



**E**xperience is not a matter of having actually swum the Hellespont, or danced with the dervishes, or slept in a doss-house. It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and coordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.

— Aldous Huxley (1894–1963)

# Getting Out and About

**A**S AN ONLY CHILD GROWING UP, WEEKNIGHT ENTERTAINMENT consisted of visiting relatives. There was no shortage. On my father's side, we'd visit Uncle Mike's where I would ride horses with my cousins Mikey and Bob, Uncle Angelo's where I could play cards with my cousin Angela, and Aunt Ronnie's where I could build models and play pool with my cousin Lloyd. On my mother's side, we'd drive off to Aunt Theresa's where I'd fool around with cousin Steve and the twins, and Uncle Frank's where I'd wrestle with my cousins Frankie and Anthony. We didn't go to aunt Frances's as much, probably because her kids were significantly younger than I.

Every once in a while, we'd get in the car to visit a friend my father had run into. I didn't want to go because there would be no kids my age. Sometimes my parents would let me stay home. Sometimes, I had to go. My parents told me they were concerned that I would not get out and meet people but just stay at home or visit only relatives already familiar to me. I didn't see any sense in this argument. I already knew enough people. I didn't want to go out and meet people just for the sake of meeting people, especially when there was no one with whom I had anything in common. I knew what was good for me. If I had gone, there would have been



the unavoidable four or five question interview. How was I doing in school? What was my favorite subject? Did I play any sports? What sorts of things did I like to do after school? Did I have any little girlfriends? Then the adults would get bored with me and want to talk with each other. I would get to watch TV or some 14- year-old son would be obliged to host me and treat me like a kid. Not exactly my idea of a fun evening. It's no fun hanging around places where you have nothing in common with people.

This attitude was reflected many years later in my martial arts. I was all in favor of visiting other schools but didn't see the value in visiting just for the sake of visiting. I would visit to get ideas or become more familiar with other systems but not just for an evening's stimulation. I had studied many martial arts informally and trained formally in judo, ju-jutsu, aiki-ju-jutsu, aikido, and karate but had not turned into a dojo hopper, the *ronin* of modern budo. I knew a multitude of martial variations and did not need to witness every possible sub-style of every possible minor martial art.

There was something in the early '60s called "dojo raiding". If a new school moved into town, a teacher might take his top students and "visit" the new school. There were even incidences where dojo hassles became inter-dojos fights. People got injured. In one famous incident, a person was killed. When schools became martial arts businesses, it was obligatory that each tolerate the other. This was much more modern, proper, and safe. Unfortunately, it also resulted in the unseemly practice of a kung-fu kwoon, for example, moving two doors down from a kempo dojo.

Luckily, dojo raiding faded out. I did know someone who, in the early '90s, was "visiting" schools to spread the word about his superior method of training. He wouldn't actually pick a fight with the head instructor but he would try to get inveigled in the class then show up everyone with his "superior methods". His argument was that he wasn't being a pain in the rear pleat of the hakama; rather he was proving that what they were teaching was actually dangerous to their students. Perhaps it did not occur to him that those students may not have been ready to demonstrate mastery of their methods or that some student train for reasons other than self-protection. Who knows? He may have been right! I doubt, however, if his tactics converted anyone.

In earlier decades, dojo denizens kept to themselves. It was very difficult to interact in any way except for the monthly tournament held at a neutral venue. That was the time when people actually got together.

It's funny, but I thought the opposite way. I would much rather see students functioning in their own school environment than go to a tournament. At tournaments, I saw people who trained to win a specific tournament change their art to score a point on competitors who had also changed their art to raise their score. I preferred to see martial artists in their own surroundings practicing seriously rather than in a public venue vying to get the judges' attention by being loud, garish, or more aggressive.

In order to become familiar with other martial arts, I read books (there were no videos available as yet), and respectfully visited dojo. I visited Tony Mirakian of Okinawan Goju in Watertown, Walter Mattson of Uechi in Framingham, Dave Castoldi of Small Circle Ju-jutsu in Newton, and Richard Byrne of Tang Soo Do in Medford. I was one of the first in the area to offer seminars so that people of different styles could learn from one another. When seminars became popular, I eagerly visited other schools to attend. After a few years of seminars in arnis, ju-jutsu, karate, and aikido, I found I had little in common with the average student in attendance. I was often familiar with what was being instructed. When I saw that I was tutoring my training partners at these seminars, it made no sense for me to attend anymore — I was paying to be a teacher. I had become the 14-year-old boy hosting the younger visitor, sometimes in the visitor's own home.

I have had students who epitomized both staying in and getting out of the dojo. Some students just will not leave the dojo no matter what the attraction. Other students spent half their free time trying to connect with divergent schools even if just to watch a class. The first seem happy at Bushido-kai but the happiness is untested. Did they fall in love with our method of teaching or was it just their first dojo infatuation? I wondered, privately, if they would have married their first girlfriend or boyfriend.

