

Dō Without Jutsu 1

Chyoshin Chibana, founder of Kobayashi Shorin-ryu Karate and student of Yasutsune “Ankoh” Itosu reported that Itosu said, “Dō without jutsu [the way without skill] is pointless.”

I read this in a Dave Lowry article and it stuck with me because I have been pushing the same thing for years. Now, if you don’t want to listen to me, listen to Lowry, and if you don’t want to listen to Lowry, listen to Chibana, and if not Chibana, at least listen to Itosu who taught more karate masters in his time than I have students.

Let’s give some specific examples at the risk of generalizing and causing an expressed lack of approbation from practitioners who will claim that I am an idiot and a curse upon all legitimate budo for my opinions (ignoring any counter arguments in the process). Dō without jutsu exists in some version of almost every martial art you know. The more widespread the art, the greater chance that jutsu takes a backseat to dō. What are the three most widespread martial arts you are familiar with? For me it is T’ai-chi, Taekwondo, and Aikido.

T’ai-chi has definite martial roots and can be a devastating self-defense art, but generally, the closest it comes to self-defense is Tui-shu or push-hands contests. Decades ago, I took a few classes under William Chen who had studied under Man-ching Chen. He gave details to the form, explained the principles, and then put on the boxing gloves. He would spar anyone in the class. The moment you tried hit him, he hit you using your reach and energy to help rotate his body into an instant counter strike. Not satisfied with doing exercise for health, Chen wanted his students to be martial practitioners as well as artists. How many Tai-chi classes have that emphasis today? I am not disparaging those people who prefer to study T’ai-chi for health—in fact, I think it a good idea, but those who want to study it for a way of life without any knowledge of the martial roots tend to contort the movements unconsciously, loose efficiency as they lose efficacy, and thus end up with nothing to challenge them or by which to measure their improvement. T’ai-chi becomes a fluid, ancient Chinese equivalent to Tae-bo in that it is good exercise, but it is not a martial skill (jutsu).

No one can dispute the martial power of Taekwondo. Don’t run into a TKD sidekick or take a spinning wheel kick, even on your forearms. Whether or not you like traditional TKD or Olympic contest TKD, its martial power is obvious. How then is the jutsu (forgive me for using a Japanese term to describe a Korean art) being replaced by a less than meaningful dō? By sheer numbers, quick promotions, family plans, and money. I think most martial arts should be available for adults and kids, men and women, but I do not think black belts and master belts should be equally available. Because certain individuals have dedicated themselves to TKD study, their very time in the *dojang* and a few kicks and breaks, earn them rank. To keep the enrollment high and the student happy, additional requirements...like applying one’s art in self-defense...are often de-emphasized. As numbers in the dojang increase, income increases and so does the incentive to keep people

studying and getting them to recommend the great community experience of training in TKD. I am not being sarcastic here. It is a great community or family experience. Often, however, it is not an experience of skill. It is wonderful to train 80-year-old grandmothers to break boards. It gives them and those watching terrific hope for the future and thus serves its *dō* appellation well, but if the boards have been baked before hand so there is little chance of failing, thus creating an enhanced chance that several spectators will sign up, the jutsu has been left behind.

I studied Aikido under an *uchi-deshi* (inner student of the founder) for several years. During that time, I was privileged to receive short-term instruction under many Japanese masters, most of which were also *uchi-deshi*. I trained along side American black belts and watched some amazingly skilled athletes. Some of the best *ukemi* (falling) in budo is done by Aikido-ka. That is as it should be, but that is also the problem. Because of sheer numbers, students are relegated to imitating Sensei's motion without much detailed instruction. In order to keep the aerobic nature of the practice going, the faller...well, falls...even if he does not have to. This helps the thrower get the feel of the technique, but when do more realistic attacks start? At black belt? At Shihan level? I honestly can't tell you. I have met several senior Aikido-ka who have studied their art at such a depth that they know how to handle strong attacks, but the knowledge seldom filters down to the masses on the mat. As a result, we have Aikido, the single most popular method of aiki, peopled by devoted followers who feel they are doing an ethical, even spiritual martial art, who can't handle a strong grip let alone a powerful punch. The *dō* is in their minds but the jutsu is not in their bodies.

Let me quickly give the obligatory caveat. What I have just described in the super-popular martial arts IS a generalization. Not every T'ai-chi teacher ignores self-defense application. Not every TKD teacher cares more about populating his dojang than the quality of his people's technique. Not all Aikido schools punch like pansies and roll over like trained Alsatians. But enough have given up the jutsu in favor of the *dō* or the dough, so that Itosu's admonition "Dō without jutsu [the way without skill] is pointless" must be seriously considered.

Next week I'll explain why I think the jutsu can and should be the root of the dō.