

Why Martial Arts Have Styles

This weeks article will be especially valuable to novices and family members who don't quite get the jumble of the martial arts stuff.

To the novice, the martial arts seem a forest of various paths through various kinds of trees. One clearing looks like another, yet it is not the one we thought we were seeking.

One of the confusing elements is the concept of styles. Bad enough that there are numerous *arts* subdivided by ethnicity, by dominant purpose, or by hardness/softness, but also there are *styles* of those arts! Why?

Before I address that question, let me say that it gets even more complex! Each style may have a sub-version represented by more than one version of a curriculum. The hierarchy goes from generality at the top to specificity at the bottom:

ART
STYLE
SUBSTYLE
SCHOOL (TEACHER'S INTERPRETATION)
STUDENT'S INTERPRETATION.

The style is a general but reproducible method by which to communicate movements and skills that make up the art. If the art, let's say, is Japanese Karate, the style may be *Wado-ryu* (Peaceful Way Style.) Actually, *ryu* means a tradition, but English-speaking people tend to use "style."

Fictional Sensei David Dove founds a school and teaches what he knows of *Wado-ryu*. In his school, he tries as best he can to adhere to the style the way he learned it. As he gets more skilled in the art and as his own teachers retire or pass away, he becomes known as a senior instructor of *Wado-ryu*. Other senior teachers of the style, say that David has not transferred the style accurately and that, at the very least, his version of *Wado* ought to be *Dove-ha* (*Dove's* sect) of the Peaceful Way Style of Japanese Karate-do.

Years later, Sensei Dove has three hot shot students (Mr. A, B and C), each of whom go off and run a school of *Dove-ha Wado-ryu Karate*. They were all classmates and learned the same thing under Sensei Dove, but because of their specific personalities, their specific skills and their specific students' needs, they tend to emphasize a little more of this or a little less of that. When Old Dave Dove retires or slows down and his students come to prominence, their methods become known as A, B and C-ho (-version) of *Dove-ha* (sect) of *Wado-ryu* (style) of Japanese Karate.

As if that were not enough, there are still other extensions up and down. On the lower end, each individual *Wado* student, accurately or inaccurately, may have his/her own interpretation of the art regardless of what A, B or C does to standardize the instruction. On the upper end, the art of Japanese Karate can be

subsumed into the larger, more general family known as *Nihon Budo* (Japanese Martial Ways). And these ways can be considered part of the Asian Martial Arts which themselves are part of the global family of martial arts.

Nobody arranged it this way to confuse beginners. Rather, **styles and other subdivision came about to refer to distinguishable patterns of study.** Consider the following analogy:

ECONOMICS

POLITICAL ECONOMICS

POLITICAL ECONOMICS AS TAUGHT BY JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

GALBRAITHIAN POLITICAL ECONOMICS AS TAUGHT AT HARVARD

GALBRAITHIAN HARVARD POLITICAL ECONOMICS INTERPRETED BY STUDENTS.

Please note that Economics itself can be subsumed by Social Science, which can be subsumed by Liberal Arts, which can be considered a branch of General Liberal Education.

It is not that anyone style is better or worse because of its name or its locale in a hierarchy (although it can do a better or worse job in preparing a student for understanding the whole art,) rather a **style or sub-style is simply a convenient place to begin.** General education that is as large as “an art,” is too vast for most students to take in efficiently while a student interpretation is too narrow to teach authoritatively.

Martial arts have styles because they are very rich, very detailed studies that can be approached on many levels. **A good style, in my opinion, is one from which a student cannot only form an interpretation, but also vault to the wider realms of art and general knowledge.**

Next time we'll talk about a looser categorization: Martial Arts by type.