

Physical Training (2017) <http://ejmas.com/>

“Some Theoretical Martial Arts Assertions”

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We theorists of martial arts have certainly had our go. Donn Draeger got the ball rolling in the 70s treating the martial arts as a subject worthy of serious study. He helped make “martial arts” an academic subject, and made, perhaps, the eventual existence of the Society for the Study of Philosophy and the Martial Arts inevitable. Draeger is also among the most humorless of authors, who perhaps rightly thought that being taken seriously meant, well, being humorless. I’m a career academic myself, but even in my glory days I couldn’t touch Draeger for that certain academic something found, for instance, in his telling us, presumably with a straight face, that the way to get a *sageo* through a *kurigata* is to first wrap the end of the *sageo* in the “plastic material used to store food”! I’m almost certain he meant cellophane or plastic wrap, but even if he didn’t they do work like gangbusters.

With that in mind—and which *gaijin budoka* who lived through the 70s hasn’t had Draeger on his mind at least now and then even if we may not be part of the Draeger-*klach* (You know who you are!)—I wonder why we have made of martial arts such a mystery and clouded it with so much, well, silliness. And we have, believe me, we have. Seems like, does it not, that everybody has some sort of axe to grind, some sort of sparring to do over technique or theory; at least we writers on the subject do—why else would we write and publish all these books and articles.

Here I sit, hacking away at this keyboard adding to the mass. I too have axes to grind. I too feel like pointing out where we, all of us, have gone wrong. I hope I know better than to think I’ll get the last word. I know I may be wrong. I hope that you will simply hear me out. In this regard we follow the path of academic philosophers and scientists whose stock in trade is argument.

But success in science and academic philosophy is discovery and testing of *fact* in the first case and discovery and testing in discourse or *reasoned argument* in the second. Most martial arts discourse, much budo discourse may be safely said to stand outside any of those weighty burdens. Talk remains cheap, but cheap talk contributes, perhaps, to our post-truth world, and we suffer, we who work to elevate the talk or merely to cultivate real and viable ideas to go with it.

Here’s some of my ideas:

1. There is no such thing as "martial arts." That is an English phrase for a bafflingly complex set of practices, from widely diverse sources, in widely distant places, with more or less tangible connections with more or less military-related theory and practice. It is not a thing that anybody could ever be a "master" of.
2. The martial aspect of martial arts is a necessary cause for the entities and phenomena and organizations and ideas we (weakly) attempt to capture under the nominative phrase "martial arts."
3. The martial aspect of what we popularly call "martial arts" is NOT a sufficient cause to explain the continued existence of such practices, ideas, theories, and entities, in the present world.
4. All martial arts are not created equal.
5. All practice of martial arts is equal . . . until such time as individual systems are pitted against other "outside" systems; the result is MMA.
6. Who cares about becoming a warrior or a swordsman? It is enough to get good at what your teacher shows you, which is an evolved version of what his teachers showed him, and so forth.
7. None of this, NONE of it, has anything to do with fighting skill . . . such as, say, a marine stationed in the Middle East might think of fighting skill.
8. Martial arts are all forms of Physical Education. That's all. They all must have some connection to "martial" matters, but woe to those who sell martial arts as fighting or defense or magic . . .
9. Martial arts are not mystical. This notion is rooted in post WW II romanticism and misunderstanding of all that Oriental exotica and esoterica. Hell! Europe had just as much martial arts activity as Asia. It just almost got lost in the whole sale Victorian era love of modern fencing.
10. All innovation started from extant tradition and all tradition started with innovation and so on and so on and boogey, boogey, boogey.
11. Martial arts are poorly-weakly assessed by reference to "fighting skill."
12. Martial arts are strongly assessed by standards and practices put forward by the individual school, teacher, and organization . . . both from the ground up and from the sky down, so to speak.
13. Older martial arts are extant precisely because they have transcended but included "fighting" in their teachings.
14. Martial arts are weak places to study "self-defense."
15. Self-defense is largely a fantasy that has more to do with getting even with the kid who put me down in grade school than any sort of reality.

