

# Myths and Misunderstandings When Teaching Traditional Eastern Martial Arts in Western Society

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## Abstract

Teaching traditional Eastern martial arts in a Western societal environment brings up a number of interesting issues for the instructor. For this paper these issues will be divided into three groups: language, culture and structure. Some of the language issues discussed are: what language is to be used to teach, what language is to be used for terms, and what translated terms are to be used such as the ever-controversial word *master*.

The second group of issues concerns the type of culture that is to be established for training. These issues include the tradition of bowing, how people should address one another, levels of discipline, clothing to be worn, and racial and gender issues.

The third group of issues concerns the structure of the classes, which includes required practice time both in the short and long term and the rank or belt system.

This paper discusses these issues and gives examples of how they might manifest themselves when teaching in a Western environment. For most of these issues a few of the pros and cons are touched upon as a way of broaching the subject. It is obvious that at

best this paper is a review of these important issues and that any kind of meaningful discussion requires more research and peer review. The sole purpose of this paper is to list these topics and discuss the complexity of these intermingled issues, leaving the reader with opportunity to have in-depth conversations on the topics in the future or just let the topics percolate into his or her own thinking. At the conclusion of the paper a few recommendations are made concerning some of the key points that were brought up.

## **Language**

The use of language in teaching martial arts is very important. Often when words are translated they lose their original meaning or become less full of inference and depth. For example a story that has been honed through the centuries to teach students a difficult concept may very well lose some or all of its meaning when it has been translated from one language to another and then retold in a different society if not a completely different era. The question remains, what language or languages should be used when martial arts are taught outside of their native cultures?

### **Language Use in Training**

What language is used in training is a major question for many instructors. Take the following three scenarios. The first scenario consists of the instructor teaching an English speaking class entirely in the “native” language of the art. So for example taekwondo would be taught in Korean and karate would be taught

in Japanese. A second scenario might have the instructor using words and phrases in the native language but teaching the balance of the class in the language of the students, in this case English. The third scenario has the instructor teaching the class entirely in English.

In the first case, while the exclusive use of a foreign language may maintain a certain degree of “authenticity,” it is also sure to greatly decrease the quality and depth of the instruction. This may not be as true when learning individual techniques as when one is trying to teach a concept or philosophy that often is inherent in learning a martial art. Thus in the short term, as in a seminar, teaching entirely in a foreign language is often acceptable if not desired for its novelty, but in the long run it will impede the breadth and depth of the learning.

In the second case a number of terms may be taught to the class and then used with as much consistency as the instructor’s language skills allow. An example of such a term is the word given for a technique such as the judo term *o-soto-gari*, which refers to a major outer reaping throw. This term has the advantage that it is used worldwide and thus largely transcends language barriers. Another term is *kuzushi*, which refers to the breaking of the balance of an opponent. However this word also has the implication of both a mental and a physical break in an opponent’s concentration and inner balance. This makes the word *kuzushi* quite complex, and for many instructors worth the time to teach in all of its many facets so it can be used as a compact term for a complex concept during regular instruction.

Finally, there are the instructors who teach entirely in English. While this may work for teaching techniques, the author believes that it is all too easy to ignore the important overlying and philosophical concepts if time and energy is not given over to teaching at least the basic phrases that are central to martial arts. This may be as simple as bowing in a class in the art's native language, which is discussed later in a section on culture, or it can be as complex as trying to define the concept of *ki* or *chi*, which refers to one's inner strength and is a concept that people have spent a lifetime studying.

### **The Unfortunate Use of the Term *Master***

At some point early on when Eastern martial arts were introduced into Western society, the term master was brought into the general vernacular to indicate someone who had achieved a high degree of proficiency in a given art. The problem is that the word master has a second meaning in English that has nothing to do with martial arts but which implies ownership over another human being as in the phrase "master and slave".

Over the last thirty years I have had a few occasions when one or more students have asked if an alternative word for master could be used, as they felt distinctly uncomfortable with the social and cultural implications of the word. It has been suggested that the term *instructor* may accomplish this goal. It is true that the word instructor is certainly a better translation for the Japanese word *sensei*. Instructor can also be built upon to maintain the seniority implied by the terms master and grand master in that instructor and senior

instructor or even master instructor can be substituted with little loss of meaning or hierarchical implications.

