

# Half a Century IV

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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*2016 Chile*

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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.

## Table of Contents

How does Sensei learn?.....	4
Accepting Failure.....	5
Practice like your hair is on fire.....	7
Uchi Deshi.....	8
What is hard.....	10
Take a note.....	11
7 Dan Blues.....	12
7 Dan Blues II.....	14
7 Dan Blues III.....	17
The Push.....	19
Hara.....	21
Budo TNG.....	22
Making sense.....	23
I am not a Japanophile.....	24
Gifts from Sensei.....	25
Your Secret Gift from Sensei.....	26
Teaching Mode.....	27
Mind Reading.....	28
Smoking and Self Defence.....	29
Bring and Take.....	30
The Right Place.....	32
Everything Teaches.....	33
Recruiting Time.....	35
Does Sensei have to be Old.....	37
Teaching Style.....	39
Go no Sen.....	41
How Selfish Can You Get.....	42
Kamiza.....	43
Switching Dojo.....	44
Esoteric Arts.....	46
Boredom.....	48
Conservatism.....	49

## How does Sensei learn?

At the heart of things, the easiest way sensei learns is to be pushed by his students. Two things have recently reminded me of this. One is that the student who is with me most these days has started to challenge me. She's starting to push back a bit during demonstrations and occasionally during practice. This is how I learn the techniques more deeply, by getting challenged and having to figure out where I need to be when that lumber is heading toward my head a bit more quickly than I expected.

The other way to learn is to have students ask questions. Every once in a while they will come up with one I haven't heard before and then I have to think. Recently there have been some online discussions of beginner questions and I hear a lot of advice such as "do what sensei says and shut up" or "because I say so". Neither of these are very helpful to a sensei who is trying to keep learning. We need questions to learn, either generated by ourselves or by students, it's too easy to "rest on our laurels" and very hard to drive ourselves once we're at a certain level. It's much easier to use student questions to keep ourselves moving forward.

So in a very real way, sensei learn by having students. Does this mean that you should teach if you want to learn? Absolutely not. You should teach when you have no other choice, and only then. If you can find someone to learn from, someone who can teach you directly, be a student, it's a hell of a lot easier.

## Accepting Failure

You can't fix everyone. This is perhaps one of the hardest lessons to learn as a sensei. It works on a couple of levels, perhaps the first every instructor encounters is that some folks just can't be taught physically. The student who tells you why they can't do some movement or other, the one who fixes it while you're looking at them and then drops right back into the same old habits, the one who looks at you blankly, as if to say "I'm doing it that way, what's wrong with you?" and the one who tries, really, really tries but never gets it.

All of them can make you wonder if you're a failure as an instructor. After all, this stuff isn't all that hard, you learned it so others should be able shouldn't they?

Well some can't. Some won't. Some will, slowly, so slowly you can't see it. All you can do is keep teaching, correct them and move on, check back in a week.

What about the other level? The one most of us would rather not speak too much about? We know that the martial arts are not about learning how to kill folks with a sword, or how to win sport matches. As my TKD instructor used to say, "nobody trains for ten years on the off chance they will get into a bar fight". So what about us teacher types who understand that we're there to help folks become better people, get off drugs, do better at school or just become a little nicer around their family?

A very long time ago... OK when I was 8 or 9 years old... I figured out that people could be manipulated. When I hit high school I became publicity director for our student council and I have been in the influence game in one form or another ever since.

When I was an undergrad at University (thirty years ago!) my mother asked me why I kept bringing these little birds with broken wings into my life. Not only did I have no idea why, I was shocked to realize I was doing it. I was trying to fix people's lives.

Becoming a martial arts instructor many years later hasn't helped much but I try to keep things in perspective by yelling at least once a month "I'm not your mother!" in an attempt to keep the students from telling me their personal problems. I just try to create a space in the dojo where they can get away from the girlfriend/boyfriend/job/parents for a while, physically and mentally. With a bit of a breathing space most folks will sort things out for themselves.

Mostly I think those who have passed through the dojo have gone out the other side a bit better for the

experience and I'm content with that.

What shocks me, every couple of years, is running straight into the realization that there are folks out there who don't want to get better. They don't want to stop being miserable, complaining, despairing wretches. They really don't. Some folks just want to be a black cloud over their own and their acquaintance's heads. They want to rain on everyone's parade, not just their own, because they can't see that they are mostly the cause of their own unhappiness.

There's a special kind of egotism that says "I am unhappy, it can't be my fault therefore it is someone else's fault, therefore I will make others unhappy until they make me happy". Of course all the other person gets from this is a big downer of a day/week/year/lifetime.

It shocks me that these people seem immune from any idea that they will die some day, that in ten years nobody will ever think of them and in 100 years nobody will even know who that miserable coot in the photograph is. They seem to think that they will live forever and that their happiness will always be of concern to those around them.

It shocks me that they can waste their lives, and those of the people who could be loving them or at least liking them in such a perverse exercise of sadism.

It also shocks me, every single time, that I can't fix them. The best you can do is walk away, and if you can't do that, at least put them in a space where their depressing influence on others is minimal.

You can't be happy until you want to be happy and are willing to do what it takes to be happy. That may even involve understanding how much you have been responsible for your own unhappiness. It's a tough lesson and no instructor can teach it.



## Practice like your hair is on fire

I just drove by a place that was hit by a tornado. We get those around here every now and then. It reminded me, as if I ever need reminding, that things are temporary. Buildings, clubs, teachers, even the art you're learning, all are temporary.

Got something to do? If you put it off for too long it just might not get done. Want to get really good at the martial art you study? Practice like your hair is on fire.

Tomorrow may be too late.

In fact, with a club like mine, where we practice at a University, it's forever almost too late. Institutions have no memory and if we don't get a couple more students to sign up for class we may end up losing our 2-3 hours a week to Hip-hop Bangra Seductive Dance. 20 years of instruction doesn't mean a thing to an 18 year old in charge of paperwork for the athletics clubs.



*Impromptu outdoor Iaido practice, Ottawa*

*with Ohmi Goyo and Kim Taylor*

## Uchi Deshi

An uchi deshi is an "inside student" one who lives with the instructor. I once had a fellow ask me to be my uchi deshi for Niten Ichiryu. I told him that I couldn't afford to feed and house him.

At some point many of us entertain the thought of living with our teacher and learning from him full time. Trust me, I once ended up as housemates with a teacher for over a year and it's not a thing I would recommend, nothing removes the mystique of "sensei" quite as fast. Now this wasn't in Japan where the system might work so let's think about it a bit.

Traditionally, an uchi deshi was an apprentice who lived and worked with a craftsman in return for food and the chance to learn the profession. Those who want to live with a martial arts instructor and learn martial arts without babysitting his kids or cleaning his toilet or digging his garden are just "leeches we teaches". I suppose the system could work with a professional instructor so that the student would clean the dojo, answer the phone, post flyers, chase down students for fees and otherwise do the money-grubby jobs which would free up sensei to teach more classes.

The problem here, and uchi deshi have indeed complained about these things, is that the outside students often get taught more quickly and systematically than they do. This makes sense, the outside students pay for their lessons and sensei needs to teach them quickly enough to keep them coming back. (But not so quickly that they get it all at once and don't have to come back). The uchi deshi aren't going anywhere so sensei can take his time with them.

I have heard the same complaint from western students who go to Japan to learn from sensei there. Although they are not uchi deshi they are at class every week. These students often see other western students come into the dojo and get taught massive amounts of technique, often jumping ahead of the "in-country" students. What is happening is similar to the situation above, the visiting students are given lots to go work on while the weekly students are fed in smaller, more careful doses.

So what about a paid uchi deshi system? These are more usual now than the apprentice system, in this case the students are paying to stay at a dojo for a short time (even a couple of years is short if you think about it) and don't have the expectation or even the chance of taking over the business some day. The system is more like a vacation (in the short term) or a traditional western university degree (in the longer run) than an apprenticeship.

