

## From the Teacher's Corner:

### The Diseased Mind

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*"You must do it this way."*

*"Our way is the right way."*

We've all heard these statements before or some variation of it. Usually it is not stated so bluntly. It might crop up in statements such as:

*"Oh, we don't do it that way."*

*"Oh, you can't cut like that."*

And then the rationales come forth to justify the position. No problem. You can come up with a justification for anything. Anyway, the impetus for exploring this subject in this article came from a recent meeting of the various groups representing a certain koryu sword art. And what is funny is that although they all study the same art, they all do it a little differently from each other to the point where they almost cannot perform kata with each other. They can do it, however, it requires someone/ some group to adjust to the other's way of doing it.

I am sure it happens in almost every art. It probably happens in iaido, in kendo, and in the various koryu sword arts. Having studied a little bit of iaido myself in my younger days, I can attest to it. Different groups (e.g., Muso Shinden Eishin Ryu, Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, Tamia Ryu, etc...) all do it a little differently from each other. Perhaps the effect is not as telling with solitary kata as it is with other koryu where you have the majority of kata involving the interplay between two partners (kumi-tachi).

For example, in Ono-ha Itto Ryu, main line OHIR do it differently than the Sokaku-den line, which is more fluid, having been influenced by their study of aikijujutsu. The topic of the different lines in Katori Shinto Ryu is well documented (Otake-line, Sugino-line, etc...) and the groups all do it differently from each other. Even within one line, you have different factions again. Take, for instance,

the Sugino Line, which I know from first-hand experience. There is the main line under the direction of Yukihiro Sugino Sensei. There are also some offshoots from this line such as the Hatakeyama-line (the former senior student of Yoshio Sugino Sensei), the Mochizuki-line (Mochizuki Sensei being a friend of Yoshio Sugino Sensei), and some independent groups in Europe which cling to the old Yoshio Sugino Way (which they have taken and made their own). Confused, yet?

Anyway, even these sub-groups have trouble practicing with each other due to differences in interpretation of the concepts in the art such as distance, timing, targeting, force, power, lines and angles, fluidity, body movement, foot movement, and whole assortment of other technical issues. I realize that different groups have different ways of doing the kata. I have no problem with that; that's to be expected.

I do have a problem with groups who refuse to do it any other way. Maybe that's not entirely accurate. There is refusal to do it any other way and there is inability to do it any other way.

Let's look at the first case.

Refusal to do it any other way is a sign of stubbornness. In this scenario, these meetings of the different factions really serves no function since they are not there to learn from others, to share, or to exchange ideas. It takes a little give and take for this to work, for people to exchange ideas and learn from each other. If one group takes the attitude of "you guys adapt to us, we do not adapt to you", then it falls apart. This is one scenario. In this way, it is regrettable.

If everyone gives a little and changes a little just for that moment, then the various groups can somehow do the kata in an acceptable fashion and enjoy the experience with each other.

In the second case, where one group cannot do it any other way, this is not a choice. They really are so locked into their way of doing it that they cannot break free from it. They are so locked into their version of the kata that they can only do it one way; that way. They cannot do it with members from other dojos. In a way, that's sad. They're stuck.

*"It is a disease to be obsessed by the thought of winning. It is also a disease to be obsessed with the thought of employing your swordsmanship. So it is to be obsessed by the thought of using everything you have learned, and to be obsessed by the thought of attacking. It is also a disease to be obsessed and stuck with the thought of ridding yourself of any of these diseases. A disease here is an obsessed mind that dwells on one thing. Because all these diseases are in your mind, you must get rid of them to put your mind in order."*

Yagyu Munenori  
Heiho Kaden Sho

So how are they stuck? Their mind is stuck. Rigid. We must do the kata this way. We must cut like this and at this point in the kata, you must react like this. You must retreat in this direction. And so on and so forth. The kata says we must do it like this, exactly like this.

Stuck...

This is where you hear some teachers say that these kinds of people are just learning the dance steps. I agree. They are learning the steps of the dance. Yes, correct. But they are NOT learning how to dance.

They know how to step. They don't know how to dance. Taken in another analogy, they know the technical movements (this move first, that move second) but they are not dancing. Dancing is an expression of the soul, of the will, of the passion that burns within. It's an expression, a creative expression, that is above and beyond step-numbering or movement-counting. It is free, spontaneous.

My teacher, Kajitsuka Sensei, told me that his teacher, Mutoh Sensei deliberately changed up the kata, even at demonstrations! This is counter to popular thinking, where you would want to be very predictable so that the kata performance went off smoothly for the spectators. He would come in at different angles, different speeds, vary up the timing of his strikes and so forth to keep his students off-balance. Why, pray tell?

*"An opponent in a waiting stance is bound to evince some change if you show a variety of changes yourself. Following that change, you win."*

*Yagyu Munenori  
Heiho Kaden Sho*

The central philosophy of Yagyu Shinkage Ryu is to adapt to your opponent. Nothing is written in stone. Every time we do a kata, it is different. It is never the same twice. Confused? That is what Yagyu Shinkage Ryu is. Fluid. Adaptable. Flexible. In constant flux.

So, the students had to be paying attention, no matter what the occasion. A good lesson indeed!

