

CLOTHES CANNOT CHANGE THE SKILL

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More and more martial artists are adopting a tendency to appear in flamboyant dress during meets, exhibitions and demonstrations.

Some argue that the flashy clothes they sport are meant to psyche opponents and dazzle the public, but all that is a matter of opinion. Clothes certainly cannot change the skill.

This harsh lesson was learned by one of the greatest martial artists in Japanese history. His name was Muso Gonnosuke, founder of Shindo Muso Ryu. He had first studied Katori Shinto Ryu and was proficient in all weapons of that ryu. He had fought every swordsman in Tokyo (Edo at that time) and had never been defeated. Constant praise and victories had given him a swollen head; he even changed his style of dress and eight students followed his every step throughout the city and its suburbs.

The sight of Muso, glittering, with eight students close behind him was sight enough to draw a holiday crowd. Muso was on his way to Kyushu with his students and he decided to stop in Akashi, a city approximately in the middle of Japan. It was there that Miyamoto Musashi was home sculpturing a piece of wood under the noonday sun, interrupted only by the occasional buzz of a fly that Musashi ignored with the peaceful calm he had developed by years of deadly matches. "Muso Gonnosuke has come!" His servant announced while Musashi sculptured quietly. "He is outside your door with eight students. They are awaiting an audience with you. What shall I tell him?"

"Show him in." Musashi requested.

The servant soon reappeared with Muso and his eight students around him. The student in front carried a huge boken.

Musashi saw Muso was a tall man, nearly six-feet tall and noticed the similarity of build between teacher and the eight students. Muso, although it was summer, wore a haori (coat) with the Rising Sun emblazoned on the back and the symbols "Heiho Tenkai Ichi" (Number One Strategist Under Heaven) embroidered down the entire left side of the coat. On the right side Musashi could read "Nippon Kaizan Muso Gonnosuke."

"So you are the famous Muso Gonnosuke. Your fame has spread far in advance of you." Musashi greeted him.

"I, too, have heard of you, Musashi. I have seen your father's style of swordsmanship. The talk is that you have improved on his style. Can I see what you have done?"

Musashi knew this was an indirect challenge, and he calmly replied, "If you have seen my father's style, then you have seen mine. There is hardly a difference between the two."

Muso insisted on seeing the improvements and finally Musashi said, "If you insist, I will demonstrate. My heiho (strategy) is basically defensive and I am told your style is based on the offense. Therefore, attack at will." Musashi picked up the piece of wood he was sculpturing and went out to the courtyard. Muso grabbed the boken his student held and followed to face Musashi. Muso attacked vigorously, but Musashi blocked every blow. Finally, Muso faked a blow to Musashi's temple and slashed across with a side-arm stroke, touching Musashi on the sleeve under the arm.

"There. I have scored a hit!" Muso shouted excitedly. His students also shouted with joy.

"It was not a hit. Only an insignificant touch on the sleeve under my arm," Musashi replied. "But if you want to know what a hit is, I will gladly show you."

Then Musashi attacked.

Muso was hard pressed and could do nothing but retreat. He had never faced such a formidable opponent. The slab of wood Musashi swung seemed alive. Muso could not muster enough speed to counterattack. Musashi then tapped Muso on the sleeve under the arm and, as the students gasped in amazement, he dealt Muso a terrific blow on the forehead, toppling him like a log.

Musashi smiled, turned to face the students and said, "Take your teacher away. He is not hurt. The only thing bruised is his ego and he will probably have a slight headache.

Tell him that the essence of the martial arts is self-development. Clothes cannot improve the skill."