

Bubbles in the Brew

In Professor John McWhorter's excellent CD course *Language A to Z*, during the lecture concerning unexpected exceptions in language, he suggests that although there is sometimes a biological, cultural, historical, political, or other reason why an exception to a language rule develops, sometimes exceptions come up for no apparent reason at all. He says these are like bubbles in soup—no intricate knowledge of physics or Chaos Theory can predict where and when the bubble will pop up or burst. For example, no professor of American culture, science *meijin*, or publisher would have predicted the general popularity of the science book *Chaos* by James Gleick in the early '90s. Whoops, there's the bubble, completely unaccounted for.

Traditional Japanese aesthetic prefers an orderliness punctuated by some unexpected exceptions that, ironically, become preserved once the aesthetic becomes tradition. Take Kata Heian Shodan, for example. Clearly, it is an orderly I-pattern (some call it an H-pattern) kata with four movements on the crosspieces of the form and four down the center. But movement number 4 is a bottom-fist strike that seems to interrupt the orderly flow, resulting in 5 movements for that line. Then, instead of performing a down block and three upper blocks down the center of the kata, one is required to throw in a left knife-hand upper block that is not balanced by any movement on the return trip down the middle. Finally, instead of finishing with lower blocks and lunge punches on the final crosspiece, one changes to backstances and knife-hand blocks, 2 of which are performed at angles. Yes, you say, but Heian Shodan came from the older Pinan Nidan the movements of which are not the same. True, but they still hold to the idea of imbalance within a predictable structure—there are bubbles in the brew. In fact, every traditional kata (this leaves out modern training forms for beginners) are kinda regular but kinda not so regular.

Anything, created by human beings, meant to be passed on like kata, cannot really replicate blind chance. Modern art tries to do that, but once committed to canvas, there is no *chance* about it. It is a concretized representation of bubbles, currents, and undercurrents in the brew, but not the irregularities themselves. Things created by human beings *can* simulate random exceptions (consider computer generated randomness or even the low-tech spinning of a lottery bin), but no one intends these things to be duplicated, studied, or passed on like kata.

In a modern training gym, one can set up a machine (as high tech as a robot *mook yang jong* or as low-tech as having a person turn a light bulb on and off) that tests our ability to respond to the unexpected. That unexpected occurrence, however, is from a very limited set of known stimuli, and decidedly not of the anything-can-happen-on-the-street variety.

Bubbles in the brew are the unexpected occurrences in a habitual and predictable reality. Because they are unexpected, you cannot, by definition, rehearse them. And self-defense has almost as

varied a set of bubbles as life itself. So how can a martial art possibly help one prepare for that which one cannot predict? Rather than predict the specific bubbles that may pop up, martial training can prepare for the unpredicted by throwing a different glob of paint on a familiar canvas then trying to create art from it.

More on this subject next week.