



The Sensei

by Harry Cook

The expression "first born" used by Shakespeare could be easily translated into Japanese by the word "sensei," a word used by Japanese martial artists as a title for their teacher or master. The word sensei is composed of two characters-sen, meaning previous or before and sei, meaning birth or life.

A sensei therefore is someone who has been "born before" you in the system you are studying and is therefore senior to you, or in Shakespearian terms your "better." This is not the same as the western idea of a coach. A sensei can actually do what he teaches, he or she embodies the art, while a coach can teach you how to do something without necessarily being able to perform the skill him or herself.

Teachers are accorded tremendous respect in traditional oriental arts. They are seen as the only real way to progress as without their knowledge, guidance and experience the student would almost certainly make serious errors and so be unable to master his chosen subject. The respect shown to a teacher is referred to in the Chinese classic known as the Li Chi (Book of Rites) a work which deals with both the form and associated morality of correct behaviour. We are told that "When you are in company with your teacher, do not go aside of the road to speak to others. When you meet your teacher on the road, run forward, and stand properly to salute him by raising both hands grasped together. If the teacher speaks to you, answer him respectfully. If he does not speak, retire."

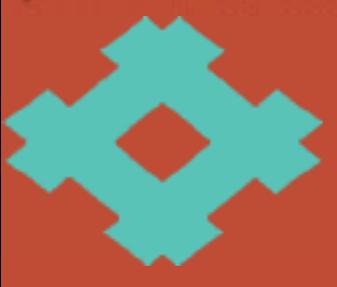
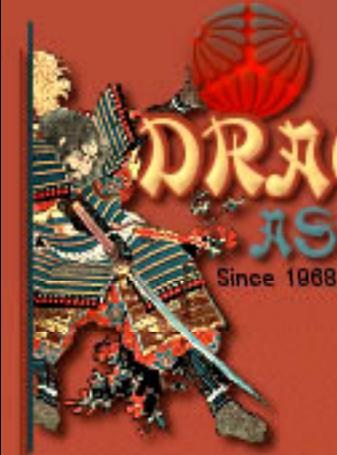
In ancient China the relationship between a teacher and student was second only to that of the relationship between a child and parent. The teacher was seen to be the living source of knowledge and as such was to be obeyed, not opposed. Martial arts practice tends to follow this pattern, although it can cause severe problems for Westerners who may view authority as something to be challenged or brought into question. Traditionally the sensei was not expected to answer to his students for either his behaviour or his teaching methods. His role was to create situations so that the student learned by experience; he was not expected to explain the intricate details of every technique-training was a thing of the heart, not of the mind.

The methods used to educate members of the samurai class were especially demanding, as the purpose was to inculcate not only knowledge but also dignity and strength of character. Thus teachers were accorded a high level of respect.

Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto was born into a samurai family in the middle years of the nineteenth century in the province of Echigo. Because it was thought that she was destined to be a priestess she was given a thorough grounding in the Confucian classics, and although she was only six years old she obviously enjoyed her lessons.

The discipline was strict, and the lessons were held along very formal lines. She explains that, "My priest-teacher taught these books with the same reverence that he taught his religion-that is, with all thoughts of worldly comfort put away.

During my lesson he was obliged, despite his humble wish, to sit on the thick silk



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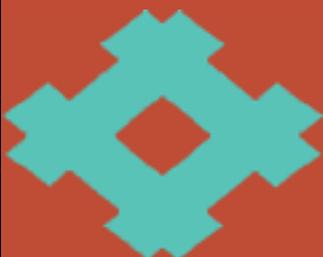
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cushion the servant brought him, for cushions were our chairs, and the position of instructor was too greatly revered for him to be allowed to sit on a level with his pupil; but throughout my two-hour lesson he never moved the slightest fraction of an inch except with his hands and his lips. And I sat before him on the matting in an equally correct and unchanging position.

"Once I moved. It was in the midst of a lesson. For some reason I was restless and swayed my body slightly, allowing my folded knee to slip a trifle from the proper angle. The faintest shade of surprise crossed my instructor's face; then very quietly he closed his book, saying gently but with a stern air 'Little Miss, it is evident that your mental attitude to-day is not suited for study. You should retire to your room and meditate.'"

Her father explained to his wife the need for such discipline by saying "We must not forget, Wife, the teaching of a samurai home. The lioness pushes her young over the cliff and watches it climb slowly back from the valley without one sign of pity, though her heart aches for the little creature. So only can it gain strength for its life work."1

Eugen Herrigel was a German philosopher who studied Kyudo (archery) under the great master, Kenzo Awa in the 1930s. After a long time struggling with technique Herrigel found himself in a situation common to all martial artists who train long enough; his teacher was not satisfied with anything he did and he asked sensei Awa to tell him how to do the perfect shot.