On the other hand, habitual visitors to other schools seem always to be looking for something better — like the confirmed bachelor who does not see the value of commitment or loyalty.



They want to see what is out there. When they are ready to settle down, however, the one they really wanted may not accept them anymore.

To extend this analogy, a potential mate (let's assume we are talking about a young woman) wants to be wanted for herself, not because she was the only convenient female in the area. She wants to feel that her lover selected her, having really had a wider selection to choose from. On the other hand, the lover's sampling of all the selections, one after another, is a refusal to make a choice.

In his turn, the guy has to understand that the young woman cannot be everything he could possibly want at all times. He should not expect her to fit his every mood or satisfy his every need. But she should fit a significant number of his moods and satisfy many of his needs or why would he choose her and not another?

So it goes with a martial arts school. No school can provide instruction in every art or satisfy every curiosity. Each instructor knows it is difficult enough to teach one good art in depth. Too many options, especially if introduced too soon, just dissipates a student's concentration.

We live at a time when students are used to getting what they want on demand. If they are interested in Plum Duk Kung-fu, they will go out and sign up for a month. Why do you think most schools demand year-long commitments? If students have a momentary fascination with Mud Stuk Buk, they will buy a video on it and pretend to really understand the art. If they would like the thrill of becoming a secret agent for ancient Shaolin priests, they will read a novel and bring their fantasy into the dojo. "When do we fight with the eight foot razor staves, Sensei?"

Investigating other disciplines can be healthy curiosity — a desire to understand the entire field from which their art is drawn. I support that. Too much of this curiosity, however, is a low level of dilettantism, a fickleness, a self-indulgence born of the thrill of new experiences. It is using disciplines to be undisciplined.

In the '80s, I had a girlfriend who wanted to do every activity available. She wanted to sky-dive, deep sea dive, visit Asia, do martial arts, become a model, go on Safari, be a dancer, etc., etc., etc. Being a doer as well as a dreamer, she went to sky diving school, took scuba courses, planned Asian vacations, studied budo for a





year, had her portfolio done by a modeling agency, Safari-ed for a week, studied dance for three months, etc., each with a boyfriend who could show her the ropes. As a result, she had had many experiences that other women her age did not. She also had experienced more than forty boyfriends by the age of twenty-two. By the age of twenty-four, one of her more exciting experiments ended up in a near-rape. “One thorn of experience is worth a whole wilderness of warning,” said Lowell.

There is no accounting for a person’s personality. It is not for me to say that Suzie and Sammy should, properly, study one art, go on vacation only to one resort, have only one career. The wonderful freedom we enjoy in the Western world means that Suzie and Sammy can study more than one art, visit as many resorts as they can afford, and have several careers. It is great to get out and about and encounter novelty and adventure. It is also great to actually master something. If it wasn’t for a teacher’s concentrated effort in one subject, Suzie and Sammy would have no teacher for the arts they wished to study, no guide for the vacations they wished to take, no mentor in the careers they wished to have. My former girlfriend would have had no boyfriends to show her the ropes.

The martial arts butterfly, like my ’80s girlfriend, trades experience in depth for experience in breadth. Breadth gives one the whole world; depth tells one what to do with it.

A martial artist has to have some breadth. You do not defend yourself in all situations just because you have an excellent high-level block and counterpunch. So too must a martial artist have experience in a variety of martial artistry. But there is a limit. I cannot tell you how many schools I have visited whose students know far more than just an upper block — they know as many as 10 blocks, 15 kata, 12 throws, 40 strikes and 30 kicks in their first year on the mat. When you attack them with a simple lunge punch, however, their upper block fails. Their counterpunch bounces off your belly. They have traded depth for breadth. They “visited many dojo” but have not spent enough time in one art.

I have always tried to create a learning environment that could merge the qualities of both breadth and depth. We offer three martial arts at Bushido-kai. I do not feel competent to teach more than three. It has taken me decades to feel capable in these arts and

I still feel there are gaps in my training. Few students would be able learn more than three simultaneously. Of course, students may study only one art, if they wish. We have developed a curriculum and methods of training that allow the arts to overlap so that when a student studies one art in depth, he or she necessarily experiences some breadth. We also offer numerous seminars each year. Sometimes, I teach a concentrated course on a subject; sometimes, I invite an instructor of repute to offer his version of martial training. Inevitably, 80% of what a visiting instructor teaches is familiar to my students because of our depth-with-breadth training. They understand concepts well enough to follow along comfortably with the other 20%. In getting the experience of breadth, they necessarily appreciate the depth at which they have been taught.

Some practitioners study martial arts as a sort of weeknight entertainment. To the extent they wish to be entertained, visiting other schools seems the thing to do. Other practitioners study martial arts as a way to self-improvement. They like getting out and about but enjoy it much more when they encounter something relevant to their goals. Getting out and about is collecting the material of knowledge. Studying is integrating that material into one home base. Getting out is breadth. Studying is depth. The former without the latter is like eating at every restaurant in the city without bothering to digest.