

Pure Technique

My major in college was English and American Literature and I have long been fascinated with how people use the English language, that unique yet ever-changing amalgam of Old Norse, German, Anglo-Norman French, Parisian French, and whatever might have been spilled into the mixing pot. While having a morning cup of tea, I noticed the label on the teabag read, “PURE GREEN TEA”, and I thought, “As opposed to what? Polluted green tea?” Was the company letting the consumer know that it cleaned its tealeaves better than its rivals? If so, were the chemically treated tealeaves meant to keep out insect impurities not themselves a sort of impurity?

No, that couldn't be what it meant. Oh, it must have meant that it was “pure” as opposed to “impure” where impure did not mean tainted but meant adulterated with something else, say red tea, Formosa Oolong, or Lapsam Suchong. (I'd love to go into the etymology of the word “adulterated” here, but perhaps another time.) Inevitably, I made a connection to martial arts. I have written several articles on how arts are rarely any more “pure” than eating Mexican food in a German restaurant is purely Mexican (believe me, I've tried), and how styles often borrow from other styles or reinterpret their heritage based on the current needs. This time around, I'd like to take a different tack.

In the 1970s, as a Shotokan student, I visited the Massachusetts dojo of Sensei Tony Mirakian, the pioneer of Okinawan Goju in the United States. He was kind enough to discuss technique with me and in doing so demonstrated the lateral knife-hand “block” that appears just before the leg catch in certain versions of Sanseiru. “But Sensei,” I asked, in my novice's ignorance, “I don't see how a level block would work against a high or low punch.” He invited me to punch him. He stepped back, delivered the double shuto from a shikko-dachi, angling the block to meet my blow, and followed it up by a rapid closing movement and a backfist. Lesson learned: a middle-level block in kata does not have to be applied at the middle level in kumite. This may seem like a pretty basic lesson, but to a novice searching for the inner mysteries of budo, it was a revelation.

I don't know how many students of mine asked similar questions about the sideways backfist block from Heian Nidan and Yondan. Forgetting that their shoulder could pivot 360 degrees, they assumed that the application of a kata movement needed to be as “pure” as the kata movement itself. Because they had been corrected so much on the precision of their kata movements, they probably thought that they were no longer doing karate if they adjusted the movements for application. But one session of *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) where the attacker can vary the level of his strike would teach them that even the strictest karate needs to be modified, adjusted, even adulterated, if it is to function well.

The same thing applies to aiki. After having learned defenses against decades of *yokomen uchi* (side head strike) attacks from over six feet away, many aiki practitioners are shocked to find that their

large stepping inside rotational receptions don't seem to function well against a guy who gets even three feet closer and hits them with a haymaker. Trying to do a "pure" aikido fluid reception works really well against a pure aikido fluid attack. Those who may be interested in aiki defense for self-protection, however, have to leave the restrictions of the pure art and mix them with some other tea if they expect to get the result they want.

No art can stay an art if it does not demand replication of its forms. But no form can function for long as self-defense unless its techniques are impure.