"One day I asked the master: 'How can the shot be loosed if I do not do it?'

'It shoots,' he replied.

'I have heard you say that several times before, so let me put it another way: How can I wait self-obliviously for the shot if I am no longer there?'

'It waits at the highest tension.'

'And who or what is this It?'

'Once you have understood that, you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I should be the worst of teachers and should deserve to be sacked! So let's stop talking about it and go on practising.'2

Fundamentally this is the function of a sensei-to create situations where the student arrives at understanding through his own experience. The sensei's role is therefore vital and transcends the teaching of mere technique, which is actually the province of the coach. Mastery in the real sense goes beyond technique and in the martial arts involves a struggle with the ego. Karlfried Graf Von Durckheim explains "However well-performed an action may be, however well controlled a technique, as long as the man using it is subject to moods and atmosphere, unrelaxed and easily disturbed for example when he is being watched, then he is a master only in a very limited degree. He is master only of technique and not of himself. He controls the skill he has but not what he is in himself."3

To achieve this state the guidance of a sensei is vital, and once the student selects his teacher it is necessary for him or her to accept that the teacher does know what he or she is doing and also to understand that what really matters is practice, not talking, and that some of the most important lessons, especially in the martial arts, cannot be taught via the spoken word.

One problem which constantly crops up is that often students have an idealised image of a sensei and when the reality does not match the myth the teacher becomes subjected to a great deal of criticism or abuse.4

Janwillem van de Wetering, a Dutch student of Zen warns "In these esoteric disciplines it is very dangerous to identify with another person, because if the other does anything which, in the eyes of the imitator, cannot be accepted or justified, the example comes tumbling down and breaks into a thousand pieces; and with the example, the image, the god, the whole discipline, breaks and appears senseless."5

The Zen master Hakuin was famous for living a simple and pure life. In the village where

he lived a young girl became pregnant and, under pressure, she named Hakuin as the father. Very angry, the parents confronted Hakuin who simply said "Is that so?"

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin who reared the child with great care. His reputation was in tatters but he bore all the criticisms and spiteful comments peacefully. After some time the mother told the truth to her parents and gave the name of the real father. Instantly the family went to Hakuin to apologize and to take the child back. All Hakuin said was, "Is that so?"

Hakuin was indeed a master of himself: ego, reputation, fame etc. were recognized for what they truly are: ephemeral, leaves on the wind. In the martial arts we often pay lip service to this ideal but what really seems to be important now is in fact the exact opposite: reputation, ego, and wealth.

A difficulty when trying to find a genuine sensei is to keep a realistic and clear view of some of the individuals who pass themselves off as "sensei." When the martial arts came to the West after the Second World War there was a tremendous demand created for instructors. Allied to this was a growth of interest in oriental and other mystical systems of thought, and so the market for fighting systems with associated spiritual overtones was huge.

When the television series Kung Fu was aired in the 1970s this market was fuelled by the antics of an imaginary half-Chinese Shaolin monk who rambled about the American West performing good deeds, somewhat in the manner of a peripatetic social worker. The success of this programme and similar fantasies such as the books by Carlos Castaneda⁶ all contributed to the popular image of a martial arts sensei: a cross between a Buddhist monk, a deadly fighter with super-normal powers, and a psychologist of profound understanding. Dr. Glen Barclay, Reader in History at the University of Queensland, actually stated that the martial arts are occult activities.⁷

The effect of all this was to exacerbate an already confused situation. It is difficult enough to understand the martial arts, given the values and beliefs of an oriental culture, but when a sensei also has to be superhuman, then great problems arise, and some students, well meaning no doubt, projected their beliefs onto otherwise perfectly normal instructors.

This process was given a tremendous impetus when Secret Fighting Arts of the World by "John F. Gilbey"⁸ was published. "Gilbey's" tongue-in-cheek account of secret fighting methods employed by superhuman practitioners⁹ is a most enjoyable read, but unfortunately many readers took it as a serious account of the martial arts, so adding to the myths already readily accepted as the truth. I remember being told in 1971 that Shotokan karate master, Kanazawa sensei had a sword that would fly out of its sheath to protect him if he was threatened, and that aikido founder Ueshiba sensei could literally step outside of time and dematerialize his body for seconds at a time to avoid an attack.

