

Returning to Source

By Ian Deavin

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So many of us have learnt from Shotokan instructors who, while doing their absolute best, missed something, because the early Japanese instructors couldn't pass on subtle details. The cultural/language barrier was simply too big to breach in one go.

My Chinese (Tai Chi) instructors are always talking about 'feeling' and much of my learning these days comes from being given the opportunity (or setting myself up for it), to experience different ways of being. Interestingly, this touches on the Chinese idea of 'true transmission' from a master, where subtle aspects can only be passed on, one-to-one. Also it gives us another answer as to why Kata (or forms in soft arts) are considered the soul of a style. How is it that a really efficient fighter can develop only from practice of one form? Partly, I believe because each form contains the full expression of its originator (his soul). As we learn a form we learn about its creator and come to experience some of the feelings that he may have experienced. The choreography of the moves becomes a language carrying his ideas and concepts. Only by feeling can we begin to understand the message.

Like children learning to read we can recite a poem, but only when we are emotionally connected to the words do we understand what the poet is trying to say? Unfortunately much of karate has focused on reciting the poem ever more vigorously or elegantly, but a master creating a form could not do otherwise than put himself into it - his intention is there to be read and these guys were serious fighters. They did things because they worked and if we know their cultural background then we are better able to see where they were coming from in achieving their aims.

The common factor in learning the language of the masters is our bodies -we all have one and the language we have to learn is about communicating between bodies and so detailed and varied partner work (Kumite) is the only way to test what this choreography might mean.

In Kihon (basics) I think we learn about our alphabet, vocabulary and grammar. In Kumite (sparring) we learn interactive discussion and in Kata we learn about stories - when we can use the language well we can get creative with it.

Sometimes in our training we need to make a focused effort to cut out the crap-often by '**Returning to Source**' - to the realities of the basic raison-d'être of all fighting systems. Spanning the spectrum from brutal destruction to gentle healing surely means that study of martial arts is one of the most demanding paths. Fortunately by constantly coming back to the physical reality of effective technique we are focused to be ruthless in pruning unnecessary 'rubbish' from our training and our lives.

A recent reminder along these lines recently was phrased thus:

"Going beyond technique implies that there is a technique in the first place."

A salutary reminder which was accomplished for me by exposure to Kyusho Jitsu; and in my Tai Chi it is this constant question, "Will it work?" that gives its point and ensures that technique does not suffer in the search for health, flow, or exercise which are the side benefits of our martial arts, not their basic rational. If we lose the brutal extreme then we also lose the 'healthy' side, both become watered down and we forget that '*you get out what you put in*' means exactly that.

Some karateka are unaware of anything other than striking, some Tai Chi students do not even know that it was designed as training for fighting. Unfortunately, such arts are often taught in ways that protect the student from the less acceptable aspects of martial arts. Equally for example, some eastern Tai Chi people are completely unaware of our western ideas of using it principally for relaxation/meditation! As we return to the source of a style or particular technique we find tough, practical fighters waiting for us, telling us that all styles are trying to do the same thing. They say to

us that fighting is about exerting will, deliberately taking an adversary apart; Chi follows mind, action follows Chi. That different styles are only separated by choreography and degree of effectiveness.

Brutality came first, that is the root of all martial arts, everything else is there to help prevent fighting, increase effectiveness during a fight or help deal with the aftermath. Knowing this we can choose to be positive human beings but have to acknowledge this dark side of life. Returning to source is often an important way to get in touch with our raw animal destructive power.

In seeking our martial arts roots we are confronted and challenged, physically and mentally. It is easy to become complacent and not even know it - a self-administered kick up the ass is often the solution, propelling us into unknown areas with unexpected results.

Returning to source can be achieved in many ways:

- geographically visiting the birthplace of a style, enabling us to put in a social context and being exposed to the way it is regarded in the land of its birth.
- by following the lineage back as far as possible, meeting and studying with masters whose experience consists of transmissions reaching back sometimes 100 years or more.
- by internal meditation, our own attempt to read the core intention of a style from its form, based on our own existing knowledge.
- by cross training, to put our own style in an environment which forces it to be effective. In this way we can often see the true meaning of obscure techniques and the flaws in our own understanding.
- by following developmental history e.g. Japanese Karate styles can be followed back to Okinawa and to China where great similarities may be found not only with hard styles such as the Shaolin forms but with the soft Tai-Chi practice.
- by returning to the basic techniques of our style, in their simplicity we can find truth and learn how to read more sophisticated forms. They are the true source of a system and generally remarkably similar to the basics of other systems. From them, all the other techniques flow and in understanding their realities we can re-centre our own training.
- by seeking the principles of our art not its routines. Without understanding the principles underlying what we do it is only movement.
- by putting ourselves on the line, by reaching out and training with a wide variety of teachers. This forces us to be constant beginners, each time trusting what we have learnt in a new forum that questions what has gone before.
- by finding the BEST teachers. They will have gone the same route as their students and on their own journey faced the same needs. Their solutions may not be for everyone but are generally good signposts. The key here is to go for the person not the style, seeking out people we want to be like and training with them. If they really are good fighters they will be in touch with the source of their own martial art and this leads to great clarity and personal power. While I frequently argue that the most useful purpose for the martial arts in modern society is for personal and social development, I am also sure that it is true that we must stay in close contact with their source since we cannot get fruit from a tree without roots. Personal development in this sense is the fruit we harvest after we have learned about survival.

In any event when we return to our martial arts roots we do the same for all other aspects of our lives, for they take us to consideration of the issues of survival. In considering such a precarious uncushioned lifestyle we are forced to re-evaluate our 'social norm' value systems in a fundamental way so that day to day worries can seem much more manageable and at the same time many social activities take on new meanings with this perspective.

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