

Half a Century VII

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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Kim, 2010

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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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What Makes It a Koryu

Apart from "internally consistent" which any modern school could be (think Aikido or Judo or Kendo), just what is this "koryu" thing? If we take it literally and pick a specific date, the Meiji restoration of 1868 perhaps, the definition is easy. Older is koryu, younger is seitei. The problem for the kenjutsu school students is always Kendo. It can be traced back into the Edo period and so would be a koryu under this definition. I have no problem with this but lots of folks do, and they start to engage in some magical thinking to find some other aspect to separate koryu from modern art. The less experience had in the koryu, the more extravagant the claims, it seems.

Some of the various ideas that have popped up over the years about koryu include the training method, secret inner knowledge of esoteric buddhist practices revealed only to the initiates, special intuition handed down through generations of warriors through the samurai period, they used weapons (as vs modern judo and other combat sports which do not), a special quality of mind that you can only develop through serious koryu practice as a warrior but not sports practice, the constant thinking of death as vs winning a fight, going right to the edge of death or injury in the kata and then stopping just short.

All these things, while surely interesting, don't really give me any insight into the difference between a koryu and a modern combat art, they seem to be differences between sports and military or paramilitary training and we certainly have both of those today, with the modern military training being done with much more lethal weapons than a sword or stick. In fact the US military weapon of choice these days to take out an individual enemy seems to be not the sword or even the gun, but the missile-armed drone, and the best operators seem to be those well trained in video games.

Taken individually, the kata training method (as vs sport randori I presume) isn't unique to koryu, modern non-koryu versions ("seitei") also include the same kata. Esoteric practices I can't talk about, I'm not aware of any but I may not be an initiate in any of the koryu I've practiced, secret knowledge is just that, secret until you know it. All I can say is that I've never seen any hint of it in any of the koryu I practice, and for those koryu who do practice it, it's well documented and not secret... OK that's a bit tautological. Special initiation by generations of warriors? Who, the Edo period bureaucrat-samurai? These were arts that were developed far from the battlefield I'm afraid. Weapons? That leaves out koryu jujutsu. Being a warrior in the first place? Fine, I'm not a warrior/army/policeman so I can't speak to this but it could be tested easily. I won't go on to the rest, all of it seems more dependent on teacher vs teacher than on koryu vs modern version.

To think about testing the assumptions, first we must assume that there is a difference between koryu and modern versions of budo and define what this difference is. If we "just know" there's a difference or even just suspect, or are curious if there is one at all, we can test it by difference. We have koryu jodo and koryu iaido and modern "seitei" versions of both available to us both in Japan and in the west. Furthermore, they are taught by fully licensed instructors in each. Let's get specific, we could test Shindo Muso Ryu Jodo, the koryu version and the ZenKenRen seitei jo version. These have been suggested to be different many times.

We have available as instructors, members of various police dojo who are menkyo kaiden and hanshi hachidan in the koryu and seitei respectively. This takes the instructor variable out of the equation. Furthermore we have a seitei that is taken completely from the koryu so we don't have the confounding factor of kata from multiple schools vs a single school.

We can then vary the conditions of our test. We can examine military or police students vs civilian students. We can examine, through asking our cooperating instructors, whether they give esoteric knowledge to the koryu students but not the seitei students, and similarly we can ask about any other suggested differences in training offered. We can directly examine how they teach the seitei vs the koryu students. In short, we have a testing platform to ask questions regarding koryu vs modern budo.

What will we test? Here's a bit of a problem. What will we define as a difference between seitei and koryu? Skill at the kata themselves? This would imply the instructors teach differently or the students learn differently so it could lead us to some answers. Resulting "grace under fire" of the two sets of students in a military or paramilitary situation? Not sure that's very ethical but we could perhaps do a retrospective examination of incident reports of students trained in the two different arts by the same instructors etc. If we can control for all other factors we might get an answer.

Other than skill at kata, we'll need to hypothesize differences between koryu and seitei that are testable. Esoteric practice is one of them, and easily testable. "Instructors are warriors if teaching koryu" can't be tested in our experiment since we're using the same instructors for each art. We would, however, be using paramilitary (police) instructors for both so the potential effect should not be confounding to the other results. I leave it up to you gentle reader to come up with more things that could be defined and examined in our experiment, and how to set it up. I don't actually have any intention to run the test since I'm not all that concerned with making the differences more important than I think they are.

My idea of koryu vs seitei? I'll use the ZenKenRen seitei iai and jo since that's what I'm most familiar with.

What	Seitei	Koryu
instructor	mostly one, but allowed to practice with many	one instructor, difficult to change instructors, rarely taught by another sensei at the same time
curriculum	limited to 12 kata	multiple kata in multiple sets
training method	kata based	kata based
individual curriculum vs group training	depends on class size, small classes tend to end up in individual training	usually small classes, so usually individual training
grading system	kyu/dan and shogo	varies, usually not kyu/dan
grading judges	committee of several senior instructors	varies, often a single instructor
kata source	jodo, one source iaido, multiple sources	one art so one source
kata differences	within the range of koryu differences	differences between lines of koryu
overall feel	jodo, feels "of a piece" iaido, can feel disjointed	all kata feel "of a piece"
esoteric instruction	rare but not unheard of	rare in my experience
consistency between instructors	very high level of agreement on way kata should be performed	no agreement sought, consistency usually only within lines of instruction
who defines the art, creates changes over time	committee of most senior instructors	any instructor of sufficient seniority
Intensity of practice	depends on instructor, can be very high	depends on instructor, can be very high
general expectation of student	technical proficiency and advanced concepts of budo	technical proficiency and advanced concepts of budo
tournaments	yes but a minor adjunct to training	no

Final conclusion:

For me, given that the same instructors are teaching both koryu and seitei, real differences are slight. In my experience no instructor will teach seitei in a way that is less "real" or intense than he teaches koryu, in fact the opposite is often true when it comes to hammering home the small details. Seitei, being "representative" is more standardized with fewer kata and so the level of student skill is high allowing more work to be done on the fine structure. If koryu is not practiced to the same extent in a club as seitei, its practice can often be perfunctory due to a desire to get all the kata learned rather than

working on the biomechanics.

So, as to what makes it a koryu according to Unka Kim? It started pre-1868 and is still being taught in more or less the same manner by a lineage that goes back directly. No reboots allowed. The rest is down to the instructor.



2012 KSK Peterborough Iaido Seminar.

How Did It Start

I'm working on the serialization of the GoRin no Sho translation for The Iaido Journal (EJMAS) http://ejmas.com/tin/gorinsho/tinart_taylor_1202.html and came across my own comment on unified theory in a school. Originally I simply stated that a school had a unified core principle and a modern school was a set of gathered up techniques. I rewrote that a bit but I'd like to expand on it here.

Modern schools (those founded or invented recently) often tend to be a collection of techniques taken from different schools. In the worst cases that's all they ever are, but some have an underlying framework. An example of this is the Zen Ken Ren Iai (All Japan Kendo Federation iaido) which has a set of 12 iai kata taken from different schools. In this case the way to move, the posture, and attitude of Kendo is used while practicing the set and so it has an overall unified feeling and theory to it.

Were old schools originally founded the same way, as a set of techniques from here and there that got smoothed out as similarities of movement were found between them and the rough (sticking out) edges smoothed off? Perhaps. Others perhaps were founded from a single principle and maybe a couple of kata and were then expanded over the years and generations, always keeping to the same principles of movement. In most cases that I know of, old schools tend to end up with a unified feeling and a comfortable number of kata, enough to be interesting and take several years to master, but not too many to keep in practice for someone with a job.

One thing about ZKR iai is that the remnants of the older schools keep it a bit rough around the edges. There are multiple noto and two different bows at the start and finish. These contribute to a somewhat choppy feel to the school compared to a koryu.

Another "modern" iaido school is Keshi-ryu (Keishicho-ryu), which is a bit older than ZKR seitei iai. It consists of 5 kata from 5 schools, front, right, left, rear and four sides. As taught to me, they could have been a koryu for all I knew (I learned them long ago), they have the same chiburi and noto throughout, opening and closing etiquette was the same (Muso Shinden-ryu since a MSR sensei taught them to me) and the kata seemed to cover a set amount of material, attacks from four directions. I showed them once to Haruna sensei who had not seen them, and he stated immediately that they were not koryu. There are edges sticking out, too many techniques piled into a small number of kata. In contrast, if we look at Muso Jikiden Eishinryu we find a horizontal cut then a vertical cut over and over. There are not too many diagonal cuts, cuts upward, techniques with the left hand on the blade and suchnot. Some are there in the iai, and some in the partner kata but mostly the kata stick to the basics.

But every koryu was once a new school, so how did they develop that feel that identifies them as "koryu". If we take a set like ZenKenRen iai, or Keshi-ryu, which are representative kata from a few schools as a model, we may speculate that someone did the same several hundred years ago with some kata he might have picked up from several people. Our founder might teach them the same as he learned them, but his student would inevitably start smoothing off the rough edges, making them more cohesive. This is only natural if he keeps practicing only that school. Each succeeding generation will

do the same, what doesn't seem to fit the core teachings, as received by each headmaster along the way, will tend to be dropped out of the school. Four different noto? Why? Let's go with one or two maximum if we can't find any real reason to have four. Eventually the techniques within the kata will interpenetrate each other and there will be a unified feel to the school.

During my time with the ZenKenRen iai, this has been happening to these kata. The senior instructors will meet and discuss it regularly and the consensus will prevail. Stances are square, kamae agree with the kendo ideal, the underlying assumption is that there is always another opponent... all this contributes to more and more agreement between the kata, a more consistent feel.