Is being an uchi deshi a good thing? If you plan to teach professionally and want to learn how to run



the business it would be great. If you just love the martial art and want to learn as much as you can as fast as you can, one of the other forms of instruction such as a week long seminar might be a better fit to your needs. Uchi deshi spend a lot of time learning how sensei washes his dog and changes his baby's diapers which may or may not have something to do with the martial art you're trying to learn.



## What is hard

Death is trite.

It is the natural state of the universe, life, the kind of life that can understand that it is alive can't be anything but statistically zero in an infinite universe. What doesn't exist should not fear what is everything. What is everything is so common it's trite.

Life is hard. And very, very special.

We know we are alive, so we are able to fear death. Personally I don't know why we should but out of that fear we invent afterlives that are just like life and, perversity upon perversity, we make ourselves miserable, sick and even killers so that we can attain that supposed life after death. We fear it but it isn't hard.

No, death isn't hard, it's inevitable, and easy to find early if you really want to. Once you're dead you don't fear any more, there is nothing else for you. Those you leave behind will miss you but death is... Death isn't what we fret about. Deep and serious sickness isn't hard either. We've got lots of procedures for that stuff, and medicine. We know how to do sympathy and receive gift baskets.

What's hard is life. What's easy is complaining about traffic, lunch, gossip, unfairness, relationships, money, sex, and just about everything else. What's hard is appreciating, at all times, whenever we are awake, the miracle, the absolute amazing, statistics-defying, absurdly unlikely delight and joy of being alive.

We need to pay attention. We need to learn how to be in the moment. We need to have some lumber heading for our eyeball once in a while to train us to appreciate the obvious, that we're not dead.

What we also need to do is figure out how to find joy in everything we're usually complaining about. Life is special, too rare and beautiful to waste making yourself miserable finding things to complain about. Hey, even when you are convinced you have every right in the world to be upset, vengeful, and entitled to divine justice, is it better to be upset or find a way to spend the next few minutes with some happy aspect of the situation? Surely you can find some way to make the situation happy? The ultimate would of course be to remind yourself that you are still not dead, but that you could be before the next breath. And if it's bad enough...

## Take a note

My senior student came out with the statement "they were all taking notes" a few days ago. You have to understand that this was right out of the blue, and it was just the two of us working on some new kata so I was a bit confused.

"I wonder why I don't take notes" she continued, "perhaps it's because I'm sitting in front of a 7dan two or three times a week". She's right of course, she really has no reason to take notes because she gets constant supervision and correction, and she can just ask if she ever has a question. No need to take notes when the textbook is right in front of you, right?

Well, no. I told her to start taking notes because I'm not always going to be here and in 20 years those notes are going to be all that's left of the way I did things and what I thought about them.

Take notes, take photographs, take videos of your teacher. One day he won't be there for you to ask questions.

Oh, and she was suddenly thinking about a seminar the two of us had attended over a year ago. That's the way her mind works.



## 7 Dan Blues

"Wow you're lucky to have a 7dan in your dojo".

You think so? I don't. I think that it's actually not very likely that having a 7dan in the dojo will make you a better ikkyu, in fact it can be a problem for beginners. At 4dan I knew one way to do things, and I was really good at it. Now I know 23 ways to do things and may or may not be good at some of them but I am sure a beginner who is taught four ways to do something is going to be lousy at all four.

A 7dan can make you lazy, you don't need to think, you don't need to remember or make notes, you can rely on sensei to correct you. Now any sensei can correct you but a nidan will likely be saying things like "I think this is how this one goes" which tends to make beginners pay attention.

7dans can tend to drift off into strange and esoteric instructions and lectures on the meaning of life... beginners just need to know which foot goes in front when you do this part.

Being a student of a 7dan can make you a bit... over-confident shall we say? It's pretty easy to assume that since your teacher is so highly ranked (and here in the west a 7dan is a pretty high rank), you somehow know more than the guy next door with the 5dan instructor who started at the same time as you did. Maybe you do "know" more, but is your skill level better? After all it's not what you know, but what you can do that counts most in a martial art.

7dans can get bored. Beginners all deserve to be told the basic stuff, the important stuff that they need to know at that stage of their career. A bored 7dan may just start handing over instruction that is more suited to a 5dan than a first kyu. This will not make a beginner into a 6dan, it will only make them confused and frustrated that they can't do what sensei is telling them to do.

Old. 7dans can be old and creaky and well onto the downslope of their physical skills. This means they aren't really very good role models to follow, it's more a matter of "do as I say not as I do" by this stage. That's fine for a 6dan who knows the basics and just needs fine tuning, but it's hell for the beginner who can end up doing "old man's style" if they aren't careful. Let's face it, it's pretty easy to slop a part of your technique if sensei does that... after all he's got a 7dan and does it, why can't you? Well you can't because you're on the upside of your path and sensei is going to get really mad if you make his mistakes after he tells you they're mistakes.

I think perhaps 7dans are like really rich desserts, excellent for your enjoyment of life if indulged

occasionally but not very good as a steady diet.

If you do end up in a dojo with a 7dan, do yourself a favour and make sure you watch the 3dans. Ask the 4dans a lot of questions, you might be surprised at how clear and simple their answers are.



## 7 Dan Blues II

When I was in High School I was a jock. I think I've got a jacket somewhere around the house with about 30 sport patches on it. Once I tried out for the badminton team and was not picked. This so irritated me that I found the best badminton players in the school (or at least as many of them as I knew about) and played them for hours, getting my ass kicked repeatedly. I made the team the next season.

While you can get to a certain level with little problem, and often much more efficiently, by working with people closer to your level, there comes a point in some people's training where they need more. They need to have their asses kicked.

As a rank beginner who has no idea how to swing a sword, and who is beginning iaido, a sandan or yondan is probably the best person to train with. Those guys will know the kata very well, will know all the points to hit and the timing to use. They can tell you how to do it without confusing you by telling you six other ways to do it.

But... but, but. When you hit sandan or yondan, when you have a few years of dedicated practice in, and can control the sword and are young and strong and flexible, you may just run out of your training. You can hit a wall.

If you are lucky, you will have a 7dan around to help you through that wall. Unluckily, just sitting in front of sensei and practicing what you've always done won't help. Sensei may assume that you are content and will offer a comment or two once in a while, may even praise you for your efforts and abilities.

You may assume you are doing well.

Such a trap.

Now is the time in your training where you must take over and push yourself. You must push yourself to understand what you're doing, and you must push sensei, challenge him, show him how far you are, and by doing so, demand to be taken to the next level.

Whinging on about how you just can't seem to get it won't do you any good, nor will telling sensei that you want to learn much more and much more deeply. Simply show him what you can do and then ask him what you need to do next. You may get a demonstration, you may get a lecture on esoteric



Buddhism, you may get some advice on which other sport to take up, or which other teacher to go visit.

You may get dumped on your ass.

Regardless, you will probably have received something quite subtle (assuming you're actually at that stage) and you should accept it for what it is, something to chew on for the next week, month, year, until you can come back and show sensei what you can do.

Eventually, if your sensei is lucky, he will tell you to get the hell out of his dojo and find someone else to bother with your questions.

The only way the arts will go forward is for students to surpass their teachers. The only way for the arts to avoid going backward into formula, ritual and cheezy dance routines is for students to challenge their teachers, and to get in front of teachers who can show them physically how to get to the next level. In some arts this can be quite painful, especially grappling arts where most of the instruction is given and gotten directly body to body. Even in something like iaido there can be pain involved as demands are made for muscles to be used in unfamiliar ways.

In every case, in every martial art, there will come a time when the student is driven beyond his limits. Unfortunately this can often be translated as some sort of endurance test, usually by half-trained instructors who figure abuse is part of the programme. A good sensei will take a student and push, find the way to make the student frustrated, find the way to make him angry, find the way to make him want to quit, and push, push, push just a little further each day, forcing the student to dig a little deeper. If sensei can make the student panic, make him desperate to find some way past his wall, that student may just come to a place where he finds the way through, or over, or around.

Do it again, and again, and again, and one day the student may find himself, if not beyond the teacher, at least at the same place.

These are the koan of the martial arts, and just as you can find books of "answers" to koan which you can spout, giving you the outward appearance of someone who understands, so too in the martial arts you can find a certain bravado, braggadoccio and bluster that gives you the look of an artist.

