The Point: Perspective

by Bill Handren

"One rarely sees a block executed correctly in kumite"....Masutatsu Oyama

It was the eighties. Heating costs skyrocketed so I, like many others, decided to install a wood burning stove. The stove was pretty heavy so it took a good bit of work to drag the behemoth down a ramp from my truck, along the sidewalk, up the porch steps and into the den. I was sweaty and tired by this time. With all the straining, I was pretty sure any future children I may sire would be born blind.

I placed the stove exactly at forty-five degrees in the corner to measure where I would need to install the chimney. But, when I stood in the room entryway and looked at the stove, it looked crooked. I measured, re-measured and re-re-measured. Nope, perfect forty-five degrees. I even checked that the walls were square to one another. I was bewildered.

After an hour, I reluctantly asked my wife to take a look at it. I see things as even, level, plumb and square. My wife doesn't. I needed a different perspective. "You have it crooked", she says, "you need to turn it a little." I lovingly explain "the @#$ thing isn't crooked, I measured the $%^ thing ten times and it is perfectly*&%$ even." She says again, "it's crooked!" So, to prove my point, I turn the thing. Aaarg...it looks better. I turn it some more. Perfect! The problem was when one stands in the entryway, the stove needs to face the entryway. So much for my Feng Shui. Her perspective wasn't well received because I had spent a good deal of time and effort doing it another way.

I take horrible pictures and my wife takes great ones. She uses a crap camera and I have a good one. I asked my daughter why mine look so bad and she said I have the subject centered. I need to move the subject to the left or right to make the photo interesting. But, my mind says, it won't be centered. So, my wife and daughter make works of art while I make jail house mug shots. Again, perspective.

I was shown yoko uke before I started studying the martial arts and I asked, "no, seriously, what does that move mean?" My friend insisted it was a defensive movement against a punch. It didn't seem to matter it didn't work and I could hit him at will. "It will just take more practice", he says. I tell him if he can't make the thing work after a few weeks of practice, he may want to rethink that plan. It seemed to me if a movement can't be used immediately its usefulness or application is dubious. So began a lifelong journey towards truth. Several decades spent in solitude, knowing the kata interpretations were very wrong.

Boxing requires no explanations. Everything works and is simple to use. I can teach someone the fundamentals of boxing and they will be able to use the techniques immediately. With karate, a lifetime of practice won't. Maybe I should say a lifetime of walking in the wrong direction won't get you to the destination. Once you are pointed in the right direction, the destination is within sight.

Others have raised questions about karate. Masutatsu Oyama and Jhoon Rhee wrote about raising the rear heel to increase power in gyaku tsuki. Yet, the concept of a strong stance for power still prevails. Steve Arneil commented it is impossible to defend against the boxer's punch with karate blocks, and demonstrated evasions as effective. In one ear and out the other for most. Try to explain a different interpretation of something and you can expect confrontation. I learned the hard way to remain silent. When in Rome.

Even demonstration won't change attitudes. I would think a few hours hitting a heavy bag would dispel a lot of what is being taught. It won't. I guess if the bag won't hardly move with a particular strike, it will nonetheless work on a determined opponent

It has been several years since Mr. Stamper and I started corresponding. It became a nightly ritual of back and forth exchanges. After over four decades, I met someone else who questioned. Like finding a long lost brother. I was no longer the sole doubter in the wilderness. We didn't agree on everything and still don't, but the differences are so small they don't matter. I had met one of the enlightened. Best of all, he was writing a book sharing his unique perspective; The Character of Goju-Ryu, Kata Implications for Experienced Practitioners

Most will read Mr. Stamper's book, nod their heads, yet continue on their merry way. But, the book wasn't meant for everyone. A cup is most useful when it is empty or when there is some room still inside. Many filled their cups years ago. The Character of Goju Ryu will be too much for all to appreciate. Sort of like handing a child a volume of beautiful black and white drawings only to have it used as a coloring book. To some, it may as well have been written in Klingon. For those who can entertain a different perspective, it will be one of the most enlightening books you will ever read

I critiqued Mr. Stamper's book and mentioned it will be hard to say whether it will change people's views. When one devotes a great deal of time and effort into their practice, it is nearly impossible to effect change. It is the nature of

humans. We are born into our religion. We are raised to our political viewpoints. Rare is the person who remains pliable after years of exposure to a method or way. A disproportionate amount of scientific discoveries are made by those who are new to their fields; they haven't yet learned the accepted as the only way.

Some will always see things as level, even, plumb and square, refusing to admit alternatives. Others will have the good sense to always question when there is doubt. No, you don't have to abandon everything you have learned. You just try to see it in a different light and take from the new perspective what you wish. Absorb what is useful. Doesn't matter if it is the study of a martial art or the installation of a wood burning stove.