced on the western side. If you have sensei's ear, if you're his gatekeeper, and you can convince everyone else that you're the interpreter for the great man, you are now in charge. That, in our little circles, this often means you're the big cheese for 50 or 100 people is no matter, in charge is in charge.

Being Sensei's mouthpiece, knowing "what the Japanese want" is a way of jumping the queue isn't it? It puts sensei's guy in charge, ahead of the normal administrative structure in the local country. "If you don't want to lose the support of the Japanese you must do what I tell you they want you to do".

I tend to want to hear it from the Japanese themselves, but it's strange just how difficult that becomes sometimes. "Oh sensei isn't available right now".

How silly can this get? How about Japanese sensei demanding that the elected officers of a foreign country resign? How about Japanese sensei picking the next leader of a section in a foreign country? This is all great stuff if you're the foreigner who benefits, but it can get the Japanese into serious trouble back home, whether or not they actually said those things. Being accused of interfering with the administration of a foreign country is as bad as actually interfering. You want to lose the support of your Japanese sensei? Start "speaking for him", start putting words in his mouth because "you know that's what he would want".

I've said this before and I'll say it again now, the Kendo Federation is different from most budo organizations. It is more like an international sports organization than a martial arts group. It is NOT, not, not, top down, no matter how much we want it to be, no matter how much we want to be right there between the top dog and everyone in our local area. The Kendo Federation is flat, it's horizontal. As much as you point out that the FIK is a desk and three chairs in the ZNKR offices, it is the FIK, not Japan that every other country answers to. Japan answers to the FIK as well. Does the ZNKR pay the vast percentage of the costs of the FIK? Yes it does. Does Japan consider the Japanese championships of Kendo to be more important than the Worlds? Yes it does. But in matters of international kendo, Japan is under the FIK, if only on paper. It has to be this way if we are going to have a world championships of kendo. Each country is responsible for its own kendo training, each country is in charge of its own training and grading system. If it isn't, it's the "Extended Japanese Kendo Championships" not the World Kendo Championships. And for gradings? The "rules" for gradings are titled "Standard Guidelines". Think about that.

Now, if a country or a group of countries want to pretend that it's all vertical, that the guidelines are rules and that there are all sorts of extra "unwritten rules" which amount to "whatever the Japanese say", that's fine. It's allowed. Is it good for the country? Is it good for you? Maybe it is if you want the Kendo Federation to be a koryu organization, (it's not). The kendo guys don't often have this confusion, only the iaido and jodo folk. In Kendo you may have a sensei but there's no feeling that you are at risk of being thrown out of the FIK if you disobey, or if "your Japanese Sensei" takes a dislike to your kote-men.

Let's examine this koryu thing a bit further because it really is the root of the problem. The Kendo Federation has a set of kata for Kendo, one for Jodo and one for Iaido. These are based on koryu but they are not koryu. Jodo comes close, being entirely derived from the Shindo Muso Ryu, but as every SMR group out there will tell you, Seitei Jo is not SMR. In all three arts under the organization, there are members who also practice koryu. There are also those who do not. There are quite highly ranked people who do not practice koryu at all, or the bare minimum, they specialize in Seitei jo or iai, or they focus on shinai kendo.

Look at the sport aspects and you can understand a lot about the organization. Look at the koryu part (assuming it's actually a part) and you start to see the power of a statement like "because the Japanese said so". Kendo is a sport, it has rules, there isn't a lot of room for extra stuff because that distracts from a fair competition. Does it never happen that a kendo fighter wins the championship round "because it's his time"? Maybe, it could, because of the way the judging of points is done. For iaido or jodo competitions? Much easier to award the win to "the guy who ought to win" because nobody is on the floor bleeding out. Hard, really, to argue with a good clean man.

The Kendo Federation itself is starting to realize the problem of koryu. A little bit. Koryu in the kendo section is sort of there but not there. A few folks practice the old sword schools and haul them out for the occasional demonstration but they rarely get confused with shinai kendo. It's in the iaido and jodo sections that koryu problems happen, as for instance the bribery problem of a few years ago when they simply got rid of the koryu iai from the grading system. The problem of course was the possibility of empire building, of "sensei said", of having to bribe a judge because he will pass or fail you on your koryu, his koryu.

Get rid of the koryu and you got rid of that concentration of power.

Nothing, however, will get rid of the self-imposed desire of those in the west to make sure they "keep the support of the Japanese" by doing what the gatekeepers say "because the Japanese said so".

This is a Western problem, not a Japanese problem. Even if some Japanese actually say things that are beyond what is proper and appropriate, they do not speak for the Kendo Federation. It's an individual talking, who may or may not actually know the rules (or the laws of a foreign country). It's up to us to either put our big boy pants on and explain this to sensei, or to double check the gatekeepers and make sure that "the Japanese" really did say that.

Provided, of course that us 50 or 100 people actually care about this.

Jan 8, 2019

Organic vs organized

How do organizations appear? I'm speaking as usual about budo and the organizations we end up with.

First I suppose we ought to ask why we need any particular organization. I know of many organizations out there that consist of a president and not much else that do not much. The important thing about these groups is that the head guy gets to be a head guy. The purpose is, perhaps, to provide a line on the resume but I suspect mostly it's so that the head guy, who is usually also the founder, can say he's the head guy of something. Just don't look too closely please.

Then there's money. If your group collects money and it isn't simply going into the pocket of the head guy, you will need some sort of organization to manage that money. When our province had money for things like Kendo, we had a provincial organization to apply for and report on it. When that money was shut off the organization continued, I'm not entirely sure what they are doing these days, tournaments perhaps. I suspect, like most similar organizations, it will be active if someone finds a use for it. This is an example of an organized organization. One that comes into existence full blown and for a reason. Other examples would be those groups that hand out rank. gradings can be very informal things, your sensei hands you a piece of paper once in a while, or they can be quite complex, requiring time between grades, money for grades, tracking of the information, renting halls, flying in examiners, and much else. Someone has to do all that, so an organization is organized.

Money and rank then, anything else? In some cases instruction is also of concern beyond a local level. Some groups have senior level instructors and coaches who are sent throughout the organization to teach and establish standards. This takes organization and money.

Those arts that involve a sport aspect need an organization to take care of the tournaments. We have circled back around to the Ontario Kendo Federation, which was set up under the provincial sport ministry. Dealing with government money is one of the most complex things a sport organization will encounter. These days the sports tend to be the Olympic group, so Judo, Karate and Tae Kwon Do? The rest are self-organizing and self-funded.

