

Half a Century VI

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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Ohmi sensei in Vancouver 2009

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Kim Taylor (that's me) is a long time martial artist living in Guelph Ontario. I've written a couple dozen books on the subject, several scholarly articles, edited several magazines and generally done what I can to spread the word.

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

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

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

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

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

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Kaizen

A process of continuous improvement in an industrial process or, in this case, a martial art. A student should undergo a continuous improvement in skill such that certain abilities should be shown at various times during that process. This is called grading and the defining of certain skills to be acquired at certain times of practice assumes that each student will improve at a more or less standard rate.

While there is supposed to be an objective standard for each grade level, in fact the requirements do change for various reasons from year to year.

One way they can change is if there is a highly skilled bunch of people grading. Although we are not supposed to grade in comparison to the other challengers, it's hard not to be influenced by a set of exceptional students. This has happened in our organization as a set of 8-10 talented and dedicated students from one dojo have moved up through the ranks. The panel has had to remind itself not to be influenced by these students who would raise the standards at least a grade level.

On the other hand, while there is an "objective" standard to pass in a grading, that standard can move upward as the quality of the art improves over the years. Our nidans are without a doubt, better now than they were ten years ago and I suspect that some who passed then might not pass now with the same technique. Of course they wouldn't have the same technique today as back then. There is more and better instruction available now, which is why the standards as a whole have drifted upward.

The time to each grade is the same, but what a student should have learned during that time has increased. Both the quality and the quantity of knowledge has been affected by this drift, and those pockets of students who do not maintain contact with the core instructors naturally risk being left behind at grading time.

Shodans and Secrets

In the last gradings I attended, the shodan group were given a set of defined kata rather than their usual free choice. You should have heard the wails, but all the candidates had learned all the kata and there was actually no problem with the pass rate.

I think folks who concentrate on passing the exam by practicing only 5 kata (likely those who were shocked and scared that they couldn't do their choices) are fooling themselves if they think their practiced kata are better than those unpracticed. At shodan it really won't make that much difference. As I said recently to my class, the range of error is going to be wider than the increase in precision.

What I mean is the extra practice they put in on their preferred set of kata will not improve their accuracy of cuts or precision of position to a noticeable degree since their kata to kata variation in position and accuracy will be larger than the increase in precision due to practice.

Perhaps that is clear as mud. Let's say that you have to stop at 43.6 degrees down angle of your sword at the end of a movement. By extra practice for a month, one might improve that accuracy by 5%, but if one's variation in angle from kata to kata remains at 10%, the improved accuracy won't be noticeable as the greater error will still cover the increased precision.

Of course, if one only knows 5 kata and those are not the ones that are chosen for the test, there is real cause for wails and moans.

And so we come to secrets.

Until students reach a certain level of skill, achieved only by practice practice practice, it is completely useless to tell them to do certain things. They simply won't be able to do them and it only gives them one more thing to be frustrated about.

In other words, beginners should not be told "everything" since they can't do much with some of the information and it only gets in the way. If they are approaching the ultimate goal, that's enough for the moment. A good instructor knows what not to teach as much as he knows what to teach. What not to correct as much as what to correct.

Later, when the student can do it, a little secret can be given, at which time the student will inevitably say "why didn't you tell me that sooner and save me all this effort!".

Such is the short term memory of the young who cannot see the long view because they are just climbing up their first valley wall.



The old way

I Am Not Your Mother

I teach adults in a class that costs very little to attend. I teach because I like what I do, and I like passing it along. Nobody has to be there in front of me, and I do not have to be there teaching. Of course I have my reasons for continuing to teach but they are of no concern to the students.

So:

1. I am not there to teach you how to tell time. If you are late to class, come on in and start practicing, I will not punish you, you will not disrupt the class if you are quiet, and we will not go over what you missed. That's not punishment, that's just common sense. I'm there teaching if there's someone to teach, if I arrive at class on time and there's nobody there I'm likely to go lift weights or have a sauna rather than wait around to see if someone shows up. I'm not your mother, it's not my job to wait for you.

2. I am not there to teach you respect. If you are respectful you will get respect, if you are a lout, you will likely get treated as a lout. I don't mind either way because I'm a bit of a lout myself. Family members get to be disrespectful because you're living with them 24/7, you I see a couple hours a week and I'm not your mother. Surely anyone can be polite a couple hours a week in front of someone who has desirable information?

3. I am not there to teach you how to read, or how to use the internet. If a grading is coming up, there are places where I hear about it, they are usually such places as the organization website or newsletter, places where you could also find the information. If you want to grade, go look it up, don't expect me to lead you into the room on a string with the rest of the class lined up behind like a bunch of pre-school kids out for a walk. I don't care if you grade or not, I may think it's good for you to do it, and I'll likely say it, but I'm not your mother.

4. I am not the laundry police. If your uniform reeks of old sweat and mildew I, and the rest of the class, will likely stay away from your general vicinity. If you can learn from 20 feet away, that's fine, but I won't likely be telling you to clean your clothes. I'm not your mother.

5. When I sweep the floor I do it because I want a clean floor to stand on, or because I want some quiet time doing something mindless. If I haven't cleaned the floor and you want it clean, go sweep it. Don't complain to me if you step on a stone or get dust on your knees, I'm not your mother. Also don't try to grab the broom from me more than once, I'm not guilty tripping you, I'm not your mother, if I want you to sweep the floor I'll tell you to sweep it.

6. If you know better than me how a technique works, we'll try it. If you end up on your ass with a broken nose I won't feel too badly, neither will I feel badly if I end up the same way so you'd better be serious about "putting it on". I take this stuff seriously and I have little interest in showing you the correct way of doing things in a nurturing and caring environment. I'm not your mother... but I do have a healthy respect for lawyers so I might not be trying to actually break your nose. Having said that, I have broken noses while trying to pull the punch, but if the nose is in the wrong place going the wrong way...

7. I don't care about your personal life, your crappy boss or your PMS. I can make comforting and non-committal social noises with the rest of them but don't confuse those with actual concern for your problems outside the technique we're practicing. I'm not your mother. I do care if your outside life is interfering with your training, and even more if it's interfering with mine, but my solution is likely to call an early end to class rather than try to fix your life. Maybe we'll go for a beer and you can tell me all about it then... if you're buying, because...

8. If you're in front of me, I'll teach you. If you're not in front of me I won't. You don't have to apologize for not being in class last week or tell me you won't be there next week. I usually have other stuff to do so it's no big deal if nobody shows up to practice. On the other hand, don't ask me to put on a special class or travel somewhere to teach without making sure it will really happen and there will be someone to teach, I have a life and I've probably rearranged it for you. I don't have to be in class and I don't have to drive to another town, so I might not do it the next time. I am not your mother, I don't have to be home at lunch just in case you decide to drop in for a snack.

9. If you want to talk sports or art or literature during class time I may just sit down and talk with you. It depends entirely on what my mood is at the time. If the rest of the class resents your taking my attention away from the lesson of the day and they call you bad names in the parking lot, that's not my problem. I'm not your mother. On the other hand, I may tell you to go home and talk sports with your brother if I feel like practicing, and when I'm in class I usually feel like practicing, so we'll do what I want to do, not what you want to do because I'm not your mother.

The bottom line is, if you give your attention to me, I'll give my knowledge to you. If you aren't present physically or mentally in class, I don't have to pay any attention to you. I am not responsible for your progress or your well-being in the world. I am not your mother.

PS. for those with OCD who are really bothered that there are nine points up there instead of 10... I apologize.

10. While I am not your mother, chances are, if you are in my class I really do like you and like your company so I really would like to continue practicing with you, and if you become a skilled martial artist I'll be happy, if you become a better, happier human being I'll be even more pleased.



If you slip into the water you'll get a soaker!

Kim Invents a Kata

I was teaching the other day and we began doing some exercises that don't fit anywhere in the schools that I teach. I was making the stuff up out of whole cloth, taking solo iaido kata and making paired techniques so that I could talk about distance, timing, strategy and a few other things. A pretty normal thing for me to do I guess.

Somewhere around three minutes in I noticed the students trying to memorize the techniques. I stopped and explained carefully that these things are simply invented on the spot. They have no meaning beyond the points I am making and they don't need to be remembered.

Then I got into a bit of a rant, very unusual for me, on the idea that all the iaido kata that we practice are somehow battle-tested or worse, battle-invented. I speculated out loud.

So I'm on the battlefield and it's my first time so I'm just waving my sword around randomly and I happen to hit someone with the sharp edge. Zippo-Hey, I've got the first kata for my future school, it showed up in an fight and I'm still alive so I add it to my notebook. I keep waving the sword around and more techniques happen that I record for the future. Now everyone who learns from my student's student's students can rest assured that this stuff works and nobody else better add anything without finding it on the battlefield.

Seriously, that's way too Darwinian even for me. We aren't random mutations of spasmodic motion on the battlefield waiting to get selected out, we never were. There has never been a fighter or an army that went out there without some sort of pre-imagined plan. The very first guy to pick up a curved, single edged sword took a look and used his imagination to make up a few techniques before he headed out looking for a life or death match against the old style.

