

Before and After

Why is it that the afterlife is before us, but the life we led before is left after us? What we leave behind is what happened before. I guess that is why we don't really leave it behind but tend to push it before us inefficiently, like a horse pushing a cart. However, completely unburdening ourselves of our baggage would also unburden us of the lessons we need to learn. Whew!

Great martial arts masters faced the challenges of creating styles they left behind. I do not know if they consciously felt the burden of pushing their past learning in front of them, dragging it behind, or if they simply dealt with the everyday problems of figuring out what to teach, how to teach it, to whom to teach it, and when to teach it, never thinking of a legacy. There is no single pattern.

Kano combined two styles of ju-jutsu after Iikubo Sensei told him that Kano had learned all he could teach. It seems Kano gradually realized that his Kodokan would, at first, maintain the existence of a withering ju-jutsu, and then later, compete with it for dominance.

Funakoshi felt that it was his duty to plant the seeds of Okinawan karate in Japan, and yet, through his followers, his method became a different, Japanese style of karate.

Miyagi was so unaware that his system might continue after him that he did not even have a name for it until a public demonstration forced a student to make up one, thus what was dubbed Hanko-ryu later became Goju-ryu.

Nonetheless, masters like Miyagi, Mabuni, Funakoshi, Kano, Takeda, and Ueshiba left behind enormously rich systems, original enough so that they stood out, but conventional enough so that they were accepted within the flow of a generic martial tradition. That is, after all, what a *ryu* is—a continuing flow.

A *ryu* pushes everything in its stream ahead of it, but unlike the horse pushing the cart, it does so more efficiently. As students of various *ryu*, we are often pushed down the stream by the sheer force of the *ryu*'s traditions. To hop out of the stream would be to leave the tradition altogether, thus stopping our learning's momentum. Some people create run-offs that flow along parallel but separate channels; others serve as unifiers of several disparate streams. No matter what the shape of the flow, the flow comes from the past and aims toward its own afterlife, albeit in a very secular way. The leaders of most *ryu* hope that their stream will continue after they are gone. They are therefore burdened with the baggage of their traditions in hopes that the *ryu* will carry it ahead of them like a river rather than their pushing it down the highway of life like a horse pushing a cart.

I suspect however that those systems that survive will not survive in the same shape as when they were way upstream. The river tends to widen at its delta. Similarly, as the *ryu* serves to concentrate teachings and produce a movement toward a specific end, the delta tends to collect then disperse the teachings into the great ocean of budo. In a way, what we flow toward in our continual learning is not the mountain top where our art began, but a unified source that sends its vapor up to the skies to rain down, feeding both new streams and old.

If a style or an art can enrich the ground it flows through and sustain the lives it touches, it doesn't matter if it is a thin, shallow rill or a wide, deep river. What came before continues afterward, perhaps not as a recognizable, name-able river complete with rapids, eddies, and calmer expanses of continuity, but in the legacy of the people it sustained. Someday perhaps, a few of those people will dig their own canals and nourish their own communities, and, if they do, we know what waters came before, although we may not know from whom they came.