IF... you find a sensei who is capable, and if you ask the right questions and if you push yourself hard enough, you may avoid that false sense of accomplishment and come to a place where nothing is ever good enough again, where you continue to try and improve your ability, where you spend the rest of



your life in search of yet another sensei, yet another exercise, yet another line of questions, trying to get IT. Whatever IT is. You may, at the very same moment, come to a place of calm and quiet, where you don't worry about finding IT.



## 7 Dan Blues III

It's all well and good to talk to students about why they should practice with a 3dan or later with a 7dan, but how does a student know if they've got an instructor that actually knows how to teach them?

Unfortunately, other than the obvious (are you learning?) it's difficult.

On the other hand, an instructor ought to be able to decide when they can't teach a student anything more, so when do you tell a student to go get help somewhere else?

Is it when the student is physically better than you? No, everyone runs into the physical barrier eventually, but that doesn't mean you can't teach. You can still push a student along and if he really needs to get a thumping you can always get someone else to do it for you.

It's necessary though, to be honest with yourself as an instructor, are you pushing this student for his own good or because you're cranky? If you're just old and cranky you're not likely helping the students. Brutal self-examination and honesty will allow you to know when you can't fix a student's problems any more and then it's time to pass them along to someone who can.

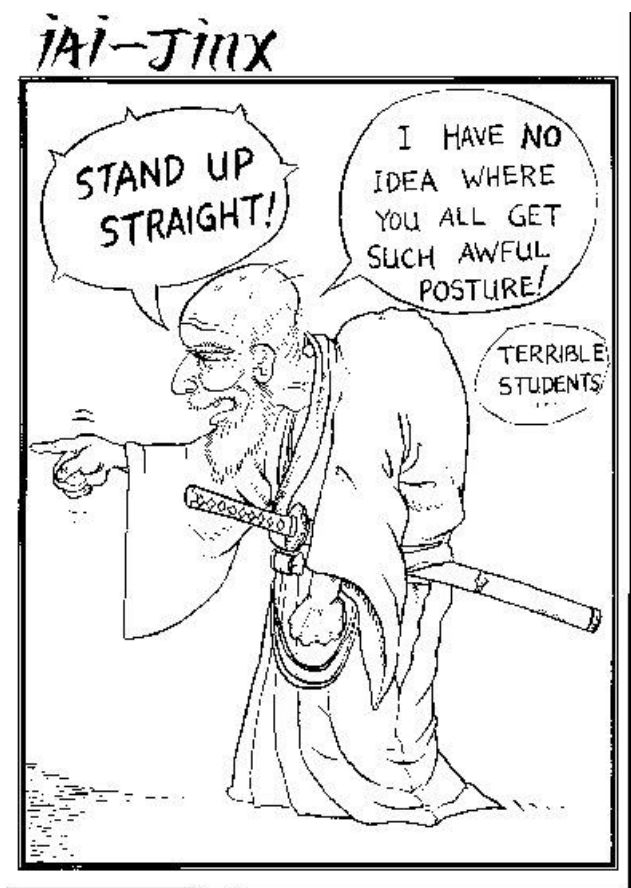
Sometimes we teach out of habit, we don't practice any more, we haven't got a teacher and we aren't learning new things from watching our students. Sometimes a teacher will just stop studying the art. These are all clues that it's time to hang it up and get a new hobby.

It may be a more subtle clue, are your students stalling out in the rankings? Are fewer of them starting their own dojo? Are they just "worse than the older generation"? If so the problem may not be the students, it may be the teacher.

Is teaching a chore? Is it getting harder to get enthusiastic about going to class and facing another bunch of slack-faced whiners who want to leach off your accumulated knowledge? Definitely time to hand over the keys to the dojo.

Are you a budo god? By that I mean are you intolerant of questioning, impatient with being asked to explain yourself and unwilling to justify your way of doing things? When you start to think that you are beyond improvement it's a pretty good sign that you're wasting your time in the dojo. After all it's a place where everyone, including sensei, go to improve themselves. If you're above that you should be looking for something else to practice, something you're no good at so that you can be a student again.

Back to the students, does your sensei exhibit any or all of these traits? In combination with your own lack of progress it might be a sign that it's time to go.



## The Push

Working on a set of koryu jodo with a student today I realized that I'm really not fond of accuracy. Absolutely, do the stuff like you were taught, learn the footwork, learn which foot goes where, what your grip should be on the stick as you take your initial kamae, but then you've got to forget it all.

And I mean really forget it, like you can't remember how to turn on the blinkers on your car when you think about it, because thinking about it is what gets you hit in the head.

So, how do you forget about the steps? Hmm, let's back up a bit. The student I was working with is beyond the memorize the steps bit with this set, and is in need of the push generally.

The push is when you either start to get this stuff or continue to be a dancer, a technician who knows the steps and knows how it's supposed to go and never actually gets it. The push is when a more experienced partner (could be sensei, could just be your senior who happens to be working with you that day) decides to start moving just a little bit faster on the attack and stops moving when it's your turn to move. Now when they attack faster it's pretty obvious to the student what's going on, and most can handle it just fine, but that stopping is nasty. It's like falling into a hole, like pushing on a door and having it move just ahead of you as someone on the other side opens it.

It's confusing and brain stopping. And then your partner attacks into the space and maybe taps you on the head.

What's happening of course is that without the senior partner moving to the next part of the kata, the junior isn't pulled along and then has to "figure out how to turn on the blinker". Which means the brain has to kick in and that creates a space.

OK all that means is that the student has to do some more memorization and move onto the attack when he's supposed to right? Well yes, if we're still dancing the kata, but there's another level.

That's when the student feels a hole and moves into it without thinking about it. Sometimes that means breaking the kata and doing something else. Now we're back to me not liking accuracy.

I was pushing today, and was reacting to my student's openings, the holes that were happening because I wasn't leading, but I also realized eventually that I was also getting upset about holes in the kihon. All the parts and pieces were in the right place, and the timing was good but I kept stopping, and then I started swinging into openings.

Those were openings that were the result of not moving quite far enough to one side, not covering the head while switching from one movement to another, rocking back before moving forward, moving in too far on other motions.

Oh my, this is the part of the kata that I love, where it starts talking to you about the basics, about why you move this way and not that.... right, back to the point.

So, I push and don't pull and correct some kihon and more and more the student closes the holes and eventually comes one kata where I'm controlled from start to finish, where I'm hit in all the right places and can't find an opening and am basically helpless for the entire time we're moving.

Yay, technique forgotten, attacks reacted to, adjustments adjusted and sensei properly poked.

I'm feeling pretty good about this but at the end comes that look. The one that says "oh hell I blew that one" and I ask why. "Because I'm not at the right angle!"

Aaargh.

# Hara

Somewhere out there in book-land is one called "Hara" by a German fellow and I thought about it the other day, maybe 20 years after I read it.

Wow, Google is the king of the world (after I somehow remembered the author's name)

*Hara : the vital centre of man* / Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim ; translated from the German by Sylvia-Monica von Kospoth in collaboration with Estelle R. Healey  
by Dürckheim, Karlfried, Graf, 1896-  
London : Allen & Unwin, 1962

Now, as I recall, the author used the concept of hara as a starting point to discuss spirituality and I seem to remember that at one point he talked about hara to hara communication.

What a lovely, budo concept. This would be the way that a good martial artist can anticipate the movement of his opponent, a hara to hara connection would mean that the intent to attack can be communicated directly and responded to before any physical movement is actually made.

Yes, it's a "gut feeling".

How do you get it? Practice of course, keiko, lots and lots of years of partner practice and competition.

What is it really? OK if you don't believe in hara to hara transmission of ki, how about all movement in the body comes through the hara, through the centre of balance, and small shifts in the weight distribution of the hips can be detected by experienced martial artists so that they can tell when someone is about to move.

And how can one detect those shifts of weight, assuming they result in pretty small actual physical movements?

