

DEN, Okuden, & Hiden

Browsing through my bookcases, I came upon an old favorite adult comic book by Richard Corben called “DEN”. Corben had been a karate student of Sensei Jim Harrison in Kansas, and I had first been attracted to his art because of his accurate depiction of karate techniques, later because of his sexy, action-filled sequences. David Ellis Norman (DEN) is a kid who is magically transformed into a muscular clothes-free adult in a mystical Neverwhere realm where he rescues busty maidens and rides giant bat-beasts.

Simply because of his name, the Japanese martial terms *okuden* (inner teachings) and *hiden* (secret teachings) came to mind and I began to wonder if they too were hidden fantasy worlds meant to draw in young males who wanted to be as strong and heroic as DEN (who looked like a naked Vin Diesel on steroids). I remembered something that I had read long ago—I think it was from Donn Draeger—that, in many cases, one style’s *hiden* was another style’s *kihon* (basic). In other words, in some cases at least, the secret techniques were nothing more than untaught variations. This did not mean that legitimately secret techniques and concepts reserved for the privileged did not exist; only that “secret” is a relative term.

Kamishin Aiki-ju-jutsu’s Godan Waza held techniques taught only to those who had earned yondan and were privately training for their godan rank under the headmaster of the system. I recall Soke Church, the inheritor of this 800-year-old system telling me that when I learned the godan techniques, I might be disappointed because “they were only variations [of previous requirements] that a good martial artist might stumble upon on his own.”

Those who have studied older martial traditions have told me that certain “secret teachings” of those styles were written in obscure language, so that even if they were discovered, they could not be interpreted without the help of an insider. These systems required *keppan* (blood oaths) and would dismiss any student who shared their knowledge (even knowledge at a lower level). This made sense when and if these methods descended from an age of internecine wars where one clan, despite its adherence to formal battle protocol, did not want another clan to know their “good stuff”, but to my way of thinking, secret teachings make little sense when the vast majority of Japanese/Okinawan martial arts taught today are *gendai budo* (contemporary martial ways), usually for sport, self-defense, or self-development.

Sometimes there are unofficial *hiden* and *okuden* that, although not locked away in a vault, appear to serve a similar function. Soke Don Angier taught all his material openly even though the principles he taught in seminars were his *okuden*, because he knew the average student could not understand the principles without his help. He considered his *okuden* “hidden in the open” and told me, “If a guy is smart enough and talented enough to understand the advanced concepts [on his own, without instruction], more power to him.”

An Aikido-ka returning from Japan stayed at my home before returning to the Midwest. He had studied Yoshinkan Aikido, which has a strict developmental curriculum of formal techniques while its headmaster Gozo Shioda always seemed to performed techniques that appeared informal and visually unlike what his

students practiced. When the Aikido-ka tried to practice those informal waza after class, the seniors admonished him not to; they were reserved for Kancho (head of the dojo) Shioda.

Why is it that we still hear of modern budo systems possessing “inner teachings” or reserved *waza*, official or unofficial? From a practical point of view, it makes sense to have a graduated curriculum, the top of which would seem unattainable, perhaps even incomprehensible, to the novice. From quite another point of view, a system’s “secret teachings” imply that once they are mastered, the student will become a martial magician. Not only is that implication attractive to any novice that sets foot on the martial path, but it also satisfies the teenager inside us that wants to magically be transported to a mystical realm where he/she may not only ride giant bat-beasts, but smash them down with impunity.