*"Our way is the right way and the only way."*

OK. So what are you learning? Basically, how to perform a dance in only one way. You can't dance with other partners.

Are you learning sword-fighting? In a way, no. You cannot adapt to an opponent. If the opponent doesn't react like we expect, we are lost. You can't say in a sword fight, "Hey, you're not supposed to do that!" Well, if things don't work like they should in our perfect little world, then what are we supposed to do? They didn't prepare us for that!

In this way, too much focus on the prescription of the kata (i.e., "the kata says to do it like this and so we are going to do exactly as it says") is debilitating.

This past summer, Kajitsuka Sensei talked to us about the concept of shu-ha-ri. It came up in one of our great discussions on the philosophy of the style. He talked about shu, the prescription of the kata. That is the first stage of learning. Learning the kata exactly as prescribed. There is value in that. It is a necessity. You have to learn the kata like it is supposed to be learned.

But later, once you know the kata very well, comes the second stage, ha. This is where you experiment. You explore, you look at applications, variations, permutations. You speculate and investigate and explore. This stage is also a necessity, to truly understand the meaning of the kata.

But some people are stuck on shu. Doing the kata exactly as prescribed. They are obsessed with the prescription of how the kata must be performed. Diseased. Rigid. Inflexible.

*"Generally, I dislike fixedness in both long swords (i.e., strategy/tactics/methodology) and hands. Fixedness means a dead hand. Pliability is a living hand. You must bear this in mind."*

*Miyamoto Musashi  
The Book of Five Rings*

Even in our own practice of Yagyu Shinkage Ryu, we have to guard against this disease of the mind. In one case, some of our more experienced practitioners had gotten a little too smug with their own accomplishments in the art, even unbeknownst to themselves. One day, they were teaching one of the less senior members one of the kata and this student was not performing the kata exactly as they were used to. This student was big and aggressive, believed in power, and liked to attack with no thought of the consequences. As soon as you showed a weakness or an opening, he would attack. He didn't perform the kata like he was supposed to, like they expected. He didn't observe distance like a cautious swordsman would. He would come in violently and powerfully. Consequently, he really befuddled these more senior members who thought they were good. He got a lot of ai-uchi kills (both kill each other), which he revelled in, to the consternation of the senior members. He was clearly enjoying himself, frustrating these so-called senior members. They, however, were getting more and more

upset because things didn't work out like they thought. I tried to give them some subtle advice on how to deal with it, but they were seeing red. They were frustrated. They even argued with me about it when I tried to talk to them about it. Of course, once they started arguing with me about it, I knew it was a waste of time to try to offer any further suggestions. Better to let the situation evolve to its natural conclusion, which it did. Later on, once they had calmed down, then we could have a reasonable talk. These senior members were banging their head on the wall. Why doesn't it work on this guy? It should work. They kept trying and trying, determined that it would work. But it wasn't.

Well yes, it does work but you have to adjust your approach: change the timing and the distance. Faced with a square peg, they kept trying to bang it into a round hole and were getting nowhere. They were stuck. They couldn't see their way around the problem because they were obsessed with the thought of showing this junior member how superior their technique was. Diseased. Becoming rigid again. They became enamoured with the technique (the "look at my lovely sword-wielding ability" syndrome) and forgot the driving philosophy of the style: Be adaptable. Stay flexible.

It was a good lesson for them that day.

Here's another story. One day, old Yoshio Sugino Sensei was practicing with a student, going through the kata in Katori Shinto Ryu. And I must admit, when you have kata that have 25-30 moves in them like is the case in KSR sword kata, it is easy to get them mixed up. Happens all the time. Well, that is exactly what happened in this case. The student somehow mixed up the movements. What started as kata 3 morphed into bits of kata 2 and pieces of kata 1. But the old man did not bat an eyelash. Old Sugino Sensei just flowed through the movements, perfect timing, perfect distance, perfect response to the attacker's attack or counter-attack. Sugino Sensei did not say anything, just flowed with his opponent. After a while, the student got befuddled and realized that he was doing the wrong kata and the apologies started. But Sugino Sensei just had a good laugh with the student. Those of us sitting on the sidelines watching this spectacle were a little amazed. He didn't even blink or hesitate. He was not put out or confused or even upset. It's almost as if he didn't even notice it. When we think of shu-ha-ri, this was an ad hoc, impromptu demonstration of ri. You are beyond the kata, free from the constraints of the prescription of the kata. You just "flow". You are "in the moment". You are "in the zone". You just... "are".

*"Experts in various arts and skills cannot be called masters (meijin) as long as they remain attached to what they do."*

*In whatever art you pursue the Way, if you are singleminded and determined to accomplish what you set out to, you are no longer pursuing the Way. Someone with nothing in his mind is a man of the Way.*

Yagyū Munenori

*Heiho Kaden Sho*

And in our Katori Shinto Ryu practice, when we get together with other groups, we can do it their way no problem. The benefit of our practicing a much more sophisticated version of KSR is that it is easier for us to adapt to them than for them to adapt to us. That is also a good experience and a good lesson for us in staying flexible and adaptable.

You want to do it our way? No problem.

You want to do it your way? No problem.

Oh, we don't know your way? Not a problem. We'll figure it out.

So what's the moral of the story?

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