Physical empathy. Remember we're talking about hara to hara communication so it has nothing to do with the eyes or the rational consideration of movements and what they mean. It is a direct feeling of what the opponent is doing (and feeling) because the martial artist feels it too. The hara are connected, what one is feeling, the other is feeling.

A martial artist who can't empathize with his opponent can't establish this hara to hara communication, can't get an accurate "gut feeling".

Meaning of course, one of the main objectives of the martial arts is to develop empathy for your opponent. If that isn't a spiritual pursuit I don't know what is.

## Budo TNG

So, all you senior instructors out there, have you got your replacements picked out yet? Are you training them to take over? Giving them more and more responsibility while you start backing out of the mix?

No? Why not? You're not getting any younger and even if you live to be a hundred you'll still eventually kick it so why aren't you thinking about who's going to replace you?

Every organization needs a plan, or at least an informal process whereby those at the top are efficiently replaced by trained, competent members of the next generation. This is something that is often sadly lacking in the budo. We've all seen cases where a dojo falls apart when sensei retires, or watched organizations flounder for years after the ruling clique retires (or more usually gets the big heave-ho from a membership that is finally fed up with them). It also happens in the koryu, quite often, when the headmaster somehow never quite gets around to setting up his successor.

The result, all too often, is that the most senior student still hanging around gets the nod, and quite often this senior isn't all that senior at all. If everyone is lucky the rest of the group falls in line and supports the new leader(s) but that is often not the case as a more senior member suddenly decides that he was passed over somehow.

Are you a senior student? Have you been paying attention to what is happening higher up? Are you putting yourself forward to do some of the jobs that need doing? If not, you should be. Doing some of the work allows you to check out how the rest of the work is being done (or not being done) and you can be prepared to help take over when the time comes.

Nobody should assume that what they're doing to run an organization is self-evident and easy to pick up. It isn't, especially if those at the top are secretive, micro-managers or really bad at keeping records.



## Making sense

Nothing better than watching a senior student working through a kata, making comparisons of kihon between two or three kata, and figuring out for himself why this kata works this way and that one works that way.

It's a delight because soon afterward their practice takes a jump upward, they are more enthusiastic, more emotive and more skilled at what they are doing.

Your kata have to make sense to you. Yes we are all told from day one what's happening, "here you punch the guy on the right and then you turn and stab the other guy" but that's not quite the same as figuring out just how much angle you need to apply here to get just the right amount of thrust there.

To do that you have to go through the kata with an eye to how things work instead of which foot goes where. Begin with the question "why" instead of "what". Why do I shift to this angle rather than What angle do I shift to.

If it took a lot of faith to memorize the dance moves, it takes even more faith to look at the kata, accept them as working / workable, and search for the reasons why. It would be much easier to change the kata to "what works" when you get to one of those points that seem to make no sense at all. Take the hard road and look at what you're doing, think about what you've been taught, and do the kata 12 times at full speed with the best partner you can find. See if it works now.

Yes, this is the "ha" of Jo Ha Kyu... one of them.

## I am not a Japanophile

Make no mistake, I like Japan, I quite like its culture in tourist-size doses, but I have no desire to be Japanese or to live in Japan.

I do budo for what it teaches, not for who invented it. I don't want to be a Samurai and I don't want to preserve an ancient culture. Never did. I am also rather suspicious of the idea that the Japanese culture has something to do with what you learn in the budo. I think the lessons of budo are contained within budo, and that's why it survived in Japan, and why it flourishes outside that country.

Why am I not more enamoured of the Japanese culture if I practice its martial arts? To be fair, I have also investigated its carpentry, furnituremaking, house design, swordmaking, kumihimo, sashiko, and zen buddhism. Perhaps this makes me a closet Japanophile? More likely it is part of why I'm not fascinated with the culture. Familiarity breeds un-fascination after all. Tellingly, I do western carpentry and joinery, build western houses, braid, or crochet rather than weave cord, have done more western embroidery than sashiko, and it's been years since I've sat on any regular basis. What I do is budo.

Another reason I'm not a Japanophile is that I associate with and am taught by a lot of Japanese who are outside Japan. I have no illusions about the people, no belief that you have to be Japanese or that the Japanese have a special genetic knowledge of budo. I know, because I've been told, that it takes a good heart and a lot of sweat, something that is not culturally unique. All this is backed up by my sensei who has for years wondered why a "round-eye" (my term, not his) would want to spend hours in seiza. I recall his words were: "I have to do it, I'm Japanese, but why would you do it?"

Good question.

I've always answered that I do it for what it teaches me.

## Gifts from Sensei

It's usually with the higher dan ranks.  
It's usually close to grading.  
It's usually painfully public.

I'm talking about getting reamed out by sensei of course. Getting it both barrels and loud, in front of all those lower grades you're supposed to be impressing with your skills. Getting it so that you feel like the skin is being taken off your back as all your faults are not only revealed, but the length of time you've had them and how hopelessly you have tried to fix them over the years.

I'm talking about the beginners wanting to slide under a rock and hide.

Now, unless your sensei is a sadistic jerk (and it's hard to tell sometimes but surely by the time you've spent 15 years with him you'll have figured that out) these are gifts and should be taken as such.

These gifts are a way to shake you up, to get you into focus once more, to get you to the next level of training.

As my sensei said a short while ago when accused of being mean to a student, "but I'm still talking to him"!

If sensei was really angry, or had given up on that student he wouldn't be talking to him at all. It's pretty easy to ignore a student in a room full of them, and it takes a lot of energy to come up with a new way to call someone a useless git, so take your gift from sensei, say "hai" and get back to work.

I should note that it wasn't me who came up with the phrase "gifts from sensei". I told the story to a soon to be newly-minted 6dan student and the first words out of his mouth were "but those are gifts from sensei".

## Your Secret Gift from Sensei

Since it is Christmas day I thought I would give all budo students a gift and reveal the deepest most hidden (hidden) secrets of your martial art.

Or rather, reveal to you how to hear the secrets from your own sensei.

So, hidden means something like secret transmission, kuden means oral transmission, and okuden means the topmost, hidden, secret teachings or some such.

When do we get them? Obviously just before we're done right? Like in the movies when the old master whispers them in the ear of the chosen student and then croaks.

Well here's your special secret gift from me to you today. The innermost secrets of your martial art are given to you on the very first day you start practice.

Yep, it's the basics, the stuff you hardly listened to for the last 4 or 5 years as you've been trying to get sensei to teach you the good stuff.

It's the stuff that sensei wouldn't even think about putting into his manual... not so much for fear that the enemies of the school will learn it, but because it's what he tells you every day of your training. It's oral because it's too damned basic (read that last word as meaning IMPORTANT) to bother writing it down.

So why do we think it's something we get only after years of practice? Because it really is something that we GET only after years of practice.

"When the student is ready the teacher appears" actually means, when the student has done enough basic practice for enough years to clean the wax out of his ears, he'll finally hear what sensei has been saying all along.

You doubt me? You think that a couple of words in the ear from a dying man would remain secret for long? Come on, martial artists are the greatest gossips since fish wives became fishers. Nothing is going to remain a secret for long. Even the (secret) correct answers to the Zen Koan were eventually written in a book and published.

No, the best place to keep the secrets is right out there in the open, like a \$10,000 bicycle covered in mud and scratches thrown on the front lawn instead of being chained to a post. Nobody ever looks for anything of value right in front of their noses.

But if you do look, if you listen with clean ears, you'll find all sorts of secret presents from sensei at your very next class. Just make sure you're standing down close to the beginners for the really juicy stuff.

## Teaching Mode

I used to have what I called teaching mode, still do I suspect, which consists of demonstrating the kata at the same speed all the way through. Each part gets the same amount of time and emphasis. The reasoning behind this was that when you are learning a kata each and every piece of it is of the same importance and so should be seen clearly.

Lately I have changed my mind and I now think that teaching mode is a mistake. I think it's a lot more important to show students what they are working toward rather than starting their instruction from an artificial timing in the kata.

Once they have seen the kata at the correct speed and timing there is plenty of time to break down the movements, show the mistakes and vary the timing. In other words, the very first thing the students should see is the very best example you can give to them. After that you teach.