## **Culture**

*Webster's New World Dictionary* has five definitions for the word *culture*. The first three definitions involve the raising of plants, animals and bacteria. It is the last two definitions that are of interest for this section:

4. Improvement by study or training, especially of the mind, manners and taste; refinement.
5. The ideas, skills, arts, tools, and way of life of a certain people in a certain time; civilization.

## **In the Beginning**

One of the first decisions an instructor of martial arts in Western society must make is to decide what kind of culture is to be maintained in the studio. Several relevant questions are:

- Should a studio put up a Korean, Japanese or Chinese flag?
- Where, to whom, and when must students bow?
- Is the club environment social or instructional?

## ***The Use of Flags***

Many clubs put up flags but they go up for many different reasons. This may vary from nationalistic pride to merely a form of decoration to lend ambiance to the workout room. Some who do put up a foreign flag also put up an American flag because they

acknowledge that some cross-cultural allowances must be made.

### ***Bowing***

At its simplest, bowing is a traditional form of greeting. In the context of martial arts, bowing is an act of common courtesy and is performed on a number of occasions. Some of these are:

- ***Bowing to the dojang***

Bowing when one enters and exits the training studio. This bow can be traced back to the times when workouts were held in temples. In the modern context this bow is to acknowledge that you are here to train and are obliged to give your full attention to the instructors and your fellow students.

- ***Bowing in and out***

At the start and end of a workout the instructors, black belts and students are asked to line up in a prescribed fashion. A common line up is to have the instructors lined up facing west, the senior black belts lined up facing north, and the students lined up facing east. When everyone is lined up the senior student calls everyone to attention and everyone bows to the instructors and then everyone bows to the senior black belts. This set of bows not only acknowledges the instructional staff but also the people who have practiced in the past and the history of the art.

- ***Bowing to the instructor***

When an instructor teaches a technique the students bow in acknowledgement.

- ***Bowing to a practice partner***

When two or more people are about to start or have concluded practicing together they bow to acknowledge their mutual responsibility to work together conscientiously and make every effort to keep each other safe.

- ***Bowing to a grand master***

When a grand master enters the training area all instruction and practice should be briefly called to a halt. Everyone is called to attention and they bow to the grand master. This bow not only acknowledges the presence of this senior instructor but also that person's contributions to the art.

Every martial arts instructor must decide how much bowing is to be performed and why. It is the author's very strong opinion that some amount of bowing should be kept in a martial arts environment. The formalism that bowing instills in a studio is a strong reminder that what is being practiced is not violence for the sake of violence but the study of one's own physical and mental limitations. The study of a martial art is more often a study of one's self.

The question of the level of strictness that will be enforced in regards to bowing is wildly complex and covers a spectrum of topics ranging between historical, sociological and cultural issues. This includes the choice of a militaristic level of bowing to everyone all the time to a less strict level of bowing only at specified

times. The choice of how often and to whom and what to bow has no one right answer, but it is suggested that whatever level of bowing is imposed, the students should be taught the reason for the school's chosen level and the fact that other schools and institutions will have alternate ideas on the subject.

### **Selecting an Instructor**

The martial arts world holds a number of preconceived ideas of what a martial arts instructor should look and act like. When Eastern martial arts were first introduced to the West, all martial arts instructors were Asian males. Over the last century it is not surprising to find that martial arts instructors come in all shapes, sizes, races, genders and ages. They come from blue collar, white collar and no collar workers. Some speak with a thick, rich Korean accent and some speak with a down-home, Georgian accent. The question becomes, if you cannot recognize a good instructor from his or her looks then how do you recognize one?

This is a very difficult and to some extent a very personal question. Difficult because there is no single national governing body that keeps track of legitimate martial arts instructors. Anyone who wants to can buy a uniform, a black belt and a little equipment and call him or herself a martial arts instructor. Claims of how many martial arts clubs are run by unqualified instructors vary but most generally agree that the percentage is significant. The best generic advice when choosing a martial arts studio is to shop around and ask questions. Like anything else, do not let yourself be talked into something before you know all the facts.