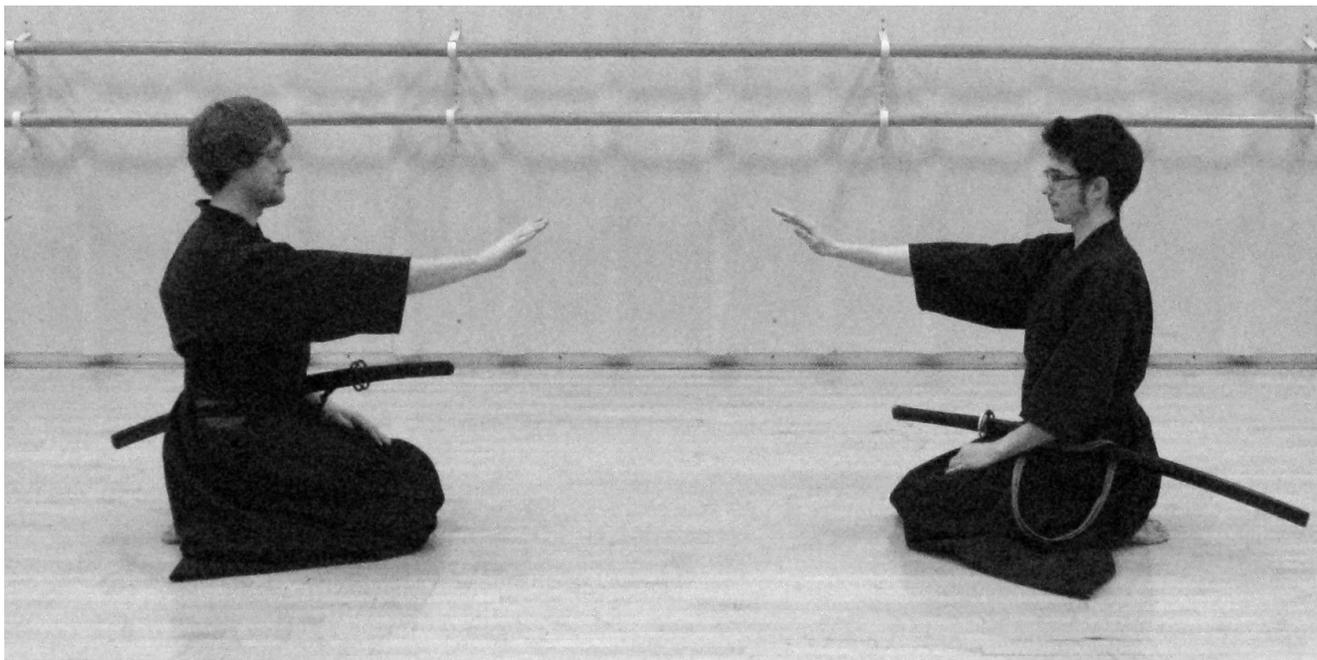
And all the generations of students afterward did their own imagining. I'll never buy the idea that our arts are battle-tested beyond a very minimal amount. I will buy that the schools get fancier, longer, more complex and with more kata hanging around as the years go by, and that sometimes they go in the opposite direction.

In any case, the point of my little rant was that these things aren't sacred, we can make up new kata if we feel the need.

But do we need to? I've been studying one style of iaido for getting on toward 30 years now and I am still finding lots of things to work on, lots of hidden lessons and lots of surprises every time I perform a kata. Maybe I'm a slow study but somehow I doubt that, since those who are my betters say the same thing and have been doing the same kata for much longer than I.

There isn't any need to invent new stuff because the old stuff is sufficient. It's not sacred, it's just sufficient.

So why was I inventing new stuff? I wasn't, I was teaching the old stuff and I'd better not discover any of the students in that class practicing those partner techniques as if they were kata. They aren't battlefield tested yet!



Carry Your Own Sword

Coming back from the kendo gradings in Toronto I was met by a rather downcast daughter. When I asked how practice that day went (she's in the KW youth orchestra, co-concertmaster in her first year with the orchestra... HEY, it's my daughter, I can brag!) she rather unhappily told me that she had fallen down and broken her violin.

Actually not hers, but the extremely expensive violin of her teacher. This teacher has pushed her for quite a while to get a better violin than the one she owns, and eventually he handed her one of his that is currently uninsured. She already plays his viola so it's not a big jump to her having his violin too.

Here's the fun part. He said the only condition is that we pay for the insurance. After a rather large argument wherein I said "you really should not use that thing until we get it insured" and the usual delays due to the usual further arguments, the call was made to our insurance broker and it was established that we don't get insurance for what we don't own. This put it back on the teacher to get insurance for which we'd pay him.

In the meantime, not wanting to go through more months of arguments in the house, I shut up about using the thing while uninsured.

And yes, it was uninsured when my daughter tripped over a doorframe and landed on it. (Guess whose fault it is that we're out the money? Yes... It's My Fault but sometimes I'd rather take the blame than endure the arguments.) She was carrying the thing in the approved violin carry way, and apparently there was something in the doorframe so who knows, maybe the orchestra or the University will pay something toward the repairs or replacement. Somehow I doubt the University lawyers will be as cooperative as these folks think, but one can only hope, that violin was worth about 2/3 of the income we get from our business in a year.

Regardless of all that personal kerfuffle, my point is really pretty simple. I tried to teach my daughter many years ago that she must always carry her own violin. This is because these things are delicate and if someone else damages it, like the time a fellow student sat on her bow, it makes for bad feelings all around. She was carrying it and I'm happy for that. It would infuriate me to have to come up with this kind of money somehow to replace a violin for a third party that some other student had broken. It's my daughter so I'll figure it out without too much grumbling.

So, folks, Carry Your Own Sword, and don't feel hurt if sensei doesn't let you carry his sword around. Carry his gym bag or his bogu or the other stuff from his car but let him carry his own sword. That way if it gets damaged he doesn't have to forgive you for damaging it. If it cuts someone (and yes, I did tell my daughter that I was glad she wasn't carrying a sword because she could have had more than a swollen knee out of it) it's the responsibility of the owner of the blade, and it's usually the person carrying it that gets cut in an accident.

Most of all, however, making a big fuss over carrying a sword or a violin reminds us that these things are:

1. valuable
2. tools of our trade and should be respected
3. personal and should not be messed about with by others
4. dangerous.

Both of them are dangerous. Do you remember when you were a kid and you banged yourself up good while not spilling a drop of your ice cream cone? Same applies to a violin or a sword because your instinct is to try to save the instrument at the risk of your own body. More than once I've snatched my hand back from grabbing my shinken as it slid out of the scabbard unexpectedly.

Let the thing hit the floor. Let it break. It's just a thing, even the most famous violin in the world is not worth my daughter having a bum shoulder or knee for the rest of her life, even the most famous sword in the world is not worth you losing your thumb and possibly your livelihood.

Carry your own sword, mostly so that you can watch it drop over that cliff or under that truck and say "wow, that could have been me".

Am I Quiet?

Having just read three renshi essays I realize that there's a reason I don't feel too bad about not writing as regularly on this blog or elsewhere as I sometimes think I should. I mean aside from the convoluted way I have of writing and the lack of information I often convey thereby.

Having just read three renshi essays I realize that there is another generation out there that "gets it". As I was reading I found myself sort of zoning out, as if I were reading my own work. In fact I do sometimes come across my own work on the net while searching for something or other and I have even said "hey this is good" before realizing it's mine... of course I like it.

But I liked these essays too.

It's interesting that in a couple of them the writers mentioned their state of mind at various times during their iaido career, they were pretty similar to each other and to those who are studying right now. We all go through stages and they're pretty much similar for anyone with a certain amount of time in.

Sorry, did you think you were unique? Ah well, you are, my dear, you are a true original and we appreciate you for what you are, now go do what the rest of the class is doing. He he.

So here I am, wondering why I'm writing when these three can be writing almost exactly what I am in a couple of years, plenty of time for the youngsters to hear it.

The power of habit I suppose.

"Zen and ..."

Just saw a note on the net that Professor Yamada Shoji has published "Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen and the West" which apparently is an amplification of his essay "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery" <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/pdf/586.pdf>

The idea seems to be that Foreign ideas about Japanese culture can influence the ideas Japanese have about their own culture.

Wow what a concept, that Japanese culture could be influenced by anything outside Japan. Radical man.

Of course it is.

We just discovered a heretofore unknown species of hominid in Denisova, the Altai mountains near Mongolia. These seem not to be Neanderthals and not to be Homo Sapiens, but a brand new species.... and yet DNA seems to indicate that this "species" interbred with the H. Sapiens who ended up in New Guinea. This same type of evidence would also indicate that 2% of our DNA comes from interbreeding with Neanderthals. Even different "species" (biologically a species is something that can't interbreed) influence each other across 20,000 years.

It is no shock that modern Japanese budo folks would be influenced by what non-Japanese think about the subject. Our ideas on Karate are influenced by the military who first imported it to the USA after WWII, the old Japanese sword schools were influenced by the State Shinto and ultranationalist ideas of the Japanese military before WWII. Got a shrine in your dojo? That dates all the way back to the 1930s.

Although we all delight in puncturing the status quo, there are few serious scholars who ever thought that the martial arts were all about Zen.

On the other hand, there are many who started the arts and continue them as a way to meditate that is similar to, and has many of the same effects as zazen. The Zen Monks will say that there is no "Zen of Running" or "Zen of Archery" (I've been at that sermon) but I give those folks as much credit as the budo purists who insist that martial arts is all about Esoteric Buddhism rather than Zen.

It's as much about State Shinto as it is about Shingon finger waving folks, but why are you practicing? Why is it that you spend large amounts of time doing something that hasn't had much of a use for generations, and then only in a country half way around the world?

If Japanese Edo-period culture can influence you, why can't your culture influence modern Japan? Is that really a shocking thought?

So You Want to be In Charge

Being the secretary of the CKF includes running the website as part of communicating with the membership. I have maintained and kept it updated (as much as it ever was) up to a couple months ago when I asked a couple of busy people to help out. What I got was a complete redesign of the site which you can see here: <http://kendo-canada.com/>

Nice isn't it, except for the graphics.

Yes I've heard about the graphics several times, always "hey those graphics are no good". So I opened a little contest for all those who don't like the images and want more quality stuff to look at. I've had a grand total of zero suggestions so far.

It is to sigh. Yes, it's easy to point out ways things can be improved, it's easy to say this or that should not be done that way, but if you have a complaint you should be prepared to be in charge of fixing it. At least that's what I've always felt. If you don't like the images (or lack thereof), be prepared to provide some.

After all, the way you are taught in the martial arts isn't all negative, even if it seems that way. Sensei says what you're doing is not correct, perhaps he is even a bit not-polite in the way he says it, but does he leave it there? Does he tell you to fix something and then walk away? I should hope not. He tells you what you are doing is wrong (that's the budo way) and then he tells you how to fix it. He shows you. He gives you a picture. And then when you don't fix it, he gets negative again, perhaps even less politely than before, perhaps he gets so unpolite that you finally pay attention and fix it. At which point he walks away with maybe a "humph".

Would you have it any other way? Would you stay with a sensei who is totally negative and only tells you what is wrong without showing how to fix it?

Think now about those around you. Do you have kids? A signif-other? How many times in the last week have you told them they were doing something wrong without telling them how to fix it? How many times have you complained without stepping in and correcting whatever it is you figured was wrong? Or showed them how to do it?