So yes, there are reasons for having organizations. Now how do those happen? They grow or they are created. They are organic or they are organized. I've been involved with both and in my experience the organic types are much more resilient than people might think. (As a footnote, this split isn't all that distinct, as I will write presently. Take the Ontario Kendo example, organized for a purpose, but now organically shifting to a different purpose and role.)

I should point out at this point that I'm talking about volunteer organizations. I'll explain why in a moment.

Create an organization, think of all the jobs you need, fill those jobs with people and ring the starting bell, off you go. That group is going to grow in some places, shrink in others, and generally morph into a system that can get the job done. You won't get a lot of extra positions, committees or meetings. This is for a volunteer organization. Make these positions paid and you will skew things in different directions. If you're being paid to hold a position that turns out to be unnecessary, you will find ways to justify it. Maybe invent extra responsibilities that are suddenly "necessary", maybe assume supervisory or consultative duties for positions that are actually needed. Another thing that is almost inevitable when dealing with paid positions is an expansion of under-positions. Let's face it, management sets the pay scales and therefore pay scales tend to be based on the number of people you manage. More underlings means more pay. The only place this doesn't work is when you're hiring in specialized knowledge that is in short supply, then you've got to pay the expert the big bucks to headhunt him away from some other company.

Take a close look at your organization. It may seem to be organized, may read as such on paper, but to see what actually happens, look at the workflows. For budo your horizontally empowered, committee based group can morph into a vertical hierarchy pretty fast. If you don't actually have a lot of work that must be done, collect money, provide grades, you don't really need a lot of extra bodies around. In that case the two or three guys at the top will tend to run things without consultation. When the guys who think they have a job to do, find out they are being bypassed it can cause some problems. No work but pay usually means "I'm going to get fired". No work but no pay (volunteers) usually means "I'm out of here". There can be a lot of empty (paper) positions in volunteer organizations.

So how do you get an organic organization? It's one that just grows out of jobs that need doing. Think of a dojo, you've got a sensei and students. No problem, that's an organic organization, it grows out of "he teaches" and "they learn". Now add a couple of dojo, if you do nothing else the organization simply adds another layer, head teacher, teachers, and students. To be perfectly honest, you don't need much more than this, and it's the model that the above, organized systems, tend toward when they end up with the few at the top doing all the work. It's the budo hierarchy and most martial artists are comfortable with it.

Add in more dojo, more geography, money flowing around for gradings, and eventually tournaments, and you will accumulate positions to take care of all this, especially if the head guy isn't being paid. As the unpaid work piles on, help usually shows up.

So there's the two ways an organization happens if it is being created from scratch. Is that the usual way they show up? Actually a lot of the time in budo a new organization results from a schism, a splitting off of people from a pre-existing group. "These guys are idiots, I'm out of here, who's coming with me?" What do you do with the new organization? Usually the same as before, including the administrative system, you just duplicate it. There are very few things that prevent this sort of splitting. One of those is the existence of sport. There are not 12 kendo federations in Canada simply because there is a world championships of kendo. Without such a unifying factor, splits will happen if the guy at the top can't keep it all together.

Which is your explanation of why, three generations back, the headmaster of your koryu ended up being some guy who "wasn't the best fighter of his generation". A headmaster will look at his students. If he sees that one guy is generally liked, has organizational and people skills, and has a vision of the art moving into the future, he's going to get the nod. The guy who is a kick-ass fighter, but is an egotist who is in it for his own pride, and is disliked by most of the other students, is likely to be overlooked.

Mr. Kickass is likely to leave and start his own group of course, but that's no big deal compared to making him the head honcho and having 10 others leave because of it.

You can't plan for everything, every when. You can't write rules that cover stupid. You can only try to get the best people into the important jobs and let the impulses of organic organizational drift take over.

Do you like your organization? If so that's great. If not, schism, tolerate, ignore, or change it. All that is up to you, just remember that no organization remains fixed through time. No "constitution" can prevent drift and change.

Organized and organic.

Jan 7, 2019

Management Side, Customer Side

Budo organizations are largely voluntary, and what that means is that nobody is getting paid to take shite. Yet the culture of budo tends toward dictatorial pronouncement and "my way or the highway" combined with admonitions to be loyal little robots.

No wonder we're not taken seriously in most of society. Folks come in, get fed up and leave.

Let's do a thought experiment shall we? Remember that we're talking about volunteers, those who do things for free, they are not paid and they can leave at any time. So here we have a top banana who can't organize, doesn't communicate and won't take responsibility. As a result there are underlings who are never consulted, who are not allowed to do their jobs, and are actively undercut. The boss resents any attempts at anything but "do what I say", and practices "management by hiring and firing".

Sound familiar? Well it isn't a case study, just an accumulation of what I've seen over my lifetime. I've always loved the idea of managing by hiring and firing, it is practised in the University quite a lot, it's why bosses hate unions. A unionized worker "can't be fired" they say. That's wrong, they can usually be fired very easily, but they have to be fired "for something". In my union the process was 3 letters. Manager Bob had to set out what the problem was and how to fix it, then a second warning and finally, the third letter which says "you're fired". The impossible part there, was always setting out that problem and how to fix it. There was usually no identifiable problem, it mostly came down to "I don't like him". "You don't like him? Tough, do your job and manage properly".

In volunteer organizations "hiring and firing" works just fine. With no money being involved, and a boss that doesn't do his job but complains that you're why the job didn't get done, it's not likely that Joe Underling is going to complain when asked to leave. More like "yes, now I'm off the hook, thank you very much, I'm out of here".

Now take that to a small organization with only a few possibilities to fill the jobs. Can we see a problem here?

Management by instinct and proclamation, by whim and wishing works about as well as any other job, like teaching, that is done by guess and by gosh.

So how does this situation survive? We know it does. For one thing, who wants the job? Seriously, who wants to run things in a volunteer organization? Very few people. There's no pay, and in the budo world, there's no glory. I bet you know six or seven people who are super high ranked or super high, administratively, in their organization. You won't know it, not unless they make a habit of telling you about it.

And some do, which brings us to the problems, the guys who want, who NEEDED desperately to be in charge of something because that's their self-esteem in a nutshell. "I'm the head of a martial arts organization!" It means a lot to some folks. To the rest of us, maybe not so much. "Really, that's nice, I'm the head of a photo club... oh, and also owner of a multinational pharmaceutical company". If you really, really want to be in charge of something, you are going to see any sort of disagreement with your whims, as a personal threat to your self-esteem. Reaction comes accordingly.

