The Truth, Half-truth, and Anything But the Truth

This essay is not about lying or the unethical presentation of martial arts, as the title may suggest, but about teaching the budo.

I am not a big fan of post-modernist philosophers, feeling that most have much to say about not much important and, in doing so, lead us astray in ways that make us favor the less important. That is a broad brush with which to paint many notables, but the more I learn about Heidegger, Derrida, et al., the more my opinion is enforced. That does not mean, however, that they did not have some insights. Jacques Derrida claimed, for example, that you could not teach the truth about something because you could not teach all of it. He also made note of the fact that the two thrusts of western politics are Sovereignty and Democracy and they are, by their nature, in conflict with each other.

In martial arts, we have a hierarchical system with the sensei as sovereign who is teaching his students to be both independent of him and able to continue as other sovereigns. At the same time, the strictly structured drills and techniques he teaches with are intended to create not dependence, as one might assume, but independence. Admittedly independence is not the same as democracy. In fact, one could argue that independence is the exact opposite of democracy since a rule by the majority (without checks and balances) can be tyrannous, especially to the minority. But in the West, we sloppily use democracy to mean a constitutional democratic republic, such a republic embodying freedom, albeit freedom within a governed society.

No teacher, no matter how complete his/her knowledge, can teach an entire subject. No teacher can even teach all he knows. No teacher can even teach most of what he knows to all his students, even if the transmissions were perfect and understood as the teacher meant them. All teaching is incomplete because there is no instant transfer from the neurons and synapses of one head to another. In the day-to-day course of teaching, Sensei cannot teach subtle, advanced techniques to those who do not have a base of simpler, larger, less advance technique. Oh, I know, some teachers think they can, but I have never seen it happen without the students looking good at the advanced stuff while being unable to handle the more rudimentary challenges you’d think they’d take in stride. In Dallas, I visited a school of JKD and watched a woman with only 2 months experience perform a cadena-de-mano drill that had me aghast. She was quick, accurate, balanced, and relatively strong for her size. Since I was then unfamiliar with the drill, it amazed me that she could master its intricacies in such a short time. However, when her instructor threw an obvious, moderate speed punch at her, she cringed, not knowing how to respond. She had learned the drill, but not what the drill was intended to teach. In attempting to teach a truth, the instructor conveyed a half-truth, and when it was applied, it was anything but the truth.

What is an instructor to do if Derrida is correct about not being able to teach the truth about something because you cannot teach all of it? Well, in my humble opinion, Derrida has not made a true statement because
he has not given us all of it. The woman in Dallas was indeed good at what she did and simultaneously not yet good at the goal she was trying to achieve. One fact does not negate the other. Her teacher, the sovereign, had no choice but to teach her one thing before he taught her another, to have her develop one skill before it integrated with others, to have her master methods before she could apply them, and to be the sovereign in order to make her independent. During that process, it would be true that she would be talented at the method, half-true that she was developing self-defense skills, and anything but the truth that she had arrived at self-protection heaven.

It is simple really: we never arrive at self-protection heaven, because we can never arrive at self-perfection heaven. All we can do is enjoy the mini-truths, tolerate journey through the half-truths (much like we’d tolerate long lines at Disney World), and recognize that we will never arrive at an absolute truth. We will be able, however, to enjoy the experience (both the lines and the resulting ride) and count ourselves richer and better for it.