We're all in the budo world, we don't need praise, but remember, if you complain, you're in charge. If sensei tells you something isn't right, he tells you how to make it right. Should you do any less?

If you've got a complaint, be prepared to be put in charge of fixing it.

How did the CKF website get created in the first place? Several years ago I said "hey we should have a website". A finger was pointed in my general direction and the words "good idea" were spoken.

Keep those photos rolling in folks, good graphics is a good idea.

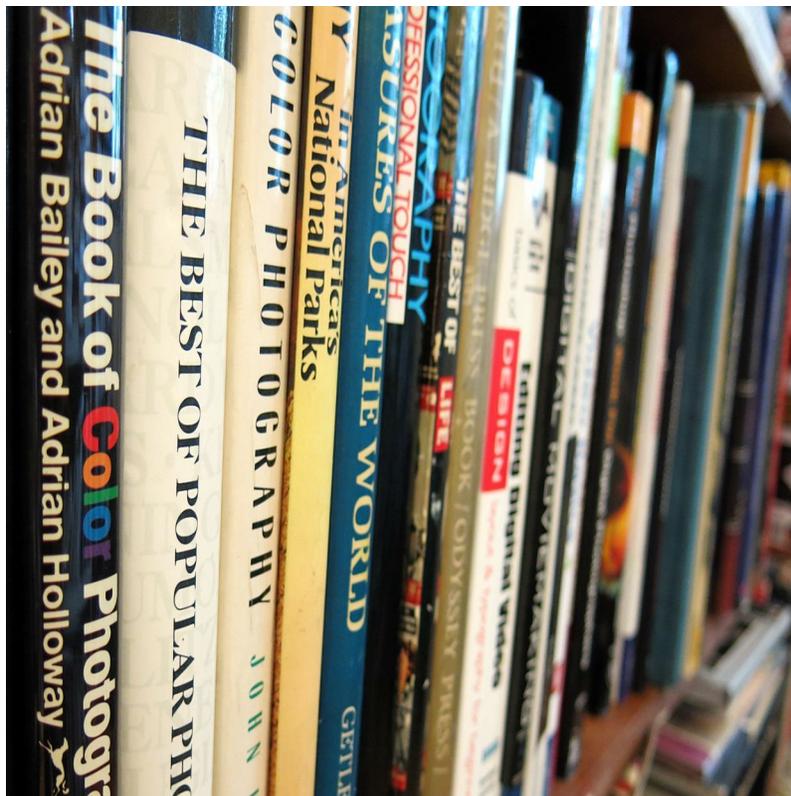
The CNN of Martial Arts

Sometimes the martial arts forums (fora?) feel a bit like an all news channel. You just gotta keep repeating the same news over and over because you have to fill up space. After all, the channel is all news and if there isn't any news we better invent some.

But how much news do you really need? Seriously? I'm busy these days and don't even bother to pick up the newspaper in the morning, a quick look at the google news top stories at breakfast on my ipod seems to keep me up to date on world happenings quite efficiently.

And discussion online? What's the benefit of budo training... no, what's the mechanism by which one receives the benefit of budo training? It's the training, the getting out to the dojo and going through the motions.

Discussions of vague points or the fine distinctions and definitions of Japanese terminology is about as useful to budo as a twenty-fifth story in a day about a protest in Cairo. It gives you just about as much further understanding of the situation in either case.



It's Contextual

If I hear one more person tell me about how Japanese is a contextual language and that you can't rely on a dictionary definition of a term to tell you what it says in a budo context... and then goes on to define what a term means....

Well I'll scream. (In this context it doesn't mean that I'll really scream, but that I will become very upset, as if I was so frustrated that I was screaming in frustration, of course I won't really be screaming because it would be silly to scream when all by myself reading something. But I will feel frustration and even exasperation.)

English is contextual, Spanish is contextual, every damned language in the world is contextual. Words are placeholders for ideas, if we both agree on the idea and the term for it, great, we can understand each other but no word in any language, living or dead, ever had just one definition. You look to the context and you try to figure out if the author was making a pun, and you check out the body language and the face the speaker is making to see if it's sarcasm.

Please, only three year olds just learning their native language figure the words are fixed in the heavens, and if you want to demonstrate that you are just learning another language, by all means start giving THE meaning of that term or telling everyone that the language is contextual.

Dee You Aitch

What's Important

I have begun teaching a class that has no prior experience in Japanese weapons and there are no seniors around to set an example. I found myself, at the third class, giving them shit about practicing in a sloppy way, and then I picked up my shinken and sliced a piece of paper a couple of times saying "this is what you have in your hand, pay attention, do the etiquette or you're going to get hurt."

Later, in my regular class I thought about what I had said and realized that I don't really care about the etiquette per se, I care about the safety that the etiquette gives. By having a formal start and finish to a kata, and indeed, by having a kata in the first place, we can practice without benefit of protective armour in a way that will allow us to survive with minimal banging of fingers and heads.

I often do a bit on the formal beginning and finishing etiquette and relate every movement to a simple safety rule, either to keep the weapons in a safe position, to keep them under control, or to ensure that a potential opponent has no excuse or opening to attack us.

The fiddling around "before and after" a kata has a similar function, it allows us to enter and leave an encounter without confusion and that means without added risk.

As anyone who has been in one of my classes can tell you, I'm not a big one for serious faces and military order throughout the class, but I hope those same people will also see that my students and I are very focused during the kata. I have adults in my class (it's at a University, very few kids have ever been in the class) so they can focus when they wish. That gives me the luxury of allowing some freedom to talk, laugh and socialize between kata.

At the same time, I am in control of the pace and intensity of the class because I am always talking. I don't actually talk to myself at home, and am not, contrary to popular impression, all that in love with the sound of my own voice, but I talk in class and by the tone and frequency of my statements the students have something to keep them on topic and on track.

What's important to me is to teach and practice the kata safely. If I can do that without having to run a boot camp or a Trappist monastery I will.

Just another paradox

I noticed, a couple of days ago, someone on a forum who signs his posts "the only x-ryu in my province" and points out regularly that he is the only student of one style in a club which practices another, highly related style.

This struck me instantly as, well, wrong. It took me a while to work it out in my head though.

As a beginner, the instructions we get are "put this foot in front of that one". It has to be that way because until we know the steps, we can't go on to the rest of the stuff.

As a beginner, that's all we know, so we figure the steps are important (they are) and when we find out that our school does the steps differently than another school, even if it's related, we figure it's important to stay with one school and learn it well.

So we figure we should stick with our school, when we really should be figuring "it's best to learn it well".

Result, beginners who find themselves in a school that is related to their own, but not the same, should convert and learn that style instead of trying to stick to their own school and translate every general instruction as to "this foot goes here and this hand goes here".

Why? Because the sensei is not going to instruct you in some other style, he doesn't know the particular dance steps you use, and if he does, you've got your own teacher "back home" that should be teaching you.

Simply put, you are wasting your time as a beginner, practicing at the dojo of another style.

On the other hand, if you are a senior in your style, from say 5-6 dan and above, you are beyond the "dance steps" and you very rarely get corrected on which foot goes where. The corrections have much more to do with hips, grip, feeling, gaze, that sort of thing.

As a student of this rank, you can change your physical movements quite easily and so it would not be a big problem to switch styles while studying in another dojo. Such a student is likely to be quite willing and expectant of a change.

But that senior student is likely to be told not to change their style, simply because it isn't necessary. Instructions can be given that apply to any style, so there's really no benefit to change.

So those who don't want to change styles (beginners) ought to change style, and those who are quite willing to change (seniors) likely don't need to and will often be told not to.

Just another budo paradox.

The Big Swing

I often hear that Muso Shinden ryu swings such and such a way, and Muso Jikiden Eishin ryu swings another way.

Not my experience at all. I've met many different ways to swing a sword, but they come down roughly to two different shapes. One is big and round, "sweep the ceiling" as we say, and the other is direct, get from the start to the target in a straight line. This second way is sometimes called "flat" or "kendo style" and I suppose it is.

From the target on down the swings tend to be the same, and the hand, sword, body position at the point of impact with the target is common to most teachers that I've encountered.

So what people are seeing is the acceleration of the tip to the target, and this seems to create the discussion.

Me, I'm a lot more concerned with the cut part of the swing than the start, but of course the acceleration is important and I'm in the "big and round" camp myself, simply because my teachers were. That doesn't mean I can't do the other style and I will use it depending on who is teaching me. From about 5dan onward, anyone should be able to change their swing on request.

What I find more interesting these days, is the particular way students grip the sword and what they use to create their swing. It seems that the swing goes in a bit of a circle, from shoulder to fingers and back again.

Beginners start with a frozen wrist, square grip and cut from the top of their shoulders.

After a while the shoulders relax a bit and the elbows start bending,

Then at about nidan the elbows stop and the forearms get a workout as the wrists start to bend.

From the top of the forearms to the underside as the fingers start working, and gripping in an attempt to choke the life out of the hilt.

Somewhere around 4dan the swing moves back up into the armpits and we're at the shoulder again.

And then there's 6dan where the students are struggling to ease up on the fingers to get that last bit of tension out of there and the swing finally starts to move into the hips.

Now, having discussed all this, and given ranks to each style of swinging the sword, I'm sure a lot of students will be trying to jump ahead.

Good luck. He he.

Rascals

Here's a post of mine I found through google, from 2000 when we were talking about teaching folks of poor character.

If you're mostly worried about the rep of the school, kick out the rascals, allow only the pure of character and high social standing to attend and thereby raise your own status.

If you're mostly concerned with a smoothly running class of like minded folks, kick out the rascals, train with the easily bidden to ease your teaching load.

If you consider what you're doing to be deadly dangerous stuff that provides the students with the ability to kill at a glance, kick out the rascals, keep the world safe by denying this knowledge to the unscrupulous.

But

If we assume that what we're doing is much less deadly than a relatively easily obtained firearm, or even the kitchen drawer carving knife, than we can forget number 3.

Now, posit that the martial arts do people some good. That they might have the ability to turn aggressive people into more tolerant, socially well adjusted people. The evidence for this does exist, both anecdotally but more importantly, in the sociology literature.

Now further posit that your aim, as an instructor, is to produce people of high character. Note that I said produce, not teach or associate with, but produce.

I would therefore submit that it is your moral duty, as an instructor, to not only continue to teach your rascal, but to seek out other rascals and teach them as well.

