

Definitive Essence

Shakespeare has Romeo muse, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Okay, we say, so names don’t matter, but if you don’t call a rose a rose, you might end up picking stinkweed because someone told you it was a rose. While it may not matter what we call a rose, it *does* matter that we consistently call it by the same name. So, I would ask, “What’s a martial art? What’s a style? Or even more basically, what’s a kata?”

At the risk of going into a metaphysical realm, let me recount the “Ship of Theseus” problem. Theseus takes his ship, filled with barrels of provisions, on a long voyage. As the crew consumes the contents of each barrel they use its wood to replace rotted sections of timber on the ship. By the time they get to their destination, the ship of Theseus has had every piece of wood replaced. The deep philosophical question is: Is it the same ship?

When we perform Shotokan kata Heian Sandan are we simply doing a newer version of the Shorin Pinan Sandan, or are they different kata? If a JKA kata champion performs Shotokan Heian Sandan, he will do it the JKA way, but if another Shotokan stylist not aligned with the JKA performs it, it is still Heian Sandan, isn’t it? Even if he changed the shin blocks and the vertical backfists, we say, “Yup, that’s Heian Sandan.” Maybe it is because it doesn’t have all the parts replaced, as did Theseus’s ship.

Now let’s do a little thought experiment. Let’s say someone decides to leave my dojo, and found his own dojo in Rodeo, NM, keeping all the details of instruction and all the details of kata as when he learned them, but renaming what he teaches as Rodeo-do. Is it still the art that he learned, or does the mere renaming of the art make it essentially different?

I have stated in numerous articles that martial arts (and kata) change as languages do: first they become regional variations, then dialects, and then separate languages. However, it is very difficult to pinpoint the moments in the language’s development that make the transition from one category to the next. Similarly, Takeshin karate’s first ten required kata look like any Shotokan-like system’s kata, but I think the differences are important enough to delineate the style. They are not different enough, however, to say that each system performs different kata.

Now to add a little mud to this already murky query, let’s picture a system that does not do kata, but uses as requirements every lock, takedown, and throw that your favorite ju-jutsu style uses. It does everything the way you do it in your ju-jutsu school, but it calls itself kempo. It supposedly came from Chinese roots, but seems to look more like Japanese ju-jutsu than any method of Chin-na. Is it really a kempo? If you say it is because it has Chinese roots, then what if, having Chinese roots, it called itself a style of ju-jutsu?

These kinds of questions are matters for philosophers and metaphysical thinkers. I don't expect that you or I will answer them to everyone else's satisfaction, or even to our own. However, I want to point out, through muddying these martial waters, both that a rose is a rose is a rose, and that names matter. These may be contradictory positions, and perhaps that is the essential reason why, in defining ourselves, we also separate ourselves from the whole. We all represent part of the puzzle, just as a clump of trees represents the forest. In order to see your clump of trees better, it helps, occasionally, to get a wider view of the entire forest.