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SENSEI'S BLOGS:

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The Way

It's said that when we start training in a traditional martial arts Dojo "it will make a new man out of us". What they don't tell us is that along the way they will kill the old one. Many people think that the Dojo is a place where they will learn some new skills that are essentially 'added' to what they can do and that they can choose what they want to learn and what they want to leave behind. This expectation is inaccurate and incomplete.

My Shinto Muso Ryu teacher, Nishioka Sensei, often said that 'people will make their own style' as soon as they possibly can. In other words they will all too quickly change the technique or the way they practice to suit themselves. The martial concept of course is the opposite... what must change is not the technique but the person. As students we need to change ourselves to suit and 'catch' the technique. A simple example might be a persons' body needs to become more flexible to maintain a certain grip on the weapon in a particular position. By striving daily to make that adjustment our bodies slowly change until we can achieve that position. Generally, people will however change the grip and position 'to suit themselves' and then the technique will change and the level of the practice will diminish. The key is not whether we all wholly succeed at making this change – some will – but that we continue to strive for this change.

It is rarely just the technique that people struggle to adapt to. It is often a standard or behaviour that forms part of the etiquette of the Dojo that challenges us. It may be bowing, receiving correction with humility, being punctual, making sure we abide by the various 'rules' that underpin how a Dojo operates and so on. In this instance it is not our body we need to take time to change – it is our mind and heart. I believe this can be done instantly if there is the will to do it. When people fail to meet the expected standards of the Dojo very quickly it is clear to me that they simply lack the will to respect the Dojo and this will be very much an ongoing issue manifesting in various ways over time.

Of course there are two aspects to this '*Suuji o toosu*' (following the line) concept. One of my Aikido teachers explained this to me some years ago in this way - For a student (uke) to follow the line, the Master (shitei) must give a strong and true line to follow. There is a responsibility on both people and because the Master is the senior he must not only make the line 'clear' but also 'wholesome' (not injurious or unreasonable for the student). When he does so, the student must then try with all their heart to follow that line / adhere to that path. In this relationship, problems can arise when either side fails... when the Master gives uncertain, varying or 'unwholesome' lines (poor leadership) or the student does not respect the Master and try wholeheartedly to follow (poor servant).





The balance, said my Aikido teacher, was to think deeply about the old maxim
—
'No teacher... no student / No student... no teacher.'

To further complicate this concept...

1. History is rife with examples of people unquestioningly following the decisions of poor leaders who demonstrated an 'unwholesome line' (think no further than the ANZAC debacle).
2. It is also full of examples of people failing to heed a 'true and pure line' from good leaders.
3. There may be times when there is no master to give a line so we may need to be guided solely by sound values (many of which are readily available through Budo) and a vision to which we aspire.

I have personally had some experience of the associated challenges both as the recipient of poor leadership and as a 'teacher' where the 'student' has been less than a wholehearted follower of a clear and reasonable line. It is my belief that it is important for personal growth that a person has a master or perhaps a 'cause' as it can help hold us firm in the cycle of mastery and service that is life.

On a slight tangent, as the leader of this organisation, I want to again make clear an aspect of the Dojo line and remind all Dojo members to please reread the Dojo Etiquette statement. If you have not received a copy recently please ensure you ask for one from the office, familiarise yourself with it and make sure you then adhere to all the elements all the time. Consideration is currently being given to the way in which adult Dojo members are enrolled, limiting access to those who can best address certain criteria through their application and successfully complete a probationary period. This change to how we enrol members would, I believe, ensure that when we are training we can be certain that we are training with others who are also serious students of the arts.

David