What about the other way I mentioned for a koryu to start, from a limited set of kata which grow in number with time. Shindo Muso Ryu jodo is said to have originated in 5 kata and all the rest were added as time went along. If you start with a few kata, and create new ones as the need to teach a specific point arises (some things are easiest taught one way, others in another way), you will naturally have a set of kata that are internally consistent. Another reason to increase the kata is to keep the students interested. Five kata that can be learned in a month might not hold students for several years... at least not beginners. Very senior instructors tend to be happy practicing one or two for decades but you have to get through the beginner stage to get that attitude.

How many kata do you end up with? In most of the koryu of my experience it comes down to a few sets of about ten kata each. That seems to be ideal as a balance of interest over time (it takes several years to master all the kata) and simple time constraints (you can run through all the kata in most of these schools in a couple of hours). Thus the syllabus isn't too big to remember or too small to be challenging.

The ZenKenRen iai set has expanded during my time. It went from 7 original kata to ten, and then to 12 (same as jodo which always had 12). Will it continue to expand? A good question, the kendo no kata of the ZenKenRen have been joined by a second set of bokuto exercises which are supposedly simpler and focus more closely on what's needed for kendo competition. Perhaps a second level of iai may eventually appear as well. This might be more likely if the ZenKenRen, or rather its members, focus more and more on seitei and ignore the various koryu. As students master the set of 12 they will be looking for more.

Alternatively, ZenKenRen students may start to put iaido and jodo together to give themselves two sets of 12 for 24 kata. This is the number of kata in the three sets of HyoHo Niten Ichiryu (12, 7 and 5), but is a bit less than the core iai kata of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu (11, 10, 8, 10, 3) at 42. Of course one could say that the jodo kata are all two-sided so you have 36 "movements" to memorize in the iai/jo practice and 48 in Niten.

Just a couple of ideas on how koryu may start and develop their internal consistency. I don't know of any way that we could know for sure how a koryu started or developed except in a very general way, records are sketchy and the Japanese didn't make detailed manuals with illustrations. The best we've got is lists of kata through the years and I would love to see a set of lists for fifty or sixty schools (there were hundreds) to see how the kata numbers change through the generations. It might give us an indication of what proportion of schools appeared full-blown and how many developed over the years.

Repeating Oneself

I suspect that if I go back through these essays I'll find that I have repeated myself a lot. One of the hazards of being an instructor I suppose, you repeat things for students who are slow on the uptake, who use you as a memory aide, or who are new to the class.

Often it can get a bit difficult when dealing with the first type (the third type of student is hearing it for the first time and the second is just lazy). You absolutely cannot say the same thing over and over, humans are very good at attenuating familiar stimuli. In other words, students go deaf when you tell them to correct something too many times. The usual attempt at a solution is to try and say it a different way and/or if the possibility is there, send the student to another instructor who may have a fresh angle on the old problem.

Me, I also try not to correct the same thing more than three times in a practice. There's always a lot else to work on so if a student isn't getting it changed, move along to something they can. In the meantime I also try not to correct something in the same way in the same practice. I might say "drop your hips" or "sink your weight" or "bend your knees" or "lower your heel" and they'll all be the same correction. My students have standing instructions to get in front of other teachers whenever they can so that's also a way to avoid repeating myself, hearing the exact same thing in a different voice might just jog something loose.



I Can't Do It

This one is likely the most annoying student habit I can think of. A student can collapse while trying to do something, or say "I've got an injury and can't turn my foot that way today" but never "I can't do it". As an instructor one gets a pretty good idea of what a student can and can't do at what stage in their career. We will always push a little beyond what the student is comfortable with, but we won't suggest doing something a student can't do. At least we'd better not as that will destroy any trust the student has in us.

I rarely react directly to this problem, I usually say "well OK but keep trying to work toward it". The exception is when I have a promising, hard-working, fast-learning student in front of me. The negativity of "I can't do it" is absolutely crippling to that sort of student's progress. To say that once will carry over into the next two or three practices so I often snap back at them and laugh at them scornfully (as scornful as an old grey-beard can be that is) when they inevitably "get it". Positive reinforcement is well and good but sometimes a good old-fashioned ridiculing can work wonders.



2012 AYC Toronto Jodo Seminar

Hand Crafted

I wonder what to tell my kids to get into. I'm in Ontario and outside of Toronto (home of our very own financial industry where you borrow money at low rates and lend it out at higher rates and pay yourself pots of money because you're so clever) so I'm looking at the rust belt creeping north of the border into our very own manufacturing sector. I'm trying to think what my kids can make money at when there are no more jobs making stuff, the financial industry finally gets regulated, farms are all owned by Agribusiness Inc. and the credit card industry is outlawed by the usury laws, so we can no longer work at fast food joints serving each other lunch.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-globalization and the problems created recently will fix themselves when bunker C prices go through the roof and shipping costs more than nothing again. Hey, I shop at the Hyaku-yen store (we call it the dollar store) where you can find all sorts of good-enough stuff from China. It's going up in price already, and it will continue on up. I'm old enough to remember when "Cheap, Made in Japan" meant just that in both senses, but Japanese goods are not cheap any more. China will move on up but there will be some other country, for my kid's working life, that will keep the manufacturing jobs out of Canada.

Well there's the tar sands, but I wouldn't want my kids doing a job that is worse than picking tobacco (my job of no-choice as a kid) so I'm going to go with handwork. Some sort of handwork. My daughter plays violin and I'm actually rooting for her to go to school for music over engineering. Seriously. She loves playing and she also loves teaching. I figure that music teachers, wedding photographers, dentists and plumbers will always have a job because folks expect to pay them for what they do, and what they do can't be done well with stuff bought at the dollar store.

Me, I no longer work as a lab tech at a university, I handcraft customized wooden weapons and resell stuff I bring in from other countries. Yes the coming shipping increases are going to hurt, just as the high Canadian petro-dollar hurt, but it still pays some of the bills (the rest comes out of the retirement savings which I won't need due to our wonderful Old Age Security system.... er wait...). I'm always looking to expand the sales lines and I spend a lot of time looking at design blogs to see what stuff I can steal... 'er be inspired by.

What I am not making any money at is teaching the martial arts. Some teaching jobs are considered paid, some not, and teaching iaido is one that has traditionally been considered a volunteer gig.

It's curious that aerobics, kickboxing, MMA, yoga, ballet, jazz-tap, and all forms of music, are all jobs where folks expect to pay the teachers. While kids coaches are supposed to work for free, parents have no problem paying for hockey, baseball, swimming and soccer classes. So what don't we think we should pay for? Martial arts classes and church.

Weird.

As a result, I make wooden swords from exotic woods and charge a minimum markup yet get requests

all the time for discounts because "it's too expensive". A function of "budo is free" of course, but then I check out a design blog and find a lamp like the ones I made recently <http://180gallery.com/> retailing for three times what I charge for a bokuto, and costing vastly less to make.

Weird.

I'll let you know if I sell many of these lamps, if I do maybe that's my next manufacturing job.



It's Worth What You Pay For It

I want to go on a bit with the thought I had yesterday about paying for budo. I'm a very firm believer in paying for it, and so should you be.

Now, I've often heard it said that "You get what you pay for" but that's garbage and we all know it. One of my favourite stories about retail is about the kid who is helping his uncle in the fruit store. He makes two piles of grapefruit and the uncle puts a sign for \$0.43 on one and a sign for \$0.99 on the other. The kid asks him why and the uncle replies "There are folks who like to buy grapefruit for 43 cents and people who like to buy grapefruit for 99 cents." It's as simple as that.

I bought an e-reader for \$200 a while ago, down from twice that amount. Was it suddenly half as good as it was at \$400? No of course not. But then the price dropped again by another \$50. Did I feel bad about that because I paid too much? No, I spent what it was worth to me, it was worth what I paid for it. I tend to think in terms of jugs of beer, and this thing was worth ten or twelve jugs of beer.

"You get what you pay for" is certainly not how most students say they think of the martial arts. The very term McDojo lets us know what we think of clubs who have a storefront and teach for pay. (Why not a McDancestudio?) Look on the net and find some information on identifying a legitimate teacher or similar. There are whole websites devoted to finding the fakes and frauds so it won't be hard. One thing that seems to come up consistently on the legitimate side is "no charge". Often, it's stated that it's OK to charge for room rental and other expenses (hey, nice of the students to allow that) but nothing more. Students seem to think that in this one and only case "a fool and his money are soon parted" rather than "you get what you pay for".

Astonishing.

Yet there is something to this. Teachers who charge money are handing their students a very tough road to travel. A student who pays for lessons is in charge. He's paid so the instruction is his to use or not, as he sees fit. If work has been a bit rough it's time to kick back and have a beer, not go to class and sweat and be yelled at... hey I paid for the lessons it's up to me whether or not I use them.

The teachers who don't charge figure that students who don't pay anything for lessons, or only pay to cover the costs of room rental, will appreciate the instruction because they will understand how much the teacher is giving up just to be there and donate his time and effort.

Also astonishing, it really doesn't work that way. "You get what you pay for" does figure into most people's thinking and they've paid nothing for the lessons, so that's what they're worth. I've even heard, and I'm not kidding here, a student say that "hey, if I wasn't here sensei would have nobody to teach". Yep, the kid was doing sensei a favour by showing up for class.