If you are trained in first aid it is not a legal requirement that you help the injured, but it is your moral duty to do so. Trained or not I would suggest it is our duty to help in any case.

It is, in a similar way, our moral duty to help those who are rascals.

The Secret Class

No apologies, I've been busy and remain busy and I'm not your mother.

At the seminar we just finished, I was two days in and wandered over to my sensei and said "we'll have a senior-senior class, I haven't done a single iai kata yet"

As it happens I did, that afternoon, stomp into the senior class and practice as a student, but the senior-senior class happened anyway on the last afternoon of the seminar.

Now this is the class that everyone complains about at a seminar, when the top guys go away and learn some secret sword school so they'll be ahead of everyone else. I got a few oblique comments about "secrets" when the class was done so I thought I'd tell everyone what we did.

First, the students. They were the top six iaido folk at the seminar, all 6 and 7dan. The top visiting instructor was teaching and we went into a small, quiet room to learn for two hours.

Here's what we worked on, to the best of my recollection.

1. Grip
2. Iai Goshi (stance)
3. How to turn around
4. Breathing
5. Two Techniques

In the two techniques we talked about how to sit down, how to breath etc.

In total, over two hours, we did two kata about four times and a few parts of other kata.

So, if any nidan out there figure they missed a secret sword school, be reassured, you did not. Any godan out there that figure they should have been there... I'll tell you what I was told and then you can decide if you were better there or with other sensei getting corrections to your technique.

OH, and lest you figure the above class was a waste of our time, I figure it will take me about two years to get half of what we were taught.

Nevertheless

Yet again (and I was reminded of our same conversation last grading) we had a grading panel that was mis-matched with some judges wearing a suit and some keikogi.

So with this in mind here's a thought.

You're a 6dan and you go to a seminar where there will be a grading. Nobody tells you about sitting on the panel so you don't bring a suit. At the seminar you get tagged to sit on the panel but you don't have a suit with you.

Not your fault right? After all nobody told you that you were sitting the panel so absolutely not your fault.

Right.

Nevertheless, there is the panel, half in suits and half in keikogi. That's what the challengers see, it's what the officials see.

Me, I figure that asked or not, I pack along the old blue blazer and dark grey trousers with the CKF tie whenever I'm near a grading or tournament. That way it's not me looking like I forgot my suit and I don't have to spend minutes out of my life explaining how it's not my fault I'm not ready for something that I could have anticipated might happen.

Hey, I watch and learn. This seminar I watched the top Iaido sensei from Japan whip out of a suit and into a kendogi because he sat on the jodo panel after supervising the iaido panel and the jodo sensei had settled on keikogi because they were teaching before and after the grading.

Good enough example for me.

Budo Administration as Invented by Janus

I've been involved in organizations continuously for almost 40 years since High School where I was a publicity director. Mostly I end up as some sort of secretary who has front-line contact with the members of the organization.

Not surprisingly I've been in a couple of martial arts organizations and one of the key things I noticed in those places is the difference between the hierarchy of instruction and the more horizontal expectations of westerners for the administration.

I have never been a big fan of democracy in the dojo, even if I go in and say "what do you want to learn today", we aren't going to be doing something that I figure we shouldn't. I get the final say if I'm at the top of the pecking order that day.

On the other hand, the only time I've ever seen the "sensei gets to decide" thing work in an organization is when that organization is more or less a single dojo, or a very few dojo with a very strong, single leader who instructs them all. The instant you get something bigger than the immediate instructional chain you need to move to a more businesslike organization and decision-making process.

That means the membership gets some say in policy and in who is running the show, it means that policies get made and followed so that everyone is clear on the rules. No changing things just because sensei has a hangover.

This seems blindingly obvious to me, and to most members of the organizations I've joined, but it is often not very clear to the senior sensei.

This is where I usually come in, trying to balance between members who can't figure out the rules and the guys at the top who figure the rules are whatever they decide on the fly. Most sensei have immense confidence in their own Solomon-like ability to solve problems intuitively, and most of the common herd can read. The conflict comes when the written policy doesn't agree with today's decision. I'm often left trying to explain what can't really be explained. I end up in a flip-flop of my own where sometimes I'll defend the decision "special circumstances", appeal to authority "because sensei says so" or trying to explain once again to sensei that "we do actually have a written policy on this which we discussed at length last month, and it would be a really good idea if we followed the policy since the membership knows what it is". More fool me for publishing the policies where people can read them.

Most of the time in a martial art organization, this does NOT work out. I can't recall a time when someone, either at the top or at the bottom wasn't pissed off at how things are being run. Often the top sensei withdraw from the running of the place, but complain constantly about how it's run. The younger guys end up as schizoid as I am, bouncing between making sensible policies and then changing them at a whim. The whim thing comes from

1. trying to do what sensei tells them to do that day and

2. learning how to make these decisions from watching how sensei makes decisions, or, if they're a bit older, from how they themselves make decisions in the dojo.

This sort of thing usually keeps budo organizations small, grumpy and ineffective. I've quit many of them in frustration and watched others simply go dormant. Mostly I try to do my job when it seems to be doing some good, and disappear when it seems like I'm wasting my time.

My prescription for the problem? The ideal is to somehow get the senior sensei to devote themselves to teaching and to stay away from the administration side of things. This, however, requires the administration to support the teaching side of things. Again something you'd think was obvious, especially since a budo organization exists to provide instruction in the budo, but it isn't. If the senior sensei get out of administration, administrators end up getting in, and those guys can nickle and dime anyone into howling frustration.

My point? The next time your organization comes around looking for help, take a real honest look at the job and your ability to do it. If you can do it in your sleep, go ahead and sign up. If, on the other hand, you will need to work your ass off, and you're sort of the sensitive type who can't take too much getting complained at with no thanks, think very carefully before agreeing to volunteer.

Don't get me started on volunteer organizations vs. ones where folks are paid to take abuse from the boss.

Spoiled for Choice

Many years ago... just a couple years after the world wide web started, we put our email list of iaido contacts onto a listserv through the University of Guelph and called it iaido-L

We had over 1500 folks on the list and they included all the top folks on the net at that time, as well as the folks in the sword collecting world.

Eventually the collector folks split off onto their own server and I was rather sad about that, the writing was on the wall. Sure enough, the fancy forums came into being and there were suddenly 20 or 30 martial arts related forums out there for every flavour you could wish, with dozens of sub-lists.

Then came facebook. Iaido-L is still around but it's pretty sleepy these days.

The thing is, just before we had the iaido-L list there were dozens of small pockets of folks who were mostly unaware of each other. We'd worked hard since 1987 on a photocopied 'zine, then email and then the listserv to get them together enough to start an iaido seminar. Then they split apart again.

The seminar is sort of the same story, when we started in 1991 we were just about the only one in North America. Eventually, as the population grew, and seminars started in the USA and elsewhere in Canada that original group started to split up and now there are iaido folks who have never been to the Guelph seminar.

Again I feel kind of sad about that, as there are loads of people out there who I've never met and never practiced with.

On the other hand, there are a lot more folks out there getting some top instruction from the teachers these seminars bring in. So get thee to some seminar somewhere this summer, I'll be at three or four more by the end of the year and maybe I'll meet some of you new folks.

Like Your Hair is on Fire

It's unfortunate that I had to go to the second Google page to find the originator of that quote, the first page and a bit was devoted to some book on teaching. I didn't check it out, I'm sure it would only make me mad.

Look it up yourself, it's a command to practice hard, as if you are about to be run over by a bus five minutes from now. It is a command to urgency because if you don't practice this way you will never achieve enlightenment.

But can you live this way?

I speak from a place of having lived my life for the last thirty years as if I was going to die tomorrow. I have had episodes of blinding illumination, I have been spread throughout the universe, at one with the entirety of creation. I have felt the stars pulsing and the weight of the seas upon the bottom of the ocean.

But I also have atrial fibrillation and a very very low tolerance for self-delusion, hypocrisy and others who waste their lives putting things off. I drink too much so that I can get to sleep at night.

In other words, I've lost a sense of balance. You see, I don't meditate any more, I'm not in a monastery, I have no inka, no proof of achievement, no infrastructure which would set me up as a teacher who could indulge his irritation at the wasted time of 90 percent of the population as they go about their dull, blind lives. I have to live in those lives.

So, while watching Inspector Lynley (no I can't watch Survivor Bora Bora or Paris Hilton's farm adventures) I heard him state "there's always tomorrow".

There is, you know. Tomorrow. There is always tomorrow. If you die tonight (maybe from a meteor hit on your house) unenlightened, without having accomplished your great goal in life, without having apologized to your father for the hurtful thing you said when you were 15, it doesn't matter. You're dead and that's the end of it. You don't get to float around as a ghost or in some sort of afterlife regretting what you didn't do for all eternity. You're worm food.

Accept this and then embrace the sure knowledge that "there's always tomorrow". Because there is, ALWAYS tomorrow. This is life, there can be no other way to look at it. The alternative is oblivion, not an eternity of regret.

You are free to live forever, there is always tomorrow.

To live as if there is a great goal that you must achieve, to live as if your hair is on fire is a tool. A means to an end. The understanding that you are the dust of stars, that there is, quite possibly, no other form of life in the entire universe that is conscious of its own existence, or the existence of the Universe. To know that we will never, ever know of such another life form if there is such a thing, is not something that you need to know in your bones. The fact that it doesn't matter if we are alone, that we can't be alone since we can't be apart from the very fabric of the entire universe, and that we can know this first hand, is also not something that you need to understand.

Enlightenment is a choice, if you want it, set a match to your hair and start working, but be aware that at the end, you must still chop wood and draw water, you still have to live in the world that you live in now. Nothing changes, you only see things in a grumpier way as you watch people live as if they will live forever.

As if there is always tomorrow.

As if their hair is actually not on fire.

But you live knowing that it is.

Convergence

The more I do this stuff, the more it all comes together. I'm currently exploring the similarity of grip between what I'm getting taught these days in Zen Ken Ren iai, and what I was taught in Niten Ichiryu, all mixed with a good dollop of Go Rin no Sho.

