

Proving vs. Improving

The first technique taught in Kamishin-ryu Aiki-ju-jutsu is called *Kamishin-shomei-odori* (Godly Heart Proof Dance). The first word is the name of the system. The last signifies “dance”, implying a movement or technique. But why the middle word “proof”? Theoretically, at least, Kamishin-shomei-odori is a foundation technique based on the raising of a sword that, when mastered, “proves” the validity of the system. Of course, in the modern sense of *proving*, it does no such thing, but every practitioner understands that this use of “proof” is a statement of pride in functionality. Who wants to study a technique that doesn’t work? By studying functioning techniques we improve our self-protection ability.

There is however another sense in which one uses *proving* and, although it marginally helps self-improvement, it does not help to the extent that a wider scope and a sense of *improving* will. The following story will clarify this sense of “proving”.

When you were in school, you may have known smart kids who learned to study only for an exam. I remember having a discussion about this with an A-student in a college dining facility. “My problem” I suggested, “is not with guys who get higher grades than I, but with guys who try to figure all the angles toward higher grades but don’t give a rat’s rear-end about the subject itself.” They were, I argued, taking a pragmatic route toward higher scores; but were they really learning what they were studying? The A-student, who was one of the angle-figurers, conceded the problem, but argued that one had to do well in the record books to make it to grad school or to a superior job.

“And what good does that do,” I asked, “if you remember what it took to pass an exam, but not what it takes to function in the art or science itself?” Because he was an A-student at angling, he said, “Well, one should do both.” Ideally, yes, but if one were to choose a motivation for studying one’s subject, should one choose to *prove* his knowledge to his teachers by passing exams, or should one choose to *improve* his knowledge to his own higher level of satisfaction by aiming toward a wider scope of mastery?

In martial arts training, we have to depend on the curriculum to get our toe wet in the big lake of *budo*. That means we have to study for the exam. But do we have to study *only* for the exam? Unfortunately, most people think that passing an exam is the same as mastering the art. That is why there are so many black belts and so few real masters. Sure, studying only for an exam may have something to do with the specific art and its specific standards, but I suggest that it has more to do with the innate attitude of the student and of the dojo in which he trains.

How many think that receiving a certificate of mastery in a martial art means one can defend oneself? I would suggest the answer is “Most.” I think they are wrong and many non-martial artists know it. That is why people respect a fledgling MMA fighter with muscles and a nasty attitude rather than someone who has crept up the *budo* ladder toward a master’s title. Traditional martial artists tend to concentrate on proving their skill through stylistic exams divorced from actually self-defense. MMA guys, conversely, must *improve* their skills

in order to *prove* themselves in the cage. I have often said that cage fighting is not self-defense, but geewhizzikers, neither is a fourth degree black belt exam. Oh, I know there is a part of the exam that requires you to spar or to defend symbolically against more than one attacker, or against Paolo Fatbelli the Italian Stallion, but that nod toward self-protection does not itself prove that one is improving in the understanding of the martial side of the art, let alone using it effectively. Instead, passing an exam proves that one knows how to prove his skill to the sensei.

MMA's full-fledged acceptance of bashing and battling as some sort of sportive simulation of self-protection does not simply prove skill to the sensei but to the opponent and to the crowd. If an MMA competitor does not objectively improve, he cannot keep winning. He may not be indulging in realistic self-defense, but he is neither is he sacrificing a sense of improvement for just doing enough to get a belt or certificate.

Neither traditional budo nor modern MMA, however, gets to the heart of the Proving vs. Improving problem.

More next week.