Given this urge to trivialize the martial arts to the level of a comic, it is not surprising that various individuals emerged to provide the kind of "sensei" that some people were seeking.¹⁰ In Britain one individual claimed to teach an ancient system of Chinese-Okinawan karate and to be an ordained Zen or Shingon monk as well as having expertise in all kinds of oriental occult subjects. In his writings he refers to being a reincarnated karate master with access to lost or secret books—all in all a tale from Shangri-la! The sad thing is that many people were taken in by this, and some of them still feel very bitter over the fact they were duped.

This is the problem—once a student gives his, or her loyalty to an instructor it may become blind obedience and belief. A fraudulent or unscrupulous instructor can manipulate this for his own ends, financial or otherwise.¹¹

Of course you must believe in your sensei, but at the same time you must never surrender the right to think for yourself. Western society stresses the rights of the

individual and all karate students and instructors must be aware of that fact. The student should also remember that the teacher has rights and may choose not to live his life according to the student's expectations of how things should be.

In closing, I would like to repeat the advice given in *The Hundred Verses of the Spear*: "If you feel that the teacher is a real teacher then give up your own ideas and learn."

Footnotes:

1. *A Daughter of the Samurai* Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1933), 35-36.

2. *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.), 73.

3. *Hara: The Vital Centre of Man* Karlfried Graf Von Durckheim (Mandala Books, 1977), 35-36.

4. Alexandra David-Neel in *Initiations and Initiates in Tibet* (Rider and Company, 1973) tells us that "Advanced disciples are able to recognise...the one from whom useful lessons and counsels may be obtained. In order to profit thereby, they tolerate the inferior manifestations which appear to them in the same Lama, just as they would patiently await the passing of a sage in a crowd of people.

"One day I related to a Lama the story of the Reverend Ekai Kawaguchi who, desirous of learning the Tibetan grammar, had applied to a famous master. The latter belonged to the religious Order and gave himself out to be a gelong (a celibate monk). After staying with him a few days, the pupil discovered that his professor had transgressed against the law of celibacy and was the father of a little boy. This fact filled him with such profound abhorrence that he packed up his books and belongings and took his departure. "What a booby!" exclaimed the Lama on hearing the anecdote. "Was the grammarian less skilled in grammar for having given way to the temptation of the flesh? What relation is there between these things and in what way did the moral purity of his professor concern the student? The intelligent man gleans knowledge wherever it is to be found. Is not that man a fool who refuses to pick up a jewel lying in a dirty vessel because of the filth adhering to the vessel." 19-20

5. *The Empty Mirror*, Janwillem van der Wetering (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 47.

6. For a brief discussion of Castaneda see *The Book of Hoaxes* Stuart Gordon (Headline Book Publishing, 1996), 71-74.

7. *Mind Over Matter: Facts and Feats Beyond the Bounds of Nature*, Dr. Glen Barclay. (Pan Books Ltd., 1973). For example chapter two of Dr. Barclay's work is entitled *At the portals of the supernatural: karate, kiai-jutsu, and shorinji kempo*.

8. From the general style of the writing as well as the range of the contents of the book I am almost certain that "John F. Gilbey" is in fact the famous martial arts writer Robert W. Smith.

9. For example chapter 20 of *Secret Fighting Arts of the World* refers to a man who was able to make a quarter inch depression in a steel girder with a punch!

10. For a discussion on fraudulent teachers see *The Essential Alan Watts*, Alan Watts (Celestial Arts, 1977), chapter 1 "The Trickster Guru." See also the excellent *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus*, Anthony Storr (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

11. This is not to say that the student should receive all his instruction without paying for it. As Gurdjieff pointed out to his pupil Orage, "You know, Orage, when you give something to a man, or do something for him, the first time he will kneel and kiss your

hand; second time, he takes his hat off; third time, he bows; fourth time, he fawns; fifth time, he nods; sixth time he insults you, and the seventh he sues you for not giving him enough. You know, Orage, we must pay for everything." Teachings of Gurdjieff, C. S. Nott (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) The payment is not always made in money, but it is a sad truth that unless payment of some kind is made it is often a human failing to undervalue anything which comes free.

The Sensei is a 2008 independent feature film, written, produced and directed by Diana Lee Inosanto (credited as D. Lee Inosanto). Set in Colorado, the story takes place in 1985 during the rise of the AIDS panic. McClain Evans is a gay high school student, constantly the target of bullying in his town. Karen O'Neil is a woman haunted by the death of her pro-boxer fianc , Mark Corey. After a five-year absence, she returns to her family, who runs a successful martial arts school. When McClain is