

The Art of War

Interview with Sensei John Sevasta

By Melanie Drury

As I sat observing this group of people strike and wrestle, wrapped up in all sorts of weird contortions, flinging each other over and down with a slam, I noticed how I was the one bearing the wince, not any one of them. I heard their grunting and panting and smelt the poignant smell of fresh sweat, which nonetheless was not unattractive... on the contrary, the entire blend of sensory perception led me to feel a sense of marvel bordering on admiration.

I was witnessing a Ju-Jitsu class, one of the disciplines classified as a Martial Art, and I could truly identify the artistic element of such techniques of self-defence. Since the beginning of life on this planet, there has been a need for four basic elements in order that a species or a race could survive: food, shelter, reproduction and self-defence. In the same way that each of these forms has been mastered to the levels of Nouvelle Cuisine, Five Star accommodation, and the Kama Sutra, defence from its rawest form - without the use of anything other than one's own skill, stamina and strength - has evolved into a variety Martial Arts.

Although my impression may sound crude, the atmosphere was very technical and highly disciplined, almost scientific. It appeared that there was no place for emotion, except for the basic feeling of survival of the fittest. Surprisingly though, one of the students later conveyed to me his feelings of bonding with his opponents, "The more he (the opponent) can resist me, the more respect I feel for him. By the end of the fight, there is a strange sense of intimacy between us."

Sensei John Sevasta allowed me to probe a little further, to elucidate my impressions of what the Bushido Ju-Jitsu Academy was teaching to its students.

Would you kindly explain to me the difference between Ju-Jitsu and other forms of martial art such as Karate, Tae Kwon Do, Judo and so on?

The name itself implies the difference. Ju-Jitsu is the only Japanese martial art that still has the suffix Jitsu, which is what identifies it as an art of war (Bugei), whereas a name that has Do as a suffix indicates that it is more of a recreational, sportive or spiritual practice, such as Kendo and Aikido.

Ju-Jitsu is an all-rounder that does not rely on any specific techniques or strategies whereas most other practices have a core element. For example, Karate is concerned mainly with blocks punches and kicks; Aikido with wrist locks and circular movements; and Tae Kwon Do with fast high kicking techniques.

For several years Ju-Jitsu was frowned upon since it appeared to have no uniformity and structure and it seemed like a mish-mash compared to the other practices. There is also a classical Ju-Jitsu which is more ritualistic, however Goshin (modern) Ju-Jitsu has evolved

so that it is very flexible strategically, and without constraints. In fact Ju-Jitsu literally translated means “the pliable or flexible art!”

When the Gracie Brothers in the USA commenced the Ultimate Fighting Championships for mixed martial arts (MMA) in 1992, the true value of Ju-Jitsu was discovered. Ju-Jitsu exponents were the only ones who were unpredictable, and capable in all areas whether it was in throwing and grappling techniques, striking and kicking techniques and ground fighting techniques, and they inevitably came out the winners. It is thus in the past decade that the interest in Ju-Jitsu re-emerged and flourished, with its grappling and ground fighting techniques even adopted by practitioners of other arts!

The Bushido Ju-Jitsu Academy has a team of Ju-Jitsukas who are willing to test their skills against any Martial Art practitioners who do not mind taking part in submission-based contests.

What would be the purpose of learning such a discipline?

Ju-Jitsu is not a sport; it is a life-skill. Some organizations teach Ju-Jitsu as a sport and they hold competitions with rules and points, but it seems to be a mere mix of Karate and Judo. Originally Ju-Jitsu was meant for combat. In real life scenarios there are no rules, and Ju-Jitsu was developed by Samurai warriors who used to apply unarmed combat techniques whenever they could not use their swords. These techniques were also used by Japanese common people in their daily lives as a means of self-protection.

Therefore Ju-Jitsu is learnt for self-protection and all-round fighting, and there are sacrifices to make in order to advance; there are no short-cuts. The body is trained for pain tolerance and delayed fatigue, and the students learn how to pace themselves, bearing in mind the end result.

The techniques learnt can overcome strength, so they are effective in all combat and self-defence scenarios, including being pinned against the wall or the floor, and handling multiple attackers, armed attacks and even aggressors versed in other Martial Arts; techniques which are not included in classic or sport-oriented disciplines. Students practice what they learn against each other in a controlled environment through free fighting (Randori).

I also give separate Self-Protection classes, teaching basic Ju-Jitsu techniques and how to use everyday objects as weapons, since some people simply want some basis for self-protection in their everyday lives. These include anybody from traffic wardens who want to learn how to avoid being hit, to women who want to defend themselves from risk of rape or any other kind of abuse.