"Yeah but if sensei wanted to be paid he'd say so, he's offering classes for free so he doesn't want anything". This also I have heard and it's perhaps the truth, but let's examine it a bit. Yes he's offering

classes for free and most sensei I know and respect who do not charge, genuinely don't want to be paid for their instruction. Does it follow that they should not be paid? Those sensei likely come from a culture of unpaid instructors, where "there are no professional X teachers" and where their own teacher didn't pay or get paid. That doesn't mean there's no pay involved here folks. This is "pay it forward". I was taught, I have to teach, it's as simple as that. Also in this culture is the idea that seniors buy the beer after practice for the students who have no money, and when those kids get jobs they have the duty to buy for the students of their day. Nice, but I've seen it come down to "sensei pays" for everyone, including the ones who have decent jobs. Clear lack of understanding of the payment scheme here.

Regardless of why sensei doesn't ask to be paid back, don't think for a moment that you should consider those classes are free. If you do it's bad for you. You will have no respect for the instructor and when you finally "get it" at some time in the future you will be disgusted with your younger self. These classes have a cost, the instruction part of these classes has a cost above and beyond rent and heat and whatnot.

Pay now AND pay it forward later. Open your eyes and see what needs doing and then do it. Sweep the floor, clean the bathroom, fix the walls and repaint when they need it. If you're in a public space rather than a private dojo you'll need to look harder. Does sensei need a new sageo? Get him one. Do Not Ask if he would like you to buy him one, hand him one and say "thanks for the extra class last week". What else does he need and how can you get it to him without discussing it with him? Can you fix his front porch? Help build his deck? Give him a ride to and from class once in a while? You go out for beer with the guy after every class, you'll find some way to pay him for his instruction so do it and make sure you pay him what it's worth to you.

It's worth what you pay for it. Make sure you don't pay nothing because if you do, you're wasting your time since you have just told yourself it's worth nothing. It's worth your time, get to class on time and every time. It's worth your extra effort, sweep the floor. It's worth your money and your labour, get a case of beer, six of the guys, and go build that deck.

When you start paying it forward and you're teaching for free and you see a bunch of your students pull up with a truck and a case of beer, welcome them, let them work and cook them some burgers. Let them pay what they can, it's good for them.

What Rank Are You Anyway?

Often I get asked by students what rank I have, or I get asked what Dan/belt I am. There is more than one way to answer this because there's more than one ranking system.

If I want to brag, or impress a Japanese visitor I say I sit on the Canadian Kendo Federation grading panel or I am the chair of the jodo section. My ranks (7dan iai and 5dan jo) are not impressive to anyone, but those positions are worthy of respect. Well I shouldn't say the ranks are not impressive, many beginners will think them high, but anyone who is impressed by them is likely unaware of what they mean on an international or even national scale. I'm one of many 7dan iai and 5dan jo folks, but there's only one head of section.

As for the koryu, MJER or SMR, I have no rank there at all, none, neither paper nor title. Yet I teach the koryu without any fuss from others or guilt on my part. My certification is the instruction of my teachers, my permission to teach is from them and that's the fact of it. Very confusing to many students who have done some reading on the net and have heard of fakes and frauds out there who teach without any "papers".

The koryu are small, anyone who is in the part of that particular world where I dwell, will recognize my teachers, and no paper on the wall is needed. I was once offered a license that stated I was shibucho (the guy in charge) of North America in a very small koryu. I asked if anyone could get to the sensei without going through me. The answer was no, so, effectively, I'm already shibucho yes? Having the paper on my wall or more likely in my desk drawer, didn't change the facts at all, and the art was so small there was no confusion over who was who.

Beside that, why would I want to be that guy anyway? It's a lot of work to keep the position, the guys above, who I would be expected to be gate-keeper for, will talk to anyone. I'd spend all my time complaining that nobody goes through me. Thanks but no thanks.

Let's go back to the dan grades, do those pieces of paper give students the right to teach? Not really, although officially it's stated that one "can" teach at a certain rank, in fact that isn't always the case. In Japan a 5dan should be able to teach, according to the rules, but it's apparently rare for anyone below 7dan to have their own dojo. Even in Canada not all 5dan have their own club, yet some even lower ranks also teach in their own club (under the signature of a 5dan or higher). It comes down, once again, to the lineage, to the teacher. If a sensei "suggests" that a student go out and start a class somewhere, it gets done, but if you are a 5dan in a dojo run by a 7dan, you tend to practice without teaching. You don't normally start a club if you're still in town, you keep on being a student. If you move to a town where there is no club, of course you will start teaching, but again, it's expected that you have the support of your own teacher even then.

All this talk of teaching is only one reason someone will ask about rank, it's also assumed that rank is an indication of skill. It is, in a rough sort of way, there's a minimum level of technical skill involved in all of the ranking systems. In many koryu you will get a rank when you have learned a certain number

of kata. In the CKF you are ranked mostly on 12 kata, and you need to show a minimum technical skill for the level at which you are challenging rank. Note that all this implies a benchmark, not an actual level of skill. Combine a minimum technical skill level with a requirement for time of practice and you have a ranking system that will tell you what the baseline should be, but not necessarily anything about the skills of the rank holder. If you have X certification it means you have satisfied, at some point, the requirements of that certification. If you received the paper 12 years ago or you are incredibly skillful, the paper may not actually reflect your skills at all.

So the next time you ask someone what rank they are, you might want to be prepared for a lengthy discussion on what standards are in place, what ranking system is being used, and what organizational positions may also be held.

Or you could just ask the person to show you what rank they are. Get them onto the dojo floor and let them show you their rank. That's the one that usually matters on an individual basis.

As to their teaching rank? Look at their students.



We Can Ignore It

I thought of this while listening to yet another program on global warming, but then I began thinking of all the other things in life that we'd like to ignore and the reasons we do. I thought I'd put up a list of reasons why we can justify not looking at, if not fixing, a problem.

As a martial artist, part of the deal is personal responsibility, after all what is fighting with someone if not taking personal responsibility for self defence, or being a soldier or looking for enlightenment or what other reason have you for doing budo. So here's a list of reasons not to act, to ignore one of your basic urges (to do something about it).

If there's disagreement amongst scientists we can ignore it.

If it costs too much we can ignore it.

If the predictive models aren't perfect we can ignore it.

If someone else does it too we can ignore it.

If someone else does it more we can ignore it.

If it's happened before we can ignore it.

If an advocate makes a mistake we can ignore it.

If the other side has alarmists we can ignore it.

If we can go too far the other way and that's bad, we can ignore it.

If there's bigger problems we can ignore it.

If it goes against tradition we can ignore it.

If it rocks the boat we can ignore it.

If it upsets the (voters, members, special interest groups, grannies) we can ignore it.

If we can't do anything about it we can ignore it.

If it's somebody else's problem we can ignore it.

If we're too busy we can ignore it.

Feel free to come up with your own set of reasons to ignore something.

Synchronized Iaido

One of my students used to call it that, having an entire class of students do the kata in exact unison. This weekend I spent two days trying to get a couple different groups doing the thing we used to be able to do at will, when we started. It was hard.

I guess we had less to think about in the old days, or we figured timing was important. Actually, timing is important and this ability to sync with others is a necessary skill.

It's a given that you can't break an opponent's timing without being able to match it. A lot of partner kata rely on the partner moving at a full beat while you break him by moving on the half or the beat and a half. So learn how to match timing.

Another consideration is when you're practicing in a large group, with kata that move in different directions you can easily clash blades with the guy beside you, or worse, clip the guy in front or back with a swing that's too mechanical and eyes that aren't seeing. Safety demands that even if you screw up a kata you move with the group until it finishes the technique.

The average timing in a group practice will be pretty close to what sensei does. Each student tries to copy sensei, and each gets this or that part of the kata slightly wrong but on average in a large group, the timing will work out to something close to the ideal. Ideal being what sensei is teaching. So if you're faster than the class, you're wrong, slow down. If you're slower than the class, you're wrong, catch up.

Figure out how to be in sync in a class and you will be safe, close to sensei's timing, able to catch someone else's timing and thus break it.

Finally, you have to open up your awareness when trying to sync up, so your eyeballs will have to roll away from looking inward, and out toward the rest of the room. Your ears will have to tell you where everyone else is, all those you can't see.

Tsune ni itte kyu ni awase, be ready to blend with the situation. The iaido "motto" and what do you need to do in order to blend with the situation? You need to be aware of the situation in the first place. You need to get out of your own head, your own timing, and be aware of what's going on around you.

First you learn the dance steps, then you learn to do them with your partners.

Thoughts on Seminar Hosting

Happy Father's Day. Mine was almost as exciting as my birthday which I usually think I forget about, and my students tell me changes my whole attitude to life. Apparently I get all depressed about getting old, and then start challenging them to fights saying something like "I may be old but I can still kick your arse". That I, in fact, can't take my seniors is patently true but apparently that doesn't stop me. Only the passing of the birthday puts me back to my usual gentle, wizened old self.

I have noticed on the net (someone slapped me into a koryu group on FacePage) that a group in Europe is having a seminar. I was mystified for weeks that the posts kept suggesting that if folks didn't sign up right away the price will go up for everyone past a certain date. It finally dawned on me that they probably haven't paid the airfare for the Japanese sensei yet. They are presumably waiting to collect enough money from registrations to pay for the tickets, and if the those go into the summer fare price everyone (including those who have already paid presumably) will have to pay more for the seminar.

