

# THE SOKE POKEY AND THE DEMISE OF BUDO.

By Bill Viola Jr.

I struggled, going back and forth, about this piece because its taboo to question authority in the martial arts industry. While I am not targeting anyone in particular, I'm confident most readers will immediately relate with the trend. In the words of Honest Abe, "*Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.*" – so be careful the shade you throw.

You put your right punch in, you put your left kick out, you put your right block in, and shake it all about... Ah, the classic participation dance where being a Sensei just isn't enough.

This is a lighthearted look at the thousands of Great Glorious Grand Masters, Supreme Grand Masters, Eternal Masters, Ultimate Masters, Sultans, Luminaries, Grand Poohbahs, and Soke who seem to rival the omnipotent. The self-proclaimed Mega Master can be found in every state, city, and neighborhood across America, just let your fingers do the walking (or nowadays google 'em). The results will make you go hmmm: "Master XYZ" from Podunk, Iowa is the undisputed undefeated world champion" (even though they've never fought outside their zip code). A similar story repeats in the next county, and the next and the next – it's mind boggling. To mythbusters, the martial arts industry has become a circus chock-full of showman touting clown credentials like PhDs of martial science, and while Doctor is reserved for academia, the truth is there is no regulation of martial arts, so we rely on the honor system. Google provided 7,230,000 results for "PhD martial arts," offering a plethora of scams and diploma mills to choose from:

I've been studying Shotokan karate-do my entire life (40 years this April) under the watchful eye of my father, who's dedicated a lifetime of service long before me, so I feel confident sharing my observations. I'm forever a student of the "martial way" and by no means an expert in Japanese nomenclature, but I studied 3 years of Japanese language in high school and 2 additional years in college, so I'm well-versed. Sadly, I've seen far too many egos inflated simply by perusing a Japanese/English dictionary and thesaurus. The psychological warfare of "one upping" the instructor next door is a game I call the Soke Pokey.

First, instructors spin the wheel of fortune in search of an exotic sounding prefix. Popular honorifics include Kyoshi and Hanshi, but sometimes those are just too plain Jane. How about Kancho, Kaicho,

Shidoshi, Shoshum or Meijin? Those sound a little more obscure and mystical. You get the idea. Next, said bogus promotion is christened under the banner of a cyber roundtable who legitimize the rank (for 3 installments of \$199.99). I know that may seem a bit snarky, but it's just too easy with all the nonsense online. You can almost hear the "as seen on TV" voice say, "But wait there's more! You get an embroidered dragon patch and certificate with assorted random hanko at no extra charge." It's obnoxiously oversized, so it's perfect for a profile pic. For a little extra coin, they will throw in a hall of fame honor where Bruce Lee is a member. Authenticity guaranteed – notarized on parchment paper from an ancient Buddhist temple. These head honcho with 13th degree barber shop belts in muckety muck are the essence of capitalism and the contradiction of budo. It's ok to chuckle, we all know the type. FYI: hanchō is Japanese term now part of American Jargon meaning, "squad leader."

Not all egomaniacs are selling snake oil, some are actually very good at fighting, but once injected, narcissistic bujutsu can be deadly. Think Cobra Kai, "fear does not exist in this dojo." The antivenom is budo, but some posers hide under its guise. Beware of the charlatan preaching humility; there is a profound philosophical difference between a martial artist and a martial wayist. It may be cliché, but actions do speak louder than words, unless you're an unsuspecting white belt who doesn't know any better. Newbies often get swept up in the cult. I'm not saying you can't be proud of your dojo's accomplishments, you should be, just don't fabricate them. My father taught me that, "*Character is a commodity you can't buy, you can only build it—authentic budo is priceless.*"

There are far too many self-promoted gurus who exaggerate to the nth degree. What may have started as a "white" belt sized stretch can quickly escalate to "black" belt levels of hyperreality. Most often the offenders share the same M.O.: out of shape, brash and boastful. You might overhear tales of a shaolin monk that blessed them with holy water or how their system is far too lethal for competition. Their ensemble includes a tattered Crayola inspired obi that Liberace would be proud of, and a uniform bedazzled with patches and chevrons signifying eminence, but nobody has actually seen them do anything—ever. Are these kuchi bushi (mouth warriors) lost in delusions of grandeur? Each case is different, but many have lineage that is hazy at best. There

are always exceptions to the rule, but if it walks and talks like a duck, well...

