

## The Advantage of Distance

I will teach only he who, when I give one corner, returns with the other three. — Chinese saying

If you are a TKD stylist, you want a certain distance between you and your opponent so you can use your kicks. Those martial artists who do not kick as well may prefer a medium distance. If you are shorter or quicker, getting in close might be your preferred distance. Few would deny that, under a good instructor, we learn to take advantage of the distance that is appropriate to our body type, style, or fighting situation. But there is a different concept of martial arts distance, as well. How close should you be to your instructor? Should you see him/her every day? Should you take only the classes he/she teaches? Or would you benefit from being a long-distance student, able to study intensely for only a week at a time, but soaking up as much as possible because it would be a year before you see the instructor again?

I was lucky enough to have several very good *martial artists as instructors* and several other very good *instructors who were martial artists*. The first group was comprised of instructors who were undeniably better at performing/applying their art than anyone in the class. The second group was comprised of instructors who were not necessarily better at performing/applying their art than their students, but could teach the art better than anyone in the class. I needed to pay rapt attention to the instructors from the good-martial-artist group in order to glean knowledge—they were not handing it out on silver platters. I would therefore *need* to attend as many of their classes as possible before it was time to return to my dojo to practice because their teachings were sparse and disconnected although their physical examples were perfection. Instructors from the good-teacher group taught me without my having to strain to understand. They were ready with answers to my questions and knew their art well enough to offer analogies and comparisons to aid my learning. Of course, I would *want* to attend as many of their classes as possible because their teaching was so rich, but if I couldn't be there, I could easily build upon what they had already taught me.

Each type of instructor offered an advantage (a quality performance to emulate or a quality instructional method to learn from), but each presented a disadvantage, as well. The obvious disadvantage presented by the excellent martial artists was that they could not teach my rational Western mind in the way it learned best. The disadvantage that the great teachers presented was not that they demonstrated poorly—in fact, often their demonstrations were excellent segmented examples even if they would not apply the art as fully as others—the great teachers' disadvantage was that they were so darn good at teaching that a student could just receive the instruction passively. If the student did not understand something after a few repetitions, he could ask Sensei for clarification rather than stumbling through the material, desperately trying to discover on his own how Sensei was able to do what he did.

My reasoning Western mind prefers the rational, question-answering, analogy-giving teacher, but I must give a grudging nod to the instructors who set an example, offered an insight here and there, and then let me discover the rest on my own. In some cases, because an instructor could have been located 1000-3000 miles away, I had to take whatever they would offer, securing it like gold bullion until I would mentally bank it in my own dojo. Because I was in the position to see these instructors only once a year at best, I had to find three corners for every one they presented.

Ironically, because of that self-discipline and self-training, I am now able to be the rational Western-style instructor that I preferred, but did not always have.