

A Puzzle of Principles

“A true bujutsu...tradition is a cohesive puzzle. Every separate aspect combines to strengthen the whole and complement each other. ...that individual techniques are not the art but rather a temporary reflection of a deeper set of concepts...is liberating. ... Mastery of these principles allows a martial school to grow from generation to generation from old applications to new.”

*–Yukiyoshi TAKAMURA (founder of Takamura-ha Shindo Yoshin Ryu)
from an interview in Aikido Journal, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1999*

I was gratified to read these words from Master Takamura since they reflected my own thoughts on the matter. Even as a young teacher I would warn my students that the exam is only a representation of the curriculum, the curriculum only a representation of the techniques, that the techniques are not the style, and the style is not the art.

Styles and arts are constructs created so that human beings can more easily grasp concepts and principles. A concept or principle cannot exist without a conductor, an example, and/or an application. Consider Soke Don Angier’s famous principle of “Triangulation” or “Off-balancing Point”. There is no way to describe it without imaging a *tori*, an *uke*, and an action between them. Uke stands in a natural posture. Tori takes uke’s wrist and reaches it diagonally downward to uke’s front or rear at a point that is about a shin’s distance from uke’s base. If the angle is too great, uke will step to retain his balance. If it is too small, uke will resist in place, but if it is at the “triangulation point”, uke will fall. When you see that action, you have an application, an example, and a conductor that transfers the concept.

Each concept may have several applications. Several concepts like this, and you have a curriculum and perhaps the beginnings of an art. But the art will somehow not seem whole if its parts do not integrate smoothly. “Pasted” arts seem simply like collections of errant techniques. Students of arts such as these memorize lists rather than master concepts. Sure, students of a well-integrated art memorize techniques, as well, but eventually those techniques help them understand the concepts upon which the techniques rest so that those students are no longer limited to a set of techniques at all.

One could easily object by pointing out that even when studying a well-integrated, concept-based art, one must *memorize* lists of concepts. Yes and no. Memorizing concepts may be a step up from memorizing techniques, but it is only a step on the staircase. The principles must become integrated within the person so that the techniques with which that person reacts automatically employ those principles.

Before the tradition of the art is passed on, the chief instructors must have integrated both representative techniques and relevant principles such that those instructors become living examples of the tradition. Before the tradition can be learned as “a cohesive puzzle”, using

Nakamura Sensei's phrase, the principal practitioners of the tradition must themselves become cohesive puzzles of techniques and principles (*waza* and *genri*). They become the conductors, the examples, and the applicators of the tradition's content and thus convey the tradition's principles and concepts, as well.