Wow, talk about living on the edge. That's a formula for seminar cancellation if I ever saw one, and teachers don't like cancelled seminars. They plan a year in advance for most of their visits, and to lose a week, or even a weekend, is tough, especially for those who book vacation time to attend. The alternative way of hosting a seminar is to be ready to lose your shirt if not enough folks show up. And if that happens (it's happened to me a few times over the years) you just chalk it up to experience and move on, often after you've decided not to host that seminar again.

And yet here I am, reviving the GSJSA after several years of peaceful Julys. I did the smart thing, I asked folks if they were up for it and I did get quite a few positive answers. Now, a month from the seminar date I have yet to receive a registration.

About par for the course really.

This is a koryu seminar, just like the one in Europe and despite what you read on the net, there is absolutely no "koryu boom" happening out there. There's just a greater awareness of the arts but no real desire to study one, except for the usual suspects, the usual 2-300 folks across the world who are hard core about this stuff. And yes I mean 2-300, I don't think there are more than that number of serious koryu students outside Japan.

Look, most folks treat budo like any other recreational activity. Sure heli-skiing in the Rockies is amazing but most people ski the local garbage hill (that's a ski hill that is made on a mound of garbage in this area folks, not a slur on the quality of the local resorts). An acquaintance who runs a commercial Karate dojo has recently realized that the "territory" his club draws from is a hell of a lot smaller than he ever imagined, on the order of several city blocks. He found this out when he gritted his teeth and opened a club nearby, or what he thought was nearby. Not a single crossover student so far. Hell, in Guelph, my hometown of 130,000 or so there are ten or fifteen commercial karate clubs. People don't like to go more than a few blocks to find a gym, a bar or a dojo.

So why revive the seminar? Well actually it's because one of my students is back into class in a big way after a few years of academia and he's keen. Or he was, haven't heard anything from him about it lately but no matter, he was the trigger that made me look back and realize the thing had been resting for many years so I decided to do a small program, just two instructors, both of us close by, and both keen on the inner lessons of koryu as vs. the kata collector mentality of those who wish to mine the koryu for secrets to brag about possessing.

There aren't any in the dance steps but there sure as hell are in the practice.

So that's what we're going to try and put across to the students. For me it will be a couple of kata in each art I teach to illustrate some ideas about dealing with an attacker. Specifically, I'm looking at going right, left or straight at the begger.

Yesterday I was demonstrating at the Canadian Tai Chi Association AGM and one of the demonstrators talked a bit about angles in three different styles of Tai Chi. Square, oblique and 90 degrees off, and why each did as it did. Interesting stuff, to explain in Japanese terms he was talking about kendo (square) jodo (hanmi) and maybe yari or naginata (90 degrees, hitoemi). When the demos were over one watcher commented that she thought the distancing in Jodo was fascinating in it's shared connection. I said it was just like push hands and another fellow said "yeah but at six feet away". The important stuff is the important stuff, and it's the stuff you heard the first day in class. So my advanced class is going to start from "if someone is swinging a sword, don't be underneath it". If you got that first class, don't bother coming to the seminar.

Me, I'm still working on it after 30 years.

Professionals

We all want our instructors to be professionals, yet we don't like our sensei to get paid.

It just doesn't work like that. Now I have never made a living at being a martial arts instructor, and I've never actually had the urge to try it. There's no money in it and there's no respect either.

Who's heard about "storefront dojo"? You know what I mean, a McDojo, those Karate/MMA places on every other block? You figure those are classy places to learn the finer points of budo?

Nah, we need to learn a koryu from some guy who learned it from the guy who's head of the organization. That's the real stuff right?

Except we don't. I've been offering free classes in koryu for decades and my students, for the most part, are local kids who wander in off the street. Yes I have long-time serious students who travel for hours to get to class but the vast majority are just local folk who happen to find the room we're practicing in. Those folk on the net who are desperate for koryu very rarely travel the hour or two it would take them to get to my class, instead they email and ask where the local teacher lives. We really want the corner dojo, we just wish they taught some esoteric sword school... specifically the esoteric sword school we've decided is just right for us.

You think I'm kidding? I've got one registration so far for the end of month koryu seminar ([GSJSA](#)), where students can taste four or five different koryu from a couple of instructors who have "stood at the feet of the masters". One, and the University of Guelph is about two hours from 25% of the population of the country.

No, we want professional instruction from amateur instructors. Most of the koryu instructors I know work at it part time, and make their living from some other job. Often that's not out of some sort of pure motive, it's mostly because you can't make a living teaching koryu. You can make a living teaching the neighbourhood kids karate, not a good one, but it's possible. It's about the same as those who teach dance or yoga or fitness classes, poor pay, little respect, but in fact, great benefit for the general public. If for no other reason than karate or dance classes are cheap babysitting while the parents get home from work.

Don't knock it, anyone who has had to do the two-job two-parent thing will know the actual value of the McDojo on the corner, which is why so many parents are supportive of the storefront schools.

While I'm on not making a living, you can't make a living teaching adults the "popular" martial arts either, I know several dojo that are struggling right now because they aren't doing the after school kids classes, the sensei are paying the rent out of their other resources, their savings or their "other job".

So what's my point... well it's simply that as students of the martial arts we ought to stop demanding that our instructors be "professionals" if we're not willing to pay them to teach and study full time. With

a full time "normal" job to make a living, our sensei can either learn or teach in the couple hours a week they can devote to the arts. If we want them to teach, they can't practice and study and learn, they can teach. If we want them to be amazing, we need to leave them alone to practice. Only a professional can both practice and teach, and we don't want to pay our sensei a living wage.

So stop expecting elite level physical skills from weekend athletes. Understand what you're asking for and have realistic expectations of what you will get.



2011 May Seminar jodo section

The Information Age

Has anyone ever thought about trivia contests in the age of the internet? I do, quite a lot. Like everyone else of my age I was a collector of trivia, in my case it was massively scattered throughout hundreds of topics. My brain was a mini-Wikipedia. (We used to say quaintly that someone like me had an "encyclopedic knowledge" now we just say "he's got Wikipedia").

So, today we have the actual Wikipedia for that sort of knowledge, and I've got to be somewhere out of range of a WiFi connection or a Cell Tower before I can impress anyone with "what I know". A good set of thumbs and a smart phone gets you many more facts than I ever knew in a shorter period of time now that my brain is a bit cluttered and unindexed due to the old shelves being dusty and unused.

In the case of budo, it means that the majority of seminar-attendance is now as needless as reading the Guinness Book of Records or the daily miscellanea column in the paper. In the last three years or so youtube has eliminated the main reason for attending a seminar in a different art... curiosity. I don't have to attend the GSJSA this year to learn what the techniques of the Yagyu Shinkage Ryu sword school look like, I can find out right now online with a few clicks of a mouse. All the information is right there. And if I want to try them out, I'm quite capable of copying what I see on the video. In fact I can download the video to my ipod and take that to the gym so I can replay it as many times as I wish and get it down really well.

Incidentally, speaking of the GSJSA, it's cancelled this year, I received three registrations as of this morning and that's just not enough interest to get the other instructor up from Toronto to spend 12 and 9 hours teaching with me. Really? I scheduled that much time to teach? No way in hell am I going to run a seminar with less than 25 students for that amount of instruction... the energy levels would just be too low to survive the weekend with less, I'm not young enough or evangelical enough for that any more... but never mind, I wasn't all that optimistic that we'd get the students to revive it. Why? Back to the topic at hand.

All the arts we were going to present at the seminar are represented in video online somewhere or other. All those who might be curious enough about some koryu sword school or other to attend a seminar can scratch that itch with a couple of minutes search online... and for free. Why would anyone pay to go to a seminar that won't give them any more information than what they can get from a video? After all what can you learn in a couple hours instruction in a new art except the overall shape of the kata?

What indeed? The information itch can be scratched instantly on the net. One can be informed about the topic for free.

Of course some will be saying "but you can't learn from books or video". Of course you can, don't be daft, and you can certainly learn what something looks like by watching it. You don't need to stand in

front of a sensei to be informed about his art, you just have to look at a vid.

I know this. All instructors know this, and yet we still offer seminars. Curious isn't it? Perhaps we're just stupid in the same way that the movie industry is stupidly trying to shut down You-Tube presentations of their movies for free. Perhaps we're all just stuck in the old way of thinking and we should adapt to the new reality that "information wants to be free".

I have no clue as to how movies which cost millions of dollars upfront to make, will be made in the future. Perhaps they can simply make them all in low-cost CGI and offer them on itunes with the hope that they'll get their money back some day at \$5 a download? That's supposed to work for music... but a song isn't a movie, really, is it? Perhaps they can be crowd-funded? Advertising placement supported? Promoted as a tax-loss to really rich people who are paying too much tax?

I do know why budo instructors continue to teach in the face of videos of their art online. It's because there's a difference between information and understanding, between trivia and learning. I'm not talking mystical "hidden techniques" or "direct transmission" in the usual sense people natter on about, I'm talking about plain old stuff I can tell you about, I can show you on a video, and I can demonstrate live in front of you that you still aren't going to get. Stuff you need me to do to you a few times before you start to understand.

It's the stuff we old farts have built up over years of doing the kata, that body-knowledge that says "the hell with the kata, it won't work because he's moving the wrong way so start over.... or maybe, do this little hip twitch, dump him on his ass and start over.

I am just writing a list of the iaido kata that we do or have done in our club over the years and it runs to... just counted, 113 kata over 5 schools. With a bit of reference to my notes (or a quick look on youtube) I can probably do any of them still today, although some have been neglected for a decade or so. Thing is, any of you reading this can also look on the net and do the kata, and you might even find some information somewhere else on the net as to what the kata means!

