

Passing on a Ryu: A Call to Ethics

By

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Techniques change in the martial arts. Sometimes the changes are subtle, and sometimes they are radical. We like to think they don't, but they do, especially in arts that are relatively accessible to the public. It's a simple matter of the more people who get in, the more human variables you add to the mix. More personal interpretation comes in. It gets harder to avoid "drift" in methods. Whether these changes are useful or not is not the subject of this short article. Intent and understanding of a ryu is the issue.

There's a huge difference between teaching a set of techniques and transmitting a ryu. Finding someone who can impart a solid understanding of body dynamics, and how to put them together with the appropriate psychology is hard enough, but someone who can pass on a ryu? That's a rare person indeed. Historically such people were carefully chosen and in some groups still are. In pre-Meiji era martial arts, a sensei would likely only give one menkyo-kaiden in his lifetime. Quality control of a ryu and its tenets was paramount. You got it when sensei said you got it. Someone who deviated from the ryu, for instance forging a menkyo-kaiden to bolster himself to the world, would be shunned by his peers if not hunted down.

As we use the method of Henry S. Okazaki, we need to be scrupulous in how we pass on what we believe to be the ryu vs. the physical movements. The knowledge of the ryu includes far more than how to do a lock or poke a nerve. Certainly the physical techniques are important, but a ryu is a bit more than that. It includes the history of the art, what the techniques impart by doing them certain ways, along with an understanding of the ryu's core strategies. It's passing on what the founder left us beyond particular grips and grabs. If you have respect for the art and its founder, this is what you do. This is a demanding task. It requires rigorous continual honesty and ethics in our dealings.

It can only be done by someone who has the self-confidence to be honest. An insecure person cannot do it.

The exact year Danzan Ryu was founded, as opposed to the opening of the Kodokan dojo, is debatable. We generally agree it was the late 1920s. It has the distinction of its curriculum being more or less fixed since its early days. That's an unusual quality in itself. Our method is less than 100 years old. That's still a new kid on the block for martial arts. For instance, the oldest documented martial art in Japan is 600 years old.

For a relatively new method we've already lost a lot. Much was not written down as to Prof. Okazaki's intentions and his personal understanding of the art. And much has been distorted, unfortunately on purpose. Sometimes it's because of faulty memories. Sometimes it's plain lies.

That different first generation Prof. Okazaki students, the ones who learned directly from him, taught the Boards differently in their careers shouldn't be much of a concern. Like any long-time instructor, Prof. Okazaki likely taught differently at different times. He had the Kodokan for twenty years. That was long enough for him to have changed his mind a time or two. That's nothing unusual. And generations of sincere black belts of these direct Okazaki students have done the same. The problems start when someone states the arts they teach are the one true method or they have secret knowledge. That's usually a statement of control, and not about the integrity of the ryu. It's about personal control over students, self-glorification, and money. It's often a statement of fear. Too often it's easier and safer to appear knowledgeable than actually be knowledgeable.

As an instructor, you're putting your personal stamp on the arts. It's unavoidable. Actually it's desirable. It's the shuhari idea. If you teach something that is extremely different from the ryu, that's your business, but it's no longer Danzan Ryu. It might be good in its own right, but it's not Danzan Ryu. Maybe it's good generic Jujitsu, but it's not Danzan Ryu.

If we are interested in preserving the ryu, we've got to ask hard critical questions about evidence. When leaders in our art make statements, we would benefit from the habit of asking, at least to ourselves, "How do you know?" Get curious about what that person is using for evidence. Oftentimes, it's traditional history vs actual facts. Traditional histories are a meld of legend and lore, as are many of the stories of Prof Okazaki. It's like George Washington and the cherry tree. Find the facts as best you can, because they are often difficult to verify. Be as clear as possible on what, at best, are educated speculations. There are some items we'll probably never discover or verify. Too much time has passed, people have died, no one asked key questions, and no one kept good records. It also matters what sort of records were kept. We all know of old notebooks by senior instructors that basically said nothing. There also been some notebooks that have been kept under restricted access and can't be easily cross-checked for validity.

As instructors we must be aware of what we know and what we don't know and not be afraid to say so. Mere claim of documents that no one is allowed to see isn't enough. Stories that sound a little too fantastic are likely just that.

The matter of evidence seems simple but is actually surprisingly important and ignored. There are many items in many fields that are simply passed down without people ever really checking them out. No one has ever really wondered if they are true or not.

Something as serious as modern medicine only started to reevaluate its standards for evidence in the 1980s. It's an ongoing concern for medical professionals. As martial artists, we should have a similar concern about our studies.

As instructors we set the example and the standards. If you've been around Danzan Ryu for any length of time, you've likely heard some odd stories. Psychic powers, telepathy, and ki projection come to mind as starters. Truly the masters are special! So are the students who buy it. Tellers of these tales can get away with it a long time and mislead a lot of people. But to return to the idea of preserving a ryu, are they doing it? No. They are promoting something else that has nothing to do with a ryu.

It's a rare person who has the self-confidence and perhaps the courage to be honest. We need the people who have it. Without it, the ryu will die.

May you be such a student. May you be such a sensei. We're counting on it.

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