

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Tradition to Transmission: Distinguishing Martial Arts from Martial Systems and the Role of Pedagogy in Modern Martial Studies

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of martial practice, the terms *martial art* and *martial system* are frequently used interchangeably, often without adequate scrutiny. This linguistic overlap reflects a deeper conceptual ambiguity that has significant implications for the development, evaluation, and transmission of martial knowledge. While martial arts are typically rooted in historical and cultural traditions, martial systems are defined by functional adaptability, methodological rigor, and pedagogical design. The distinction between the two is more than semantic: it is foundational to the evolution of modern martial studies as a discipline.

This essay articulates a clear framework for understanding the difference between a martial art and a martial system, grounded in principles of instructional theory, combat methodology, and research-informed practice. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of pedagogy—the theory and method of teaching—as a critical, and often overlooked, component in the transmission and sustainability of martial knowledge. Additionally, this work explores how traditional martial arts can evolve by adopting the structural tools of systemized instruction, enhancing both relevance and retention in modern contexts.

Martial Arts as Cultural Expression

A *martial art* is best understood as a culturally rooted expression of combative movement, shaped by the specific sociopolitical, historical, and geographical context in which it emerged. Traditions such as karate, Wing Chun, Capoeira, and classical jujutsu were often developed not just as systems of combat, but as repositories of ethical codes, social identity, and spiritual philosophy (Draeger, 1974; Green & Svinth, 2010). The preservation of



kata, ritual, and lineage reflects the art's commitment to honoring its historical origins.

While these values are significant, they often come at the cost of functional evolution. Many martial arts are marked by conservatism in curriculum design, where the replication of form takes precedence over the exploration of adaptive tactics. As a result, they can become insular and vulnerable to obsolescence in rapidly shifting combative or pedagogical landscapes.

The Martial System: Methodology and Adaptability

In contrast, a *martial system* is constructed intentionally around the principles of adaptability, problem-solving, and methodological clarity. A martial system does not arise organically over centuries; it is designed—often through synthesis, experimentation, and cross-disciplinary inquiry. Its core identity lies not in its aesthetics or cultural symbolism, but in its ability to produce functional outcomes across variable contexts.

Systems are typically grounded in research-informed training methods, such as tactical decision games, scenario-based learning, and stress inoculation drills (Grossman, 1995; Vickers, 2007), and also incorporate dynamic feedback loops that test hypotheses in live training environments, allowing the system to evolve in response to observed inefficiencies. In this way, martial systems resemble scientific models: structured frameworks capable of being tested, revised, and replicated.

Pedagogy as the Engine of Transmission

Critical to the success of a martial system is the establishment of a coherent and intentional **pedagogy**—defined as the science and art of education. Pedagogy encompasses not only content, but also delivery, sequencing, feedback, and the creation of appropriate learning environments (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978). In martial contexts, a system without pedagogy is merely a collection of disconnected techniques, incapable of consistent transmission or long-term sustainability.

An effective pedagogical structure enables:

- **Progressive skill development** through scaffolded curriculum



- **Differentiated instruction** based on learning modalities and student needs (Gardner, 1983)
- **Objective assessment** of performance through observable metrics
- **Instructor training** that preserves instructional fidelity across generations

Without this structure, even highly functional systems risk degradation over time, especially as the system is scaled or moved into new cultural environments.

The Misuse of Terminology: System or Style?

Despite the specific structural and methodological demands of a true system, many modern martial arts organizations employ the term *system* without having



developed the corresponding infrastructure. Rebranded arts are often passed off as systems simply because they include a few unique drills or reorganized curricula. This superficial use of terminology blurs the academic and practical distinctions between art and system and contributes to the dilution of martial discourse (Bowman, 2017).

By establishing clear criteria—functionality, adaptability, pedagogical structure, and research orientation—we can better discern which programs constitute legitimate systems and which remain stylistic evolutions of traditional forms.

Revitalizing Traditional Martial Arts through Systemic Integration

Despite these distinctions, the relationship between martial arts and systems need not be adversarial. On the contrary, traditional martial arts can **greatly benefit** from the selective integration of systemic methodologies. This hybridization does not require abandoning cultural identity, but rather **enhancing transmission, efficacy, and relevance** through pedagogical and methodological upgrades.



Pedagogical Renewal in the Dojo

Incorporating a systemized pedagogy enables a dojo to:

- Structure learning in progressive, achievable stages
- Address the needs of diverse learners
- Improve student retention through clarity and goal-setting
- Train future instructors in consistent, effective methods

This enhances not only technical proficiency but also the organizational longevity of the dojo.

Scenario-Based and Dilemma Training

Traditional training often emphasizes *form over function*. By introducing tactical dilemmas—variable drills, controlled resistance, and scenario simulation—a dojo can engage students in decision-making under stress, thereby improving real-world performance without discarding traditional forms.

Research-Informed Curriculum Evaluation

Traditional systems can conduct critical audits of their curricula using modern tools such as biomechanics, cognitive science, and martial ethnography. This process can validate long-standing techniques or identify opportunities for improvement, ensuring that tradition remains *living knowledge* rather than static repetition.

Conclusion

Understanding the distinction between a martial art



and a martial system is essential for the advancement of both martial pedagogy and practice. Martial arts, as cultural legacies, serve to preserve identity and tradition. Martial systems, as functional constructs, serve to solve problems. The former benefits from reverence; the latter, from refinement.

Yet, the future of martial study lies in synthesis. By integrating research-driven methodology, tactical adaptability, and formal pedagogy into traditional structures, martial educators can honor the past while equipping practitioners for the demands of the present and future. In doing so, they move from merely *preserving techniques* to *transmitting systems of knowledge*—and, ultimately, toward the professionalization of martial instruction as a serious academic and applied field. 🌀

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A Request from Castillo Sensei

My name is Edward Castillo. On October 20th, 2024, **I had a series of cardiac traumas, resulting in a hospitalization.** I am in need of assistance as I can't work at this time and things have taken a downturn financially. **I am seeking assistance while recovering from this life-changing situation.** I am a martial arts instructor and have a limited capacity for any physical activities. As you know, the monthly bills mount and it becomes difficult to focus on recovery, with the other worries involved. I am working on making a full recovery and my particular health insurance does not cover my cardiac therapy. Thank you and any assistance is appreciated. All the best to you and yours.



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Edward Castillo (Salahuddin Muhammad) is dojocho of the Takeshin Dojo and director of the Nihonden Aikibujutsu Senyokai. An overseas director (Nihon jujutsu division) for the Japanese Budo Association under his teacher, Asano Yasuhito Sensei, Castillo Sensei is the current head of Hontai Hakkei-ryu, and a student of Shinkage-ryu Hyoho (Asano-ha). He is retired from the fields of private client and executive protection, and has also worked in fugitive recovery.