But what you can't do with a google search is teach yourself that 33 seconds into the kata you are not driving your left big toe into the floor on a 45 degree angle and so your whole posture is unstable and you would die if you tried to do this "for real". A sensei with 30 years of practice over 6 or 7 different related arts might have a chance of telling you this.

If you're someone who is slightly more than simply curious about what an art looks like, what would you pay for learning that thing about what you're doing at 33 seconds? Would you pay 21 hours of your life over a weekend? Because that's what was planned for the GSJSA, an analysis of the basic movements of Japanese swordsmanship, not the trivia of "this is how you do kata number six". For that you can go look at youtube, just make sure you look at someone who actually knows how the kata is done...

But that's another kettle of fish entirely isn't it?

Is Time Per Kata Relative to Numbers of Kata Practiced?

On the chalkboard in our usual room at the University are several lists of kata. They accumulate for a couple of years until someone wipes them off to put three or four key points down for some fitness class or other, then we start writing all over again.

As I have been pushing beginners and seniors through three or four sets of partner practice in both iai and jo, I happened to look at the many dozens of kata and wonder if I am pushing too fast. After all there are many people out there who will spend a couple of weeks going through a single kata making sure everyone has every little angle correct. And there are students who obsess over tiny details of timing that can't have much to do with either effectiveness or enlightenment.

A lot of those clubs practice a single koryu, or maybe a koryu and a seitei set. Do clubs with few kata spend more time on each one? Of course they do. By the simple calculation of total class time divided by number of kata practiced it is obvious they must spend more time on each kata than we do.

The question isn't time per kata but rather, learning over time. What's better, lots of time on a single kata or lots of kata? Neither in my opinion, getting every single nuance in a kata memorized is useful, as is doing several score of kata, they are both helpful... and both equally damaging. Wasteful obsession over detail is a result of spending too much time on a kata. The students begin to think the difference between half a second here and three degrees of angle there, is important. Kata collection is the result of simply memorizing the dance steps of dozens of techniques from several schools and thinking that some sort of secret knowledge is being accumulated with each one. Or worse, thinking that there's a specific kata for each potential threat to be encountered on the battlefield.

It's the underlying principles that we need to teach, and there is more than one way to do that. I have students who want to learn Niten Ichiryu, and others that want to stick to iaido, and some that want to go over tanjo again before they forget the steps. To all of them I try to explain that it doesn't matter what school, set or waza we are working on, the principles are the same. I'm always teaching the art of "drop the hips, get the tension out of the shoulders, move from the centre and unite the breath with the cut".

Frustration City or: Damn You Entropy

Just can't seem to get healthy. I was improving for a while, and then while cutting the lawn I stepped back into our shared driveway. Yep, the neighbour girl ran over my ankle with her SUV. Thankfully I know how to fall down and a couple boots on her fender got her to pull forward off the foot. Funny, you can feel the tire deform as it goes over your ankle.

Anyway that threw me back a week while it healed. While the shoulder and knee that I blew seem to be coming along, the other knee and shoulder (the ones I was protecting when I blew the healthy ones) are still sore and not improving.

Then there's a wasp nest in my wall that won't die, I swear they have reduced the lethality of insecticide! This little wart on my finger has been frozen to general frostbite five times now and it's still laughing at me.

There's been three trips to the cabin to take down the old wind generator, all of which ended with the thing up there still... and winter's coming.

I don't know, it may just be my usual depression at the shortening days, or maybe my starting to feel the tipping point between getting better and hanging on to my skills with fingertips dug into the cliff of time.

One cool thing I'd like to share is this shot from my shop.



Those are chips of purpleheart sticking in a cedar board. They were drilled in there by my router which is a good seven feet away. The cedar is for a paddle (now why didn't I shoot the paddles and put them online instead of doing this essay?) and the purpleheart was for a custom order I imagine.

Just think of what one of those little chips would do in your eyeball next time you think to yourself that custom weapons are expensive. Hah.

Yesterday and today were spent replacing a couple of dead light fixtures in the shop with new, low temperature fluorescents. I hate that I need that light to see by these days, and I hate even more that I have to replace light fixtures that I put up there myself not so long ago.... well maybe 15 or 20 years ago but damnit things should last longer!

All my saw blades are dull.

The place needs a sweep and all the dust bags are full.

Ugh, brain the size of a planet....

On the plus side, last weekend at the cabin got the Tsumi Ai no Kurai manual done and the Tachi Uchi no Kurai manual half done... but of course that means they join two or three other manuals that are waiting for me to get healthy enough to do photos and video.

Sigh.

Polishing Coal

We have a koryu iaido seminar coming up and it appears the plan is to cover 4 sets of solo techniques then get stuck into some partner practice. The students "of a certain rank" are going to love it, you know, the ones who are kata-collecting, who figure they know the ones they've been taught and want to learn the rest.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with that attitude, and the presence of 50 or 60 kata in a school is testimony that things haven't changed over the years. The kids still want to "get on with it" so you give them more kata to learn, more dance steps to memorize. It's good, you amuse them and they maybe stick around long enough to learn some of the real lessons.

Thing is, this attitude that you know a kata is largely a conviction that you can "learn it" and move on. Thankfully that isn't true. If you could learn a kata perfectly, or even well, you would eventually learn the entire curriculum perfectly or well and then you would have to quit or start learning another school. You would be polishing a diamond.

If kata were like diamonds you could take the rough gem and with a few strikes of the chisel, and some work with the polishing wheel, come up with something that is flawless and perfect. A couple wipes with a rag to clean off the dust and you stop working because no matter how much you polish this diamond now, you won't improve it.

Thankfully, the kata are not diamonds, they are lumps of coal. We can spend all our lives polishing and still not have a diamond.

You start with something ugly and rub furiously. It gets shiny and it seems like you can go further, eventually the edges get worn down and the kata seems smaller. Perhaps along the way you hit patches of sand (in the coal, on your rag, who knows from where) and the kata falls apart a bit, but you keep polishing and it becomes smooth and shiny again. Maybe it's a different shape, but you keep working. Eventually, with enough polishing, the kata may disappear altogether, but you've got all that blackness deep inside the skin of your hands, it hasn't really gone away, it's just in you now.

Try to wash it out.

Over Brazil

- Uruguay, Nov 15 2012

What sad-blasted thoughts come
while the Amazon floats
in that colour
after red leaves the sky
What blue-scrubbed images
of your face look back
from the window
as we drone through the night

An hour ago
the jungle trees were sand
on a green beach
leading to a river
wide as a lake
And you weren't here
to see it

===

Why I don't like travel, written for my kids of course.

Tournaments in Iai (and Jo)

There has been a "explosion" of interest in iaido tournaments in Canada lately. Well OK we've just had one a month or so ago and now the CKF wants to start a national iaido tournament.

I've got some problems with iaido tournaments, always have had, even though I was a driving force behind the triannual Canadian Open which was started, I must admit, in the somewhat forlorn hope that the kendo guys would "get it" when they thought about iaido. I was wrong because an iaido tournament doesn't make any more sense to a kendoka than iaido itself does.

Both iaido as training and as tournament is done necessarily as a solo practice. For a tournament you have two people (side by side) facing three judges who decide which has done a set of five kata better. Yes it's competition but it has no actual meaning... or perhaps I should say it needn't have any more meaning than just another day in the dojo. You can compete in iai without the least reference to the opponent, and still win provided he isn't as good in the eyes of the judges as you are.

Try that in a kendo match. If you aren't fully and constantly aware of your opponents in a kendo tournament, you are going home early. That's good practice and it's different than the usual training one does in the dojo. Competition in kendo has good use as a training tool. Iaido or jodo, not necessarily so.

But, you say, tournaments are all about nerves, all about overcoming your fears. Fears of what? What causes the nerves? I'm afraid it's a fear of losing (the match, respect, maybe your sensei's faith in your ability). In a kendo match if you have a fear of losing, you increase your likelihood of losing. Play well, lose your defensive posture, attack with joy and abandon and you are going to do better. Lose your fear of losing in an iaido match and you are right back at the usual training state in the dojo. If tournaments are a chance to lose the ego through winning and losing, then a successful iaido tournament career means you simply lose the desire to compete. Let's face it, even the winner of a large iaido tournament will perform less than half an hour's worth of kata in a day. Better to stay home and put in a solid day's practice. And if you lose? Well same as for the kendo losers, you spend a day and the entry fees to get a few minutes practice in.

Nope, iaido and jodo tournaments are a good chance to get together with other folks in the organization to bond, but they're not great learning experiences unless you want to learn whether the guy beside you is better or worse than you are at the points the judges are judging. Seminars in iaido and jodo are much more efficient learning-slash-bonding opportunities and that's where I'd rather be as a student. Let's face it, every iaido tournament is an iaido seminar lost.

What exactly is being judged in a tournament anyway? Like I said, it's whether you're better than the guy beside you at the five kata you just performed. A tournament win tells you nothing more than this, was your iaido better or worse in a competitive situation. Tournament judgements mean one winner and one loser, no ties, someone gets the nod. Grading judgements might use the same criteria on paper, but in this case you have either met a minimum criteria or you have not. In a grading it's possible for the entire cohort to pass or fail, and all the judges are saying is that you met a minimum standard. In

neither case do you really get a feeling for where you are in your iai. Only your sensei can tell you that. If I win a match or pass a grade it tells me something, but really not much.

