

## Knowledge like Water

*For it is hardly possible at one and the same time to gaze with admiration upon authors and to excel them, knowledge being like water, which does not rise higher than the level from which it descended. – Francis Bacon (1561-1626)*

Five decades of respect for the founders of traditional martial arts has spurred me to both follow their lead and to emulate them to the extent possible in the modern world. The founders are similar to, although more rare than, students that earn PhDs in an academic subject. Each has contributed something new, albeit based on the old, to their field.

Admittedly, there are those in the martial arts who have founded arts without offering more than an unbroken record of training and the skills to pass their exams. As in lower level academia (BA, MA degrees), the martial arts reward its titles without the receiver having contributed anything new. Rarely do holders of high titles like Kyoshi, Tashi, or Hanshi need to contribute something new to the budo where PhD candidates and almost all founders do.

Ironically, many innovators who have contributed a great deal to traditional martial arts have had to go outside their styles to be recognized, nor have they been considered entitled to a title within their original arts even after they achieve notoriety. Modern masters like Bill Wallace and the late Joe Lewis, Florendo Visatacion and Wally Jay, although rooted in tradition, have broken from tradition thus have been ignored by their traditions. Sure, they have done some ignoring, too. Their interests may not have been in the traditional systems themselves but some other aspect of martial arts dear to them, but their mastery is undeniable and their contributions sufficient to have been surreptitiously pulled into the traditional mainstream, even if the authors of those contributions were not.

Contributing something new is certainly not the only measure of mastery, but without it, tradition over time becomes stolid classicism, inviolable and presumptuously holy because of its age rather than because of its intrinsic value. Although every innovation, like every PhD thesis, is neither inherently valuable nor original, just a tidbit of original insight can inspire others to develop even more valuable innovations that, if they last, become contributions to a living tradition. Even strict Japanese traditions that may not readily recognize innovators recognize the *idea* of innovation in the *Shu-Ha-Ri* concept (conformity, innovation within the tradition, creation of a new tradition).

Way back in the seventies, I was discussing martial arts with a couple of *yudansha* from Shotokan and Wado-ryu. They mentioned doing kata at the end of their workouts for exercise and to maintain their traditions. They were taken aback when I explained that I favored a concept of kata in which every movement had a functional meaning. After I explained the concepts of *bunkai* and *oyo*, ideas that were, of course, not original with me but which few others at the time

advocated, they were intrigued. Only a year or two before, other black belts had told me that I was a little off my rocker for thinking that kata was anything more than an exercise. Today, the bunkai and oyo concepts are taken for granted in almost every system of traditional karate.

William James (1842-1910) in *Pragmatism's Concept of Truth* wrote, "First...a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it." In order to rise to the level of founder, old masters had to suffer the slings and arrows of those who, only decades afterwards, acceded to the very methods they first thought untraditional. And thus are higher watermarks set. If you wish to excel, then respect, learn from, but do not worship the masters. As Newton said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."