- Great instructors come in all races, shapes, sizes and genders. Choose one whom you feel you can work comfortably with over a long period of time.
- How well does the instructor teach? Just because someone has a medal from the Olympics does not mean that he or she can teach what he or she knows.
- Talk with other students who have already participated in the club.
- Clubs that cost more or demand that you sign up for long-term contracts should be treated with great suspicion.
- Do not be lured by lines such as “You too can be a black belt”, “Guaranteed black belt in one year”, or “Become the toughest guy on the block”. Learning martial arts is a journey and while personal goals are fine, they should not be what govern your choice of school. Reputable schools recognize that everyone will promote through the ranks at different rates.
- What are the instructor’s views on student health and safety? While pressing a student to physically and mentally perform at their best, does the instructor maintain a safe practice environment?

## **Structure**

### **Issues with Time and Scheduling**

How long should it take the “average” student to earn a black belt? This one inescapable limitation is an

issue that some types of programs, such as a university-based club, must cope with. The fact remains that the average student only attends the university for four to five years. Once a student's degree is completed then he or she often leaves the area. It is unrealistic to require that a student stay in the area solely to continue his or her martial arts training. Thus the instructor must try to create a learning path so the student has some chance of carrying away a relatively complete and self-sustaining chunk of martial arts training in a limited time frame. Often this goal is illustrated by achieving the rank of first *dan* black belt. However, a martial arts school is not an assembly line where a student gets on at one end and at a predetermined time emerges at the other end as a first *dan* black belt. It is an institution that allows the student to hone body and mind at a pace that is determined by the student's relative abilities, desires and available time. Different people, for a variety of reasons, will pass through the ranks at different rates. None-the-less many programs are set up such that a first *dan* can be achieved by a hard working student in a three to four year window.

This issue leads inevitably to the question of "belt inflation". How long should it take a student to earn a given rank? Many martial arts instructors cringe at the sight of advertisements that say something like, "We guarantee you will be a black belt in eight weeks or your money back". These less than reputable institutions have never given any money back and that there are a large number of people who eventually appear at legitimate schools thinking they have earned the right to wear a black belt. It is often an unpleasant

experience being the one to inform these people that their black belt is not universally accepted.

There are also schools that go to the other extreme where by the average black belt is awarded only after many years of practice. For these schools belt color is usually de-emphasized in favor of a deeper and better understanding of the material being taught.

Issues of timing also walk hand-in-hand with other scheduling issues such as how many tests should be given each year. With some clubs belt tests are offered every month, and for the very beginning ranks in a large studio this may be appropriate. But with the higher *kub* ranks and especially the senior dan ranks (say fourth dan and above), one or two tests each year is usually more than adequate.

Some clubs have fewer tests, say one a year. They argue that too many tests force the students to learn only for the tests and place an undue emphasis on belt testing over the actual learning and martial arts experience.

There are a wide variety of shorter-term scheduling issues that come up over time and they represent a surprisingly diverse spectrum of issues. For example at a large university program there were three belt tests held each year. The tests for one martial art were always given on the last Saturday of each semester. It took a number of years before it was discovered that some Jewish students were unable to promote on Saturdays due to the tenets of their faith, and thus they transferred to a different martial art that held its belt tests on days other than Saturday.

Another common problem with day-to-day scheduling is in setting the hours for workouts. For

example a workout can be held “just after work” or “just after school”, but given the wide variety of times this implies there is always a substantial subset of people who cannot attend the workouts during the hours that are selected. For example if a class is set for Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 5:30pm until 7:00pm, some people will love this as they can go directly from work (or school) to class and still be home at a reasonable hour. Others find this schedule is too early to deal with on a regular basis and cannot attend the class.

### **Belt Test Fees**

Belt test fees are a very sensitive topic for many programs. The two major viewpoints are often taken from the commercial club, where the instructors are trying to make a living from teaching martial arts, and the non-profit clubs where the instructors make their living by other means. There is always a worry that if an instructor’s livelihood is correlated with belt test fees then more tests will be required and the fees will be higher. There is no question that there are numerous commercial schools that are well run and well respected, but for every legitimate school there are many more that are run by less than competent instructors who charge too much in fees. One school the author visited required every student to pass three tests for each of the 10 kub ranks (stripes were added to the colored belt for each test passed) and five or more tests had to be passed to achieve the various dan ranks. Each test cost the student fifty dollars, whether the student passed or not. These belt fees quickly added up as there were also monthly gym fees in

addition to the other costs that included vastly over inflated fees for uniforms, belts, patches, etc.

There are some who would believe that the more expensive a belt, the more valuable it should be perceived. The author would argue that this is a myth and that it is the length and quality of instruction, not the price that matters most.