All this changes if I'm in the judging seat. Now a tournament means something to me, it means the chance to watch our students closely, two at a time. By the end of a tournament day my butt is numb, my hands and forearms are cramped from holding the flags, and my mind is full of just what the students need to work on to improve. Same as when I sit a grading panel (minus the cramped hands). Unfortunately, in the usual way these things work, at the end of the tournament we all go drinking.

Before I hear suggestions that the students should run to the judges and ask for pointers after the tournament or grading, let me say that to be fair to everyone there should be a strict policy of no discussion of the results between judges or between judges and applicants. Judges need to be impartial observers and should not be changing their mind after a judgement is made. Judges should also be free to make their judgements and to say to applicants afterward "ask your sensei". If you lost or failed, you really need to ask your sensei (and in both senses of that statement, perhaps so do the judges). Asking a judge to tell you what to improve upon is to ask why he failed you and this is no better idea in iaido than it is in soccer.

Save it for a seminar.

Ah yes, tournament and grading seminars. Seminars attached to gradings and tournaments are held before the event, not afterward. Makes sense to a student, you learn what you need to know to pass the exam or win the match and then you go pass or win right?

You tell me.

Even if it worked, the seminar will always end up being a cram session in "how to pass or win" and not "what you need to do for the next year and a half to get better at iaido".

If I were in charge of the world the tournament (and/or grading) would be held first, and the instructors would use their observations to structure the seminar which would be held afterward. Oh, and any winners not attending the seminar afterward would be stripped of their wins.

Deaf, Blind and Dumb

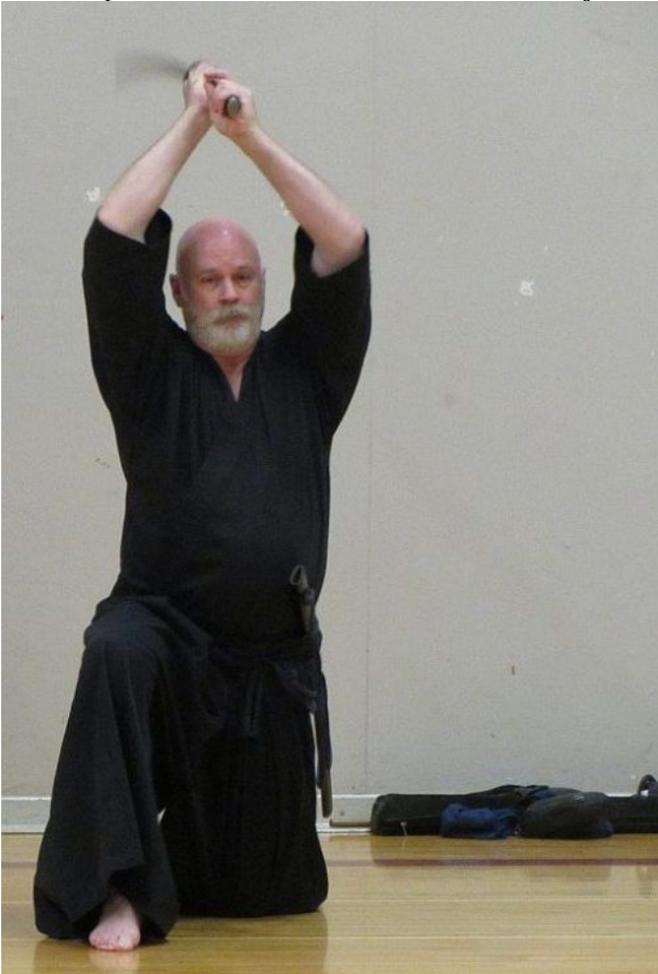
Students go deaf, certainly, but teachers also go blind.

Not a particularly shocking revelation to me but I was reminded of this while doing some photos to illustrate the judging points of the official ZNKR iaido manual. My student was posing and I was finding all sorts of interesting quirks and angles that I hadn't seen for a while.

Makes me wonder what sort of things I've got stored up in my own body.

The moral of the story is to use mirrors ("mirror teacher" as one of our sensei calls it) and video and still photos to check yourself. Far from "not being able to learn from video" I'd say that anyone not using this ubiquitous technology these days is just asking for a set of problems that are entirely preventable.

Case in point, this first shot shows me with my head tilted to the right.



On the good side of things I like the lack of tension in the hands.

By this second shot I've straightened my head



But you can see that my left shoulder is up compared to my right, this would seem to indicate that my right hip is forward of my left, which would mean my left foot is likely not square and my left hip isn't involved in the cut. I can feel the un-exhaled breath in my lungs damnit, I am just too in love with the sound of that iaito.

Not sure I'm liking the metsuke either.

Overall though, taking into consideration the state of my knees when these were shot, I'm relatively happy that I look as good as I do.

The Three Stages of Teaching

It occurs to me that there are as many forms of teaching the martial arts as there are students ... OK that's trite. There are as many stages of teaching and as there are levels of learning.

For the fellow who just walks in the dojo the level of teaching is "this foot goes in front of that one".



You know, a lot of people in iaido and jodo never get beyond this point, figuring it's all about memorizing kata and knowing which sensei did it this way and which did it that way and being ultra precise with the angle of the cut and the shape of the swing. The physical part is often accompanied by a historical and encyclopedic knowledge of Japanese budo and esoteric buddhism as it applies to the sengoku era samurai.

These folks usually quit after a short time, figuring they've got it all learned, but some of them can stay around for a surprising number of years before they finally burn out due to old-age related injuries. After all if you can't do it like it should be done, it's time to move on.

Thing is, that sort of attitude might be the fault of the instructor who can't (or is too lazy to) get beyond the mechanical instruction. It's a lot easier to simply keep correcting angles and timing than it is to

teach the stuff that's beyond that.

By beyond it, in the kendo federation, I mean very specifically 5th dan. There are three rough levels of instruction bounded by 1-3dan, 4-5dan and 6-8dan with the technical levels more or less finishing at 5dan.

1-3dan is learning to walk, what we've been talking about. Specifically, according to the kendo federation instructions to judges the student must demonstrate:

- 1) Correct etiquette & correct way of wearing uniform
- 2) Correct Nukituke & Kirituke
- 3) Correct Chiburi & angle
- 4) Correct Noto

From a kata point of view, that means they have to get their pants on straight and be able to do the mechanics of the techniques and not much beyond that.

Let's call this teaching style A (or we could call it shu)

For 4-5 dan they are expected to also master:

- 1) Composure/Calmness of your mind and spirit
- 2) Metsuke
- 3) Kihaku (spirit, dynamism, energy, etc.)
- 4) Ki-Ken-Tai no Icchi

Experience means calm, and by a 4dan challenge they've been at it for at least six years. They've got to look in the right direction (show they at least understand where the pretend bad guys are in the kata) show some energy rather than look like they're trying to remember the times tables, and they've got to move the sword, the body and their "spirit" together. Mostly that means the sword and the body move together.

This requires teaching style B (call it ha)

Finally, for 6-8dan the challengers must demonstrate that they understand:

- 1) Riai (principle, theory)
- 2) Huukaku (character, originality) & Hinni (grace, dignity)

Theory and principle is easy yes? You just need to know which kata to use for which battlefield situation right? Well, no. Riai means a grasp of the underlying principles of the art, almost by definition it means you're beyond the mechanics of the kata and in the kendo federation the iaido and jodo manuals say "for grades up to 5dan check the book" In other words, "what we've written down about how to do the kata is what they should know". For 6 and 7dan they ought to have the book "in their

bones" and they ought to be moving beyond technical concerns.

For 8dan they add a requirement for character, originality, grace and dignity. This is the level at which the owners of the art get together over a good bottle of port and decide what the art is, so it's sort of expected that they're going to be exceptional people of good character. You don't want small minded technocrats hanging around here because these are the guys that have to pull the rest of the folks up to their own level.

Let's call the 6-7 dan teaching style C (ri) and I am not going to even attempt to guess what it takes to make an 8dan because I'm all sorts of unqualified to talk about that. I will say though, that it does NOT take a 9dan, that's technical thinking once again. In the kendo federation there's only rank up to 8dan so 8dan is by definition "the top" and folks get there by being "the top". (I'm not forgetting the shogo, I know all about it but let's keep it simple).

So back to our 1-3dan beginner, he's going to get teaching level A, here's the kata, here's what you have to do with it, here's how you move to look good doing it. The simple stuff, the memorization of dance steps.

Teaching style B, getting students to 4-5dan is, actually, mostly a matter of letting them get on with it for 5 or 6 years while they get better and better at remembering the kata and it starts to become an acquired skill that they can use to demonstrate other things. It's these "other things" that the instructor has to show the student and now is where the student sometimes thinks "sensei is getting mean".

You teach balance by challenging it, and calmness is nothing if not balance. Around year 4 or 5 when the student has pretty much learned all the technique he's going to need for a while, the teacher starts pushing. Nothing is good enough any more, there's not enough concentration, there's not enough energy, there's too much strength, the shoulders are too tight, the breathing isn't right, the weight is too high, the feet are at the wrong angles. All this is thrown at the student with the expectation that he will figure it out. He has to go inside his own body and analyze how he's moving, he has to watch his teacher and "feel in his guts" what is happening so that he can copy the movements. This is the period of analysis of the art, when the student starts to understand how to adapt the movements to his own situation, where he learns to make the technical aspects of the art his own.

As a teacher this is difficult, it's no good simply saying "do it this way" or trying to describe how you do it yourself or even (oh dear) how some teacher from three generations ago said you do it in some dusty notebook. You've got to let go of the student's body, stop being a puppetmaster and let them find their own way. Yet it has to be the right way, so the teacher has to be far enough along the curve to

know what is right and what is wrong for the student. There's no "teaching to your own level" here, you've got to have the experience to know which path will work and which will lead to a cliff.