Then there's the habit of loyalty that hangs around the "samurai ideals" sort of thing like the smell of old socks in a gym. Most of us start our budo career as young men who are seriously in need of a cause, who want to dedicate their lives to a higher ideal. The idea of loyalty fits right in there. It takes decades to understand that 1. The samurai weren't so much loyal as employed and 2. Loyalty to idiots is idiotic, or put more kindly, blind loyalty is a waste of time.

Finally there is the wages of volunteer budo, which is rank. The bad manager always has the "nuclear option" of withholding your next rank. Yay. Wait, rank? That's only a threat if I allow it to be a threat. Only if I care about rank. Do I? Do you?

The customer side of all this? It's the students who have to put up with the flip-flopping, with the arbitrary decisions and changes of rules as the top banana keeps asserting his authority by forcing people to do what he says. Actually that second sentence was mis-written wasn't it? It should read "the students who DO NOT have to put up with the flip-flopping".

Our thought experiment comes down to the vote. Will this management style be in the best interests of your martial art? Yes/No.

No wonder I often head into a store for some "retail therapy", where I get people who approach me and say "can I help you"? And smile. Ah the reception of a smile without the need to check for a weapon any more deadly than a credit card machine. So nice.

Happy post-holiday shopping.

Jan 6, 2019

Empires from the Sun

OK I spent an absolutely horrible night without sleep of more than 30 minutes at a time before I had to get up. Couldn't sit to read, couldn't lie down, went to the sauna, and couldn't sleep there. Thank goodness morning came before I had to go work in the shop.

Why am I telling you this? It's a rant, a grouchy, grumpy rant so if you don't want to hear my private, grumpy thoughts, stop reading. Seriously, I'm about to complain about the state of the system.

You were warned.

On the other hand, I'd like my direct students to read on.

Had beers last evening with one of my students who has been doing some world traveling and was told that Seitei Iaido has become so homogenized that the hanshi out of Japan are giving identical instructions at seminars no matter where they are in the world. Precisely identical, as in look at the notes from one sensei in one country and compare to another in different country a couple months later, and you'd figure you were at the same event.

Interesting, that tells me a couple of things, first, these guys ought to be interchangeable now. No reason at all to ask for, or hope for, any individual, they are all saying the same thing. That's good, since the ZNKR/FIK is sending whoever they want when it's an "official" seminar. Official means that one of the Japanese sits on a panel. I've explained this before, if you want a Japanese panellist you have to ask and you get sent and that's it.

But what about koryu you say? You need your specific sensei for koryu, you can't learn from just anyone that gets sent over. That is correct, but if it's an official delegation you aren't going to get any koryu anyway. The official delegations teach seitei and that's it, no koryu. That's the rule, if they are teaching you koryu at the same time, they're not following the rules, and neither are you for asking. So how do you learn your koryu? Invite your sensei, don't hold a seitei grading (or hold one without your Japanese guest sitting the panel) and you're fine. This is a "private" seminar. Stop leaching off of seitei gradings to get your koryu instruction.

This stuff isn't complicated, it's getting more and more clear in certain aspects. To repeat, it means that as far as Seitei is concerned, you are going to get the same instruction no matter who comes, so be happy with whoever is sent along.

But Koryu? Forget koryu, you won't see it in gradings any more, you won't need it. I've been told Canada is in the process of cutting it out for iaido. Canadian jodo hasn't had koryu kata in our gradings for a decade or more.

Why is koryu gone? Because it's not zen ken ren seitei. And mainly because, according to the ZNKR, it was a way for the old hachidan committee to concentrate power which allowed them to extort large gifts from the challengers. Part of the cleanup was to get rid of the koryu.

I'm good with that, the system needed to be fixed and that was part of the fix. The riai of seitei, the underlying principles are that it is standard, and that rank is standards-based. Bring in koryu, bring in patronage (you gotta have the right sponsor) and anything other than "meet the standard", and you don't have a standards-based system any more. Pass/fail on things outside the standards and it's outside the standards.

I can hear some of you laughing. Why? Can you think of a way that the old system can re-assert itself? How about being told "you need my vote, you should come to Japan". Ah yes, the old overseas empire building with new emperors, this time not built around koryu, but around seitei itself.

Thing is, it can't be done, not without active participation from the natives of foreign lands, not without us. The rules are quite simple, you need six panellists, period. They don't specify where they come from, so any time we want to cut the emperor system, we simply stop inviting Japanese to sit the panels.

Horrors, this would cut us off from our koryu sensei, we can't do that! OK now you're feeling the frown on my face, these things are not connected any more, unless you figure you're going to keep using kendo federation gradings to bring over your koryu sensei to teach. But that's not supposed to be happening any more, this stuff is supposed to be separate. So separate them. Private invites are fine, the FIK doesn't want to hear about them so don't tell them.

There ought to be a lot more koryu seminars now. If seitei has become so standard that everyone teaches exactly the same thing, why do you need multiple seitei seminars? Do you forget what you were taught from one month to the next? You see, that's the next consequence of standardization, once you've got it, you've got it. There is an end to the process, a finish to the technical skill. Once you can cut on that angle you can cut on that angle.

But what about all that stuff beyond the technique I keep talking about? When was the last time you were taught that stuff at a seminar, when was the last time you got told that your seitei should be adapted to your height, your age? Not long ago? By your sensei? How about by an official delegation? That doesn't happen. Film an official seminar and you've got this year's changes, share it and we're all up to date.

Doesn't help us to pass gradings if we're being told "you gotta go to Japan because you need my vote", but what the heck, maybe you don't want to participate in that system. Those "empires from the sun" where you need to be seen in the right camp, the right clique, to pass. If you want to participate in that, pick your sponsor carefully, make sure you know who has the power to push you through. If "it's political", be political, that's part of budo, learn to swim in those waters.

This year I'm asking my most senior students to concentrate on our koryu, that's where you can adapt your teaching to your students, where you and they can learn and grow, where you can work hard on those things that aren't the technical skills. You get lots of technique practice when you do the seitei, don't neglect the koryu that you were originally taught. "You dance with the one what brung ya". You guys learned your iai from the koryu, seitei was added on later. Go back to your roots and be confident that a quick seminar from anyone from Japan, about once a year, will keep you up to date on the latest seitei moves.

The other thing about going back to our roots? Remember how long we practised without gradings? Was that a problem? You guys complain to me about the system, that your rank seems to have no use. Why are you still banging on closed doors?

Just asking.

Jan 5, 2019

Know Your Purpose

Apparently my purpose in life is to continue to fix stuff until I keel over. 20 years of building at the cabin, the last thing I thought I'd have to do is get a functional solar system, but yesterday I found out the place has been broken into.

