



A Brief Case for Classical Martial Thought: *Stepping back to move forward*
By Scot Combs

For the purposes of this essay the term ‘traditional’ will refer to the martial arts systems brought from Japan, Okinawa and later, China to the US after World War II. The term ‘classical’ will refer to those systems in their complete (historical, original) form passed from family member to family member and master to student.

Following WWII many US servicemen were introduced to the martial arts of Japan and Okinawa. Many who trained in karate were excited about it and naturally wanted to bring this wonderful new experience home. Their instructors demanded they maintain the purity of the systems they were taught. Nothing could be changed, nothing could be added and nothing could be subtracted. It was paramount that these traditional forms be adhered to in the strictist sense.

The American servicemen followed their master’s orders to the letter. But what these dedicated American karate-ka (karate students) didn’t know is they had been taught an incomplete and therefore, inferior form of karate...the form taught only to beginners or school children.

The vanquished Japanese weren’t about to give away a significant portion of their national identity to the American invaders. Some of the systems were family treasures passed only within the family group and guarded carefully. No one in their right mind would give something that valuable to the enemy. But life could be tough after the war and American servicemen would pay good money to be taught karate. So, many instructors taught kids’ karate to servicemen who had no way on knowing better.

Protecting a family treasure from outsiders was operative in China as well. In both cultures xenophobia played a part in preventing the systems from being transmitted to outsiders in their entirety.

Beyond protecting family treasures, is the problem that some teachers didn’t teach the complete art because they didn’t know the complete art. They had stopped their personal training and truncated their knowledge base. They couldn’t pass on what they didn’t know.

This was exacerbated in Japan due to the war. Many of Japans finest martial artists died in combat. This created a vacuum that was filled, in part, by the ‘instant black belt’. These were people who would train with a qualified instructor in the morning and teach the same technique to their students in the evening.

But that’s not all. Quite a number of sensei purposely taught flawed technique that would make the student who attempted to employ it vulnerable. This may

have been done to protect the system from outsiders and/or to protect the instructor's aura of invincibility (ego).

When the American karate-ka brought these traditional arts to the US, they had no way of knowing they weren't teaching the complete systems. They taught what they had been taught, and did it well.

Sometime in the last 20 or 30 years, a change began because the wisdom of the martial arts was being lost. Some of the old masters in China and Japan were dying and taking their 'secret' techniques with them. A few very forward thinking teachers began to share their treasures with the rest of the world. It took a lot of courage from them to break with tradition but the break was necessary if the techniques were to be preserved.

These techniques contain the keys to unlock the systems and bring martial arts around the world into the new millennium. The master key is classical thought. In classical thought a technique must function, it's that simple. If it does not work we must re-examine it for flaws or discard it and continue searching for a technique that will work.

As the keys to functional techniques are readily available in book, video and seminar form, thoughtful study and reason will guide each sensei and student to a more complete art.

This isn't as easy as it sounds. Challenging long held beliefs and traditions will put many on the defensive. People have a difficult time changing the structure of their thinking. It's jarring and upsetting in some cases. Some egos will be bruised in the process. But a bruised ego isn't the worst fate a martial artist can suffer. The worst fate for a martial artist is to be found irrelevant.

The benefit of 'Classical Martial Thought' is functional martial arts systems that bring students to a deeper understanding of their art, themselves and their place in the universe. We have been given an opportunity and a choice. We can hold on to the traditional, incomplete systems taught since WWII or we can step back and allow the historical, functional, classical arts to inform and influence our practice and technique. By stepping back we can move boldly into the future.

In closing, a martial haiku:

Attend life within
Free the mind, accept the truth
Attend life without