Here's something to go think about: Beginners tend to put their thumbs on the top of the hilt, and we keep knocking them off of there. Next time you have your hands in the position where you can do this (put the thumb on the top) try moving your hands so that you put your index fingers on the top instead. Lay your left hand and index finger on the hilt, index pointing at the tip of the sword. Now just fold down the finger and place your right hand on in exactly the same way.

Pay attention that you don't move your grip around, and swing with no muscle involved... check out your hasuji, the angle of the blade as it cuts. Check out the stop at the end of the swing.

Pinch thumb and index fingers on either side of the hilt, make sure that you aren't "pulling the trigger" to stop the blade, just pinch in from the sides.



I Wanna Do Kenjutsu

Yet another call for a kenjutsu dojo on the net. Where can I find a club that does kenjutsu?

Well good news, look for any club that does Japanese sword arts and you've found it folks. Kenjutsu translates from Japanese to "sword arts" so if you've found Japanese sword instruction you've found kenjutsu.

And yet, and yet, there are clubs out there teaching "Kenjutsu" and they're getting students. I suspect that if it were 1963 they'd be teaching "Karate" (hell some still teach "Karate" even if they have to call it Korean Karate for semi accuracy), in 1978 the same clubs would be teaching "Kung Fu" and in 1983 "Ninja". Today the big one is "MMA" which ought to be a dead giveaway to anyone who expands that to Mixed Martial Arts.

I want to study Mixed Martial Arts. I want to study Sword Arts. I want to learn to play Cards.

It's either very simple to find... look for any club that teaches more than one martial art or any sword art at all, or it's really hard to find... after all how easy is it to find someone to teach you how to play "Cards".

There's folks that will teach you "Kenjutsu" and there's lots of students studying "Kenjutsu" so have at it. Look up "Kenjutsu" on google and pay your dues.

Too Much Training

It occurs to me that by the time you're a nidan in iaido you pretty much know all there is to know about the technical aspects of swinging a sword, and you could easily hack an enemy badly enough to win a fight. After all how much is needed to cut anything with a sword? I cut my thumb a while ago on a free-falling blade, just touched it in mid air and it was down to the bone before the blade itself moved away from the thumb in free-fall.

So why the extra 20 or 30 years training for those who get to the top of the grading ladder? How much more can they really know?

Turns out it's a lot more, but much of that is in the minute movements of force through the body, the mental aspects of working at something repetitive for years, how to teach, and other such things.

There are many people out there who can ski over a bump, and a very few who can do a triple twist with a flip over that same bump. There are many people who can do math, and very few who are pushing the field forward.

It's the nature of being at the top of any profession that you specialize, you concentrate, you spend the years in to get incrementally smaller results with each year of training. It's these guys who should be at the top of the profession, they're the ones who know a lot about the little that is any profession and I would always prefer to learn from these experts.

Not all those who put in the years are equally skilled of course. One can stop at a certain level of training and simply coast for the rest of one's career, either teaching or simply not paying attention. Those at the very top should avoid that sort of thing as it will lead at best to a stagnant art, one that never gets any better.

On the other end of this thought is how much training anyone needs, to "use" a martial art. I'd argue that it's not much. I teach women's self defence and we have a ten week course that has returned some success stories and no failures that I'm aware of. The course doesn't teach how to fight, it teaches how to survive using a range of techniques that are simple and effective, and it's taught in ten weeks.

Most folks train in the martial arts somewhere between the 30 years it takes to get to the top of the heap, and the ten weeks it takes to learn something useful. Each person has to decide when they've had too much training.

I Don't Know You

Just had a quick tour around some of the forums in my bookmarks and I see lots of new names cropping up with esoteric koryu to offer us poor underserved westerners.

At one point I used to go hunting for information on these guys because I wanted to know what was out there, but as always, the youngsters are keeping tabs and calling out the fakes with gusto so everyone will be safe from the frauds.

Me, I find myself a bit less interested in either the supposedly superior arts, or the secret knowledge of the new guys on the block, and not at all interested in the frauds. What I find myself saying mostly about the whole lot of them is "I don't know you".

And I think that's it really, why should I concern myself with folks I don't know? I don't know the students or the teachers so it's outside my responsibility.

But I should be one of the gatekeepers because I've been around so long?

Hah! In 20 years of writing about the martial arts I've never had any indication that I saved one person from folly, with the possible exception of those who asked me face to face about this or that instructor.

These days I suspect my advice would simply be "I don't know that guy".

Now, before you figure that's a cop-out, please be aware that "I don't know that guy" has always been one of the most valuable pieces of advice to me from my seniors.

Think about it.

Saving Japan's Culture

This one is perpetual, it's one of the main arguments I hear for practicing koryu. Almost inevitably it's brought up by those folks who are practicing a koryu on the edge of extinction, some local variant or even mainline school is down to four or five students and a Westerner starts to practice. Back home after many years they look for students and try to "keep the school alive" to preserve a part of Japan's heritage.

A noble goal, but one I've never had myself.

If, as one westerner, the last of his line, once said to me, the Japanese can't be bothered to keep this stuff alive, why should I worry about it. On the other hand, I'm sure there are three or four Europeans who would love to come to Canada and learn [Ice Hurley](#) and take it back to keep it alive to preserve a piece of Canadian culture. Or some Japanese fellow who would like to keep the eighteenth century Virginian "boxing" (kick and gouge wrestling... gouging out an eye was one way to win a bout) alive. http://jmanly.ejmas.com/articles/2001/jmanlyart_gorn_0401.htm

Bits and pieces of culture do sometimes stay around in a culture without any application to modern times, but these aren't a sure thing. If the modern culture has no use for them, they might stick for a few generations provided they have strong supporters, but they're doomed. One day a son isn't going to want to keep welding the parts back on the steam tractor his father treasured.

Now, there are some martial arts that are doing just fine thank you. Judo is a sport, lots of students there, so's Kendo. They're both fun and kids love them. Karate sure, same thing.

Adult oriented martial arts might include Aikido, koryu jujutsu (as opposed to the western AiKaJuDo mixtures which appeal strongly to kids who want to compete in the UFC) and any of the rest of the sword or staff arts. Kids may want to practice with swords, but the kata-based instruction of the old schools is just not fun and there's Kendo around the corner. What is it about the arts that mostly attract older folks? It's not the slam-bang action with the brittle crowd, no it's more about the self. Either the fantasy life of being a modern samurai (usually doesn't last), the noble (but ultimately doomed) effort to save Japanese medieval culture, or a seeking after self-improvement, be it mental or physical.

In my experience, the healthiest koryu schools in the west are those who go after the self-improvement crowd. They're also the ones who are smart about getting new students, which means those that have attached themselves to the kendo federation (to catch those kendo adults who have blown their achilles tendon) or share space with judo, aikido or karate clubs. The sword and stick koryu are great places to move when rough and tumble becomes tough and fumble.

Which brings us back to some of the "save the culture" folks who seem to think that the way to get students is by explaining frequently and in painful detail that their koryu has no connection whatsoever to kendo or the kendo federation. Quite aside from the frequency of their senior instructors having been in the kendo federation ("He was only there to keep the art alive, he hated what kendo did to his art")

their description of their art is a negative one. They are explaining what it's not, rather than what it is.

You know, if their teacher could stomach the kendo federation in order to keep their art alive for another generation....

But the humiliation you say? The demands to change the koryu?

Doesn't happen. Any instructor who changes his koryu while in the kendo federation does so at his own choice, the federation has nothing to say about koryu. Membership implies doing 12 kata of iaido or jodo as the federation defines them. Considering some of the obscure arts have 60 or 70 kata, that's not a lot of extra effort.

But the higher level kendo grades require a koryu kata or two and if you don't do it like the kendo federation likes to see it you can't get 7 or 8 dan!

Are you there for students and the perpetuation of your koryu or are you there to get rank? And even regardless of that, you can't modify one or two of your koryu kata in order to please the federation judges? Are you the last teacher (and therefore the owner by default if not by license) or not? Who says you can't do two variations of a kata, one pure line and one federation friendly?

But the constant practice of kendo federation kata leaks over into the koryu!

How long have you been training? If it's that easy to contaminate your koryu, you need to ask how deeply you know your art and whether or not you can transmit a faithful copy under any circumstance.

There's damned few people interested in these obscure arts, why set yourself against the sizable numbers in the kendo federation in an attempt to, what, avoid contamination? Steal students?

Teaching Does Not Equal Expertise

A few days ago I was reading a forum thread where a fellow repeatedly stated that he taught self defence and then continued on to make his points, assuming an "expertise by authority of teaching".

Amongst those who teach martial arts, there is likely a majority who also teach "self defence" as a related or separate item from their martial art classes. Let's face it, a "self defence" class is a great way to get new students into the dojo so why not? But are these folks experts on self defence?

Not by a long shot, no more than those who teach photography workshops are expert photographers, or those who teach aerobics are expert exercise physiologists.

It is dangerous for instructors to believe they are experts simply because they instruct. It is dangerous for them to believe this, even if they have some sort of certification to teach. After all, most of these things are self-regulated, which means that a few folks who teach something get together, decide on a basic set of "things to know", set themselves up as an accreditation body and proceed to convince health clubs, schools and community centers that their instructors need to be certified.

None of it requires expertise, only promotion and public acceptance of their certification bodies. There is no governmental oversight for most of this accreditation and what there is, has nothing to do with declaring expertise, only with ensuring the public isn't abused too badly by such things as lifetime memberships in gyms that last four months.

An expert is someone who does the research, who stays current with the field of experimental, scientific investigation into their topic. There is a vast and continually growing field of research into assault and resistance to assault which reveals some interesting things about "self defence". Over the years I've acquired the very deep suspicion that most of the martial artists who teach self defence, are unaware of this research. They may be experts at judo or karate or aikido but they aren't experts at self defence. They don't know what works and how best to teach it.

The next time you find somebody saying to you "I teach this stuff and let me tell you..." stop them and ask them what sort of certification they have to teach, and what sort of ongoing research they conduct or courses they take to keep themselves current in developments in their field.

Oh, but self defence is about fighting and I have a high rank (that means I can teach) in a martial art that hasn't changed in hundreds of years so therefore there's nothing else to learn or to keep up with right?

Sooo many things wrong with that sentence.

A couple of things that high ranked martial artists could keep up on:

How to teach

How to teach kids

How to teach adults

How to teach those with disabilities

How to perform their own art at a higher level

How to keep their students safe while practicing (CPR, First Aid, the latest in sprung floors)

All this before they get to self defence instruction.