A problem with teaching mode is that it can be a trap for an instructor. A while ago I was working with one of my students who has his own dojo and it took almost an hour for me to get him out of his own teaching mode so that we could work at his level.

Never forget that teaching time is an instructor's practice time as well, and by starting from your best effort you will be stretching your own legs.

## Mind Reading

I was doing a bit of Niten Ichiryu after weeks of learning some relatively complex kata in another school. One thing I noticed immediately is that Niten is simple. That is, a Niten kata has very few movements, which is what attracted me to the school in the first place, you can get down to it quickly.

"It" being the good stuff, the timing, the distance, the courage and the mind reading.

Mind reading? Yes, you can read minds by learning how to read bodies. You can read when your partner is about to attack through the tell-tale signs in his body. Now of course he is going to try to move without telegraphing it, but you can still read him if you work at it.

To develop the ability you have to start with your own body and learn how it moves, then you need to learn how to control it. For this practice, iaido is ideal, and that's why I began that study in the first place. Iaido allows you to analyse your stance and posture. It allows you to study power and sword handling and tip position and how to control it all.

Next on the list is to move on to partner kata work. Here you have to learn sei chu do, the stillness and the explosion and the relationship between the two. You can't simply freeze and then leap, you have to learn how to move from a state of rest, of relaxation, into a full attack without any preparation. To wait in a state of tension means that you are getting tired while screaming "I'm going to attack soon". Not very surprising to your opponent at all.

Does competition have any place in all this? Sure it does, if one trains correctly. Unfortunately most competition training consists in how to be faster than your opponent rather than how to read him. To be fair, most kata training consists in learning how to dance so it's not much better. The ideal of both competition and kata is to know when your opponent is about to move, then you can move easily to whichever place is best to be, thus stopping the attack even before it is made.

All this means that the ideal partner kata should be simple. It should allow you to "see the world in a grain of sand". There is infinite pleasure in Sasei, the first kata of the Niten Ichiryu long sword set which consists of walking up to the opponent and stabbing him in the throat when he tries to cut you down. Nothing more complicated than that, yet the technique is infinitely complex and infinitely difficult.

## Smoking and Self Defence

Just in the spirit of self defence, I present the following information I gained from a podcast I heard this morning.

It takes just 5 cigarettes to gain your first mutation of your DNA.

It takes 18,000 packs of cigarettes to pretty much ensure that you will develop cancer.

So, for those who give themselves cancer from cigarette smoking in Ontario, where you can buy a package for about \$4 apparently, it will cost you \$72,000 which is damned near as much as I had accumulated in my pension fund when I took a buyout after 24 years of service.

Let's be clear about this, you will spend \$72,000 for the privilege of getting cancer.

If you hear that, and stop smoking it will be the single most beneficial act of self defence you will ever perform. It could save your life and put \$72,000 in your pocket at the same time.

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A little addendum to this, and an explanation I suppose. My mother died a couple of days ago. She suffered from leukemia, diabetes, kidney failure, macular degeneration, heart disease and a couple other things. She was a life long chain-smoker. I loved her dearly but I couldn't spend as much time with her in the last few years as I wanted to because I couldn't stand being around the smoke.



## Bring and Take

Call me old and a fuddy duddy. I was never really bothered by neologisms... at least not rationally. Sure the verbification of nouns grated on my ears, or should I say "impacted my ears", but I understood that's the way English works. However, I can't seem to ignore the misuse of bring and take. It seems that we are doomed to use bring for every instance of moving something from one place to another. I know we're doomed because all US TV shows seem to say "bring". "We need to bring the tools to the jobsite".

I'm sorry but if it's going from here to there we take it, and if it's going from there to here they bring it. It's driving me crazy and I finally figured out why.

Bring means gimme, bring me a present, bring me a beer, bring me the TV remote. Take means work, giving something away, I take dessert to the party and I take the bokuto to the dojo.

The bringers of the world want it all and want it now. "Bring it, baby". Giving? What's that?

Which brings us to "You get what you pay for". Christmas just came and went and Santa brought all sorts of presents to everyone (he didn't take them to anyone apparently). Those of us who weren't gifted by the fat one had to buy stuff for people and bring it to them personally (aaargh my teeth hurt). While shopping I'm sure you looked at a couple of geejaws with two different prices and thought "the more expensive one will last longer" right? We have no proof of any such thing but we've been taught that better is more expensive so we tend to buy into that.

It works for martial arts instruction too, the more expensive classes at the University where I teach tend to have more students, implying that students sign up for courses they value based on price. OK maybe those classes with more students charge more? Well even given that, the statement stands. More people in a class means they value that class more, so therefore we should charge more because... yes, "you get what you pay for". See?

Well I don't. What I see in the martial arts, and in a hell of a lot of other places where one person teaches another, is a different value system altogether and it goes like this.

You get back what you put in.

Once said, it seems obvious for the martial arts but it holds true for University science courses as well. Over the 65 or 70 courses I took during my school days I got the most out of those courses I put the most work into. I may have chosen to put that work in or I may have been forced to work by an instructor that insisted on it, but I got more out when I put more in.

They all cost the same but some were better than others.

Now, how can we work money back into this new equation? Well if you are being taught a martial art

that you figure you're getting a lot out of, put more in. Your sensei teaches for free? (Not unusual in some arts, like the ones I teach), find some way of paying him back other than stuffing a wad of bills in his obi. Is he a carpenter? Get him to build your garden shed. Is he a baker? Buy your bread from his shop. After all, he has to make a living and if he can't do it in your area he may just move away and that means you lose your instruction. Put more in, get more out. It works on many levels.

"I want you to bring me to that class Dad, it's more expensive so it should be better".

"Take me there father, I hear they make you work very hard so I should get more out of it".



## The Right Place

A couple posts ago I mentioned moving to the right place. I used to play Go a little, was never very good but occasionally I could make a decent player frown. The way I did that was to make every single move in the game the same way, I would look over the board and decide where the most important point was, then drop a stone there. I tried to be where it was most important to be, I tried to be in the right place.

I got that from the martial arts. Whether you are throwing, grappling or using weapons it is vitally important to be in the right place... of course at the right time, but time doesn't matter if you can't figure out where.

This was brought home to me recently when I was practicing Niten with a student. Niten tends to be where I emphasize timing and placement, mostly because it's made for that. Several of the tachi seiho (long vs long sword) kata are great for examining body positioning, too far away and it doesn't work, too close and it doesn't work, wrong angle of the body, wrong angle of movement... it is by being in the right place we knock uchidachi back on his heels and make the kata work. Wrong place and it doesn't matter how fast you are, how strong you are, uchidach can lay that blade on you. Right place and I don't care how much more experienced you are, you're jumping around wide-eyed looking for the nearest exit.

Damn that's fun. I most especially like ending up with a blade in my face while my own sword is hanging off to one side and I'm hopping up and down one one leg, the other dangling because I really don't know how to get it back on the ground without poking my own eye out. I'm not kidding, that's fun!

## Everything Teaches

I was at my mother's house yesterday, cleaning. My sister had suggested hiring someone to clean and we could easily have afforded it, but my mother kept a neat house. She painted about once each 10 years and used good paint. She cleaned at least three times a year, and by cleaning I mean she got out a bucket and a sponge and scrubbed ceilings, walls and floors. She did this because both she and her husband smoked and everything went dull and dingy, white became beige, blue became beige, red became beige...

If my mother had let the place go, if it looked like my own house looks now (it looks like a not very well organized warehouse with boxes and stacks of loose wooden sticks everywhere, winding pathways between) I would have had no problem hiring someone to clean it. But I couldn't.

As her eyes got worse she went to a cleaning company and she would ask me when I visited "are there cobwebs?" There weren't and I told her so but I knew she didn't believe me. She could feel the place getting dingy as her eyesight faded.

I needed to clean the place myself. I didn't succeed, I didn't clean it very well, but I was witness to how it wasn't clean in a way that a cleaning company wouldn't see, wouldn't care. I know what my mother considered clean and I honoured that, at least in the breach.

