

Putting Yourself Out There

There was a time when I was going to every local seminar (and a few not-so-local) in hopes of broadening my experience and finding universal principles that would span divergent martial arts.

I traveled to Dennis Palumbo's dojo in Colorado to visit Roland Maroteaux's Aiki-jujutsu seminar. I drove down to Rhode Island to drop in on Fumio Toyoda's Aikido seminar. In both cases, I ran into Miguel Ibarra, who mentioned that he and I were two of the few senior instructors (6th dan+ at the time) that actually attended seminars other than our own. Of course, this truth should have come as no surprise to me, but I had not thought about it until then. It had not occurred to me that we were putting ourselves in the position of a student and as such could easily have been corrected for our ignorance of any technique on the agenda, and also could have been tossed around indiscreetly by lower ranked students who might just relish slamming a senior to the mat on occasion.

Although we were taking some risks, each of us handled ourselves such that we were never embarrassed either by our ignorance or our inability to handle an overeager partner. This started me thinking about other ways a certain limited number of instructors tend to "put themselves out there" where most take a safer route, at least in public. (This is not to suggest that sometimes a safer route is never preferable or desirable, but that is a subject for another essay.)

It is not unusual for a senior instructor to travel with his own *uke* (receiver) on the premise that only someone trained under the senior instructor could possibly take the difficult falls required in his art. Certainly this can be true, but it is just as likely that the trained *uke* knows how to move smoothly with these techniques, anticipating them somewhat, thus making the senior instructor look, not just good, but extraordinary. I realize that picking a stiff, awkward black belt out of a crowded seminar and expecting him to fall with aplomb might not make me appear masterful, but it does make me appear real. I tend to take both tacks. First I will work with a known partner when demonstrating in front of the class, then I will go around to offer corrections and try out other partners in the process of illustrating those corrections. Often I will stop the training to make a point in the middle of the dojo, using the partner that is most convenient to illustrate it.

If the technique or principle warrants further demonstration, I will try to use different sized partners to illustrate modifications or potential problems. About once per seminar there is someone who will ask me to do the technique to him, requiring me to assess whether this guy just needs to feel it because that is how he learns, or whether he is issuing a veiled challenge because he doesn't believe it works. I always help the former and always avoid the latter. Later

I'll use that partner showing a technique or variation he has never seen before, so he cannot either deny its functionality, nor can he intentionally resist it.

Often, when senior teachers instruct subtler techniques, the techniques seem impressive if not incredible. It is easier and more natural to be a doubter than a believer. Good instructors put themselves out there by taking chances regarding whom they demonstrate upon or train with, thus publically welcoming the doubting Thomas.

Those that do not are themselves doubtful of their own abilities.