

HOW STRAIGHT THE GAIT

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“He is too much!” Sato complained. “I am a man, not a slave. I’ve had it, I’m leaving. The hell with his art.”

And Sato kept on beating his gums. He was complaining about sensei finding fault with him. Nothing he did seemed to please sensei, if you believed what Sato said. No matter what he did, sensei found something to correct with pedantic regularity. And yet, on the surface, our sensei, Lieutenant Jean Martinet, was, by comparison, permissive about discipline.

As Sato was my senior, I kept my mouth shut and listened. Martial arts etiquette held my tongue in place. I wanted to say, “I see no difference in the way sensei treats me. He is a little harder on you because you are the senior.”

Anyway Sato did quit and went back to Hokkaido from where he had come. Later, it was rumored that he had opened his own dojo, joined another ryu and received a much higher dan.

I knew sensei was hurt. Not the kind of hurt when one loses a student, a good student. But the kind of hurt when one loses a possible successor. Sensei was grooming Sato to take over, but Sato never knew it. Sato, in his selfish pride, believed that sensei was picking on him and in his imagined humiliation he resented sensei.

It surprised me when this fact was made known to me. Sensei never told me. I heard it from Sawai.

“Sato is Japanese, he should have known,” I said in surprise. “If he was foreign born, without the cultural background, maybe there would be room for a different perspective of mercy.”

“Even among the Japanese,” Sawai said, “there are those who look for the easy way and confuse sensei’s mercy for pedantry and humiliating insult. If Sato had been able to weather the storm, sensei would have gone to the great beyond satisfied that he had left his art in good hands. The undisciplined false pride of the egotist must never be given the tools of the martial arts to use as they please.”

I made up my mind then to thoroughly immerse myself in Japanese culture for I realized that I would never be able to see the world in Japanese perspective unless I could think like them.

I have never regretted it. For the martial artist in Japan, no matter how straight the gait, he suffers the insufferable, bears the unbearable, endures the unendurable, because the sensei says so and society expects it to be so. When it all comes out in the wash, sensei knows best because he has been there.

The following is a favorite Japanese dojo story exemplifying the Japanese way: Matajuro wanted to become a great swordsman, but his father said he wasn’t quick enough and could never learn. So Matajuro went to the famous dueler Banzo, and asked to become his pupil. “How long will it take me to become a master?” he asked, “Suppose I became your servant, to be with you every minute; how long?” “Ten years,” said Banzo.

“My father is getting old. Before ten years have passed I will have to return home to take care of him. Suppose I work twice as hard, how long will it take me?”

“Thirty years,” said Banzo.

“How is that?” asked Matajuro. “First you say ten years. Then when I offer to work twice as hard, you say it will take three times as long. Let me make myself clear: I will work unceasingly, no hardship will be too much. How long will it take?”

“Seventy years,” said Banzo. “A pupil in such a hurry learns slowly.” Matajuro understood. Without asking for any promises in terms of time he became Banzo’s servant. He cleaned, he cooked, he washed, he gardened. He was ordered never to speak of fencing or to touch a sword. He was very sad at this but he had given his promise to the master, and resolved to keep his word. Three years passed for Matajuro as a servant.

One day, while he was gardening, Banzo came up quietly behind him and gave him a terrible blow with a wooden sword. The next day in the kitchen, the same terrible blow fell again. Thereafter, day in, day out, from every corner and at any moment, he was attacked by Banzo’s wooden sword. Banzo began to look like a demon. Matajuro learned to live on the balls of his feet, ready to dodge at any moment. He became a body with no desires, no thoughts—only eternal readiness. Banzo, smiled, and started lessons. Soon Matajuro was the greatest swordsman in Japan.