

## Test Some Food?

Many years ago in his magazine *Goshin-do* (#83, special Edition), Soke Roland Maroteaux quotes Henri Plee's *Reflexion Sur Le Budo*: "For example, karate-do was an art, a way of life. In competition, it evolved toward a ritual. In full-contact [karate], it became the ritual of ritual, a sort of 'test some food'." Of course, my translation may be missing some nuances, but if I have it right: what did Plee mean by "test some food", and how does that relate to his main point? Remember, we are going back before the advent of cage fighting when full-contact karate was the premier sport version of martial arts.

When I first read this, it seemed to me that karate-do an art was *more* ritualistic than its sport version, but upon reflection, I can see how sport karate adds another level of ritual. Ritual is defined as

...an established and prescribed pattern of observance; the performance of actions or procedures in a set, ordered, and ceremonial way; a set sequence of actions used to communicate information or to reinforce social cohesion.

If karate-do has its rituals, sport karate has at least as many, but how does full-contact karate become the ritual of ritual? Does it have even more ordered patterns or ceremonies? And how is that a kind of "test some food"? I remember taking down this note wanting to cogitate on it and, instead, found myself ignoring it for decades. Recently, as I was going through some old notes, it came up again. Now I see it quite differently, although I do not know if it is what Plee intended.

Sometimes, we step away from the formality of what we learn and try to apply it in reality in hopes that the application will be closer to "practical use" than the structured learning was. In this way, we want karate applied in competition to become *less* ritualistic. However, we find that, to keep it safe, we have to withdraw from reality somewhat and create rules that add back structure, formality, and ritual: we get non-contact karate competition. Later, we may find that our somewhat less formal practice is still too formal, so we take yet another step in trying to make it "practical": competitive karate becomes full-contact karate with more realistic blows and less need for officials.

Of course, we then find ourselves running away on the same treadmill. In order to make full-contact karate both fair and safe, we create rules, a point system so that contests without knockouts can have a victor, and we add officials to judge those points, and thus we find ourselves with a new set of rituals based on a previous ritual. This second separation from traditional karate-do thus preserves a taste or two of the original, much as a person, hungry to

finish lunch, but still in favor of variety, can taste everything from the buffet, but cannot appreciate the richness of a well-balanced meal.

If we extend this logic, the third extension from karate-do, called cage fighting, uses various aspects of traditional martial arts, testing the food of karate, ju-jitsu, judo, wrestling, and boxing, but not experiencing the satisfaction of mastering them.

This does not mean that martial artists cannot order the poo-poo platter, it just means that the poo-poo platter represents Chinese food about as well as David Carradine represented Shaolin kung-fu. A journey into martial sports represents a traditional martial art about as well as, to paraphrase Henri Poincaré, a pile of bricks represents a house.