Finish my coffee and start phoning people I guess. Instead of going up and finally enjoying the fruits of my labour, I get to labour some more. I am so depressed.

But it's another purpose and another function I want to talk about today. Ones related to budo. I recently transcribed some notes of Carole Galligan sensei's Monday iaido class where she talked about knowing the purpose of each movement in a kata. I call this the functional approach but it's pretty much the same thing.

There are two ways to approach learning an iai kata. The most usual is to focus on the form, the technique. One gets instructions like "stop your cut at such and such a height". The other way is to know the purpose of that movement "draw and cut his face".

If you perform your kata with an eye on the purpose of your movements, you will naturally arrive at the correct form. Or perhaps I should say you will tend to arrive there. Students being students, if there's a way to mess things up, they'll find it. This is why most instruction is of the "stop here" variety, a focus on form. It is so specific it's hard to screw up, to get it wrong.

It's also why students tend to figure all kata are separate, distinct things. They find it hard to relate one to the other. Of course, seitei iai, the kendo federation iaido kata are, in fact, somewhat hard to relate to each other, being derived from a variety of koryu schools. Nevertheless, after 50 years of existence (last year, why no celebration?) they do have some underlying principles, specifically the same principles (form and purpose) as kendo no kata.

Learning from purpose, from function, is to learn from the underlying principles, the inside, learning from the form, from specific descriptions of each step of the kata, is learning the outside.

From an instructor's point of view, teaching students to learn from purpose is desirable simply because students are free to extrapolate. "The draw and cut is to suppress your opponent and then to cut him as deeply as you can to slow him down". This can be applied to each draw and cut, regardless of angle of draw or target of cut. It's efficient, it saves time.

"You must move forward with your right leg and move your sword horizontally, stopping the tip directly in front of your right shoulder". This does not extrapolate to the next kata which requires you to turn 180 degrees and then cut horizontally. Or the fifth kata which requires that you draw upward and move the tip down diagonally, stopping at your chin height.

With the purpose-driven instruction you can, as Galligan sensei said, self-correct many kata. With form-driven instruction you end up receiving the same correction for each kata.

Know the purpose, know many things.

April 17

Port Credit no name dojo class II

We finish today with my notes from the iaido class instruction by Carole Galligan sensei at the introductory class of April 15. Is it necessary to say that any mistakes are my fault?

Now we will look at the kata. I would like you to look at the purpose of each movement in the kata. If you look at the form only, you will lose.

We will examine Mae. The first cut of this kata is to scratch your opponent as deeply as you can, but it is little more than a scratch. The second cut is to finish him.

When you break the habaki you want to give your opponent the time to back down. The mindset is that he has attacked but I will win, still, I will let him back down, I will give him that chance. The body moves forward, turn the edge of the sword to the correct angle, toes under and cut. Move the sword overhead efficiently, and perform the finishing cut. Chiburi and noto. Don't be in a hurry with these movements, each is done with jo ha kyu, slow, faster, fastest.

When standing, your first move will be much faster, so time it correctly.

It is said that you can tell someone's rank, their experience by watching this first draw and cut. This is true, there are lots of elements in the first cut to examine. Timing, metsuke, the show of spirit for example.

Draw and rise, all the way to saya banari and the cut, there must be no pause. Your timing is yours, you must learn what is best for you, and for instance, if you are older you may wish to slow down a little. Your opponent is as good as you are, if you are slightly faster than him, you will win. Your hips push you forward on the draw, not your shoulders.

You should arrive at saya banari just before your opponent. Begin slowly at the start, you can only go 100% so start at 0 not 50% speed. Find the timing that works for you.

Practice and I will help each of you.

1. Your next test is for 5dan, please examine your saya biki on the draw. You win or lose with the tip of the sword, all else is extra. Don't begin rising before you start to draw. There is only win or lose with a sword. Give your opponent a chance to back down but there is no moment where you lose, you must find that place.
2. If your hands are too far back on your lap it will take too long to get them on the hilt. Don't give up ground once you have gained it.
3. The sword and the body must move together. You are 1.5 meters apart from your opponent, when you rise you move into the cutting distance. Start with the sword, and move the sword and body together, if you do that there will be no moment when teki wants to attack you.
4. When doing this kata standing, take a smaller step forward on the draw, you look over-extended. Put teki closer to you. You tend to take the second step forward and then cut. This

means you move into his range without cutting him, watch your timing, cut him as you move into the cutting range, don't leave a gap.

5. I said you can cut as slowly as you wish, but you might want to get a bit more speed into the tip, don't push the tip over, pull it from the hilt, from the left hand.

Most of you are making a good first cut. If you don't cut on this first move you are done, your opponent will kill you. Each movement in the kata has a purpose. Each move must be correct, yes, but if you know the purpose of the movement, the correctness falls into place. Sit tall, with good posture. In seitei gata we keep the tsuba in the center. Give the opponent a chance to back down, cut him with no pause. Slide forward efficiently, the back foot plants, then the front foot plants just before you cut him.

During o-chiburi there is never a moment when your sword is weak. Move as if you are stabbing all the way around yourself, then move the sword so that it feels like you are throwing off the blood from the blade. As if you are cutting.

At the end of this move the sword curve can be followed so that the line finishes roughly toward teki. If you perform a cut on the chiburi movement the sword naturally ends up in the correct position.

Move forward to check teki.

On the noto you must retain control. The noto is like the draw, but in reverse. This means you ought to be able to cut at any time during the movement.

When you finish, you must remain calm, you must retain control.

Regarding timing, there must be no stop during the first cut, the same is true for the second cut. If you are finished, put the sword away. The number of years you have practised will determine your personal timing during this kata. How much time are you going to give your opponent to back down? For the second cut, there must be no pause at all once the left hand is on the hilt. When there are two hands on the hilt the cut is happening.

In Mae, or any kata, all the moves have a purpose. First, push forward and get as much of a cut as you can. Next, the second cut must be efficient, it must finish your opponent.

Q: Where are you committed to the first cut?

A: This is your choice, but there will be some point where it will be too late for you. As you accelerate, jo ha kyu, there will be a moment in you where you commit to the cut BEFORE they commit. In jodo you can see the opponent's timing, in iai you can say "oh well" and do whatever you wish.

Try to find the correct timing in your iaido.

