

## Authority and Reason

For authority proceeds from true reason, but reason certainly does not proceed from authority. — Johannes Scotus Erigena (c.817-877)

John the Scot (Erigena means Irish-born) disagreed with St. Augustine and deferred to Plato in setting reason as superior to Church authority. Ironically, Plato believed in a world of ideals beyond this one and his student Aristotle disagreed with *him*, preferring this-worldly rationality. Although today Aristotle is embraced as the foundation of scientific thinking and reason, his specific conclusions were often mistaken according to modern science. So where does that leave us?

I agree with Scotus's statement even though reason can be wrong at times. Consider this in the context of the traditional martial arts. We take our training from a higher authority, sometimes a federation, sometimes a founder, but always an instructor the Japanese term for which (*sensei*) means "the one who came before". We have no choice about this unless we have been beaten up several times as a youth, won several similar encounters, and are intelligent enough to single-handedly develop a martial system that can be passed on to those who have not had such experiences. It is reasonable, I submit, that we submit to an authority that has more experience than we. The instructor's authority, after all, proceeds from experience. But, in the case of most contemporary martial arts, Sensei's experience proceeds from a prior authority.

Although it seems reasonable to invest in an instructor who has experience, experience itself may not be reasonable unless he is that guy who has been beaten up several times as a youth, won several similar encounters, and is intelligent enough to develop a martial system. In other words, the farther we get from the guy who had been there and done that, the less our teacher's experience can take the place of reason, authoritative though it may seem.

Many martial arts were created not by a brawler who happens to have a brain, but by the brains that see the advantage of being able to brawl. Of the great Okinawan masters, only Motobu was considered a brawler and his style has much fewer followers than his compatriots Miyagi, Mabuni, Kyan, Uechi, Toyama, Konishi, or Funakoshi. I am not saying that the Okinawan karate founders could not defend themselves, but that they were not primarily known as fighters. Of the Aiki masters, Sokaku Takeda was the tough guy, but Ueshiba and his followers like Tomiki and Shioda, although they may have been skillful, were not pugilists or street warriors. Martial arts masters were able to perform *waza* and in some cases deal with threats and challenges, but seldom were they brawlers who could build a style on pure gritty experience. So why do these guys have the majority of the followers? Their arts, built on experiences in several other arts, a modicum of hands-on experience, and a lot of mental effort, produced a reasonable training method. In other words, we see their reasoned efforts rather than their sweat equity as the root of their authority. Did they not earn their authority with a broader sort of experience and more reasoning than Motobu and Takeda were able to put into their arts? In fact, Motobu's and Takeda's arts were, by and large, developed and propagated by their followers, not by

them personally. Although Takeda traveled much of Japan and taught many different students several aspects of his art, he did not develop a unified curriculum to pass on to others. That was left to his son, Tokimune and to other students.

We tend to think of traditional martial arts as ruled by central authorities, but these contemporary authorities are a long way from their sources, so unless they can provide reasons along with curriculums, I suggest that they are in danger of becoming rule-bound rulers rather than the reasonable experts their founders were and that authorities should be.