

## *Approachability and Aura*

The more approachable an instructor is, the less of an aura he maintains (or so the common wisdom asserts). You can easily understand why we believe this to be true. Anything easily accessible is not valued. Things that are valued most highly tend to be rare. (Why people don't see that food, water and shelter, although plentiful for most of us, should be highest on the value list, I will never understand.)

Instructors are no exception to the inaccessible=valued rule. But have you ever met a great instructor who was also approachable? Did his aura lessen because you could talk to him, or did it take on a different sort of glow?

Why do we, as a default position, expect our instructors to be distant? "Obviously," we respond, "it is because of our inheritance of a Japanese hierarchical society within the dojo." (Other Asian cultures may have similar structures, but I can speak from experience only about the Japanese tradition.) We never think that the "tradition" of inapproachable instructors may lie in the **personal characters** of the Japanese instructors who were shipped westward in the later half of the twentieth century to spread their art.

I was talking to an associate very highly ranked in a semi-classical martial tradition who has traveled the world teaching and hobnobbing with other highly ranked instructors, many of Japanese descent. Two of them independently told my associate a dirty little secret: many early Japanese imports to the West, sent to enlighten the outlander about the native art, were social misfits. The reason these men were chosen was not simply because of their technical merit, but also because they could not easily fit in at home. This statement may be an exaggeration, but let's assume, for the moment, that it is true.

There are a few ways to look at this. Did they not fit in because they were **budo-geeks** who gained their technical merit at the price of normal social interactions? Were they **independent sorts** who would not conform to tribal tradition of the native Asian country? Or were they just **bastard nastards**? And, does it matter, if the result of their non-conformity was inapproachability? The Westerner, ignorant of Japanese culture, language, and his specific instructor's situation, learned not by a discussion of the pros and cons of hip rotation versus weight shift for example, but by imitating the master. We Westerners imitated the technique, the spirit, AND the attitude. When we finally became instructors, it seemed only traditional to become inapproachable. It added to our aura.

### IMPORTED INSTRUCTOR AS BUDO GEEK

Many dojo have their budo-geeks, guys who would rather train in wool underwear and iron *geta* than spend a weekend in Tahiti with the Brazilian bikini babe who advertises Tahitian Sunscreen. They are dedicated, to be sure, but would you want to hang around with such single-minded budo-geeks, invite them to a

Super Bowl party, or have them over for Thanksgiving? I don't think so. You might, however, want them to represent your art in a foreign country.

#### IMPORTED INSTRUCTOR AS NON-COMFORMIST

Even Japanese dojo have those who, although raised in tribal conformity, think for themselves and would like to try things their own ways. That can be refreshing or insulting, depending on how the innovator handles the situation. If he innovates too much, however, it is unlikely he'll be asked to teach the essence of the art to the ignorant Westerner. If he innovates just enough to be noisome to the *hombu*, but not enough to misrepresent the art, he may be asked to spread the word abroad.

#### IMPORTED INSTRUCTOR AS NO-GOODNICK

And if the Japanese imports were just basty nastards? Well, if their technique were good and their technical standards high, who could tell? After all, they don't speak the language of the land in which they settle and they have the advantage of being in a position of authority possessing unique specialized knowledge for which students have to bend over backwards. Besides, they can beat up anyone who doesn't like their attitude. They don't actually do that of course, but the implied thereat is there. In fact, it is sometimes even welcomed by the envious Westerner who wants to learn to be more self-assertive. Is that demeanor desirable in a teacher-student relationship? Is a bad boy attitude something we want to pass on to the next generation, or is it misunderstood as Asian aura?

Watch out for aura. The closer you approach, the less awesome it is.