A teacher who isn't far enough ahead of the student will only be able to show his students the dance steps. But all is not lost, as I said it's mostly a matter of getting on with it so the students may be slowed down a bit but they won't be stopped. They'll eventually find their way to an understanding of how the art works for them.

And it's still largely technical.

Now we come to it. The reason why there are old men in the martial arts. Somehow at 6dan you've got to start leaving technique behind, while still improving your technique. You've got to start getting to the point where you can deal with a situation "on the battlefield" without going through a list of kata trying to find the one that works. If you understand the principles behind a kata, you don't need the kata. This is what we mean by leaving the art, by the "ri" of "shu ha ri" the "leave" of "keep, break, leave".

How do you teach the principles of the art? Certainly not by pulling out a chalkboard and setting up chairs for a talk. Absolutely not by sending the student out to read chapters in a textbook or even telling them to study another art.

No, you teach the principles by going back to the kihon, by starting all over again and teaching how to hold the sword, how to breathe, how to look, how to stand up and how to sit down. And oh dear how hard this is, because you have to get through the wall of knowledge the student has about the art, all his success at gradings, at tournaments, all his accumulated practice time in the dojo, all his "I know". You have to break all that down, get him to throw it all away and open his eyes up once more and become a baby so that all that knowledge can flow out of him leaving only the stuff that he can't forget.

If the teacher can't do it, he has to make his first leap to that same level and send the student to someone who can. He has to let go of his own wall of assurance that he "can teach" and admit that he's crap, that he can't teach what the student needs to know, and by doing that he can make his own leap of faith back to the basics.

Did I mention that since about 5dan, or even earlier here in the west, the student has been teaching?

Practice vs Checkpoints

Recently I've been re-reading my notes from various hanshi on the ZNKR iaido kata. These are a set of common kata and the form of each kata is set by the iaido committee of the ZNKR, the all Japan Kendo Federation.



Reading these notes plus the official manual for iaido with an eye to providing a set of notes for common judging practice in Canada, I was struck by the difference between grading points and practice points. (See that article here: http://ejmas.com/tin/2012tin/tinart_taylor_1212.html)

A grading point is a specific check on a position that the students have to hit. The sword must be in this position, the feet at this angle, that sort of thing. They are places where judges are instructed to pay attention, they are quick and easy ways to make sure the kata are being done to a standard and as such are really quite useful to judges.

The problem is, they have little to do with the proper performance and practice of iaido. Check points are just that, points, they aren't the flow of the art, the spirit of the art. It's more or less necessary to make these checkpoints a frozen-in-time item as it's very difficult to describe a movement check ... "is the cut done without pause" is about as good as it gets, we need checkpoints to figure out whether the cut done without pause is done correctly. Checkpoints can be illustrated by photographs, but as we all know, kata are difficult to describe with either text or photographs, you need a video.

All this is fine up to the point where students begin to confuse checkpoints with skill. Now at the lower levels of practice, where you're learning which foot goes where, checkpoints are excellent teaching devices, they are the footprints painted on the floor that help you learn the dance steps. After a while, you gotta step off the paint and show that you understand other things like timing and rhythm and where your partner/enemy is and that can't be done by hitting the checkpoints. It has to be done by moving smoothly through those points.

To put it simply, an instruction like "when turning is the back foot pointed straight at the opponent and the back heel raised" is a checkpoint. If the instruction reads "turn on the balls of your feet and sweep the back foot across" it's a practice point and in many ways is much more important than the checkpoint which is the place where you change from turning to attacking the opponent.



Teachers Gotta Teach

Just uploaded a rather long diatribe on hiki otoshi uchi or how to smack down a sword using a jo. This was in response to a question from a long-distance student (like an 11 hour flight) and I did it using my tablet, filmed the comments and uploaded them all in the same evening.

So unedited comments to be sure, but perhaps useful. Regardless of this the student emailed back and said thanks, and hoped that he wasn't imposing with the questions.

Hah.

We live for this sort of excuse to hear ourselves talk... well at least I do, and I'm really pleased to have an excuse to use a new toy.

I love answering questions because it's the way I learn these days, I learned a brand new thing doing the video, and so did the two folks helping me (you'll see it if you pay attention to the video, the camera guy looked up to watch).

Even though I've been swinging jo and bokuto around for almost 35 years now, I still don't consider myself an expert. My proof is that I'm still learning stuff, so questions that help me do that are not a bother at all.

Students Gotta Learn

The long range student also said he hoped the students here knew how lucky they are.

They don't, they're here and familiarity breeds contempt, it's just the way of the world. That's not a bad thing really, when we're home we're busy so we tend to start learning a rare skill only if it's right next door to us and we've got time for it. We only do the long commutes when we get hooked and we no longer have a sensei right next door. Then we grumble and get in the car or on the airplane.

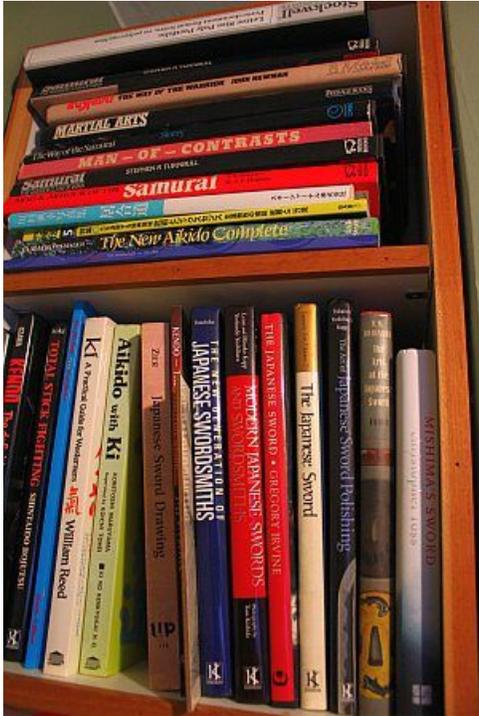
My advice, though, is to get a bunch of people hooked on the art and then get the teacher on the plane. Let him get the jet-lag while you sleep in your own bed.

Will a teacher come if asked? See above.

Dreamers Gotta Dream

Then there's the folks who read something on the net and wish they could travel across the oceans to learn from a master. These folks often won't spend half an hour commuting to class and never start learning at all, but hey, they may tell someone else about the guy half an hour away.

The Opposite of Books



In case you haven't noticed, Lauren has set up SDKsupplies.com (well OK, she set me up) with the social media. There's six little symbols on the top of the page, representing six "communities" with slightly different takes on social media. The temptation is to do something different in each of them, blog in tumblr, put up photos in instagram, videos in youtube, updates and news in twitter, share links in pinterest and do whatever the hell people do in facebook and google+. In fact Lauren tells me that's what young people do, which means that if you "follow" (what's the difference between following and stalking?) your friends you have to do it on a whole bunch of "media".

While all this may seem to be a wonderful way to bring people together, it's actually not a sharing environment at all. There's a reason I code my own blog rather than use blogger or some other "free" service, and it's not because I'm a luddite who can't figure those systems out (remember I said I code my own stuff here). The reason I don't like the social media stuff is that I am a fan of the original fantasy of the net, the ability to share your ideas freely and contribute to the sum of knowledge of humanity.

Let me tell you a story about why this doesn't happen on the net. In the beginning of the WWW (which isn't the net but I'm not going back that far kiddies) there was... well actually before the WWW there was email. Soon after email, and we're talking early 90s I suppose, there was listserv which was an email list that let you go back and forth in a chain of discussion. While it wasn't the first martial arts related list, Iaido-L was started here in Guelph in 1994 as a place to talk about swords. It replaced a "zine" and a manual list of email addresses that went back to 1987. At the start we had folks who discussed iaido, kendo, kenjutsu, sword-using aspects of arts like aikido and sword collecting. The discussions were pretty interesting with a lot of cross-fertilization but soon the breakup started.

First to go was the sword collecting community who didn't want to have to read about using swords since they were more interested in preserving them rather than dinging them up. Then came the WWW and the forums which were nicely graphic and allowed subjects and threads and suddenly there were small places where folks could go and set up as experts to a select set of listeners. With the forums came moderation so that everyone had to speak nicely or get banned.

Then came the "social media" which remind me so much of a return to the enclaves of the bulletin board era, the compuserv and AOL era. These have fractured the net further into fenced compounds which, within them, contain even-smaller sub-groups of people trying to learn and discuss things like iaido and jodo and kendo. Now, however, not only do you get the moderators, you get the censors.

So, if a book is a place where one might expect to find a large body of information on a topic, the present-day net is a place where you will find a page here and a page there under a bush or up a tree or even blowing across the open prairie. The binding has come loose, the pages scattered.

Worse yet, some of those pages have fallen in the water and sunk out of contact, dissolving back into chaos. Witness what happens when whole enclaves disappear (Geocities) or become "old-fashioned" (that thing before facebook... damnit, music oriented... not yahoo voices, not orkut, not google+... aaargh, not friendster... MYSPEACE!!) These are all commercial spaces, they are walled compounds subject to the rules and whims of the owners and their lawyers. Places where you pay for admission by giving up your buying preferences to advertisers and your freedom of speech to software-based censors.