April 17

The Reality

Now, I absolutely do not want to start a long string of "I served..." but a conversation with Mike Chinadi sensei this past weekend brought up a serious point about our martial arts. Mike has been in the arts as long or longer than I, and he has also been a Master Sergeant in our armed forces. In other words he was one of those training kids to kill and, as he mentioned happened to a couple of his friends in Afghanistan, to die.

His comment was that he had left his early idea of martial arts, as training for fighting, somewhat behind, along with that youth. For myself, having come from a volunteer family (not professional soldiers, but the ones who volunteer and fill out the ranks during most of the wars up to Korea) and having grown up through the Vietnam era, I never really had an idea of budo as training for war. Being a big man, I also didn't have any particular reason to join the martial arts for self-defence. I got few offers to fight and I was quite content to walk away from the few I did.

The budo (or bujutsu I suppose, if you want) may once have had some connection to warfare but that was left long behind as the major ryuha, the budo schools, began and developed. If we take Musashi as being a soldier in the wars, one of the last, his teachings, as can be read in his writings, were tinged with practical wartime advice, especially the Go Rin no Sho where he mentions unit tactics specifically with his comparison of solo sword and the battlefield. But since then? 12 generations of headmasters handing things down from ear to mouth, teacher to student. Are the techniques the same as those of 1645? As I mentioned to a western martial artist last weekend, they may be recreating their arts from manuals, but we in the Japanese side are assuming that 300 years of "telephone" are more accurate than those manuals.

Neither side can realistically claim what they are doing came from the wars of the sixteenth century. Nor should we wish for that. In Niten Ichiryu, Aoki sensei, our 8th headmaster, was in Taiwan during the Second World War. As far as I know, no practical advice on modern warfare has come down from him. As for today? There are very, very few hanshi in Japan who saw combat. Those I have known confined their stories to the bar after class.

None of the stories of the founders mention their desire to teach actual battlefield tactics, nor do they mention, except rarely, their desire that we use these techniques to kill. One such rare story happens in the Itto Ryu where a headmaster asks two of his top students to fight it out for the nod as successor.

Can we find other examples, down to the modern age, where folks want to "try this stuff out" at the risk of their lives? Sure, because 20 years old. Are those folks convinced that the sword, stick or bare hands are good ways to fight a war? Do I tell my students that this place in a kata is where you kill or die and that place is where you escape with your life? Absolutely.

But that is an attempt to create seriousness in the practice, and while I do believe this stuff is about life and death, it's our own death we are concerned with, not that of others. Even arts like Aikido, with all the admonitions that we must love and care for our attackers, even this art is about our own death.

So budo, as far as I'm concerned, is not about the battlefield, or about self-defence in back alleyways, it's about one life and one death. Yours.

The reality is that you don't train for 30 or 40 years on the off chance that you'll get into a bar fight. You certainly don't train for 20 years to hit the battlefield, your knees and hips won't survive that long, humping the loads the modern soldier is asked to carry. I'm sure someone will now tell us how long it takes to train a kid off the street well enough to drop him off in Afghanistan.

Apr 10, 2019

The Builders

Since I'm in Peterborough with a couple of the builders of Canadian iaido and jodo, had a half-pint with them last evening, it occurs to me that you folks might want to hear about them. I certainly would.

I'm talking about Mike Chinadi and Jim Wilson of course... oops time out to take my 8 pills for breakfast.

So, good topic? Yes? You may not think so when you realize it's a project for you, I'm not doing it. I'm going to give you a framework of questions to start with, and then you're going to go to your local builder and interview him or her. Let's include the kendo builders too shall we?

I'll put them up as essays here and maybe someone will collect them into a book for the CKF. Oh I'm so optimistic you guys will respond. If we get more than one of these we might put them on a webpage so you can see them all together and to encourage other interviews.

Some rules for picking the builders: I don't have any. If you don't know who they are, they probably aren't builders. If you want to interview your sensei, go ahead and do it. Just remember we want the guys who built. Some folks have already passed on, feel free to do some research and interview their students. Most of the builders in iai and jo are still around, which makes this project a lot easier.

So on to the interview.

Remember the five Ws, who, what, when, where and why. Add to this how, and with whom.

Who are you? You can fill this in.

What do you do? Which arts, civilian job, other hobbies.

When did you start? When did you do this, that and the other thing? We will want to do a timeline perhaps.

Where did you do what you do? Your interviewee doesn't have to be a national figure, he can be a local hero, let us know which locale.

Why? Look, we don't want a photo and a bunch of dry facts, we want the stories that means you the interviewer are going to dig, dig, dig, or remind them of incidents you were part of. Human interest is the byword here, WHY are they builders, ask their students, ask yourself what they mean to you.

How did you ever manage to do the amazing things that you did? How did that funny situation come about, you remember, that time when you....

With whom did you build the arts? If you can't find five people who also think your builder is a builder you're not doing your job right. Find those others and ask for their stories too.

Now, if one of your students wants to interview you, be nice and talk to them. Dredge out those old stories "everyone knows" because not everyone does and it would be a shame to lose them.

What do you think? Want to take it on? You wannabe writers out there who are looking for topics? You can even (oh lord I dread saying this) just do it on audio or video and I'll transcribe it. Take a few photos now, and steal a few photos of your subject as a young man.

Why don't I do it? Are you kidding? I've been doing it for decades, look up EJMAS.com if you don't believe me. But my work these days is to take notes and provide you guys with the stuff you should do yourselves, record the teachings of our teachers. You think you're the perfect student? Embodying the teachings of your sensei accurately and without change? Hah, go look back at your notes if you have any. Memory is a strange thing, that's why we think that books are magical.

You might be surprised what you can find recorded out there. I learned last evening that there is video of the jujutsu of Muso Jikiden out there. Jim took it a couple years ago when I last taught it here in Peterborough. Now, I have warned against the practice of constantly looking at your instructors through a video camera, how many times can you film somebody telling you the latest fashions in Seitei Gata? How many times can you listen to someone telling you to square your feet? But video of a new topic? Good for you, now share it with the class.

Remember, this will be a good way for you writers out there to get in some practice. And in ten years you'll be glad you did it.

Now it might be time to go blast the Pamurai out of her bed so she can drive me to the seminar.

Apr 6, 2019

Post Script: Nothing, not one, in case you were waiting to see them.

Train like your hair is on fire

And plan like you're going to live forever.

I don't know what else you could do, really. I am in a bit of a quandry at the moment, do I fix the solar power system at the cabin, it needs new batteries at minimum, or do I upgrade the whole thing to a 4 season house, in anticipation that the family is going to sell the place when I'm out of here. Brenda's comment was "you're not going to die tomorrow" and realistically, I need to plan as if I'm not. That means fix it since I am probably not going to move up there to live year round. If I die from a hair fire tomorrow the family will get more for the place if it's a year-round place.

