

HE WHO SEEKS A COMPLIMENT FINDS TRUTH

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“The truth rarely makes a person happy,” my sensei was saying, “it ought to but it does not.” He was talking and waving his spear for emphasis. Sweat was running down my brow and every once in a while I had to wipe my face to prevent the sweat from getting into my eyes.

As uncomfortable as I was physically, I was much more uncomfortable mentally and squirming inside. I looked at my friend, Seki, and felt sorry that he had come to this. But it was inevitable, the way it happened.

He was a student of Shinkage-Ryu and bragged about his prowess with the spear. He was a very affable person. Often we took a cup together. It was when he was in his cups that he was always seeking a compliment about how great he was with the spear. The patrons at the bars he frequented enjoyed his hospitality and agreed with him that he was the greatest. The better he felt, the more money he shelled out.

One day Seki found out that Yoshida Kotaro was staying at my house. He could hardly control his excitement. Seki grabbed my hand almost spilling my beer. He shouted, “Why didn’t you tell me that the great martial artist, Yoshida Kotaro, is staying at your place? I must meet him.”

“Why?” I asked. “You are studying another ryu and your teacher is very good.” But he interrupted. His words gushed forth. “If Yoshida sensei should see how skillful I am and acknowledge it, I am made. You are my friend. Please introduce me.”

That is how I brought Seki to my house. That is how we came to learn that truth does not make people happy; especially for a martial artist who thinks he is the greatest—drinking in a bar, yes—facing a master, no!

Sensei Kotaro was not in when I brought Seki home, so we went into the front yard and went through our warming up exercises while we waited for the sensei to come back. After an hour or so sensei returned. I took him aside and told him about Seki. “Reality is hard to take,” sensei responded. “In the make-believe world of the bars, truth fits the pocket book and becomes twisted. It is better for your friend to stay there.”

Seki heard him and prostrating himself, said “Onegai, itashimasu.” “Let your friend have your spear, if he wants the truth, he shall have it today.”

Seki, smiling, grabbed my spear and went into a kamae.

“Excuse me,” sensei said, and thrust his spear towards Seki. Seki gave a big jump but the spear was at his throat. “I was just testing you,” sensei continued. “Now get ready,” and he thrust again. No matter what Seki did the spear was always at his throat. Finally he backed up against the fence and could not move at all.

I felt sorry for Seki and looked around to see if anyone was watching. There was no one around. I felt better. I liked Seki, and knowing him I knew that a few beers would fix him up and restore his spirits. My sensei then told us this tale:

“There were times when Mercury, between errands on Olympus, yearned to know whether he still was held in high esteem by mankind.

So one day, disguising himself as a traveler, he visited a sculptor’s studio. Walking about among the many statues displayed there, he pointed to an image of Jupiter. ‘How much are you asking for this odd piece?’ he asked. ‘I’ll let you have that one cheap,’ replied the sculptor. ‘It is one of our less popular numbers. One drachma.’

Mercury laughed in his sleeve. Then he asked: ‘How much for this stout lady here?’

The sculptor said: ‘Oh, that one is Juno. I have to get a little more for females.’

Mercury’s eye now caught sight of an image of himself. Thinking that as messenger of the gods and source of all commercial gain his image would command a gratifyingly high price, he said: ‘I see you have a very handsome statue there of Mercury. How high do you value that excellent likeness?’

‘Well,’ replied the sculptor, ‘I am willing to make you a bargain. If you will pay me the price I quoted to you on the other two statues, I will throw this one in free.’