### **Gender Issues**

The question is often asked as to what role gender has with students of martial arts? The answer to this question is simple and unambiguous. It is the author's considered opinion that men, with sufficient tenacity and practice, can reach the same levels of martial arts proficiency as women ... period.

### **Acceptance of Students of Diverse Martial Arts Backgrounds**

While the wild assortment of available martial arts training styles has subsided since the explosion of the 1970s and 1980s, it is still true that martial arts students starting at a new school have often taken some form of martial art before their arrival. Where do these students belong as they join a new club while bringing with them some amount of previous knowledge?

It is standard practice to have new students start in the new art at the beginning (unless a student's old belt is from an affiliated art). However many schools will allow students to progress a bit more quickly until they have such a rank as is commensurate with their skill level.

The author would contend that the students' old

knowledge is part of what they are and that short of techniques that conflict with the new style, they should be encouraged to adapt what they already know so as to more easily adapt to the new style. On occasion techniques need to be relearned or even eliminated. This is usually due to the technique being inherently dangerous to either the practitioner or his or her partner.

### **Safety**

All too often the idea of practicing a martial art safely has somehow meant that it lessens the value or the efficaciousness of the martial art. The myth is that the harder students hit each other the more they learn. The author believes that an effective martial art is one that can be practiced for a lifetime. This requires that the training be augmented to suit the age, health and strength of the students. It is a medical fact that a twenty-year-old will heal faster than a fifty-year-old, but that should not preclude the fifty-year-old from full participation in the art. All too often students are allowed or even encouraged to participate in activities that will come back to haunt them later in life. For example it was once in vogue to “toughen” the hands, arms, feet and shins. This usually entailed repeated blows to unforgiving objects and a corresponding buildup of scar tissue. Unfortunately the long-term effect of this training is an early onset of arthritis and an eventual significant loss of physical abilities in those limbs. This is counter to the often-described precept that martial arts should enhance the student’s life, not needlessly limit or inhibit it.

The author highly recommends that students should

choose martial arts schools where safety is not only emphasized but also practiced. Injuries will sometimes occur during any kind of physical activity. It is up to the instructor to create an environment where safety is both fostered and encouraged and that injuries, when they occur, are properly treated.

### **Students of Diverse Physical Attributes**

There are a number of people who believe that raw physical talent should be enough to promote to any level in martial arts. This belief leads one to conclude that a physically gifted person should be promoted with little or no practice, but that a less physically gifted person should have to practice much harder to achieve the same rank. What is the role of the degree of raw physical skill a student has in so far as his or her rank promotion is concerned?

While the assortment of physically different people who wish to practice martial arts is staggering, it is the considered opinion of the author that all martial arts practitioners be encouraged to practice up to their physical abilities. Some students may be able to kick well, roll well or do groundwork well, but few will be able to perform in all areas equally well. Nonetheless students should be encouraged to work hard to improve in all areas with a special emphasis on the areas that they do not do well. This encouragement is often reflected in how a student promotes in rank. The question then becomes, for a given rank is there a level of competence that all students must achieve before they can be promoted?

The author suggests that while all ranks must certainly have a minimum level of physical

accomplishment associated with them, the level is not nearly as important as the amount of improvement that the student has shown since he or she was last promoted. In short a student who wishes to promote should work to improve him or herself in order to earn the next rank. One of the finest martial artists I have ever trained was born with cerebral palsy (CP). CP is a static condition in which a person's nervous system does not innervate all muscle groups. Some people have such mild cases that it is not noticed in their day-to-day activities. Other people with CP have a difficult time with such simple activities as walking or opening a jar. The student I am describing had a middling case of CP so he could perform many techniques, but for most of them some adaptation of the movement had to be made in order for him to safely execute the move. This man's spirit and training discipline had him working as hard as anyone in the club, and while he struggled with many aspects of learning the art, he worked so hard and came so far in his personal growth and improvement that he was promoted alongside his peers. His efforts were so greatly appreciated by his fellow students that in successive years he was elected at the annual awards dinner as "Most Improved" one year and "Most Inspirational" the next.

Nobody was about to mistake this student's techniques for Bruce Lee, but on the other hand if the idea of belt promotions is to mark a student's improvement and in particular the student's ability to overcome and adapt to physical barriers, then this student was as richly deserving of his rank as any of his peers.