Which brings me to the opportunity to give a lesson. We started at the ceiling and used a mop and a strong cleaner. Once we got to the area where my mother lived the last few years, listening to old TV shows (she remembered what they looked like) and smoking, the stray bits of water would run down the walls away from the ceiling. An almost black drop would appear about a foot down and a streak of... not white but at least 5 shades whiter than what was there, would appear.

I called the kids over and said "imagine that in your lungs over 60 years". Both kids expressed wonder that Gramma had lived as long as she had. [Why had she? The women in my family are tough, they live a LONG time. They have to be tough to deal with the men (who, on the Taylor side at least, tend to die young and of faulty livers).]

The lesson, which was only in the way of reinforcement, neither kid has the least interest in smoking, was taken I think.

My budo points?

- Everything is an opportunity to teach and to learn.
- Everything is a chance to practice (my back and neck are now shot, I learned once again how to drive myself physically beyond what I can/should do)
- Honour your teachers in the way that best honours them. My mother would not want the final family gathering in a place that was less than spotless... I failed but I tried. I honour my deceased instructors by trying to teach as they taught... again I fail but I try.

- Your mother was your first budo teacher. I discovered this by reading a letter she sent me while I was in University. You should think about it.



## Recruiting Time

It's been a downward trend for students in many of the clubs I'm affiliated with lately, so we should think about a bit of recruiting to keep things ticking along I think. Here I'm going to gather some ideas together, so this post may grow a bit over the next few days.

- **Constant recruiting:** We should recruit in good times as well as bad, if we wait until we're down to 3 students we've waited too long and those who have to rent practice space will find themselves hard pressed to keep their space. Those in free community centres or other shared space may also experience the same problem as groups with more participants start lobbying for your space or practice times.
- **Bring a friend for free week:** or month, get everyone to bring at least one more person along to try it out. Club members will be the most effective recruiters in any club.
- **Press releases:** in local papers, if you don't have an event handy, make one up and write up a release, including a photo for all the local media. Every grading, every special event, every seminar, every visiting teacher should provide you with a new press release.
- **Articles and interviews:** Write articles for local papers, magazines or EJMAS.com even (see below). Give interviews whenever and wherever you are asked.
- **Recreation handbooks:** make sure you're listed in all the community calendars.
- **Web pages:** Your dojo absolutely has to have a web page. The internet is now the first place to look for any service, and if you're not there you're not going to be found. Make sure your organization has a dojo listing as well, and get your club onto it. Link to other clubs or back to your organization, provide as many ways for the search engines to find your site as you can. Put the link to your website in your email signature.
- **Business cards:** Always have a few in your wallet, and give them to your students to hand out as well. Make it easy for people to get in touch, and give them several ways to do it, by phone, mail, email or walk in visits.
- **Open house:** Invite the public in regularly, once a quarter maybe, or just before the next beginner class starts. Let people come and look the place over. Joining a dojo is stressful, make it less so by letting folks see what a regular bunch you are.
- **Summer Samurai Camp:** if one of the club members needs a job for the summer, why not do a day camp? Can you imagine being a kid and being able to do a camp based on your martial art for a week or two? Wouldn't you have loved that?
- **Kids Kids Kids:** Sure you figure you're a cheap babysitting class if you take in kids, but what's wrong with that? The kids are getting something great out of the arts, you get to hang out with all that enthusiasm and you can help make them better people. Why not have a homework

area so the kids can do their schoolwork before (or after) they can get onto the mat and blow off some steam? If you're a babysitter why not be the best. Remember, kids grow up to become the next generation of instructors.

- **Be generous:** If you have a full class and a waiting list, pass those students on to a nearby club, don't think for a moment that they will wait around to join your class later. They will be on to some other activity instead. Pass them to a club in your organization or even send them to another group, just make sure that everyone who is interested gets into the arts while they are keen on it.
- **Kick the seniors out:** If you've got a lot of high ranking students in your dojo, students who could be teaching a class, encourage them to go start a class somewhere else. They won't be taking students away from your class, they'll be expanding the art as a whole. Think about how many martial art clubs are in your area as compared to fitness clubs, or dance studios. People expect there to be a fitness club in every neighbourhood. If you get beyond a critical mass of clubs and students, the same expectation will occur for your martial art.
- **Talk it up:** Any budo is good budo, just like people want a dance studio, they want a martial art dojo and they aren't too fussy about which style they try at first. Don't talk down anybody's dojo, encourage everyone who asks to get involved, no matter where or with whom. People will start, find out they like it, and then migrate to your club because it's the best in town right? Look, the bottom line is that the more of us that are advertising, the more folks will come looking and they may just find you when they go looking for the other guys.
- **Hit the mall:** Most shopping malls will rent some hallway space and a table to groups for a very reasonable rate. Go sit for a day and answer questions, give demonstrations, show videos and hand out flyers.
- **Demonstrations:** Never turn one down, and tell your students that you're willing to demonstrate at their school, scout meeting, business lunch or retail store.
- **Seminars:** Same here, get thee to any other dojo or fitness club or dance studio that will have you and teach a short seminar. Everyone can teach something, even if it isn't the innermost secrets of your school. There's always some aspect of any art that transfers fast and easily.
- **Retain those students:** It's a lot more easy to keep someone who is already in the dojo than it is to find a new one, so lighten up there sensei, stop chasing the beginners out. Save that for the seniors when they are thoroughly hooked. Make it easy for students to come back to class after a few missed sessions. Even if the budo is everything to you, your students may have a life, recognize that once in a while and cut them a little slack.

## Does Sensei have to be Old

I had a situation recently that made me question whether a sensei needed to be old in order to teach a martial art. This question came about when I decided to attend an open house for a local martial arts school that offered kendo. I was excited about the whole thing and was eager to see a demonstration of their art. The senior students went about demonstrating their other various arts: hand-to-hand combat, jo techniques, bo staff techniques, and a few other ninja type weapons. Finally, the time came for the sensei to demonstrate their sword techniques. One of the senior students picked up a sword and the sensei went to face him. The match barely began when it was over, the senior student admitted defeat and bowed out. Some of the older men from the crowd began grumbling amongst themselves. The demonstration continued and with each technique the sensei demonstrated the disgruntled men just got worse. At the end of the demonstration, the several disgruntled men got up and walked towards the door. I stopped one of the men and asked why they were leaving and he answered, "He's too young to know anything!" This statement perplexed me, I couldn't figure out why age would be that important. First of all, the sensei at the demonstration was in his mid thirties and was of sandan rank with certification from his sensei. I personally felt this enough to at least watch his demonstration and get to know him. But I've began to notice this trend in all aspects of life, people don't want to learn from someone younger than them. So my question to you is, "Does a sensei need to be old in order to teach?" Does age matter or does the sensei need to be the bald, white breasted master we see in the movies and on TV? Sorry for this long e-mail but if you could make sense of this I'd appreciate it.

Hey, I'm bald and white-bearded and have been since I was about 35... in fact I took off the beard and what was left of the hair because I didn't like the old man staring out at me from the mirror.

I think that's the problem right there. Your old men who walked out of the demonstration didn't really believe they were old, they still saw themselves as the same age as the sensei who was demonstrating, and so they couldn't believe that someone that young (their age) could know much.

We are trained by older men, it's a plain and simple fact, and so we expect our teachers to be older than we are. When we get old ourselves it becomes very difficult to take instruction from someone who is younger. It takes a certain strength of character, assuredness of self, and humbleness to stand before someone who is younger than you are and ask to be taught. It takes a serious lack of ego.

You run into this situation a lot in the koryu, where the headmaster dies and leaves the school to a younger man. Where do the old students go? Do they stay with the new headmaster, a fellow they remember in diapers? A kid who asked them how to hold the sword? How can you be kohai and sensei at the same time? How can you be sempai and student?

In a lot of cases the older men step aside politely, teaching in their own dojo but rarely visiting the old school. Charitably, this allows the new teacher to establish himself in his own school without having the students look sideways at the seniors. I suspect there is also a bit of removing oneself from the temptation to correct the new headmaster, and perhaps a bit of staying away so that one's own ego does



not get rubbed the wrong way. Mostly this situation works to the satisfaction of all, the old men come to the official functions and support the young headmaster and mostly do their own thing for the rest of the time.

