

From the Teacher's Corner:

A One-Trick Pony

copyright © 2016 Douglas Tong, all rights reserved.

"I don't see how anyone can do more than one style."

Have you heard this before? This phrase is one that I have heard a few times in conversation but more often, I read it on the sword forums from time to time. And I have heard the corollary to this:

"I don't see how anyone can do more than one style... and be successful at both."

Now some people argue that this might only pertain to two styles within the same art form. For example, 2 styles of kenjutsu, 2 styles of jujutsu, 2 styles of iaido, etc... If it were two styles from completely different art forms, for these people, there is less of an argument. For example, being good at kenjutsu and judo, or iaido and jodo.

This is an interesting conversation piece.

Some people argue that the two will taint each other. Your kenjutsu will have a judo flavour or your iaido will have a jodo flavour. They argue that it will never be a pure form of whatever style of kenjutsu it is or that your iaido will never be a pure form of iaido. It will have been tainted by your immersion in the other art. These are the kind of people who argue that you must do only that art to be really good at it.

Really?

And then there are old Japanese aphorisms like "chasing two rabbits, you succeed in capturing neither." Or the English one, "Jack of all trades, master of none." The Japanese one refers to the thinking that if you study too many arts, you will be good at none of them. You will be too confused and lack focus. The English one seems to imply that dabbling in too many arts makes you not good at any of them, which I guess is essentially the same idea.

"I don't see how anyone can do more than one style... and be successful at both."

And this phrase was said to me via email from a high-level practitioner of one certain art in the Western world. And I can certainly understand this mode of thinking. It makes sense. Perfect sense. It is logical and reflects good common-sense. A common way of thinking.

I have no answer to this assertion. So, why do I have this nagging feeling that there is something more going on here? That things are not so clear-cut?

When I look through the Internet and read the bios of some high-level teachers in the West, I see what was nagging me all along. Some of them are high-level practitioners and teachers in multiple arts. Yes, multiple arts. Sometimes, they are different art forms (e.g., jujutsu and sojutsu, aikido and kenjutsu, etc...). Sometimes, they are styles within the same art form (e.g., two styles of kenjutsu, two styles of iaido, kendo and iaido, etc...).

Even in Japan, there are masters of multiple arts (e.g., kenjutsu and sojutsu, kyudo and naginata jutsu, etc...). I have met a few in my time.

So now I am confused. Some people argue that you can't study more than one art or one style. But the evidence points in some cases to the contrary; that, in fact, there are many people doing exactly the opposite.

When I was in Japan, many foreigners (from Australia, UK, Europe, Middle East, South America, and North America – I am sure there are many others too) were themselves studying multiple arts. When you are attached to a certain dojo in Japan and go to all the demonstrations and gatherings, you start to see the same faces over and over again and you get to meet them and chit-chat. For example, one guy was doing jujutsu, kenjutsu, and kendo. Another girl was doing aikido, kyudo, and karate. It was not uncommon.

When you are a foreigner in a foreign land and cannot speak the language, there is nothing to do. Might as well go train in something and learn something valuable. And martial arts is the one great art form that doesn't require that you have a mastery of the language to be able to learn it.

Some will argue however that these (i.e., aikido, kyudo, and karate) are different art forms. OK. In my case, I studied 3 styles of kenjutsu, as well as kendo and iaido. So I guess I am the case where a guy focuses on only one art form, in this case, the sword (or maybe I should label it as an "art category" rather than "art form"?). But I did pass my second dan test in iaido in Yokohama (the Kanagawa Prefectural Grading), so I guess it was good enough for the testing committee of 7th and 8th dans who were presiding over the testing that day. There are people who have done what I have done or are doing it now, either in this art, the sword, or in other art forms. I don't think I am unique in having done this.



second dan test in iaido in Yokohama

So, I don't get it.

Anyway, you're probably wondering why I brought this up. Well, today, in class, one of my students told me about her sister who was a Ph.D. and brilliant in her field. So this student of mine felt inferior to her since the parents lavished so much praise on the older, more accomplished sister. So I asked her, "OK, so she is good at that one thing. So what? What is she not good at?"

Then came a litany of weaknesses: she cannot cook for herself, she can't clean, she doesn't know how to wash clothes, and the list went on. I guess she was so deficient in these basic skills that my student, I'll call her Jane, had to go and cook for her occasionally, help her clean, do her laundry, and other simple household chores. Her sister was completely lacking in these basic life skills. I say life skills because that's what they call these simple but important things that a person should be able to do to maintain their basic existence. In our public school, we have a developmentally-challenged (DC) class and for the students in that class, their curriculum consists mostly of learning basic life skills.

Anyway, we got to talking and it became a kind of class discussion. She was kind of beating herself up saying she didn't feel she was as good as her sister, when one of the students piped up and said, "Yeah, but your sister is like a one-trick pony." Bam! That hit the nail right on the head. A one-trick pony. That one little phrase encapsulated the entire argument; basically, the idea of the deficiency of only being able to do one thing well.

"I don't see how anyone can do more than one style."

The one-trick pony-style of thinking. Yes... Now, looked at in the context of Jane's world, I am starting to see how maybe this one-trick pony way of thinking is kind of limiting. Sure, you are

good at one thing. But take away that one thing and what are you? Nothing. Take Jane's sister out of Ph.D. world and what does she become? Hopeless.

Let's apply it to martial arts. Say a girl is good at kyudo. Take her out of kyudo-world, give her a sword for instance, and what does she become? Lost. Say a guy is good at kendo. Take him out of kendo-land and put him in aikido-land and shazam, he's lost.

