

The Hedgehog and the Fox

According to Isaiah Berlin, author and cotemporary philosopher, there are two kinds of thinkers: the hedgehog and the fox. He may have meant the comparison as a joke, but it has been taken seriously, probably because there is a kernel of wisdom that both a hedgehog and a fox can appreciate.

The hedgehog is a master of one discipline and tends to see the world by trying to extend that discipline into other fields used to understand reality. For example, if you believe that all evil in society is due to the breakup of the nuclear family, you tend explain a recession by tracing back the society's lack of savings to the fiscal discipline left untaught by a single parent. You explain terrorist bombings not by the *terrorist's* lack of a family, but by the West's over-exuberant exportation of its culture and influence due to an exaggerated sense of self-importance that relates back to not having a stable and supporting family unit.

Plato was a hedgehog because he had one overriding idea — the Platonic ideal — that shaped his intellect (this is a bit of an exaggeration, but Berlin uses it, so I will, too.) Dante also was a hedgehog with his decidedly medieval Christian view of reality.

A fox, on the other hand, flits from paradigm to statistic, trying to understand the world *as it changes*. He does not settle on one way of looking at things, but sees the world through many lenses. Aristotle and Shakespeare were intellectual foxes.

Each category has an advantage. When I was but a youth, it was a commonly accepted wisdom that it was better to be a jack-of-all-trades than a master of none. But as I went through the educational establishment, it became obvious that educators wanted students to be jacks-of-all-trades only until they became masters of one, notably their field of graduate concentration in which they wrote a thesis, every aspect of which they were expert. Then I began to study martial arts and realized that my proficiency at one "trade" introduced me to others that were popping up like jackrabbits whose names had been called on *The Price is Right*. I was surprised to find that the kata of judo (introduced either a brown or black belt level in many dojo) included self-defense and...gasp...striking! I was equally surprised to discover my karate sensei teaching us foot sweeps to off-balance the opponent so we could score with a punch. I was beginning to see that I had to be more than a jack of several trades *in order to be* a master of one, so that if I really mastered one art at a high level, familiarity with others would fall into place. I was being a fox by being a well-studied hedgehog.

In order to adapt to the ever-changing situation of a fight or to different potential self-defense scenarios, one has to be fox-like in one's thinking. One cannot expect that one's incredibly powerful round kick will always win the day, for example. Still it is desirable—is it not—to have an incredibly powerful round kick. In order to have a great roundhouse kick, one must understand it in depth and practice it to the exclusion of other techniques. In other words, one must be a roundhouse kick hedgehog. But as soon as one chooses one's

hedgehog concentration, one diminishes the breadth of one's fox appeal. This is why there is no superior art, only superior students, and then only in certain contexts.

I once had a large, muscular brown belt student who, although he was studying our Japanese system, enjoyed playing with very athletic kicks. Having seen the annual Tang Soo Do tournament we attended as guests, he realized that the majority of the tournament attendees prized kicking. When we received newly revamped rules that head kicks would get two points and flying head kicks would get three points, resulting in an automatic win, my student trained to perfect his flying side kick. "They won't expect a big lug to get up in the air," he said. Ironically, when it came tournament time, I was called upon to be a corner judge. I knew to look out for a surprise flying side kick and sure enough, Bang! It happened in the opening volley. I immediately raised my hand and called out three points and win, but the other judges, all Tang Soo Do stylists fully familiar with the kick, had not expected it to happen and certainly not from a Japanese stylist. They did not confirm my call. My student ended up losing the match 3 to 2. Not having developed his other skills, and now having given away his secret weapon, he was unable to surprise his opponent with it again.

When hedgehogs win, they win spectacularly. When they lose, they lose spectacularly. This is fine when it comes to tournament play, but is it acceptable in self-defense? When defending ourselves, do we want to be a master of one trade and jack of none, a jack of many trades but master of none, or a master of much as we can without dissipating our efforts? And how would we do a concentrated, hedgehoggy sort of foxitude? I vote for training in a well-taught traditional martial discipline that goes into depth as well as breadth.