The situation can get a bit more sticky if friction occurs, perhaps the new headmaster was a bit of a late-comer, perhaps the students of the old men and the young soke get into a bit of "my dad is bigger than your dad". In this case the practical difference might simply be that the old men don't show up for the official events. In almost all cases, the new headmaster eventually gets to be the old headmaster and the sempei shuffle off the stage and all settles down again.

Let's face it, new headmasters tend to have their own ideas on practice and who wants to change their style after 30 years of practice. It doesn't have to be any more complicated than that.

To get back to this specific case we aren't talking about koryu, but kendo which is a pretty broad art with no clear headmaster but a great many older, experienced instructors around. Lots of them. Enough of them that you could find a pretty senior person with a bit of effort for just about any demonstration you might wish to present. This may be one reason your old men were complaining, compared to a 7dan that might have been in the next town, what does a 3dan know indeed? Perhaps they weren't complaining about the skill level of the sandan but the very fact that he was demonstrating in public at that rank (when there was a better example to be had). If there was no better example around, it really comes down to expose the art or don't expose it. I would tend to come down on the side of "show it" in that case because the damage to kendo by a sandan showing it publicly won't be all that great.

Can a young man have something to teach? Certainly. Would an old man want to learn from him? A different question indeed, even if he was a great teacher, as most honest old men would admit.

"Does a sensei need to be old in order to teach?" ... No but it helps.

My own question is "should the old men have discouraged a potential student (you) from entering the art by 'dissing' the young sensei?"

## Teaching Style

I have a new question that is related to my last e-mail about old/ young sensei. I talked a little bit about the demonstration in my last e-mail, well my question is about teaching methods. I'm not referring to the methods used in demos, but the methods used in day to day classes. I know that in demos, a new technique is shown and the students have a few minutes to practice the technique then another new technique is introduced. I get that this teaching is a way to show a lot of techniques to prospect students and get them to want to join your dojo. But the problem I have is when that type of teaching continues into the classes. What happened in my case was, I watched the demo and took up the dojos offer to try a week of classes for free. I was told I would attend the regular classes and, if I was a good student, I could join. The first class I attended, the teaching was indirect and was all over the place. A technique was introduced and quickly the technique was altered then altered again at the sensei's will. There were no basics and everything was fast paced, with a "do as say not as I do" attitude. Well, my question is whether this teaching is normal or not? Also, what is your method of teaching, I would like to know for myself.

Ah yes, teaching style. One of my sensei learned the very first kata for 2 or 3 years before starting to move along. The other learned in a dojo where they proceeded through the kata sets in a regular fashion, start to finish and start again. As a result, my own students sometimes get marched through a set or two in one evening and at other times may get four hours of the same kata.

The thing about iaido is that it can be practiced solo and I do tend to assume my students are practicing outside class so I feel free to move along briskly at times, confident that they will be reinforcing things on their own time.

Silly, I know.

So how best to teach beginners? It's a delicate balance. If you spend three weeks on a single kata you are quite likely to lose the 10% of those who start who would have stayed on. On the other hand, if you march right through things too quickly you may lose that vital 10% of "stickers" and retain a different set of students who leave a bit later assuming they know everything there is to know once they've picked up the "dance steps".

It sounds as if the sensei who was teaching you not only moved through the kata quickly, but also showed you a lot of variation and interpretation in the kata. This is something that beginners really don't appreciate. If you're whizzing past a kata they don't want three different ways to do it, especially if you tell them that they can pick any of the three and don't tell them which you practice personally.

How should one teach?

I think the ideal, and what I like to think I do, is to give a bit of a mix. Go through several kata at one time, explaining to the class that they are getting an overview to let them know what's ahead. Then go back and start teaching. For beginners go from the big to the small. Start with the dance steps, this foot

goes in front of that. Once they have the shape explain the basic meaning of the kata, since we're talking iai here we must tell them what their invisible opponent is doing. After they get the right shape we start working on the flavour, the timing, posture and the targeting of the cuts to make sure it all works together. Here is where we start to introduce the variations to show how the kata would change if the opponent did this or that. Much later we start working on the texture, the feeling of the kata. Finally, the student has to start working toward making the art their own, which means that sensei has to suggest modifications which suit the student so that they can begin to feel the art within their own bodies. Once they do that, sensei is just the guy who stands around making tea while they get on with learning the rest of the lessons by themselves.

That's the kata. But the kata are only places where we learn the kihon, and that instruction goes on continually through learning one kata after another. How to grip the sword, how to swing, how to move the hips, how to breathe. That's something that would be excruciating to learn without the distraction of learning kata so a good sensei will sneak that stuff in between repetitions of each small dance.



## Go no Sen

Check out this short article here: <http://sciencenow.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/2010/203/1>

Basically it supports the idea that there is an error prone reaction system which we can tap into when we are in danger. This reaction system is marginally faster than an action that is deliberately taken. The example they use is the gunfight, the person drawing second, reacting to the other person's draw, is marginally faster than the first person. Unfortunately, this speed doesn't entirely make up for the lack of initiative and if we're just counting draw and shoot, the second fellow loses.

But if someone is slightly faster to begin with, more practiced, and reacts to the attack efficiently...

Go no sen: To attack after the attack. A sword cut, especially an iaido draw and cut, isn't going to be as fast as a gunslinger. Add in some serious practice in a patterned response to a predictable attack and you just may get to an advantage going to the person who reacts, rather than the person who initiates.

Now, if you can get to the point where you can read the attacker's intention and begin your danger-driven, practiced reaction at that point...



## How Selfish Can You Get

Last evening I realized, not for the first time, that I only teach because it helps me learn. I don't make any money teaching, it's a pain in the butt to convince the powers that be every year (for 20 years now) that they should grant us a bit of time in a dance studio when nobody else wants to be near the place, and I've passed on pretty much everything I know to other students who are teaching in dojo of their own. I've done my bit for the arts, so I teach only for my own gain these days.

How does that work? Having to go teach helps get my lazy self into the dojo. Having some residual feeling of responsibility to get the students through their next grading helps focus the classes on a few key sets of kata which are suitable for beginners, and forces me to concentrate on basics. Beyond that, I wander through kata and arts as it pleases me. I see connections between this and that so we practice them. I torture whichever senior is around just so I can see whether this angle or that step is good or bad for me (and the opposite for them).

And I answer questions. By answering questions I concentrate and focus my own thoughts about the subject, I discover new answers as I am speaking them, and I get pushed into new areas to investigate.

All this is good for me, not so good for beginners, but I don't really care much about that. They seem to pick it up despite how I'm laying it out so enough of them stay around to become interesting. Of course I also suspect the seniors are telling the beginners what they need to know when my back is turned, which will turn them into teachers without their realizing it.

Oh devious arts, how resilient thou art to overcome even the most selfish of instructors.

## Kamiza

In the Kendo World forum someone is asking about kamiza and Peter West (a 7dan iaido teacher in England) replied that "A basketball hoop makes a perfect kamiza."

I'm not sure that folks really got that remark. There were comments on the perfect circle and a hilarious note that a great scroll to hang would be "don't clip the basketball hoop" but I was struck by a rather deeper appreciation for a seemingly throwaway remark.

A basketball hoop for a kamiza.

First, why is one worrying about a kamiza in the west? One obviously wants to make a Japanese dojo, complete with shinto decoration. This means a special place to practice iaido.

This is a bad idea.

The best place to practice iaido is wherever you can practice it, and often that means in a gym, stealing some time away from the boys in the 'hood who want to get in there and sink a few hoops.

Even in Japan you'll find a lot of very serious iaido being practiced in places where the basketball hoop is the kamiza.

If you've got a private dojo, a dedicated space with a wonderful kamiza and a lovely scroll in the tokonoma, that's great, but a basketball hoop will do for the important stuff.

## Switching Dojo

One of the most divisive things about the martial arts is the act of moving from one dojo to another. It's like leaving a family to go live with another one, and you should treat it like that.

