

Allatonce-ness

*Ours is a brand new world of all-at-once-ness [Spelling changed for clarity.]
“Time” has ceased, “space” has vanished. We now live in a global village.
—Marshall McLuhan*

No longer are children influenced simply by their parents and their teachers, or even by their peers, but by the entire world to which they have access—which seems to be the entire world. Martial artists are no longer influenced simply by their own or their federation’s instructors, by their art, or related arts, or even by the various arts their seniors previously studied, but by the entire martial arts world to which they have access—which seems to be the entire martial arts world.

Previously, those in a position to represent a martial art saw their art competing in a field of arts only one of which could be “best”. After all, there would be no second place in a life-or-death combat, why should there be anything but a death-struggle between martial arts? W. F. Hegel took a wider view of philosophy. Made up of positions and “isms” competing to win the war of “how the world is”, philosophies were unable to cooperate or even learn from each other. Hegel suggested that one could take in all these “isms” and that, over time, their competition would yield more generally accepted “truths”. It is a position, ironically, that institutes of learning have had for centuries. Instead of competing for the “correct world view” (a practice that institutes of learning indulged in during medieval times), universities compete for students. Universities gain repute by producing good students, not necessarily the objectively correct view of the world as held by those students. What is a good student? A good student is one who can use what he has learned to function in everyday life and do his job (whether physical or intellectual) effectively and efficiently.

That’s what we want in the martial arts, isn’t it? If so, that suggests that students of budo are better off with a wider perception of martial knowledge than with a narrower, stylistic, dojo-centric perception. I agree...but with an important caveat.

Consider the title of this article. It is McLuhan’s original spelling of “all-at-once-ness” or simultaneity, if you will. Did the title throw you at first? It did me. I looked up the word, thinking my vocabulary was about to be enriched. In his characteristically exaggerated method, McLuhan makes the reader pay attention and, like e.e. cummings, makes the word look like what it means. But people do not learn all-at-once. They are given more “texts” than ever before and they review them in a more cursory fashion than ever before, but they still take them in one-at-a-time, as time permits. Time hasn’t ceased; it simply feels compressed. Space hasn’t vanished; we simply communicate over longer distances more quickly. Things don’t really happen all-at-once; they just seem to. And so a martial artist learning her art (or simply learning generic self-defense) must take in her lessons one-at-a-time. Sure, she can spend an hour during lunch browsing YouTube for video clips of other martial arts, four or six or eight minute lessons in one aspect of kicking, grappling, blocking, or countering, but

she must view them one-at-a-time and she will integrate them in the larger whole of her martial arts knowledge only if it does not mess up her primary skill-set.

Martial arts should not compete with each other for dominance. Let the market determine which is most popular; let the culture determine which is most worthy of garnering large numbers of adherents. Since it is the student who is influenced not only by his/her instructor, by their arts, or related arts, nor even by the various arts their seniors previously studied, but by the entire martial arts world to which they have access, it is now the student who is responsible for integrating those influences. Too much to integrate? Not enough detail? Not ready for the advanced stuff? There is only one solution. Go back to the dojo and train. Preferably one day at a time.