Secrets and Fetishes

Recently I was reminded of a comment made by a student several years ago. This fellow is older than I and has been teaching longer than I've been in the arts so he's no beginner (and I've always been honoured that he considers me his teacher when he's my senior in so many ways). It was when I was teaching koryu iai and had just finished demonstrating three different ways to do a kata that he said "which is the way we should do it".

Of course I started talking about how each way was correct and he could choose whichever he liked. He came back with "which one do you want us to do" and I went on to say that I didn't mind which and...

Not being stupid he interrupted (with a slightly irritated tone) "then which one do you do".

Slowly the dawn. I realized he was after two things, one was to give me a bit of a teaching moment... don't give beginners three different ways to do something they're just learning how to do... and he was honestly looking for the one to practice, the one I practiced, which would be the one the dojo practiced as their base technique. Variations are just that, alternative ways to do the base technique.

So the secret teachings are something revealed in passing to seniors, a variation, an alternative way to think about a technique. They are not something to tell beginners, it's just confusing, they are secrets.

The Fetish? Ah, that's when a student can't get past that first way to do something, that's when a student figures there is a single correct way to do a technique. Note my student never once said "which is the right way" he wasn't a beginner, he knew there were variations, he just wasn't interested in trying to remember all of them while learning the technique. But he has never had a fetish about "the way sensei does it".

I've met students who can't get over "the way sensei does it" or did it, if he has died. It's not a healthy attitude but it's not uncommon. A fetish is an attribution of mystical or spiritual powers to a physical object. A kata is a physical object, so to insist that it be done "the way sensei did it" is to fetishize a movement. Like the wizards and alchemists of old, if we get the movement wrong, bad things can happen, the demon can cross the chalk circle and we all know what happens then.

It doesn't have to be some sort of exaggerated wish to respect our sensei that causes us to fetishize a kata, it could be the belief that these things were invented on the battlefield and that if we change them from what we were taught we'd be doing something that doesn't work "for real".

Real matters, but I have no faith whatsoever that I can tell/teach/show someone to do a movement in a certain way and have them be able to do it "for real".

Last night we were working on moving from the hips.... OK don't look at the date, EVERY last night we were doing that... and we went to a partner practice to try and get the students to move forward, to

drive in rather than concentrate on their shoulders or their grip or whatever. I was moving toward one of the seniors and getting right up on her sword. I told her to get back, to protect her distance and she said "I can't, that's as far as I can get back, I'd have to jump" I yelled at her "then you're dead, dead, dead! Do what you have to do to make the distance!". She jumped and suddenly she could maintain the maai.

She was doing exactly what I had taught her for years, but what I taught her was just a movement, perfect or not, it wasn't enough. Good form = fetish. There's nothing wrong with good form, but if your opponent is a foot taller than you and can drive in well, you'd better be concentrating on the maai and not on the kata. Jump, even if you think that's the wrong way to do it.

From "do what you have to" come the changes to your kata that make it "real". Fetishizing the movements simply makes them a distraction to learning the lesson. We came back to "real is what works" later in the class when I couldn't get some of them to begin their iai kata with good posture, or the right starting position. We went to "how do you defeat an iaido technique" and had an unarmed person sit in front of a sword and prevent the swordsman from cutting them. It's not hard if they aren't doing the technique properly. What's proper? That's when they can't be stopped and the cut hits the opponent no matter what they try to do. Funny enough, what works looks just like what I try to teach, but it's a lot easier to get over the fetish of the movement (I'm doing what I was told so I don't have to change anything) when you realize your fetish doesn't work (oops, maybe I wasn't doing what I thought I was doing).

It's why you need to have a teacher, why you need to figure out what actually works. Just because you've always drawn your chalk circles that way doesn't necessarily mean the demon won't find a way out. A kata isn't "the right way" do a sword technique, it's a classroom where you can go and learn something about timing and distance and moving from the hips and... you really shouldn't make those schoolgirl uniforms a fetish.

Budo Sermons

In 1982 I decided the philosophy of Aikido was contained in the techniques. I was there to learn how to be a better person because I couldn't find a Zen priest in Guelph and sensei never gave sermons in class so...

Much later I decided the philosophy of the martial arts came during the beers after class, that's when all the stories and jibber-jabber about overall technique and internal dialog during kata showed up.

Now I've moved to a slightly different perspective on sermonizing.

"there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" said Hamlet, while Siddhartha taught us that while life is suffering, there is a way out which involves meditation.

And that is a sufficient sermon in my opinion. The brain is the source of pain and thoughts are the source of emotional suffering. A solution must involve treating the cause, rather than adding to the symptoms.

When I started my martial arts practice it was a part of a massive amount of reading and thinking and even obtaining a minor in philosophy, I knew all the dates, all the terms, all the various schools of thought and could demonstrate wonderful dominance over others in that book learning. None of the book learning helped, in fact it just made me argue with those who got something wrong. I sermonized all the time but somehow telling other folks how to live their lives didn't make their life, or mine, any better.

Now I just smile and nod when folks tell me how to be happy, or what is best for them or for me or for everyone. That makes me feel better for not getting into conflict, and it must make them feel better because they stop talking to me about it. I am reminded of one fellow I know who can quote chapter and verse of obscure philosophy at me and I'm sure he is never wrong about it, but he's an ass who causes no end of trouble around himself, while making himself miserable at the same time. None of that learning has done him a bit of good, it's just so much craving for things, in his case, data.

Over the years I've forgotten all of that book stuff; if I want to know it, there's Wikipedia where thousands of bright young things argue infinitely over angels and heads of pins. In fact, I was out at a cafe this morning and popped onto the internet to find that Shakespeare quote up there... what a wonderful bit of technology that lets me let go of so much. Now there's room in my head for knowing who Brittney is dating this week without worrying about what fell out of the other side of my head.

These days I mostly just swing the sword and teach my students how to swing the sword better than they were swinging it yesterday. While I do occasionally slip into what they call "rant mode", as I did yesterday when I went on for a while about the kata kaishaku and what it means today, I try to keep my mouth shut. The best sermon in iaido practice is to swing the sword.

All of which is a trick of course, it really does make no difference at all whether or not you're good at iaido since your average punk on the street with a gun will blow your head off, as the modern fighters are fond of telling us, and your sword is going to be at home when your MMA expert does the ground and pound on you. All those years of swinging the sword. Wasted, just wasted.

Consider what you're doing in an iaido class. Give it 10 or 12 years if it appeals to you at all (and it doesn't appeal to many). If, after that time you still feel that you need sermons during the class, go back to church, it will probably do you more good than swinging a sword.

Me, I'll continue to try and perfect something that can't be perfected, I'll continue to enjoy all the impositions and committee-led changes to seitei, all the struggling with koryu iai and kenjutsu to try and work out from the inside of the kata what I should be looking for on the outside. All the while, for each hour of my life I spend doing that, I'll have saved myself an hour of fuss and bother thinking that I should be reading a new book or listening to a new holy man just in case they have the secret formula to make me happy.



Book Learning

It is a constant in the martial arts world that some beginner will ask which book is good to read to start iaido and a dozen people will jump all over them telling them that they can't learn from a book and, further, that it's dangerous and counterproductive and will hurt their chances of learning when they do get to a sensei.

No wonder the arts are drying up. Used to be that we'd get a magazine or a book and start hacking around with each other, and then if we found a teacher we'd jump on the chance and nobody had a problem. Now that we've got the internet, a beginner wouldn't dare even read a book for fear of getting bad habits. Don't even think about watching a video.

The most curious thing, is that it's rarely the top folks who are giving this advice, it's the beginners who surf the net (and have soaked up the wisdom of the masses) and the intermediate types who have five or six years in.

Bottom line is that you can learn as much iaido from a book as you can learn any other physical activity such as skiing or skating or swimming. Some stuff is really hard to put into words but you generally don't need that stuff until you're beyond "book learning" anyway. I learned how to cross country ski from a book (and many other skills along the way). Never noticed that I was bad at any of it, hurt by it, or held back by "bad habits" when I found a teacher.

In fact, I'm a bit ticked off every time some junior tells the world you can't learn from a book. I learned from books, I pretty much had to, until there were enough people doing iaido in Eastern North America that we could start bringing instructors over from Japan. I was luckier than most, I was only four years from my introduction to iaido, until I found my current sensei, but even then, we all read everything we could find, to try and get up to speed. My sensei still reads everything he can get his hands on, a good lesson as far as I can tell.

When folks speak so glibly about "go see a sensei" they are actually being quite dismissive of the efforts of the first generation or two of students over here. Quite often all we had were books to keep up with what was happening, it was many years until we had sensei coming regularly from Japan to update us, and when those sensei finally did become available we worked our asses off to fix what we needed to.

Also understand that while we were trying to get enough time for practice ourselves, we were teaching the next generation who only needed to do as they were told and, as my sensei says, "selfish practice". It is not easy to start an art from scratch administratively, while "filling in the blanks", catching up to date and teaching so that there will be enough folks to fill the seminars that bring the sensei from Japan.

Now I am not a bad writer, and as far as banging out words, I'm fast. It's easy for me, so I have written a lot of manuals on how to do iaido. I wrote them intending that beginners could use them to get started and advanced beginners could use them as reference. I spent a lot of time and care on them and so

again, I don't appreciate some kid who's never seen them telling me they're harmful.

For a beginner, a book (and even better, books and video) are just fine for learning the large motor skills you'll need, to memorize the kata. An advanced student is also just fine with books. If you have a good grounding in the art, you can read an old book (that's well enough written) which might contain kata which you've never seen and be able to fill in the gaps in the descriptions. The gaps will contain the fundamentals, the stuff that is too obvious to write down. Anyone who has developed the skill of making notes will know how the shorthand goes.

As a demonstration of the power of words, many years ago the FIK introduced two new kata to the Zen Ken Ren Iai set. We had a written description (no photos, no video) of the kata from a student in Japan and passed it around to the seniors in our organization. Several months later, we had a visit from an 8dan who offered to introduce the new kata to us. Having heard that we had been practicing from written notes he asked us to demonstrate what we had come up with. Several of the brave ones walked forward to demonstrate and not only were we close to each other (we hadn't had a chance to compare notes), we were also very close to the technique. Our difference from the technique was about the same as the changes that came over later that year as the sensei in Japan continued to refine it.