If it's one person leaving to go practice with someone else, perhaps to get a different style of instruction, a couple of things should be done as a matter of course. First, both the current and the future instructor should be asked, and in that order. Your current instructor got you to where you are now, you need to acknowledge that by asking him if you can switch to another instructor. Your future instructor will likely value his relationship with your old teacher much more than he will value you as a student, you should respect that as well. There should be no feeling of abandonment or "student poaching" if you discuss the move beforehand.

What are good reasons for a move? One is a difference in instruction as I mentioned, if a kendo player is on the verge of breaking into a national team level and that breakthrough can be made better with a different instructor, all parties may agree it's a good thing. Another reason to leave, and much more common, would be moving to a different location where there is a different, local dojo. There will seldom be a problem with switching in this case.

Be aware that we are talking about fairly low-ranked short-studied students here. It is accepted that students need to find their best fit for instruction and a certain amount of moving around to find it is good for the art. On the other hand, if you've got 5 or 6dan with the same instructor, or have been there for 15 years, moving to another dojo is going to be a serious business and the reasons had better be extremely good if difficulties are to be avoided. This goes for moves across the country. It is perfectly acceptable to practice in a different dojo while being a student of someone far away, it is less acceptable to move, as a high ranking student, to another sensei altogether. There are political consequences that will reverberate far beyond the two instructors and the student involved.

What about leaving a dojo to start your own?

Ah, this is the sort of thing that breaks apart organizations. I have seen many cases where a senior student leaves a dojo and invites students to move with him to a new place. This is amazingly bad manners and a real slap in the face to the instructor of the original dojo. This sort of thing takes years to heal, if it ever does... and often it never does. I've seen it spill over into the next generation and I've seen it split organizations in two.

If you really want to go start teaching on your own, do it the correct way. Ask permission from your sensei, ask him for help, ask him to come teach once in a while, ask him to allow your students to come practice in the old dojo, and most important of all.... get your own students.

If your sensei tells his students they can practice with you, great, but never, ever invite them to leave the old dojo and join yours. Not unless you really mean to insult the man who "raised you" to the level you're at now.

In the case where you are already a high-level student who has been practicing in another teacher's dojo for a few years and it's time to go start your own place, it is still inappropriate to ask students to come along to your new place. Thank your long-time host and start your own dojo, find your own students. In this case your old host may just send a few students along to help you get started.

Don't poach students, ever. I've seen instructors practice in another dojo and tell students they should come practice with them. Poor taste, right up there with having dinner at a friend's house and making a pass at his wife. At least have the decency to make a pass at the wife in the supermarket, not while enjoying the husband's hospitality. If a student shows up at your dojo and wants to practice with you, ask him who his sensei is, and whether or not he's talked it over with him. Call the old sensei and talk with him if you think it's appropriate.

None of this is to imply that students shouldn't travel to different dojo to practice. I have seen the case where there are many dojo in a city, and students move from one to another through the week so that they can practice 7 days out of 7. This can be quite healthy, it makes for better students and it makes for instructors who don't get bent out of shape with each other, how can they fly apart when their students are busy making things come together. As long as the students have a home dojo and as long as the various sensei are happy, this is a marvellous situation.



## Esoteric Arts

A couple of days ago I began making plans to get the partner into the gym and practice up a couple of new koryu sets that I still don't have worked into my bones. I don't have a lot of time for this and it suddenly occurred to me that I don't really have dozens of students waiting anxiously for this material.

Now learning new kata and new sets is a good thing, there is no doubt of that. You learn a few new moves with your weapon, you learn a lot of subtle new ways to use the basic moves you already know, and it reinforces a lot of the basics you already have.

But often it's really just a bunch of variations on the same theme so why am I knocking myself out learning them "by heart".

I've often said that I'm a fan of arts that are small, that have few but pithy techniques. These arts are easy to learn and provide a lifetime of the stuff that comes after you've learned them. (Learning obviously meaning to learn the movements of the kata.)

A lot of people on the net express a desire to learn an obscure koryu so that they can help preserve it for the future.

Nuts to that, they're curious, nothing more, or they're romantic but there's nothing in any art I ever practiced or watched that is intrinsically valuable. There are no movements I've ever seen that are worth preserving for their own sake, they can all be reinvented at need. The value of a koryu, at least a good one, is that it has been pared down into an internally consistent set of movements that fit together and make sense. One leads into the next and at the end of your study you can move within that art inventing techniques at will.

Some seitei gata (representative forms) share a similar theme. The kendo federation jodo forms are such as they are a subset of the Shindo Muso Ryu. Study of the seitei gata is more or less the study of the first 2 or 3 (depending on how you count) sets of the koryu and study of one means a pretty good understanding of the other. The beauty of the seitei forms is that there are only 12 of them, as compared to 26 of the koryu forms in the same covered material. There is value in simplicity and I doubt I'll ever forget which seitei kata comes next or how to do it. The same can't be said for my study of the SMR koryu kata.

But that's what books, video and my notebook are for isn't it? That's what the walls full of kata lists in the dojo are for isn't it?

Back to the point. There is really no reason for me to be too concerned about learning these new kata sets as long as I don't have students eager to learn them.

Are there students? I teach 5 or 6 koryu, 3 or 4 "seitei" (depending again on how you count) and I have the time to travel. There are no hoards beating down my door to be taught, no invites to exotic locations

to pass on my knowledge. I travel about once a month to visit the various folks I've been practicing with for years but I don't see many new faces there either.

Nah, I'll head out to the shop and finish that stick order rather than haul myself and my partner out to the gym to practice. Maybe tomorrow I'll go swing the sticks I made today.



## Boredom

I seem to get bored easily, in fact it takes about 5 minutes on average. This isn't a problem in and of itself, but with me boredom is dangerous. It causes projects.

I can't count the number of projects I've started and haven't been able to finish because of this. I should be able to deal with a half day of downtime between one update to EJMAS, monthly issue to 180 magazine, update to the one of a kind page of sdksupplies, change to the kendo-canada website and another... or a pause in any of the other 12 or 14 things I do, but no, I end up starting another project.

Sigh

This is not a variation on "train like your hair is on fire", this is more the result of being afraid that I won't get it all done, or that if I don't do it, nobody will.

Less haste and more speed. Fewer projects and get more done!

## Conservatism

Moshe Feldenkrais said, in 1942, that "... the word Ju-Jitsu is used only in Europe and is obsolete in the country in which it originated, as is the method it is used to denote. Both are replaced by a more scientific and much more efficient system called Judo."

Feldenkrais was a convert to judo of course, but it's interesting that he would say jujutsu was an obsolete word. In this day of koryu-mania they are far from obsolete, we're digging up all those old terms and even the old grading systems as fast as we can.

Ah yes, "there's none so Scots as the Scots abroad". Or perhaps more appropriately, "there's none so fervent as the converted". While the Japanese were keen to embrace the new and improved, the Europeans were clinging to the old ways which were, of course, much more romantic.

We agonize over mirrors in the dojo while the Japanese are working with motion capture training systems.

# Mostly

Mostly,  
growing up and being happy  
comes down to  
asking yourself  
what you want.

Out of life  
Out of love  
Out of time

Mostly,  
figuring out what you want  
gives you answers:  
what you don't want  
how to get that  
how to say goodbye

Mostly,  
it isn't money  
it isn't fame  
it isn't sex

Mostly,  
it's time  
to spend with the kids  
to think  
to write  
to be alone with your thoughts

So why  
Oh why  
Why

Mostly,  
do we spend our lives  
with people who don't like us  
doing things we don't have to do  
for money we don't need  
in places we don't like

Is it God  
Society  
Systemic disadvantage  
Nature or Nurture

Lazy  
Thoughtless  
Fearful  
Hurtful

Guilty  
Empathic  
Responsible  
Nurturing

Mostly,  
it comes down to understanding  
that I'm not your mother  
you're not my mother  
and your pain really  
is not mine.

Mostly,  
it's the golden rule  
You get what you give  
not what you deserve

Mostly,  
you need to figure out  
what you deserve

Mostly,  
your great great grandkids  
won't know your name  
let alone  
what you were upset about

Mostly

*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.*