What am I getting at?

There is a case for being well-rounded; in life and in martial arts too.

Case in point: My student went to a large gathering of kenjutsu practitioners, call it a gasshuku (intensive training session). The sensei there broke down the kata into specific scenarios and had the students work on those isolated engagements. He told them to "experiment" with distance, timing, and different options/ choices of response to the attacks coming at them. Well, the short story is that they couldn't do it. They couldn't think "outside the box", so to speak. They knew the one set response that the kata taught and that was it.

In another instance at the same event, if the attack came at them slightly differently than the way it was prescribed in the kata, they froze. They couldn't figure it out. The kata says this. This is not like the kata. Yes, Virginia, it is not like the kata and there is a Santa Claus.

My student admitted to me that she was shocked and disappointed. Some of these students had been practicing 5 years or more and couldn't think it through. My student, however, had a blast because she had options and answers for everything they threw at her. Why?

Well, at our dojo, because we practice both Katori Shinto Ryu and Yagyu Shinkage Ryu, we routinely approach things from multiple perspectives. Sometimes, we break things down and look at things, but not from a one-world viewpoint.

Here's an example:

OK, so this attack comes this way. What is the typical Katori response? Yes, correct because Katori values this. So what other responses does the Katori mind say? Yes, yes, and yes. Because the Katori mindset thinks this way and they will respond exactly like this every time. And because Katori is kamae-driven, there are only a finite set of responses available from a certain position or stance.

Now, let's look at it from the Yagyu perspective. Now, it is completely different. Yagyu wants nothing to do with kamae. Free-flowing and free-form, it has different aims and objectives. So the answer to this attack is to do this. Yes, because this is the way Yagyu thinks.

Or, occasionally for fun, I'll throw in some Ono-ha Itto Ryu. For this type of attack, the Itto Ryu swordsman would respond in this way. First, we'd have to take on our "übermensch" personality, Nietzsche's word for Super-human or more commonly, Superman. Then we'd blast through that attacking sword. That's Itto Ryu thinking.

My point? This is a case for being more well-rounded. By being more well-rounded, you are more versatile. You can more easily adapt to anything, to a changing environment, to differing variables. You are not locked into only one thing or only one way of thinking.

Some people say your world expands. You see things from multiple perspectives, different viewpoints.

*“To attain the Way of strategy as a warrior **you must study fully other martial arts**... Then you will come to think of things **in a wide sense**...”*

*Miyamoto Musashi
The Book of Five Rings*

If I am correctly interpreting what Musashi is saying, if you want to learn sword-fighting, for instance, you need to see more than your own one style of sword-fighting. Your one style sees the world only one way. That's the equivalent of the blinders that they put on over the eyes of the horses to limit what they can see...

More broadly, learning jujutsu, bojutsu, and other martial arts in addition to your own art would, I think, make you much more balanced and accomplished as a martial artist, as a warrior, as Musashi says.

*“The Great Learning says, “Exhaust all knowledge and master everything.”
Exhausting all knowledge means knowing the principle of everything that exists. Mastering everything means that when you have come to know the principle of everything, there is nothing you don't know, nothing you can't do.”*

*Yagyu Munenori
Heiho Kaden Sho*

My teacher, Kajitsuka Sensei, is the 11th lineal headmaster of Yagyu Shingan Ryu, a sogo-bujutsu (comprehensive martial arts) style. Yagyu Shingan Ryu encompasses study in the following disciplines: jujutsu, kenjutsu, sojutsu, bojutsu, naginatajutsu, iaijutsu, and hojojutsu.

If you study Katori Shinto Ryu, their curriculum consists of study in these disciplines: kenjutsu (one-sword, two-sword, and short sword), jujutsu, sojutsu, bojutsu, naginatajutsu, and iaijutsu.

So, for either of these types of arts, you will learn to use many weapons. It kind of forces you to be good in an all-around sense. They are training you to be a master-at-arms. Of course, there will be some weapons that you will be good at, and others that you will be fair at. But having to learn them all and having to struggle through trying to master each type of weapon and its unique characteristics and mind-set, I think in the long-run, makes you more versatile and adaptable.

“I don't see how anyone can do more than one style... and be successful at both.”

My kendo and iaido teacher in Japan, Master Izawa, once told me that many kendo practitioners study iaido because it completes them. Like Jerry Maguire said to his girlfriend, “You complete me...” A great line.

Master Izawa was, the last time I saw him in 1994, a 7th dan in kendo and 7th dan in iaido. He was a great kendo practitioner; calm, purposeful, unflappable. His iaido was exquisite: calm and precise. Can't master two styles? Not true in his case.

"I don't see how anyone can do more than one style... and be successful..."

I don't agree. Maybe this quote from my teacher sums it up nicely:

"You can understand your ryuha in a deep way by studying not only your own ryuha, but also other ryuha as well."

Why is this important? Because...

"... through the interchange between the ryuha, I hope that all kobudo practitioners will come to see that all martial arts have a common root and in the end, they all have the same purpose."

Yasushi Kajitsuka Sensei, 2011

[Interview](#)

If we think about it, to see this – namely that things are inter-connected, you would need to have a wide vision, a broad view of things. This echoes Musashi's way of thinking, I think.

There is something to be said for focusing on one thing exclusively. I do not disagree with that premise. However, there is also something to be said for being well-rounded.

A one-trick pony? For me, personally, it's just too limiting. I like the idea of being well-rounded. How do I sum it up? I rather like what Jerry Maguire said:

"You complete me..."