

Everything Flows

The fact that things change is not a world-shattering philosophical revelation. Heraclitus told us around 500 BC that “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man,” and “The only thing that is constant is change.” However, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, in the late 19th century, is famed for saying, “*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*” (“The more things change, the more they remain the same.”) What are we to do with these seemingly true but seemingly conflicting aphorisms? And what have they to do with martial arts?

Having gone through a rather traumatic loss, I recalled something I had heard in a personal development program years ago: when we are depressed, we tend to think our situation is pervasive and permanent. A friend, who had gone through something similar, advised me to realize that just as fate brings sudden losses, it can also bring sudden successes. *We simply do not know what will happen next.* So, although it is true that losses occur and reoccur despite the changes in our lives (giving credence to Karr's stay-the-same aphorism), it is also true that the specifics of our circumstances are always in flux so that not only *will* things change, but also they *are* constantly changing around us and within us (giving credence to Heraclitus's aphorisms).

In the traditional martial arts, we try to replicate again and again the traditional movements in traditional practices via traditional techniques and kata, but we do so in order to constantly change ourselves. **You can never step into the same dojo twice.** You can never do the same kata twice. You can never do the same technique twice.

When I have difficulty falling asleep, I sometimes employ various chants that tend to put my mind in a less active state. The Buddhist chant in praise of the Lotus Sutra “*Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*” is one such calming phrase. You do not have to be Buddhist, know the Lotus Sutra, or even know what the words mean to eventually calm down when speaking or even thinking a phrase like this. Ironically, it is not flowing at all, having several syllables that should be pronounced separately with harsh consonants thrown in. And yet, after several repetitions, it seems to smooth itself out. This reminded me of a karate kata in which each movement is focused, but as soon as the movement is used in *ippon kumite*, or especially in *jiyu kumite*, it becomes much more fluid. The very focus that brings power also wastes both time and energy. What seems abrupt, harsh, and even jagged on the surface will inevitably transmute into fluidity, like crags worn away by the waterfall. Whatever we focus on becomes powerful, but when we move and adapt to the circumstances around us, the maintenance of positive energy and an efficient use of time becomes, not only more important, but also easier. Thus, we can merge both staying the same and constantly changing.

After that traumatic loss, I changed my falling-asleep mantra to “Everything flows” so that I would unconsciously program myself to recognize not only that Fate surprises painfully, but also

joyfully. If I did not want my depression to be pervasive or permanent and if I had no knowledge of a silver lining showing through my cloud, I had to at least see that clouds blow away as often as they gather.

The same thing happens with committed martial arts training. Like committed relationships, training has its ups and downs, its failures and successes, but it is the commitment itself that keeps people coming back to smooth out the edges.