### **Self-Defense versus Martial Arts**

As we are well along into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, crime statistics in America have actually fallen somewhat, but many report that there is a more acute sense of danger. With this feeling of insecurity there is a demand for solutions. With America's demand for fast solutions to long-term problems, more often than not people are looking for solutions to their safety concerns that require minutes not years.

While martial arts cannot guarantee any kind of safety, it can give its practitioners some peace of mind but only after months if not years of practice. Many people attending self-defense seminars and workshops are seeking some kind of magical, if not mythological, degree of safety through learning a few secret techniques. Often it takes these people many seminars and a great deal of money to learn that money will not replace the need for hours of practice and buckets of sweat. That being said there are still some distinctions between practicing self-defense and practicing a martial art.

In short, self-defense classes can be as simple as learning how to use mace or shoot a gun. If these tools are to be purchased and relied upon then it certainly behooves people to learn as much as they can about their purchase. Learning martial arts, however, goes beyond mere physical training as it includes training of the mind. This can range from teaching students not to be a "deer in headlights" (so shocked by a physical confrontation that they are unable to respond in a timely manner) to being able to respond in a coherent and intelligent way at a time of crisis.

### **Martial Arts, Martial Sports and Martial Exercises**

In the world of martial training there are three basic branches that are practiced. These branches are:

- **martial exercises** such as tai chi where the primary goal is to physically train one's body and mind;
- **martial arts** such as karate, wushu and yongmudo where the primary goal is to physically train the body for other venues such as demonstration and forms (wushu) or work with other people to train in self-defense;
- and **martial sports** such as judo and taekwondo where the primary goal is to participate in a contest against other people using a set of established rules.

Obviously many martial disciplines can be practiced such that they cover more than one of these basic areas, but in many cases the martial discipline is taught to emphasize one of these areas more than the others. If one accepts for a moment these three areas as mapping most of the world of martial disciplines, then the question must be asked as to the area that yongmudo finds itself. When yongmudo was first introduced to the world it pushed the idea of being a self-defense art. However in recent years it has been primarily associated with the yongmudo competitions, with the self-defense aspects being relegated to a less prominent position in training. This would imply that yongmudo has evolved from a martial art to a martial sport.

The reason this issue is important to this paper is

that these different areas of martial study attract different age groups and personality types. By and large the martial sports are primarily practiced by the young. In most martial sports the primary age group is limited to school age people. This age range is arguably eight to twenty-four. While there are certainly people outside that range who actively practice the various martial sports, the vast majority of those who practice are in that age range. Martial arts, especially those that profess to teach self-defense, attract participants over a somewhat broader age range. If the instructor has a strong enough emphasis on safety, schools have been known to maintain students' interest long after they have left their schooling years. The fact remains that even if a person enjoys practicing a martial discipline, if he or she regularly gets injured to the point of being unable to work and/or carry on day-to-day activities, then that student will soon quit practicing. This leads to the practice of martial exercises with tai chi being a good example. Practicing these disciplines rarely leads to a student getting injured beyond the usual skeletomuscular stresses and strains of physical activities, and even those are rare and relatively well controlled.

To have yongmudo stand in both the martial arts and martial sports areas is not necessarily a bad thing. The danger is that yongmudo follows the path of taekwondo and gets pushed too far onto the side of martial sports and thus loses much of its claim of catering to the study of self-defense.

## Thoughts and Conclusions

Any time something as culturally dependent as traditional martial arts are taken out of their original culture, it must be expected that there will be some changes. Some of these changes will be for the worse and some for the better. With limited time and resources available to preserve certain aspects of the martial art in its original form, usually through education and training protocols, the question becomes which aspects should be preserved? For example to use bowing as a sign of mutual respect and not subservience is of great importance in training students to become better citizens.

While judo and taekwondo have shown themselves to be at least somewhat successful as martial sports, they both have shown that for many of their schools the sport aspect has largely displaced the art aspect, although this is not true of all schools. Unfortunately the loss of the art aspect has been to the detriment of teaching students one of the basic tenets of martial arts, which is how to become a better world citizen.

As for the many myths and misunderstandings that seem to be inherent in the practice of martial arts, some are relatively benign and might even add to the mystique of practicing the martial arts, but others can needlessly detract from the name and discourage participation in the martial arts. It is the responsibility of every martial arts instructor to shed light on the old traditions, especially those that the club chooses to maintain, and to make clear to everyone the importance of following at least some of the old-world ways.