What psychological benefits can be observed in practitioners?

Ju-Jitsu also increases psychological resilience, so as not to give up easily because of suffering. It also increases concentration and focus abilities, and practitioners learn

assertion, determination and self-confidence, and conviction that what they practice actually works.

On the contrary to what many may think, Ju-Jitsu practitioners learn to control their temper if ever they were hot-headed. Whereas instinct usually impels us to hit blindly in dangerous situations, actions become calculated, giving the opponent the opportunity to submit, the ultimate aim remaining self-protection.

There are different belt colours to denote grades, or levels of advancement; would you please elucidate?

Originally there were no coloured belts. A novice wore a white belt, and in time the sweat and dirt would turn it to a yellowish brown. Eventually it would turn almost black, and that denoted a longer experience in practicing the art.

From the conversion of martial arts into a sport, more colours emerged. Unfortunately belt colours have become a commercialized aspect of martial arts whereas they should be seen as milestones, denoting the length of time of practice and the number of techniques mastered in that time.

Since there are fees involved for the examination of students and the issue of belts, commercial minded people take advantage of their students, who are not given the opportunity of testing themselves against other schools. I attribute minimal importance to grades, emphasizing the acquisition of the actual skills. At the BJJ, if you walk in with a coloured belt or Dan grade you have to prove it.

Bushido Ju-Jitsu Academy has six Kyus, or pupil grades: white, yellow, orange, green, lower brown and higher brown. Some schools use blue and purple as well. After going through all the Kyus, a black belt is obtained. A black belt is called a Sensei, which means "Teacher". Even black belts have gradations, beginning with 1st Dan continuing up to 10th Dan.

What does a Sensei represent, and from your personal experience, what does it take to reach that level?

A Sensei is the black belt level at which one can teach others. A student who achieves Black Belt status means he has learnt all the techniques pertaining to pupil level. From Black Belt upward a fresh journey for higher skills and knowledge commences. A true Sensei serves to inspire and motivate his students. He is someone whose level of skills and dedication the student will continuously strive to emulate.

I have been practicing Martial Arts for thirty years, and founded BJJ in 1989. In more than fifteen years I have graded only three black belts, because I maintain very high standards and many cannot endure the pressure and hard work involved. The students took about five years of intensive training to reach that level. Students at the BJJ learn to respect the Black Belt for what it truly signifies and nobody is in a rush to acquire that

level. A BJJ Black Belt must not only be worthy of this grade but he must also be prepared at all times to prove his worth.

As a Sensei I strive to inspire my students in the same way that my teachers inspired me. Some of the commandos with the British Army in Malta practiced Ju-Jitsu techniques and they were my first inspiration as I observed their training, although they only focused on a limited number of techniques. Over the years I was inspired by a number of teachers: the late Sensei Tony Tanti, Sensei Roy Grainger, Sensei Dave Vincent and most of all Shihan Billy Doak, who has been my greatest influence in my practice and dedication of Ju-Jitsu.

There are Martial Arts such as Aikido that are more often associated with developing the spiritual side of our existence apart from the physical and mental benefits. Would you say that Ju-Jitsu has any spiritual connotation at all?

Ju-Jitsu is not meant for spiritual enhancement or achieving higher consciousness. The Samurai practiced Zen Buddhism but made a clear distinction between that and the tool for battle.

Mohrei Uesuyhiba saw this spiritual lacking and thus developed Aikido, which literally translated means “Way of the Spirit”. Far from having any spiritual connotations Ju-Jitsu is a hardcore aggressive Martial Art system whose lethal techniques are intended to incapacitate or dispose of an aggressor.

Bushido means “Way of the Warrior” and is the code of ethics of the Samurai, but I do not condition my students with it, although I do make sure they are respectful at all times. My main focus is on discipline, physical fitness and self-defence techniques that are relevant to modern times.

Finally, what, to you, is the greatest attraction, satisfaction or reward from practicing Ju-Jitsu and passing on your knowledge of this discipline to others?

I remain active and in good physical shape, and I am always thrilled by the excitement of executing a perfect technique. I have met and befriended people from all walks of life, and earned the respect of my Senseis and students, not because of the high number of Dan grades I possess, but because of my skills, dedication and experience. Yet the greatest reward is to see the progress of novices transformed into dedicated Ju-Jitsukas who will carry on when I am not around. As for the attraction, Ju-Jitsu is simply an integral part of my life!

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