In other words, from someone else's written notes we were able to get very close to a brand new kata. This is not magical, it's simply that humans are very capable of communicating in ways other than speech and demonstration.

This is not to say that all things can be easily taught by book, some are best shown "hands on" so that instant feedback can be given. The time for that type of teaching is during the intermediate ages of, say, 4 to 10 years practice. Just the time when students have the confidence to head online and teach beginners by written posts all about how they can't learn from books.

Is it better to learn from a sensei from day one? You betcha, a hell of a lot easier than the way we had to do it, but don't go all superior about your skills and assume you know the true way to the top of the mountain. There are many ways, as someone starting now you've got one of the easier ones. If the current generation isn't vastly better than we are when they reach our age, it will be from pure laziness.

I'd like to see a lot more of you stick your noses into some source material instead of looking at us with big cow eyes expecting to be spoon fed and making excuses for not reading like "I'm afraid it will give me bad habits".

I Don't Trust My Left Arm

I am not using my left arm very much these days, it mostly hangs loose by my side. I don't trust it. It's not that it's useless, it is recovering from a tear in the biceps and some rotator cuff stuff as far as I can tell. I have a large range of motion (compared to a month ago) that is pain free and quite a bit of strength and I reconfirm all that regularly in the weight room. But the thing betrayed me, it failed and caused a lot of pain for quite a while so I don't trust it.

It would be nice, but you can't just decide to trust something once you've lost faith in it. You have to forget the betrayal and the pain, you have to forget and then use it through old, deep habits for long enough that you can once again rely on it. Any little stab of pain will act as a reminder of the betrayal and you're back to not trusting at all. What's conscious, what's rational, is distrust, to avoid more pain. What allows trust once more is a long period of no reminders so that old routines can reassert themselves and eventually you can come to rely on the damaged part again.

It's the same with people. Trust in someone is a habit acquired over quite a long time, family is most deep, then childhood friends and on through the years to the guy you met last week. Trust isn't automatic, that would be rather counter-productive to continued existence. Lions would love monkeys to trust them. Once trust in a person is lost it has to be regained through continued association for long enough that habits of reliance can be re-established. Multiple, constant apologies and explanations only dredge up the pain of betrayal and delay the process. The only thing that will help is to forget.

Forgiving is a rational, conscious decision and has nothing to do with trust. To forgive is the same as to apologize, it allows the continued association through which the trust habit may be reestablished. Trust is much more easily lost with those of shallower habit, those you've known for a shorter time, but it can also be regained more quickly since there's not much to regain.

Let's talk about budo since it's a budo blog. We often hear people saying you have to go into a dojo with trust in your sensei, you have to trust what he says and do it without question. What utter rot. Firstly, it doesn't happen, a student who comes into a class and does whatever sensei says is looking for a messiah to save him from personal responsibility and thought. It's got nothing to do with trust and everything to do with abdicating the hard chore of living correctly.

Expectation is a much better way of describing the sensei student relationship. A student should have an expectation that sensei will be able to teach him, and expect that what sensei tells him to do will be instructive. The student accepts the teaching, questions it's result and if the result is more knowledge over the years, the student will come to trust the sensei. You can't go in with trust or you're setting yourself up for a painful betrayal when you fail to learn a lesson. Sorry, I should say you can't go in with trust at all as I've described it here. You can however, go in with faith and so can feel a betrayal of religious proportions when lesson failure inevitably occurs. Look, my left arm was never infinitely strong or pain free, I never had faith in it, I had trust that it would do what I asked as long as I didn't ask what was beyond it's ability.

In most of our personal life trust is the most important currency we can develop. It is for a smaller part of our life that we are dealing with money (hard currency) or other exchange goods in the sort of legally enforceable contract which substitutes for trust. Before lawyers we had our good word. Now we have agreements which exchange actions for goods and defined penalties (usually more goods) for non-performance (the equivalent of a betrayal). Unfortunately it seems people are starting to accept this legalist model of life as the way things should be.

Let's say we've got two people who live together. For 200,000 years of our existence what was important was trust, did the other person have our back? Could we trust them to help us live to see tomorrow? What mattered was the ability to rely on our partner, it was our "word" our "honour" our "trust" that let us set up these relationships. Since the invention of money we have created a world with contracts and agreements. If you give me that or do this work for me I'll give you these tokens which you can exchange with someone else who is participating in this system of trust, for other goods or work. Somewhere along the way somebody thought it would be a good idea to see if we could reinforce the trust-based nature of this stuff (somebody betrayed someone didn't they) by government, by setting up a bunch of guys with bats of wood who would break your kneecaps if you didn't respect your side of the bargains. The value of a man's word began to slip. Then, Chthulu help us, we invented a class of people whose job it was to draw up contracts on paper, and immediately that class doubled in number due to an equal number of people designated to find out how to cheat on said written contracts.

So our two people living together and producing kids and fighting back to back outside the cave mouth? Marriage. A contract that says if you want to do that kind of stuff you gotta agree to a bunch of things and if you don't do them you're going to pay through goods, labour or pain. Trust became just another clause in the contract and now even that has gone, betrayal of the marriage vows is no longer direct justification for divorce... well never mind we won't push this one too far.

As martial artists, looking to become better people we learn how to injure, maim and kill. A big part of this training is the injunction against doing just what we've been trained to do. We are training to trust our partners and to give our word to them that we will hold back when swinging lumber at their head. We learn that our word, our honour is something of value. We learn to value the old ways of 200,000 years. Is there any budoka out there who has anything but contempt for that waiver you signed on the first day of training? Fear of lawyers is not what keeps us from hurting each other, it's trust. We aren't paying each other to spar, we're in it voluntarily, it's different. Same with the people we drink with and watch movies with, we exchange trust, not money, and if we lose trust in someone, we stop cooking dinners for them.

Of course I have no doubt that somewhere right now someone with no knowledge of honour is suing someone because they hurt their feelings. I'd like to sue my left arm. Is trust as a concept losing out? Do we need to talk about politics? We now have a class of professional rulers (you go to school to learn how to politic and then you join a party and spend your life doing that stuff) who we expect to lie, and we put them in power over us so that they can make decisions about what contractual interactions we will carry out with each other. No need for trust anywhere along this line. It was a lot easier up in the trees where you'd simply turn your back on someone who broke trust. Off they'd need to go to reestablish themselves somewhere else, perhaps a bit wiser and more conscientious, if not, they dropped out of the gene pool.

Finally, let's talk about organizations. There are two kinds, those who run on pay and those who run on trust. The ones who pay are businesses and they are subject to all sorts of laws and study in school but boil down to something pretty simple. I'll give you money to do things for me and/or I'll sell other people stuff for money. No need to get all bent out of shape over trust here, employers don't have to trust employees and vice versa. We've got money and contracts and lawyers up the wazoo. Sure we talk about trust sometimes, and employees who break their trust with the employers get fired, but that stuff mostly boils down to what's in the contract anyway. Thou shalt not steal office supplies is not a matter of trust, it's in the contract. Thou shalt not treat me like a donkey is heading more toward the trust thing but we still have human resources vs human rights to fight that one out in the courts. Money means contracts, not trust.

But when we go to volunteer organizations we lose the basis for all that contractual stuff. It's really hard to make a contract on "if you give me your time and effort for nothing I'll pay you nothing". The urge to contract, the direction of value for service, actually moves the other way, from individual to organization. In a business the boss says "I'll pay you to do this", with volunteer organizations the "employee" says "I'll give the organization my time and effort for free so that a certain goal I desire can be attained".

So where's the trust come in? All organizations over a certain size end up with management. Someone has to make sure things are coordinated, goals are set, money is collected, accounted for and spent correctly, etc. etc. So we can go to a simpler agreement. "I'll donate money or give my time and effort to the organization because I trust you to use that money time and effort well".

What happens if management betrays that trust? Pretty simple really, the monkey turns his back and walks away. He's not being paid to work for the organization, he's paying to be part of it. Business principles and human resources theory don't work.

Trust works, a person's word is important when all you have is people who say "I'll do that" rather than some middle manager who says "I'll hire someone to do that". You don't fire people from volunteer organizations, they fire you.

Facts and Statistics and Kata

I heard a few days ago that facts didn't start to dominate in the Western intellectual landscape until the 18th century when the scientific method became the way to look at the world. That method was to observe the world, derive a hypothesis from those observable facts, and then do some experimentation to disprove the hypothesis. I say disprove because you can't prove anything scientifically. (Which is why I am constantly amazed at religious folk trying to prove god exists "scientifically" or wanting creationism to be taught in a science class. If we disprove it with experiment, we discard it, it's gone... If we can't test it experimentally, it isn't science.)

Before the uplifting of facts it was more common to try and decide what super-factual ability made man better than the animals, since, after all, they said, even a cat can see a rock. Animals deal in facts, but humans can see beyond. Often this "beyond" was/is defined as religious belief (God made us above the animals), or sometimes as metaphysics (we are closer to an ideal state than animals). While most folks of my acquaintance today embrace the scientific method, there are some who still seek some sort of Platonic Ideal world, usually in the form of economic theory (market forces will come into play to solve the oil crisis, for instance).

You can see the problem of course, facts, no matter how many are accumulated, can't give you a grasp on how the world works, or what it's for. In one case you won't have a way to predict future events, in the other you may be asking a meaningless question, or one that won't yield to factual analysis (depending on your tendency to believe in the supernatural). Even if we gather huge numbers of facts and subject them to statistical analysis, we will be missing a key element to understanding, the leap to a hypothesis, a way of explaining the facts in a causal manner. It's sunny today, it was sunny yesterday and the day before and it's sunny 46.8% of the days in Januarys of years that are even numbered. Will it be sunny tomorrow? Without some sort of hypothesis about weather, who could say other than "based on past activity, there's a 46.8% chance that it will be".

Well, do we get much beyond that these days? Often not. Numbers and facts are easy, cats can do them, they're simple and comforting, they seem to work, but really, to be useful we need to be asking what we can do with facts rather than accumulating them endlessly in the hope that with enough of them will come understanding (rather than statistics).

Think of Kata as facts.

We can take an entire kata as a fact, or we can break the kata down and know a bunch of facts about it. Which foot goes where. We can examine other people's kata, or rather the kata of teachers other than our own, and learn what they do differently than us... more facts like they put their foot in a different place.

