

## “The Path”

W.S. Bumgarner Dojo-cho Atlanta Gi Yu Dojo

Roku DAN 07/16



Summing up annual seminars is always tough. The three days are packed with training, testing, fellowship, and very little rest. It takes me about a week to come down from the whirlwind and to recover (thank God I took off Monday from work). The Shin Ken Gata Jujutsu was exhausting, the Kukishin Den Ryu Biken was challenging, and the Tameshi Giri was humbling. All together it's a lot to digest. This year we had one of our youngest students from the Atlanta Dojo, Bryan Chunasamy, challenge the San Kyu test. Also, after four years of lying low, I decided to challenge the Roku Dan test. We both faced specific and personal challenges during our respective tests; but, the toughest part of the test wasn't the techniques. Let me explain.



The San Kyu test is divided into three parts. One part is the performance of the required techniques. The second part is the written exam displaying the student's understanding of the history and lineages that we study. The third and final part is the Randori. Bryan performed well in the first two parts of the exam; but, I believe that the Randori was not only the most challenging for Bryan, but also the part where he learned the most. The Randori portion of Bryan's exam was almost finished when he got hit in the ribs with a training Yari. He went down fast and fell in a heap, grabbing his side, and stayed still for a few moments. All of us on the testing panel have had shots like that and we all knew immediately how much he was hurting. Chuck Sempai gave Bryan a few moments to gather himself and asked if he was ready to continue. Slowly Bryan stood up, still grabbing his ribs, and said he was ready. I can't say I know exactly what was going through Bryan's mind, but I bet it was a combination of shock and fear and an overwhelming desire to just stop and go sit down. In that one strike, I think Bryan woke up from his martial arts dream and found the reality of martial arts. There are many martial arts movies, but the martial arts are no movie. Koryu can be beautiful and awe inspiring. But, Koryu is a crucible of frustration and pain. Usually, the frustration hurts much more and lingers way longer than the actual pain.



My testing was very different, but no less challenging. The main part of my test involved cutting tatami with a live blade. The test requires making five specific cuts in a specific order on a single roll of tatami. Now, I have practiced these cuts many times and I am confident that I know the physical movements. This makes it all the more frustrating when you can't get through the damn thing. It could not be simpler. The tatami does not move and it is not made of concrete, so why couldn't I get through it? Like a teacher of mine once said while admonishing another student about his poor use of the bo staff, "It's not the bo's fault." In this case, "It's not the tatami's fault."



In addition, several years ago, I had an accident with the sword where I almost lost the use of my left hand. Now, the left is not my primary hand, but I was still kind of attached to it (Ha! Ha!). Fortunately, everything turned out fine, but the memory still lingers when I hold a live blade. That single incident has created doubt and hesitation over the years and then at times has caused me to be overcome with genuine fear when handling a live blade. The memories of all of the pain, rehab appointments, doctors' bills, lifelong diminished use of my hand, and embarrassment have been with me for a long time. Fear of anything is hard to overcome. I have thought about this for a long time and realized that the fear of snakes, the fear of flying, the fear of water, or the fear of anything is all the same. It's not the snake's

fault that you fear it, or the plane or the water or the sword. The fear or doubt exists in you and only you. And, consequently, only you can overcome it. Your spirit rises up to prevail over an obstacle and is strengthened, or it recoils and is crushed by it. Just like Bryan, you either choose to stand back up and continue or you don't. Those thoughts churned in my mind and gut for a few days. The Saturday morning of the seminar I woke up around 4 a.m. with a sense of overwhelming confidence about the tatami cutting. It was not arrogance, but a feeling of assuredness that the cutting had already successfully been done. And, pretty soon, it was.

Bryan's tests for San Kyu and my tests for Roku Dan could not have been more different, considering the techniques and requirements for passing. But, we were both challenged - Bryan, because of his lack of experience, and me, because of my experience over the past two-and-a-half decades. We are all challenged - by Koryu, by our careers, by balancing training and family and work. The challenges will change, but the path through them won't.

