

A Base for Corrections

I was looking at some modified aikido on the web the other day. Both partners wore *hakama* (the traditional divided skirt) and the techniques were clearly out of the aikido syllabus, but they were adding *atemi* (body blows) and finishing their techniques with chokes or strikes, not just aikido *osaekomi* (pins). In other words, it was mixing hard and soft to arrive at a practical self-defense with an aiki format.

Strict traditionalists in aikido might object, I thought, to the attitude with which the techniques were performed. There was no brotherly love, no letting the opponent create his own demise, no control-rather-than-conquer. Self-defense seldom allows for ideals that philosophies such as aikido's aspire to. But newly converted cage-fighting enthusiasts would probably object, as well, complaining that you can't fight in a skirt, that no one would allow such big techniques to be applied without a little slamming and dunking first, and that this wasn't really how martial arts should be mixed.

Personally, I liked it. Sure, the form could have been more elegant—but not without giving up speed, power, and the ability to adjust to the attacker's attack. Sure, the attitude could have been meaner and more direct, but not without giving up the fundamentals of aiki. So, I asked myself, not what was wrong or right with the video, but why others who favor function over form can find fault with even a functional aiki, and why those preferring form over function feel that self-defense aiki just ain't cutting it.

Obviously, each critic is judging the perceived art with different standards. How did they get these standards? And how did they get into the habit of believing they were qualified to judge another art? It is because, I suggest, they are used to receiving detailed criticism themselves and, as good martial artists, have to nod and accept it. Their instructors, imbued with the details of the art they teach, correct students with precision and reason such that the corrections truly improve techniques. Therefore, they must be right. When thrust into the critic's role (albeit self-thrust by dint of an internet connection), students use the same standards they are used to, thinking that they are contributing to the quality of the martial arts in general by not letting those phony/sloppy/unrealistic/non-traditional/too-traditional/etc. arts go unscathed.

Whenever one is criticizing, one implies that certain corrections should be made. In other words, by saying A sucks, they imply that Z is the way to go. In order to criticize, one has to have a base for the corrections offered. Unfortunately, few would-be critics have the experience to correct anything. Rather, they imitate the corrections they have received, or they measure the object of their criticism against some ideal they have been fantasizing about since their first Jet Li film or since their last training session.

If you recognize my recurring theme of "judge a martial arts in its own context" rearing its head, you are right, but from a different angle this time. People choose a martial art according to their tastes. If they have a taste for mixing it up in the real world, there is no martial art that advocates going out and picking street fights, therefore they choose a combative, usually sportive, martial art in order to pretend they are in a street fight. If

they don't have a taste for bloody lips and chipped teeth, but still want to protect themselves, they choose a more traditional art. If they like to compete, but want to emphasize the art rather than the martial, they may choose a karate system that emphasizes kata competition. If they'd rather not compete, but still want to emphasize the art, they may choose a cooperative aikido variant. In each case, the teacher will correct them, but the corrections will be based not only on the specific art but also on the emphasis that teacher places on the art. Imagine the absurdity of a traditionally trained aikido-ka criticizing a cage-fight by pointing to the lack of vertical posture and the excessive effort used in the ground-and-pound. Yet the lack of vertical posture while standing, or the effort used while holding someone on the mat, is precisely what they would have been criticized for in aikido class.

Martial arts myopia is a rampant disease that is threatening to make the family of martial artists more dysfunctional family than if Ozzy Osbourne's kids married Ozzie and Harriet's great grandchildren. Is there a cure for the illness? It's pretty simple, in my opinion. Let's go back to taste: would you criticize your cousin for preferring candied yams to mashed russets? Is your sister worthy of a public excoriation if she prefers Justin Bieber to Michael Bublé? Maybe it's a characteristic of our increasingly globalized yet centralized society not simply that we have little tolerance for someone else's taste, but also that we have to condemn them for not having ours.

If they don't have our tastes, they won't choose our martial art, thus they won't experience the same base of corrections, and therefore are doomed to being absolutely wrong in everything they do. Quick! Get the torches and pitchforks. Let's chase them up to the old mill and burn it down with them in it!