It's simple and comforting to look at our facts and make sure we have them written down, that we have our kata memorized exactly as sensei has taught us, that our school is passed down faithfully from generation to generation. The kata shouldn't change, after all the facts don't lie right? A fact is a fact and

our kata work (we've been told or at least, we assume). If we know enough facts we'll understand (somehow) the entire picture... if we just keep accumulating facts. And one fact is as important as any other fact (because without a hypothesis or even a belief, we have no way of choosing between them).

I'm a scientist, was trained as one and worked as one. I believe in facts as much as the next fellow, but facts are only part of the world-picture. If you believe in facts alone, you treat them all as equal and that leads to giving the same TV air-time to idiots as to learned men simply because there's some sort of feeling these days that arguments should be balanced. Thing is, you can't tell an idiot fact from an intelligent fact without some knowledge of the scientific method where the idea of facts come from. Belief isn't fact, opinion isn't fact, and neither is the scientific "other side" of facts.

Hypothesis is the other side of facts, and it's not such an easy thing. With kata you have facts, now put the facts together, or pick them apart, and derive a hypothesis based on these facts. I know 24 kata from a school, what can I do with that? I could break them down and say that 32.5% of the kata involve a vertical sword strike but where's that get me? It gets me as far as our sunny day predictor doesn't it? The problem with recording sunny day facts is that we have somehow missed the reason it's sunny or not sunny. We didn't "get" clouds. No amount of study of the 24 kata, or the 347 lost kata beyond those, or the 1346 kata of the other sword schools we can study will ever suddenly throw up an understanding of clouds if we don't see clouds in the kata. Clouds aren't present on sunny days so why should we consider them when counting sunny days?

What sort of stuff can we miss if we are trying to derive a hypothesis of our martial art school? What things are not present, are outside the facts themselves that have influence and bearing on the facts? (Where are the "clouds"?) Why should we care about such things in the first place? Why should we care about sunshine? What does it do for us?

Now, I hinted at a problem with a belief system, with believing that the market will solve the oil crisis. Belief too is easy, especially if we believe in something we can bend to fit any situation. The problem is that Belief isn't subjected to testing (it would be hypothesis otherwise) and it isn't subject to being discarded if found wanting (same reason). The market will solve the oil crisis because as oil prices go up due to shortage of easily obtained oil, other sources of oil such as tar sands or fracking shale will become economic and will supply the demand. It's a nice belief and it may even work for a while but oil is finite and so is the capacity of "globalization" to work with more expensive shipping fuel. Of course the belief is that when oil gets expensive enough we'll simply come up with fusion... but that's bringing in another "fact" to deny the finding that the supply and demand market can't solve the oil crisis, it will only cause oil prices to be cheap when there's lots of it around, and expensive when there isn't. It's not a bad hypothesis for price fluctuation but it isn't a solution to a limited resource.

My point? To believe that we will derive the benefit of our budo kata if only we keep on doing the kata is the same as believing the market will fix the oil crisis if we only let it work on us. It's a belief that has very little to back it up. The market does affect this and that and so do the kata but we can't be sure of the end result of either if we don't ask deeper questions.

What's the purpose of kata? What's the use of it? What can it predict, produce or otherwise promise? Can you know any of that by simply accumulating more kata, more facts? Hypothesize.

There's a Koryu Over There in the Corner

People speak of the koryu as if they were some sort of physical thing, some sort of body of knowledge, a list of kata that you could find in Wikipedia, or some school building you could find out in the country somewhere.

A koryu is a line of instruction, it's what is passed along from teacher to student, and how it's passed along. This supposedly-physical thing might be said to breathe in and out as headmasters add or subtract from the teachings, but in fact it changes form with each new leader. If the 4th headmaster drops half the techniques from what he teaches the 5th, and the 7th headmaster picks them up again, they aren't the same techniques. Despite having the same name and perhaps being vaguely similar to something written on a scroll, they have not been handed body to body. They will probably be something which is pretty close, but filtered through what the 7th head knows and has been taught about the rest of the kata that were handed down. They might be very close but some of the tiny weight shifts here or there will be lost.

Think of a rather opposite situation. A story can be written down and copied scribe to scribe, that's not much problem except that small mis-spellings might creep in, a word changed without noticing here and there but the story isn't going to change much in overall theme or in nuance. That's the kata handed down from one body to another.

Now think of that story being memorized and repeated orally just once before it is again written down. That's the kata written down and revived later from the scrolls. Could be pretty close, the main themes and moral of the story will likely be there, but the nuances of telling will be changed and the writer of the later version will have a tremendous influence on the new-old kata.

The koryu is this passing along, this writing from one body to another, it's not the kata, they change in number and nature. It's the ideas behind the kata, the morals of the stories and these also acquire different meanings over the years. If we assume Aesop's fables are more or less as written generations ago can we also assume we get the same lesson now as a Greek of 500 BCE? It may be close, I suspect it is, but the nuance is probably different.

Education is not a physical thing that can be placed under glass and preserved in its pristine state. It's a process. Koryu is a line of education from generation to generation.

A koryu, being simply a lineage, it is as effective, moral, useful, adaptable, honourable, trustworthy and loyal to its members, as the headmaster is all of those things.

People speak of combining, adding to, changing or otherwise modifying koryu to create a new koryu. This is, again, to give body to something that is essentially bodiless. A teacher can't unlearn or change what they have learned in order to create a new koryu, they simply teach what they know. If what they know is that they reject completely or partially what some teacher handed down to them, they are still teaching in relation to what they were taught. If they add stuff, they add to, they don't invent out of whole cloth.

I defy any reader to create an entirely new sentence right now. Don't go firing up a search engine to check out your creation, I don't care what it is, it isn't something new in the world. You used an alphabet, grammar and vocabulary that you learned long ago. Did you create a brand new word? So did Shakespeare before you, and nobody ever accused him of being anything but a writer of English.

One might argue that now we can incorporate organizations, make our administrative body a legal "person" and so it's a physical thing. This legislative fiction is intended to make an organization or company easier to deal with, and to protect its members from liability of one sort or another. It doesn't really create something where nothing actually exists, it just invents a way of dealing with a bunch of people doing something together.

Your budo organization, whether koryu or modern accumulation of various arts, clubs and ryu isn't a thing, it's the sum total of everyone involved and it is only as good as those in charge. There's really nothing inherent in the organization to honour, be loyal to or otherwise interact with. You interact with the guys running the thing and like your teacher, they deserve as much respect as they earn and not a dollop more. The koryu, the budo organization should get as much loyalty as the top guy gives, as much respect and as much admiration as they earn.

Is That So

Everyone should be aware of this story of Priest Hakuin. The one where the village girl names Hakuin as father of her child. He says "is that so?" and takes the child as his own. Later the girl says she lied and wants the child back. Hakuin says "is that so?" and gives it back.

Assuming for a moment that Hakuin actually knew that he was not the father, what possible motivation would he have for simply going along with the activities?

Let's get rid of the notion right here that the story is all about being above the concerns of society, or what I like to call, the tyranny of the grannies. A brief read about his life will reveal that Hakuin had little reason for concern with such approval from the gossiping classes. While this may be the usual take home lesson of the story, it's not likely Hakuin would have cared for a child simply to show we should be unaffected by gossip.

Why did he do it?

Firstly, the child was going to have a bad time of it. Born out of wedlock and obviously with someone the girl didn't want to name, there wasn't a lot of incentive for the girl or the family to look out for an unwanted baby. Hakuin may simply have been motivated to care for something that needed caring for. This is a putting aside of one's own comfort for another. An excellent trait to have, and one that is far more rare than we would suspect.

It is snowy here today and as I walked through a parking lot I watched an old man walking behind a car backing up and driven by another old man. The pedestrian was commenting quite loudly to his wife that "he isn't even looking" as he walked closer to the backing car and trapped himself between it and another parked vehicle. It was plain to see that if the guy backing up didn't stop, a crushing collision was inevitable. Mr "I like broken legs" couldn't put himself in the driver's seat, even though he probably also had a stiff neck and probably also drove the very same way. Even though he could see the danger, he couldn't get past his own world-view and just get out of the way. His inconvenience at having to stop and wait was more important than the potential hospital stay or worse. I know he saw the danger, he just couldn't get beyond his own feeling of entitlement, not even to preserve his own health.

A bit later in the day my daughter bit her lip as she watched an idiot run a late orange and just about hit another SUV that was clearing the intersection turning left. Again, a nice demonstration of how people can't get beyond the feeling that their lives are the centre of existence, that somehow nothing else in the world could possibly be as important as their concerns. After all "they're busy people".

Think of the CEO who figures he's worth 10,000 times the salary of his secretary, (as Warren Buffet noted for us) or worse, the exec of a volunteer organization who figures said organization should fly his kids with him to some meeting "because he's giving up his family time for the organization". The CEO of a for-profit company may be right in feeling that he deserves whatever he can squeeze out in compensation (after all his goal is identical to the company's goal, to make money) but volunteer

organizations are not about accumulating money, they're about giving your money and time to something the organization represents. Yet those who end up in charge often feel they're "doing a job" and should be compensated accordingly for their sacrifices.

Hakuin took in the child, cared for it and gave it back when asked for it. He didn't also hand back a list of feeding and cleaning supplies to be recompensed. He didn't charge a weekly child care fee.

Secondly, Hakuin may have considered this a teaching moment. In this case, he did something wrong (he allowed a lie to be told about him) in the knowledge that eventually those who lied would learn something useful to them. The girl eventually learned that she wanted her baby, that the baby was more important to her than her parent's anger, and that her lies did not make her happy.

As martial artists we may feel that honour is everything and that we should never suffer liars without exposing them and of course never lie ourselves. Looking at this a bit more closely we can see that we are actually just being concerned about the grannies, about what others may think of us. There may be a situation (a child that needs caring for?) where it would be appropriate for us to accept a lie, or to lie ourselves in order for a more general lesson to be presented.

I'm not speaking of little white lies here to protect the feelings of others "does this hakama make me look fat?" but big ones that go to the heart of your self-esteem and self-worth.

Could you look to the greater good and allow your name to be dragged through the mud? Could you watch your dignity be destroyed and simply say "is that so?"

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