It all comes down to money of course, so I guess I have to get some ballpark figures. One thing is for sure, no more lead-acid batteries, they get neglected and have twice been the cause of failure in the system. Once a bit catastrophically "there were sparks".

Any solar/wind experts out there? I could put up another wind generator, the system is set up for it. And do not say to me "well it depends". I get so tired of that, I just want the big picture, I can fine tune later.

Sort of like training, you have to start with the big picture and then fine tune. Yesterday we ended the class with some work on the tachi side of jodo. Square hips and a good cut is more difficult than one might assume. For the hips we looked at how we walk forward and back in the mirror. Walking like a samurai is quite different than walking like we usually walk. At least for me, I noticed that my left leg goes all over the place.

For the cuts, we went back to nidan-sandan, back to the first things you have to learn about cutting, how to do it fast and straight. Now if you're using this stuff for real, that's actually all you will ever need, it's the "big stuff" so learn it first. Soft right hand that does nothing at all. Left hand pushes up and forward, meets attachment to shoulder so curves upward overhead, pull with left hand little finger, throw sword at far wall, let it curve down and stop it with the right hand gripping. Do this with as much relaxation as possible, only the little finger of the left hand squeezing.

Here we come to the contradiction between hair on fire and live forever. To best learn budo you need to learn it NOW, you need to assume your sensei is gone tomorrow, that you will need this skill tomorrow that you will die tomorrow without having achieved enlightenment if you don't pay attention NOW. If you assume you can skip class and learn it next week, or you can leave your habits to change little by little over the years, in other words if you assume the world will go on as it is forever, you will take forever to learn anything.

So you need to pick and choose. What should be done now, do it now, don't put it off. For other things, like fixing the solar system at the cabin, you have to assume you will live forever. Living day to day, assuming you're going to die tomorrow will never get the walls painted, the generator oil changed, or the batteries replaced. After all, it works NOW, so it's good enough.

Would be nice to have hair that could be on fire.

April 19, 2017

Different Paths

Everyone has a different path through life. That's what Guido told me this weekend, Guido is a Belgian fellow who owns "The Patch" in Sauble Beach. They had their bag sale on, and I am "the roller". You roll stuff up and you get much more in the bag. Strong fingers from budo. See, useful!

Different paths indeed, in my own family we have mom and dad who were trained in Biology, both worked as technicians at a University. No surprise there, you often find your mate at work, despite all efforts to prevent such things. But along the way I drifted toward working with my hands, making stuff in my shop. Mom has gone back to being a tech. The kids? One has a degree in Music and the other is studying software engineering.

Different paths but actually not so different, everyone has gone on to post-secondary education, so a general drift on the same currents.

There is, in fact, room for all sorts of variation in the world. There are many ways to get along, yet there are those who fight against the idea.

It never works.

The Guardian just did a story about the new racists or some such, where some of the young American ultra-nationalists who are to the right of the tea party were interviewed. A couple of them expressed their admiration for Japan, a country that "got it right" that has managed to resist immigration and maintain a "pure" society.

Yeah, we'll see how that goes as the population gets older. They are already working on care-giver robots but it's going to be a lot cheaper to hire youngsters from SE Asia and that is going to lead to emotional attachment and that sort of thing leads to... well to diversity.

Unity of purpose or action or culture can be imposed for a while. Think Yugoslavia, but smaller unities arise to rip the bigger ones apart. The Catholic Church had its Protestant splits after Luther, Islam has its splits, Buddhism, any religion splits and splits again. Funny that. One god or set of gods, yet many paths develop. You wouldn't think that could happen.

Why can't we all just get along? Why do we have to go different ways? There's always someone who wants to reunite the split. The problem is, it gets quickly into conflict rather than merging because, well, because people. Because most people's idea of getting along is a single, re-unified movement under "me". Each and every person out there in religion, or national politics, or martial arts has "the answer", they have "the right".

The right to fight. And once those fights start the drift apart while drifting together becomes an active paddling away from each other. All the little paper lanterns moving in their Brownian motions down the stream start to set fire to each other and push each other under the waves and onto the sand bars and into the branches.

It doesn't have to be that way. As Guido says, everyone goes through life on their own path, if we can just understand that (and it takes years) we can work together in a different way than the way of the iron fist, the armed dictator who forces us into a common standard, his, standard.

One of the hardest learned lessons in anyone's life is to understand that everyone has their own path. Those that do, those that can resist saying "my way or the highway", "my" country right or wrong, can "just get along". Those that can't get their heads around the concept write laws and create customs and fill jails with those who don't agree.

Think about those in your budo organization, the guys up near the top. Now think about replacing the Big Kahuna. Who do you want in there? I bet you picked the guy who can get along with the greatest numbers of the membership rather than the iron-fisted disciplinarian who would tear the place apart in his search for heresy. Unless of course you are that guy, or figure you can ride his coat-tails.

In budo I have heard many times that the guy who got the headmastership wasn't actually the best martial artist. Inevitably it's a student of the guy who "really was the best" who is saying that. Fine, but what does that prove? That the previous headmaster was blind? Stupid?

Call me crazy but perhaps being very, very good at beating people up is, perhaps, not very well, not necessarily, correlated with getting along with people. I'm not saying it can't be that someone with good skills at fighting might also have good people skills, I'm just saying that being able to beat everyone else up might not be the ideal requirement for leading those people through the next generation.

We're all drifting along in the stream. Random forces will tend to cause us to drift apart and back together again but we're all heading in the same direction and, with the occasional bit of help from each other to get unsnagged from the branches and off the sandbars and maybe a bit of help to prevent getting waterlogged and going under, we will all arrive at the ocean sooner or later. If you take the collected experiences of all of us at the end of the trip, you might find that they are much greater than the experience of a single one of us.

Now, if you tie us all together tightly in single file so that the best we see (except for the guy in front) is the hind end of the guy in front of us, what do we know at the end beyond what that guy in front has seen and passed down the line? We certainly "all got along", and we certainly all know the same thing, but is that better than getting along and all-knowing different things?

You tell me. Your answer will depend largely on how you were raised. It may even be correlated to which political party you vote for.

There are examples in the budo world, of tolerance and more than tolerance of other ideas, other streams. In Shindo Muso ryu Jodo there was a time when there were three lines of instruction. When one of them failed, the headmaster of one of the other lines trained someone to take over the line. This is a surprise? Look at the lineage charts, there is cross-instruction and cross-leadership all over the place. Oe Masamichi, of the tanimura-ha Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu was once headmaster of the "other line" if I remember my history correctly.

