

Solving Training Mysteries

Martial arts were originally taught with the Asian emphasis on experiencing viscerally (not on understanding rationally), but because, as a Westerner, I learn with an emphasis on rationality, I challenge myself to explain, first to myself and then to others, how budo techniques work.

I wrote in *Why do You REALLY Like Your Art?* that **Solving Mysteries** was the second of my key attractions for on-going study. I don't enter the dojo with my Sherlock Holmes hunting cap on, but I do become fascinated with little items that I try to solve. Often, I am gratified years later when I find that others have encountered similar little “mysteries” and have come to similar solutions.

I remember wondering, way back when, why Goju and Uechi practitioners chambered their fists at the side of the chest, Shorin practitioners usually at mid-rib, and Shotokan practitioners at the hip. I noted that Shaolin stylists also used the hip while Wing Chun stylists used a much higher chamber. At first, as a white belt, I fantasized that Shotokan must be historically more directly related to Shaolin systems. A little study of history proved that theory way off base, although it may be true that the southern Chinese styles like Wing Chun do have a closer historical link to the forerunners of Goju and Uechi. For me, the most convincing solution had to do with dominant stance length. The higher (and usually shorter) the stance, the more likely the chamber will be high. I won't go into the intricacies of that argument here, but the mystery serves to illustrate a type of question no style tends to answer, but that nonetheless entices martial artists.

Early in training, one might be fascinated simply by watching Sensei then asking oneself, “How'd he do that?” For example, Sensei may be older and even less athletic than his students and yet perform the jump from Unsu kata with ease. There are hidden little tricks that Sensei can show us, but often he leaves us to figure them out on our own. As a result, there are several methods by which this jump is accomplished, some with more consistent results than others, but all of which are there to be discovered by Solvers of Mysteries.

For me, discovering realistic applications from formalistic kata provided an unending supply of mysteries. I got so good at discovering potential applications that, at one time many years ago, I felt that I could immediately come up with a viable application for anyone's kata. A teacher in Texas asked me to interpret a movement in a beautiful kata I had never seen before and, frankly, I was stumped—another mystery to solve. Admittedly, some forms are so poorly pasted together from parts of other forms that their very construction prevents a reasonable solution to the application problem. That suggests that their creators never knew any of the applications and simply put the “traditional” movements they knew in different sequences in attempt to stay within

an accepted legitimacy while creating their own distinctive system. Instead of building a system on mysteries solved, they simply jumbled a system so that its mysteries could not be solved.

I created a new curriculum for what became Takeshin Aiki based on two existing Kamishin curricula, but instead of jumbling the elements, I added explanatory techniques between the existing techniques, then asked the stylistic head (in this case, Shihan Albert C. Church, Jr.) for permission to use the new curriculum, something he was delighted to do since my added techniques made learning Kamishin easier for students even though it added more things to be learned. In order to know what techniques would serve as bridges between existing requirements, I had to go about “solving the mysteries”, that is, understanding the nature, of those requirements.

To do this day, decades later, my own curriculum is revealing secrets to me—and that is motivating.

Next time: Ease of Movement as a Motivator