

The Anti-Martial Arts Mentality

It never ceases to amaze me that martial artists, a group of people whose dedication, for the most part, centers on self-defense or the arts born of self-defense, are so self-destructive. How so? Who criticizes martial arts more than martial artists? Certainly not baseball players, dancers, or yoga-practitioners. After four and a half decades of hearing the arguments, I have come to realize they boil down, for the most part again, to four: (1) legitimacy, (2) accurate representation, (3) functionality, and (4) self-deprecation. There is about half a book worth of material here, but I will condense it down to essentials (still wanting to portray my argument *legitimately* and *accurately* with appropriate *functionality* and *self-deprecation*).

Imagine you are having a meal with your friend Johnny Hotshot after a tournament, demonstration, seminar, lesson, etc. (fill in the blank). He says something like...

“That Sedgwick Sensei (Sifu or Sabum will do, as well) is pretty good, but he does not come from a legitimate lineage. Not only was his teacher suspect, but also he admittedly skirts the traditional Okinawan/Japan/Korean/Chinese (fill in the blank) way of doing things.” (the ILLEGITIMACY criticism);

or

“That Sedgwick Sensei is pretty good, but he is not really doing Shotokan/Aiki/TKD/Tang Soo Do/Ju-jutsu/Kempo (fill in the blank).” (the INACCURATE REPRESENTATION criticism);

or

“Sedgwick Sensei may look good and move smoothly, but his stuff wouldn’t work in a tournament/a street confrontation/a no-hold-barred match/against more than one attacker (fill in the blank).” (the LACK OF FUNCTIONALITY criticism);

or

“Although Sedgwick Sensei is good enough to be popular, he is not doing real martial arts, but just what he needs to do to make a profit/get a rank/get publicity/garner a following (fill in the blank).” (the EGO and/or THE PROFIT MOTIVE, i.e. lack of SELF-DEPRECIATION criticism).

Having nipped in the bud that gut response that starts, “Go...” and ends with the reflexive pronoun “yourself”, I’ll take these on, one at a time.

Sorry to report this, but in my humble opinion, there is no such thing as LEGITIMACY, only agreed upon or apparent legitimacy. Was Funakoshi legitimate? Of course, but he broke away (probably without intending to do so) from the Shorin tradition that he learned and added kata from other systems to form what became known as Shotokan. He did not teach in private, backyard dojo, but in Japanese universities and later in public dojo. Still we think of him as legitimate. Was Ueshiba legitimate? He also taught more openly than did his main instructor Sokaku Takeda under whom he studied only the rudiments of Daito-ryu before founding his own art of Aikido. Still we think of him as legitimate. Was Kano legitimate? He studied two styles of ju-jutsu

for less than 2 years each before founding judo at age 22! Still we think of him as legitimate. What did these men have in common? Their methods endured, ergo no one considers them illegitimate because you cannot nip the arts' endurance in the bud by denigrating them anymore. A simple, more contemporary example will suffice. In the '70s many martial artists in my area were railing against Fred Villari, howling to whoever would listen that his background was forged. Villari created the largest chain of schools in the world. One never hears a martial artist rail against Villari anymore. His background hasn't changed, but his system has endured. And, oh you critics, even *you* can't tell what will pass the endurance test.

To assess a practitioner as INACCURATELY REPRESENTING another style assumes that the critic is more than familiar with every variation of that style than the practitioner he criticizes. Usually critiques of this nature come not from high-level, lifetime practitioners of the art who are in a position to know, but from novices with a few years training twice a week (except for holidays or if they have a heavy date). Many styles have sub-styles and even the strictest of styles vary from dojo to dojo. Although it is possible to inaccurately represent a martial art (chain kicking probably is not a good representation of Aikido), it is unlikely that some self-made master is going to foist that jarring disconnect upon an unwary public. Most INNACCURATE REPRESENTATION criticisms, then, are usually...inaccurate.

You can't be sure if an art is FUNCTIONAL unless you see it applied in the situation for which it was intended. Okay, strong TKD side-kicks look a lot more powerful than fluid Aikido locks, but how functional would they be used by a bouncer trying to quietly extricate a noisy drunk? They'd be functional once and then the bouncer would be bounced off the payroll. Conversely, how functional would locks be against a boxer? In that case, I'll go with kicks, thanks. Training in a martial art does not always reveal its intended application.

Finally, everyone seems to love the starving martial artist. Somehow his refusal to bow to pressure of the marketplace (something I certainly admire and can identify with) makes him noble. So his following shrinks and his proselytizing for his art is non-existent. He takes a job as a bellboy to make ends meet and you don't have Dick Kickson to nix anymore. Happy now?

Most martial artists criticize because it is easier to take someone down verbally than to do it physically. It is easier to tread down upon others than to step up to face the mirror.