Three blind men and an elephant. Roshamon. Evolution. Compare and contrast these with reference to the main ideas presented above.

Or not.

Oct 11, 2016

More on growth

Joe Svinth has posted an analysis of growth in any art as compared to population growth of humans and, aside from scaring me all over again at the way we can breed, suggests the following.

["https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population_estimates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population_estimates)

Anyway, with billions more young people to practice martial arts, it would seem reasonable to assume that more people would be available to practice judo, boxing, wushu, or whatever. And if that is true, then all one needs to do to grow an art is send out teachers. To grow, an organization does not need to promote high ranks. Instead, it needs to produce classroom teachers. Put in everyday terms, we need more teachers in the classroom, and fewer EdDs in the head shed."

While I agree entirely, we still need some way of producing those teachers and that, unfortunately, means having higher ranks to sit panels to produce instructor ranks.

Elsewhere it has been pointed out that France has a separate system of teacher certification for budo instructors but I suspect this is not disconnected from the grading system. The certification consists of three parts, anatomy and physiology, teaching the art, and finally, administration and other paperwork. I would suggest the first two can be picked up in the current grading system of most arts, and could certainly be added to tests, but there is no harm in splitting it out.

Still, teaching certifications would not replace grading in, say, the kendo federation where a multinational structure requires inter-national grading standards. These are minimum guidelines and are not particularly secret although some people seem to have trouble finding them, but they are minimums. Any country can add to them and some are being pressured to add requirements which, effectively, shut down the grading process. I have no idea if this is a deliberate policy from Japan or simply the usual messing around by individuals but it is happening in multiple countries. The lack of higher grading means a lack of lower grading which leads to a lack of teachers which means stalled growth.

Now, to replace the grading system with a system of teacher training which includes the current grading requirements is entirely possible and may become necessary, but this will put any country that uses the new certification system outside the fold. Even with the same requirements you have created a new grading system.

As I have pointed out, this happens all the time and is called "leaving the organization to form your own". For iaido and jodo this may be practical but for kendo and those who want to compete at the worlds, this is a problem. On the other hand, there are no rank requirements to compete, so kendo, from the competition point of view, can happily exist without rank. At least until the FIK declares a minimum rank requirement to compete. What that would mean from a hierarchy point of view I suppose, is a replacement of dan grade with seeding position. Of course, being wicked, I might point out that one would also fall in one's rank as well as rise... well perhaps we make it like a recording thermometer, one's indicator goes up but not back down. You finish your career with the highest seeding you achieve. The teaching certification then takes over for those who continue in the art as coaches.

Part of the reason I write these essays is to talk to myself and I have just more or less convinced myself that the lack of higher dan ranks to create lower dan ranks doesn't need to be a problem for iaido or jodo either. We simply create a within-country teaching certification which matches that of the current system and perhaps even adds the curriculum of our national coaching certification. There is no other use for the ranking system than to sort people out into teachers and students, and to give paper to the kids who love to know they've passed a test.

This way the people who just want to see guideposts without going into debt are able to see them and those who are concerned with "being the same level as in Japan" can spend their money and go to Japan to grade. I put the quotes there because I have no idea what that means, "to be the same level as". Our arts can continue under the kendo federation, we do not lose access to Japanese instruction, and recognition of rank within the organization continues. If someone comes from Europe with a 6dan they are recognized as a 6dan here and are slotted into the system accordingly. Now, if someone from Canada has a teaching certification and moves to Europe, that will be a different story but as I say, if it's that important they can go outside the country to grade.

That might be a way to keep things running should our top ranks continue to thin out, which they will. On the other hand, perhaps the problem is not at the institutional level, and is just the usual messing about by individuals, perhaps the current requirements for panels will be reasserted and all will return to growth and this will have been just another bump in the road. We've had them before.

Get the teachers out there if you want to grow. Stop producing them if you want to shrink. Not a complicated calculation really.

April 11, 2016

When should I teach?

Teaching is a difficult subject in budo, at least when you start. Just when are you ready? In some cases it's not that hard to know but in others, the decision can go on for years. Understand I'm talking mostly about non-commercial groups here, those where it doesn't really matter how many dojo are within one territory, but even commercial dojo often find that their territory is surprisingly small.

Let's look at the easiest case, the one where you have no choice. You are the only person in your area who knows what you know, there are no instructors in weekly reach and you need to have a space to practice. Unless you can build a dojo in your back yard or the weather is good year round, you're pretty much stuck with gathering up some bodies and getting a space. That was my deal with iaido in 1987 when I started teaching at the University of Guelph, I needed a room and the easiest way to get one was to have a few folks who would practice with me. Now, I must say that I had been teaching Aikido for a few years already, and I suppose I could have signed out a room for myself to practice, in other words I didn't really need to teach in order to practice, but I wanted the art to grow.

Which is the second case, you want to promote the art. After many years of thinking about this, I've come to the conclusion that the best, perhaps the only way to increase the numbers of students in some martial arts is to increase the number of dojo. It would seem that some arts, iaido and jodo included, tend to max out at a smallish number of people per dojo. There are exceptions of course, Japanese cultural centres tend to have large numbers of students simply because those centres are where students would expect to find iai and jo. But for your usual small town the numbers of students tend to be less than 20 and often less than ten per room. I know that my own numbers at the University have been steady at about 14 for decades, with 6 to 10 being the usual practice size per class.

So what rank should you have when you start your dojo "because you have to"? Whatever rank you have. There is no real-world minimum rank to teach, if you know more than your students you are qualified. Of course most arts have some sort of minimum experience requirement, a minimum rank or some such, but that's an artificial standard. The fact of the matter is that anyone can teach as long as they have something to teach. Will the students of a one-year experienced instructor be very good? I don't know, it depends on how good that instructor is and how good a teacher he turns out to be.

The other "rank" you need as a short-timer who is teaching is ego. You ought not to be teaching if you don't believe you can teach. That doesn't mean you should be an arrogant fellow who thinks he knows stuff, in fact that fellow will make a bad teacher. No, you need to believe you have something to pass along and you need to believe you can pass that along. Having faith in the art and in your own instructor will help. Knowing you will have continued instruction for yourself and help with your students will help. Ego is not a bad thing, but perhaps if we call it "perceived self-efficacy" it might help. You have to believe you can do it.

In areas where the arts are just new and growing it is critical that these inexperienced instructors be encouraged and supported by the few higher ranked instructors who will have taught these juniors. In fact, if the senior instructors discourage such juniors they will not even consider going out to teach. There are cases of this, and these arts do not grow.

