

But My Other Sensei...

It is not unusual for a student to come to the dojo with a varied martial arts background. Where in the '60s everyone was a beginner no matter what they studied, nowadays it is as usual as not that a student is either changing arts or expanding on what she already knows. Maybe Ms. Mary McMoonshadow has just moved in from Silver Bullet, Wisconsin and can't find a Berserker Budo club, so she decides to study something similar, Hans Delbrück's Mindless Martial Arts in Germantown, PA. Great! She is welcomed with opened arms, but after a while, the arms seem to close somewhat due to her constant conflict between her original teacher and her new teacher—the seeds of what could be a monster problem.

It seems that her first sensei, Master L. Talbot always advocated loud *kiai* and go-for-broke counterattacks that bordered on initiating violence if the opponent were too offensive or the moon were in a certain phase. "But my other sensei always told us..." she would begin. How should her current sensei Master V. Helsing respond, and more importantly, how should Ms. Mary McMoonshadow conduct herself so that she gets the most out of her new dojo?

First, I wouldn't blame Master Helsing if he said, "Hey! You wanna study here? Dat means you ain't studying dere! Forget dere and concentrate on here!" More delicately, Master Helsing might explain to Mary that every instructor has his specialties and favorite emphases. That does not make either of them right or wrong, but different. Just as Yale differs from Harvard, one dojo's emphasis will differ from another's. When you are at Yale, you study Yale's curriculum and take Yale's exams. When at Harvard, you study Harvard's curriculum and take Harvard's exams. Seems fair, right? But now Mary feels she cannot ask questions and wonders if all the time she spent with Master Talbot was just so much howling at the moon.

My recommendation for Mary is to put one dojo's instruction into a separate cubbyhole for now. Think of Master Talbot's instruction not as a similar system, not as a competing system, but as a separate martial art altogether. At Talbot's dojo you were learning to play Chess. Now, at Helsing's dojo, you are learning to play Monopoly. Both have game-boards, both have pieces that move on the board, but there the similarities end.

One must kill the monster when it is merely a hatchling; and that is the real problem. If someone had been watching the graveyards, Dr. Frankenstein would not have had access to body parts with which to make his monster. If Mr. Renfield had listened to the carriage driver, he would not have spent the night in Castle Dracula. When seniors do not explain proper etiquette and when sensei do not explain their philosophies of teaching, students are left with their natural, non-dojō responses and myriad questions.

To many it may seem that traditional dojō etiquette is passé and unnecessary for the teaching of a fighting art. Really? Do you think that boxing gyms and MMA schools do not have their customs and cultures to which they expect students to adhere? Sure, rigid enforcement of every custom known to Funakoshi, Kano, and Ueshiba may be a bit much, but conformity is a universal custom that all members of any school, team, church, or social movement demand. You are not a member until and unless you conform to what members do.

That does not mean that all students should be good little non-thinking robots, but it does mean, as I have written before, that “Sign up, Line up, and Shut up” comes before “Let’s discuss the advantages of Master Talbot’s all-out attacking as against the intricacies of Master Helsing’s wait-and-see approach.”

Mary, ask yourself how your first teacher Master Talbot would act if you returned to him saying, “My other sensei...” He’d probably bite your head off.