

Wise Men of the Village?

In the Okinawa of previous centuries, if a martial artist lived in the village, he was looked upon as a village resource. He could be a healer or decision maker, an advisor or a counsel elder. To the extent that he had made a reputation for himself because of his long-term martial arts studies, he was generally looked up to, depended upon, and, frankly, lauded.

Today we would barely consider praising a long-term martial artist for any quality, let alone one that implied that an entire village would refer, let alone defer, to his opinion/wisdom/expertise. Is that because there are too many martial artists out there? Is it because we no longer live in groups small enough to be called a village? Or is it because our culture has developed specialists in various fields to whom we can turn in a time of need?

The answer is probably a mixture of all the above. Okay, times change. It is certainly better, should one become ill, to depend on one of several local doctors than one lone martial arts master. It is wiser to have a police force and a judicial system than to have a martial arts master acting as judge, jury, and punch-a-cusioner. It is better that we have a city council or board of selectmen than that we have village elders, isn't it?

I can envision situation in which one might prefer to have a Master Chojun in charge, but by and large, I see where one's preference would most likely lie with contemporary culture. Nevertheless, wouldn't it be nice if martial artists like you and I could not only aspire to be recognized as Masters by our own dojo, federation, or hall-of-fame, but also could aspire to be knowledgeable and wise enough to serve in the capacities Okinawan masters often served in.

Decades ago, I was in a bookstore in Harvard Square, when I saw a young woman begin to look dizzy. I got to her just as she collapsed to the floor. No one else seemed to notice. I stayed with her to determine if she needed medical help. She did not lose consciousness but remained weak and did not know what the problem was. She did not want an ambulance, but said she'd like to be taken to the Harvard Infirmary, which was in the square, but several blocks away. I sat her down against the end of a bookcase and asked her to wait while I pulled my car to the front door. Other people in the store were sitting cross-legged on the floor reading, not unusual in the 1970s, and probably still *de rigueur* in many university towns, so she still did not garner attention.

It did not take me long to reappear and help her into my vehicle. She asked, "You are so calm about all this. Thanks very much for helping. Are you an EMT or a Med student?"

"No," I said, "I'm a martial artist." It was the first thing that came to mind.

Now, I freely admit that it does not take an experienced martial artist to keep his cool whenever someone else may be in trouble, nor to help that person in a way that does not draw attention to her, but it is satisfying to think that I may not have acted the same way if I had *not* been a martial artist. In other words, for a

very brief moment, I had the opportunity to be the wise man of the village, and, thank goodness, I met the challenge.

I was able to contact her several days later to find that she was okay, so it really had not been a life-threatening incident, and, had I not been there, I am sure someone else would have risen to the task, yet I can't help thinking that the incident formed my desire to know something more about the body than I had learned up to that time. I did not want to be a pre-Med student, nor an EMT—my preferred profession lay elsewhere—but having been a momentary “wise man of the village” made me realize how far we can aspire as martial artists. Forget the belts—they will come in time. Forget the titles—continually personal development may bring them, as well. Think instead about what you can achieve using traditional martial arts as a starting point. Not a bad career path to follow.