Is teaching a good thing for the inexperienced? Absolutely not, but teaching-to-practice is better than no practice at all. As long as these juniors are realistic about their own skills and their need for further training (and let's face it, I'm talking about ranks requiring up to 20 years and more here) they will be OK. Most of the teachers I've met in this situation, who were successful, are just fine, as are their students. The egomaniac who just wants to be a big shot is easily spotted and his students never stay beyond a year or two.

From a selfish, grow the art point of view, even these guys are fine, they tend to be good self-promoters and bring in the students, and those who get hooked tend to move on to the better instructors.

Let's move on to the case where there is no necessity to teach, where there are dojo with senior teachers in weekly reach. When should those students consider going out to teach?

Well, if there is a complete grading system in place (and very few cases exist of incomplete grading systems) then the easy answer is not before you get the recommended/required license to teach. In the kendo federation this is usually thought to be 5dan. I haven't read the Canadian bylaws for a while, or those of the FIK or ZNKR so I don't know if this is actually described as "teaching rank" or not. It is the rank at which an instructor can sign the grading request for a student so it's usually called "teaching rank". If you have instructors of lower rank it's not hard to get someone of higher rank to sign papers. Some groups may make a big deal out of this, others may not.

If there is an incomplete grading system, as there is here in Canada with Jodo in the kendo federation, an ad-hoc requirement will appear. Our system stops at 3dan, so 3dan becomes the top rank and therefore, 3dan is absolutely the teaching rank (or the art dies). We are fortunate to have 5dans in jodo around who sign everyone's papers but if they were not there it would simply fall to a 5dan in one of the other arts, iaido or kendo, or failing that, the president to sign the papers. Of course if we had no 5dans we would not be grading 3dans and the president would be signing for those students to grade in another country. The point is that signing authority isn't really a measure of teaching permission, it's a measure of signing authority.

So what is teaching permission? Well in most systems it's when sensei says "get out and teach". Some sensei won't ever say that and there are clubs around with many, many senior ranks under an even more senior rank. If the area has plenty of dojo to satisfy the demand for instruction, there's no real problem with this, except that too much rank in a single dojo tends to create "washerwoman" problems. Who won't get a bit irritated on occasion with being fourth in line after 40 years of experience? Who wouldn't erupt in an occasional bout of complaining over the back fence if they were still cleaning the toilets and organizing the parties at 6dan? Better to be cleaning your own toilets somewhere else one might think.

A true teaching license is not the administrative permission to sign a form that can only ever be an effort to ensure some sort of minimum standard for the organization. No the true teaching license is when your sensei says "I've taught you all I can, or at least all I'm willing to teach you right now and you're a snotty know-it-all so get out and torture your own students for a while" which is budo for "wait until you have your own kids, then you'll know". After three or four years of practicing Niten Ichiryu with Haruna sensei I knew I had a teaching license when he said "where are the other students?". I took that to mean "I'm not wasting my time teaching you if the art isn't getting passed along" and I started forcing my iaido students to learn Niten so that I could continue learning.

All these teaching grades and permissions/orders from sensei are well and good, but don't really create instructors. That happens when the student in question believes they actually have the ability to teach. No amount of paper or yelling can change that, it has to come from the student himself. The other reality is that even if you have the grade, the permission and the belief that you can teach, you still need a place to go teach. Curiously, in a small town this is hardly ever a problem, while in the crowded city, along with lots of other dojo in your own and many other arts, it can be a real problem.

When should I teach?

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Bwahahaha you thought that meant something else?

March 28, 2016

It's Academic

Be told!

It seems my research into Musashi is beginning to become differences of opinion. The new information is slowing down, the papers and books I'm reading are beginning to agree on the facts and what is left is opinion. This fellow thinks this manuscript is mostly story, that one thinks it is likely true. Academics, arguments about balances of evidence and in the absence of evidence, opinion.

What shall I do? I want to keep learning from the Niten Ichiryu, what will I do if I can't learn more about Musashi? From, and about. They are not the same are they?

What I know about Musashi is that he was pretty serious about his swordwork, and just as serious about passing it along. He had no secret teachings, no secret scrolls, by his own statement. I don't expect any great discovery in an archive of an Oku set of kata. He rejected the whole idea of an Oku, a hidden level of teaching, yet it was becoming popular in his day. There may be some interesting family archives revealing his day to day life, but that's pretty well documented already. Better than most actually.

Through most of the Edo period he was a famous fellow with books and plays about his exploits, yet the Go Rin no Sho, his famous book, wasn't published until 1909. Is it any wonder that there's a lot of "social media news" about him? (Read "stupid falsehoods endlessly repeated" for that quote please). I'm pretty sure a lot of these social media photos of some samurai-looking dude with a new-age quote attributed to him are as reliable as a manga. Which is unfortunate, Musashi had a lot of important things to say.

One thing he had to say was that on the battlefield there is no Oku and no Omote. He said that there were not many ways to cut or thrust with a sword. He said that he would write down everything that he knew, minus a few things he didn't have time to write or may have forgotten to write, but that there were no secrets.

Mostly though, he said that the best way to learn his sword is to practice what he says. Try it out, learn it for yourself. In other words, learn from what he has written, don't worry about learning about some secret, there isn't one. Practice and learn from.

As for teaching, again, there is no curriculum to be used, no Omote and Oku levels, and no paper to be had after learning 10 or 12 kata. No grades to practice toward and judges to suck up to. Instead there is the teacher and the student. The student is looked at, his skills assessed and then he is taught according to what he can learn fastest. After that the deeper meanings can be taught.

Deeper meanings? But Musashi had none right, I just said so. Deeper for one is not deeper for another. Deeper learning is simply something that you don't pick up fast. Something you have to work at. Some boards are straight and clear and strong and you use them for the walls. Some are straight and strong but knotty and you use them for the structure. Some carpenters are just starting and you make them sharpen the tools and sweep up the jobsite.

In other words, there are no unsuitable students. Everyone can learn something.

So to summarize, there are no secrets, no levels of practice to achieve and be graded on, and no unsuitable students. Makes for a pretty tough job for the teacher.

Being told is learning about. It runs out. It is academic argument about which authority trumps which, and then it becomes opinion. It becomes bite-sized chapters of rote learning to be tested along the way. It becomes secrets to be bought on instalment.

Practice and learn from Musashi's teaching. He said so. I believe him.

Oct 23, 2016

Over to you

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jan 28, 2019

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