

From Asia to America:
A Shift in Martial Arts Culture and Attitude

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Introduction

As any coach or teacher can tell you, the attitude of a student or athlete is paramount to the success of any athletic endeavor. Students are told time and time again that what you get out of something is equal to what you put into it. This cannot be truer in martial arts. As martial arts have evolved and become a part of western culture, the attitudes of martial arts students have changed. Martial arts in general have received much more exposure over the last 50 years than they had before, especially in the United States. The mentor-student relationship has evolved for most people into something different than what it was one hundred years ago in Japan. For most, it seems that this has turned into more of a contractual service that the student controls as opposed to the teacher deciding what students they will teach their art to. The increased exposure has also led to many misnomers about martial arts as a whole, including what most people think it means if you are a "black belt." This attitude has also led to a phenomenon where people seem to care less about their training and more about the black belt they wear. Media exposure and the internet have drastically changed how some areas of martial arts are perceived and practiced. There are sites online completely dedicated to extreme martial arts. Mixed martial arts competitions have enjoyed much popularity from the exposure on television. All of these differences have led to a new culture of martial arts as well as differences in attitude of martial arts students.

Americanization of the Student Teacher Relationship

One of the biggest changes that martial arts have seen in the last hundred years is the opening of martial arts schools to the public. In Asian culture, specifically Japanese, the student teacher relationship is different from the view that most people have in the United States. Especially in the 19th century, a student's instructor was beyond reproach. It was deemed improper to question their methods or choices. The student did as they were told because the instructor had tasked them with what they deemed best for that student.

In Unante, John Sells describes the view that most students in the United States take of their martial arts instructors. "Americans often view the relationship between student and teacher as a commercial contract. As such, the students are "customers"." The notion that a student of martial arts, let alone any discipline, be it music or art, is a customer of their instructor leaves much to be lost by the student. As with any learning, a student has to be willing to open their minds to what a particular instructor has to offer. If a student views their training as something that they are entitled to, the beauty of what they are taught and the hours that their instructor has put into learning their craft is surely to be lost. Until the opening of official karate schools, students learned at the pleasure of their teachers. The seriousness of what a student is learning and what the instructor has chosen to share with them should not be taken as lightly as it seems to be today. While it would seem from a legal standpoint that students are in fact customers who are paying to learn a discipline, they are in fact taking care of their instructor so that they are afforded the opportunity to learn.

Loyalty between students and instructors has changed much as martial arts have

moved into America. Because students feel that they are paying for the right to learn from a particular school, many also feel that they have the right to and learn whatever they want. While it is true that people should be able to learn what they want from someone that works well with their learning style, it would be considered very bad form in Japan to up and leave a dojo after spending many years studying under a particular instructor. Again the gift of knowledge that is being shared between a teacher and students seems to be construed as something that the student can do whatever they want with. The ideology appears to have become “Because I have paid for this, I can do whatever I want with it.” Also, due to the numerous amounts of schools that are available to students of martial arts these days, it is easy for a student to move from one school to another without an instructor knowing, except that they have left.

The practice of kata has changed as well. While not necessarily attributed to the Americanization of karate, but to the development of particular style curricula, most students in the United States would have a difficult time staying with an instructor if they taught them in a more classical style. Karateka used to be taught much fewer kata, sometimes only one [1]. Beyond these few numbers, a student would not be taught a new kata until the instructor had decided that the student had become proficient enough in the current kata. Students in America would have a hard time with this. They would get bored and leave to find a school that offered more variation of training. While it is true that any practice becomes trite when done repetitively, the entitlement that most American's seem to feel would make this type of practice even more unlikely.

The subject student rank has become prevalent in some martial arts school. While there are still many schools that have notices posted that lists students eligible to

move to the next level of rank, there are many schools that let the students test when they feel that they are ready. This is a change that most certainly has developed in part due to American influence. While a student might petition to test, it is an entirely different matter than to decide that they are ready. A student without a good estimation of them will test much faster than they should and possibly end up in a place of seniority that they do not deserve.

Sad occurrences that are rare but seem to be becoming more common are martial arts instructors who are only teaching for the money and not for the joy of spreading their art. In the worst cases the instructor has not been training long and possibly has not had any formal instruction. While this has been going on for quite some time, it is sad how many people do not know better and are paying to learn something that possibly might get them hurt. A good example of this is recalled by Gichin Funakoshi in Karate-Do Nyumon. He tells a story of how a karate master came to his dojo one day and offered to teach him his secret technique of ripping the flesh from a human being. When Master Funakoshi asked to perform the technique on him, he simply received a pinch on the arm. This is an example of how old myths were abused in karate. Currently with the advent of the internet, it is very easy for a person to pass themselves off as being knowledgeable in a subject without having actually experienced what they are selling.

The move that some martial arts have made from art to sport has created much change in how the art is practiced and perceived by its practitioners. In some schools this has become the main focus of their practice. The attitude has shifted from personal enrichment and growth to practice mainly for competition. While there is nothing wrong

with this attitude, it is important to try and keep the philosophy associated with the art from getting lost in the motive of training to win.

Karate as a life style

Karate, as well as most martial arts, is seen as a means of self improvement or a road to enlightenment. Karate has many roots in a mixture of religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism [1]. The themes from these religions can be seen through many aspects of martial arts, including even the name of karate. The name denotes not just an empty hand, but an empty mind as well. Like the religions that helped spawn its philosophy, karate, as well as most other martial arts, is something that a serious student will carry with them through their life. It is not just something that one does for a little while and stops, but something that, for some, becomes more of a lifestyle. Some students of karate view it as life-long path, not just a passing hobby.