16. Judge your practice by reference to your practice: specifics, local, specifics, specifics, local.
17. Koryu is an arbitrary distinction made based on the artificial division of time into pre-1868 and after-1868; it is nothing more. Koryu are as different one to another as they are to gendai budo. As individual gendai budo forms are distinct one from another; there is no such thing as koryu or martial arts; these are useful nominatives but also useless generalities.
18. We should be careful in assigning military goals to koryu; they may have had more or less tangible roots in military realities, but they have transcended and included those . . . at least since the turn of the Century, and probably almost at their inceptions . . . these founders saw something worthy of evolving out of, namely hacking other fools to bits with swords.
19. All martial arts practice has the potential to lead to personal change on the trainee's part; even training for sport requires practice of discipline, devotion, etc., and warfare has moral and ethical aspects and those are expected to actually change the person—hence post-traumatic stress and the inability for many ex-soldiers to live away from “their” wars.
20. Hence the post-civil war, Edo-peace, rise of martial arts schools; commercial ventures for out of work fighting persons for people adjusting to a peace time world. Period. Otake-sensei himself has many times reminded us that his school, Draeger's school never thrived until the Edo period and peace time.
21. Martial systems with sporting aspects: Gracie Jujutsu, kendo, judo, fencing, MMA etc.; are not about fighting skill. They are about winning competitions. Rules apply.
22. Some of the above can and may be folded into meaningful self-defense courses, but very few advanced practitioners are motivated primarily by notions of getting or keeping fighting skill.
23. Violence, fighting, and combat are transcended and included in martial practices. Iaido has nothing to do, except at its root tips, with learning to sword fight.
24. Any martial art that is made up or collated or synthesized can be considered worthy in so far as it does what it claims; but what does it claim?
25. Beware of truth claims based solely upon antiquity or authority; they are weak things to base rational beliefs upon, weaker still in making a meaningful practice.
26. Martial systems are not good, better, best because they are old or new; they are old in so far as they are "good." That is: having survived and thrived. Pasting together things results in pasted together things. But no martial art is immune to evolution as long as it is alive and thriving. Koryu are extant precisely because they transcended but included their military sources.

27. The drive to shoe horn fighting ability into martial arts is futile and foolhardy; tai chi is good just as it is for what it claims to be, but again, what does it claim to be?
28. It is certainly common for folks to co-opt martial arts into rational or irrational belief systems; Yeshua-do (Jesus Way? Really?) or Shorinji Kempo (Japanese "version" of Shaolin "fighting" systems; "Shaolin" itself is an historically questionable idea), but that doesn't make them other than what they can show themselves to be; again, what is claimed and how is it to be demonstrated.) Cults arise very easily and may or may not be benign in their purposes or outcomes. Which came first the martial, the art, or Yeshua?
29. Martial arts all originated with the rise of the middle classes, the merchant classes, and the rise of leisure time; they are post-war and post-post-war pass times with some atavistic passion for the past both motivating their foundation and formulation and marketing their value; Korean armed forces practice taekwondo as P.E. not as combat training.
30. Budo is Physical Education; it offers a laboratory for personal and transpersonal fitness and wellness; it has no special powers or special provenance. Polo may have its roots in warfare--knocking a bagged enemy head around, cavalry tactics, and so forth--but it is not about warfare, or warriors, or violence, or fighting.
31. How would one possibly actually test combative-fighting skill or self-defense? Going around attempting to kill people is against, has usually been against, the law. Sporting contest has wonderful value but it is not fighting. Likewise, are you planning to get into regular bar fights? A suggestion: don't. That's good self-defense. What, really, are you afraid of? Are you really afraid? Or, are you, actually, just a little enamored of your personal fantasy of warriorship.
32. Martial arts can't make you better. You can be faced with the need to change to excel in a martial art, but you will have to do the changing. Claims otherwise are minor or major frauds. Period.

And the beat goes on.

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