While I never really got into these compounds to do much of my work, I have been on a few martial arts forums out in the general area of the net, and there is a good example of the book coming apart in a forum called e-budo. It was, for a few years, one of the more popular places to discuss martial arts and accumulated quite a lot of information, including many long and time-consuming posts from yours truly. A few weeks ago it disappeared under the waters taking all the pages it contained with it. All that accumulated discussion has gone.

There is no "cloud" out there, stuff put "onto the net" does not exist forever. If it is being archived somewhere I haven't ever found it. Once an accumulation of electronic knowledge is erased from the last disk holding it, it's gone, never to be unearthed again by some archeologist in the future.

Now I'm the last person on earth to claim that my writings ought to be preserved for future generations, but I'm damned if I'm going to put my time into something that some other putz will decide isn't worth saving, or should be censored. No I'll continue to code my own little website here which is available to anyone who wants to drop on by to read it. It will be here as long as I pay the hosting bills and/or have a backup on a disk here at home.

Did I mention that one of my businesses disappeared completely off the net after the buddy who was hosting the site on his home server decided to clean up his disk?

The net is the opposite of books.

PS, Iaido-L is still around, being hosted and archived at the University of Guelph and mirrored somewhere else as fa.iaido in google groups which was, I'm sure, some other company when the list began to be mirrored.

Ten Second Black Belt

I was looking online this morning and found a post relating to 5 ways to deal with a punch to the head. OK I thought, I'm up for that and started the video. Ten minutes in and we still hadn't got to number 1.

I don't have time for that, I wonder if anyone has time for my long ramblings?

If not, here's martial arts in a nutshell.

1. Figure out the attack line
2. Get off it if he's attacking
3. Get on it if he's not.

There's every koryu and gendai armed and unarmed martial art in three seconds for ya.

Have a great rest of the day.



Kuden

Kuden means "oral teaching" Okuden means "great, big, special oral teaching". Of course we all figure they mean "secrets whispered into the ear of the special student".

In fact the kuden are the first things you ever heard out of the mouth of sensei. Seriously, the verbal teaching and the secret knowledge is the stuff too central, too fundamental for anyone to write down so they don't get written down.

Kuden are the kihon, the basic exercises, but they're what make those exercises clear, the kuden are the principles of the school. In Aikido the kihon is irimi, tenkan and kaiten, ways of moving off the attack line. the kuden is just what I wrote there, "these are ways to move off the attack line, you can't do any aikido if your opponent has just smacked you with a sword so move off the attack line and then do stuff". Who is going to bother writing that down? Can you think of a kuden for Judo? Karate? Kendo?

Take your martial art and distill it to a single sentence and you will go a long way toward understanding it.

It's not that easy, which is why the kuden, the kihon are the things you go back to at the other end of 30 years of training. You get to the top levels of your art by working on the basics for 30 years of course but somewhere in the middle of that you find yourself trapped in all sorts of complexities, which angle of a foot turn do we use for this kata, as opposed to the three degrees less we use for that kata. But it's an illusion that you eventually see through, the idea isn't that you "just turn your foot enough" or that "no battle plan survives contact with the enemy" (you won't have time to worry about angles of your foot) or even "all foot turns are the same foot turn", no the idea is that you no longer need to worry about your foot, it turns by itself as you do something else. Foot turns are no more a problem than breathing and how many middle level folks get all screwed up with breathing? Eventually you learn to let all that stuff go and realize the basic is what you were told the first day you started class. Move in and punch him... step here and cut him as he cuts you... shift your hip here when he's off balance...

You know, the stuff that's too obvious to write down. That's the stuff you have to go back to after 30 years of training. I'm not there yet, I know it because I'm still getting stuck on breathing out when I cut, I just can't get past listening to the fine nuances of what the sounds from my sword are telling me, it's a teaching thing but I have to get past that before I can become a bit more than just a teacher.

I have to get back to the best, most secret kuden of all. One day I asked Haruna sensei how to sit in tate hiza and he crooked his finger at me and leaned over to whisper in my ear... "keiko".

Go ask your sensei to explain that secret concept to you, it's too secret for me to write down publicly.



Am I there yet?

While I usually ramble on about gradings being practice, I really don't think of them as a good place to teach. I suggested a while ago that I'd like to do the grading and then the seminar rather than the other way around and Chris Gilham suggested a further elaboration. Grading, feedback, seminar and then re-test.

That would be a great way to use gradings as a way to teach, and Chris knows his teaching theory, but as someone who has to sit the grading panel, I'm not keen on that for selfish reasons. For one thing, watching 60 people do the same kata over and over is hypnotizing, you have to fight to pay attention unless you grade by "nails sticking up" (if it caught your attention it must have been a bad point). Not that we'd be looking at 60 people again at the end of the seminar but really, I'm tired by that time.

More to the point, that sort of setup would assume the goal of grading is to pass the grading. By that I mean we'd be assuming that grading requirements are firmly linked with improving one's budo and that each grade level puts one on a higher level of knowledge.

I don't entirely buy it. Grading should be thought of more as a specific location rather than as the actual progression down the road to your destination. There's often more than one way to get from here to there, and gradings are markers on the google maps route. That way is usually a good one, but there are other, often more scenic routes available. If you don't pass a grading it simply means you aren't at the place where google says turn left and continue for the next four years. You may not be there yet (the usual case), but it might be that you are on a parallel road and would have to move sideways to hit that particular corner on the road.

If you pass the grading it doesn't mean you're at the turning, it could mean you're well past it, on down the road because you're speeding (gradings happen at set times during the year, as if your map app just counts down and calls out the turns when you should be at the corner rather than checking where you actually are).

Not to push our map app too far, but gradings are places where you can say to yourself "am I there yet?". Useful but not much more informative than that for your personal budo journey.

I mentioned the use of gradings for the instructors earlier, but gradings are also useful to the overall organization if it's a large one.

Rank is a way of sorting and assigning, of planning and checking. In an organization that is scattered geographically with too many people to keep track of in one head, a way of putting name tags to faces and rank insignia to sleeves is useful. If you're moving along the grading path we know you're not too far from our desired route to the destination. If you're at a certain point we can assign certain duties and we know who you should be talking with next to find the next point on the map.

So, to sum up (you're supposed to do that in an essay, apparently) I find the idea of teaching a seminar ahead of the grading, to pass the grading, a bit hopeless, and I don't think we ought to teach a seminar after the grading to do the same thing.

I'm more in favour of not worrying about gradings too much except as a chance to re-read the manual and bring ourselves back onto the organizational path so that we're at roughly the same corner as everyone else at roughly the same times along the way. That way when we say to each other "were you there?" we can talk about the nice pie and ice cream at the corner restaurant.



Business 101 or Follow the Money

In recent posts I've talked about grading from the student and the teacher point of view. Now I'd like to go on to talk about grading from the supply side. Any budo organization can be split into instructional and administrative functions. Forget about who does what and think about what jobs are done and this is easier to see. Some jobs deal with keeping records (secretarial) and some with teaching students (education / product).

There are good things about rank from the instruction side of the business, the chance to see where each student is in his development, and as a way of sorting your corporals from your majors so that instruction flows down the chain (it rarely flows upward very well).

From the administrator's viewpoint rank is also a good thing because it's a source of income. To put things into business 101 terms, a budo organization's product line generally consists of two items, access to instruction and rank. Personally I'm rather in favour of putting the greater cost on grades because as someone on the instruction side of the company, I think the instruction is much more valuable than the grade so I want it to be cheap for my students. Not very loyal to the shareholders I know, but I'm not a shareholder I'm an instructor / student.

Budo is a bit of a strange duck if you're talking traditional business models (make widgets and sell them) because we have a business model where customers (members) provide the product (instruction) to other customers (students)... Sort of like facebook really (members provide content for members) which shouldn't work but it does because facebook sells the customer eyeballs to advertisers. One difference is that facebook doesn't charge folks to be members, it's "free". In the budo world customers teach customers but instead of advertisers to fund the system, we've got customers who buy content from other customers up the line who teach. We all pay so that the system continues, at least that's the theory. Why should anyone pay to teach other people? So you can be taught in your own turn of course, stop thinking ponzi schemes.

What do the gradings do for the admin side? Quite a lot actually. Gradings are the second source of income as mentioned, and without gradings there's a lot less administration. No records would be needed to keep track of who has what rank, only who has paid their membership dues.

The instructional division wants the ranks so we have them.

For a volunteer budo business that just teaches, grades and keeps records, there's very little need for

either an admin department or for income, really. It doesn't cost much to keep track of the membership and grading information so a couple people are usually good.

If the business decides to do a bit more for the students (and the customers / members / students always ask "what am I getting for my dues?" ... funny they rarely ask "what am I getting for the money I pay for my rank?") then more money has to come in and often more administration jobs. What sort of extra goes to the membership? The ones I like, involve more organized effort at education, the organization itself can provide instruction tours, education for more senior instructors, supplementary teaching aids like videos or books and other such things. Of somewhat less concern to me on a personal level is the situation where the budo is competitive (like the kendo, judo or TKD federations). Then regional and national teams or athletes may be supported from the general funds. If this happens, then money also has to be spent on extra administration in the form of coaches, trainers and other such support for the competitors.

So the balance between admin and education ebbs and flows depending on what the organization does, but as a general rule, the 101 of budo is that students pay for instruction and grading on the demand side, and the organization supplies instruction and rank for the money.

Now you can use this simple way of looking at it to analyse your own organization. Do you pay your instructors? Do they keep the records? Do volunteers organize things for volunteer instructors? If so where's the money go?

Follow the money if you want to know "what you get for your fees", decide what product you're buying and you'll soon see if you are getting value for your dollars.

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.