The goal of martial arts is what has seemed to change in many of the schools in America. Many have signs or banners proclaiming “We are a black belt school” or “My goal is black belt”. From these signs it would appear that these schools are promoting the belt color as being more important than the training that a student receives. The more important aspect of training comes not from the rank that one attains or the color of a belt, but the progress that a student has made physically, mentally, and emotionally.

As Americans have begun to train more in martial arts or have had family members many people seem to think that receiving a black belt is a finishing point in a student’s martial arts training. It is as if getting a piece of black cloth to put around you

waist will make you more powerful. This is simply not the case. A black belt is simply something that you wear. There is so much learning and training that takes place before and beyond the attainment of the rank of shodan; ask any martial artist that has spent their life training. This mentality can be illustrated in a conversation with a fellow co-worker last fall. Her daughter had been training in Taekwondo for a few years and had decided that she was no longer interested in pursuing the art. She stayed until she got her black belt and then stopped training. Her mother recalled that she was glad her daughter stayed through and got her black belt and finished. This conversation is a prime example of how many people feel about the study of martial arts. That it is not so much of a lifelong path but something that someone can finish.

The two mentalities mentioned above go in the opposite direction of what Dr. Jigoro Kano said was the goal of the martial arts. He said that the goal is “the harmonious development and eventual perfection of human character”. This statement brings together much of the philosophies of the religions that martial arts are based upon. First, the martial arts are not about what rank or belt color, but the training that a person undergoes the personal growth and they attain from this training. Second, martial arts are not mere hobbies that a student simply pursues until they are bored. Martial arts are a lifetime pursuit that helps the student learn about themselves as well as grow and develop [1]. These might be misconceptions that a student begins training under, but if nurtured correctly the student will surely to grow out of.

Effects of Media Exposure

As with anything, the more exposure that something gets, the more it is morphed by different people. This is certainly true for martial arts. The internet and television has allowed many people to be exposed to martial arts. This has led to many changes in martial arts. From people melding martial arts and gymnastics and sharing their tricks online to the Mixed Martial Arts fascination that has swept the United States, people are sharing lots of information with each other which has bred whole new areas of training and philosophies.

As martial arts evolve, new movements come from training. Nowhere could this be more true than it what has become extreme martial arts (XMA). While the development of XMA can be attributed to all martial arts and Kung Fu movies, it appears to have mostly come from Taekwondo and the internet. As Taekwondo increased in popularity, people started to combine acrobatic moves with kicking. Through sites like YouTube, these tricks have then been shared with others who are trying the same movements and concepts. This movement spawned the extreme martial arts style of training and has led some schools to have specific XMA training regimens. There are some schools that now focus primarily on this as part of their training. There has been much debate over the use of this training and how it is not real martial arts and the applications are not realistic. However, a person that trains and works on these movements will have an easier time in other parts of their training. The strength and flexibility needed to perform XMA movements will enhance a person's physical fitness. It should be understood though that this has become more of a gymnastics style performance than a form of self defense.

The internet has also spawned a whole library of online learning. There are many sites dedicated to learning martial arts on your own or “the most deadly martial art” technique. While much can be learned on your own it should not be taken for granted that some training should be done with a partner and a teacher, not just on your own from a video. Many aspects of the art and technique will be lost on someone without a teacher to guide you. While much of martial arts were spawned by people trying new things on their own, these practitioners received training from others before they became savants in their arts. Gichin Funakoshi, who is now called the father of modern karate-do, recalls many episodes of training under Yasutsune Azato and Yasutsune Itosu in his book Karate-Do: My Way of Life.

Fighting events has been around for thousands of years. From the coliseum in Rome to modern day boxing events, people have always enjoyed watching two opponents fight each other. As martial arts increased in popularity, there was bound to be an event that based around less traditional fighting such as boxing or wrestling. Ultimate Fighting Championship took the idea of no holds barred fighting and has popularized it in today’s society. The term mixed-martial arts (MMA) has been used to emphasize the two fighters do not necessarily come from the same style of fighting. This has led to an interesting training regimen and attitude along with it. For most schools that now teach MMA most of the philosophy or art has been removed from the curriculum. The training is based solely on the competition and preparing for a fight. This is contrary to most traditional martial art philosophies on self defense and harming others [1]. At this point MMA has become a style of fighting that focuses primarily on grappling. It could be considered more of a sport from the point of view of the attitude

and training of its practitioners.

Conclusion

With the increased availability of martial arts to the public as well as the exposure of martial arts in American culture, the attitudes are shifting of the practitioners of most martial arts. Most Americans view the teaching they receive as a contractual obligation as opposed to something they are being given. Many of the old traditions and values that were prominent in Asia have been lost to cultural differences. Not all old traditions and attitudes have been lost. Sensei Eric Fillipenko recalled his early days practicing Karate. His first training sessions involved cleaning a church that was near where he met his teacher. He kept going back because he wanted to keep practicing karate and he did not know what formal practice was like. Finally after a little while his teacher started to teach him the movements of Karate. This is a good example of what a student teacher relationship used to be like where the student is striving to learn while the teacher guides them towards their goal.

Beyond this change in culture many schools in the United States have become enamored with the idea that a student's final goal should be black belt. This attitude runs completely contrary to the ultimate goal of the martial arts from Jigoro Kano. Students of martial arts should be striving towards the personal growth and perfection of their character, not working towards earning a specific belt or rank.

Finally with the increased media exposure and the advent of the internet, many changes have been seen in how people train and what they are training in. XMA, MMA, and self study websites are distinct changes that the martial arts world has seen in the

last twenty years. Each of these changes comes with its own set of attitude and training differences.

While training in martial arts it is important to have the proper attitude and outlook. As these attitudes have shifted from Japan to America, it is important to remember what really matters is the attitude that the student brings to their training. In the end it is the student's responsibility to show the instructor their dedication and their enthusiasm when they are learning something that they love.

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