Some are harmless, while others harmful. I do believe there are innocent casualties of this vicious cycle, by-products of second or third generations of blasphemy. Alas, Funakoshi Sensei must be rolling over in his grave. The father of modern karate never really bothered with rank himself; instead progression was dignified through a journey of self-perfection. I'm not saying modern kyu/dan ranking is wrong (we use it), I am emphasizing it shouldn't be the bane of your existence. Hierarchy is necessary for the success of commercial karate schools and is beneficial when kept in perspective. There are certainly qualified Grand Masters and 10th degree black belts who deserve this rank, but they are few and far between. Not every McDojo headmaster is qualified.

All Japanese arts, be it ikebana (flower arrangements) or tea ceremonies, are highly structured and regimented so it's no surprise karate followed this pattern. However, belts, uniforms, and degrees are a modern phenomenon that didn't exist in feudal Japan. Its history really began with the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai (Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society) established in 1895 in Kyoto (under the authority of the Japanese Government).

Its purpose was noble; solidify and standardize all disciplines, and it worked for a time. At the turn of the 20th century the Butoku-kai tested the water by issuing titles of Hanshi and Kyoshi to several kendo experts. (Prior, menkyo or secret scrolls were common). These licenses are not, I repeat, not spoken titles (only used in written format). In layman terms, my brother in-law Tim is a Master Plumber, but I don't greet him as, "Master Tim," although he might get a kick out of that. The only place I see it is on his resume. In Japan, using "Master" in the first person is a breach of etiquette. Yes, you have earned that rank, but it's impolite and ignorant to broadcast it. Sensei is the polite accepted title when speaking of lawyers, teachers, doctors or martial arts masters. Sadly, for insecure karate-ka, that isn't very sexy. Speaking of etiquette, don't forget the physical act of rei (bowing) is literally pushing down ego (the core value of budo).

The initial disciplines of the Butoku-ka were Jujutsu, Judo and Kendo. Kano Jigoro (the founder of Judo) had already adapted the kyu/dan system (1883) however it was not a new invention as some like to romanticize, it was modified from the ancient Japanese board game



Photo 1. Intercept an attempted front choke.

An alternative oyo for the section of Gojushiho-(sho) / hotaku described in the text.  
Sochin ("vigorous calming") to Hakko ("eight devastations") seems to have failed due to its explicit reference to violent conflict which would have been unacceptable in mainland Japan. By creating the name Hakko, Funakoshi appears to be drawing our attention to



Photo 2. Pull the attacker onto a head butt.

the fact that the kata makes attacking techniques to all the eight directional points of the compass.

Wank(u)an ("king's crown") underwent two unsuccessful attempts at renaming. One attempt was to Shofu, which can also be pronounced Matsukaze, meaning "pine wind" – the first character is once again the same as that of Funakoshi's



Photo 3. Turn to apply a guillotine choke and control the attacker's body (alternative oyo).

own pen name. Another renaming attempt was to Hito ("flying waves") where the second character is the same as that of Funakoshi's own pen name, Shoto. In spite of these connections with O'sensei, neither of these names were accepted by his senior students. This may seem surprising, particularly in view of the fact that the name "king's crown", which purports to visually describe the shape of a royal diadem in the first three moves of the kata, is quite inappropriate for the Okinawan kings since they did not wear such a crown. Another minor mystery is why its name was not translated into Japanese where it would be pronounced Oh-kan instead of Wan-kan.

To summarize, it appears that kata names indicating Chinese or Okinawan origins were changed due to the political history between these countries and mainland Japan. Kata names with conflictual connotations were often altered to names with a pictorial or poetic description of some aspect of the kata in order to mitigate the perceived negative impact on their intended Japanese clientele. A combination of the earlier and the revised names, whether ultimately adopted or not, can act as valuable indications or hints in aiding our understanding of the katas and some of their potential applications from more than one perspective.

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Photo 4. Attacker applies bear hug.

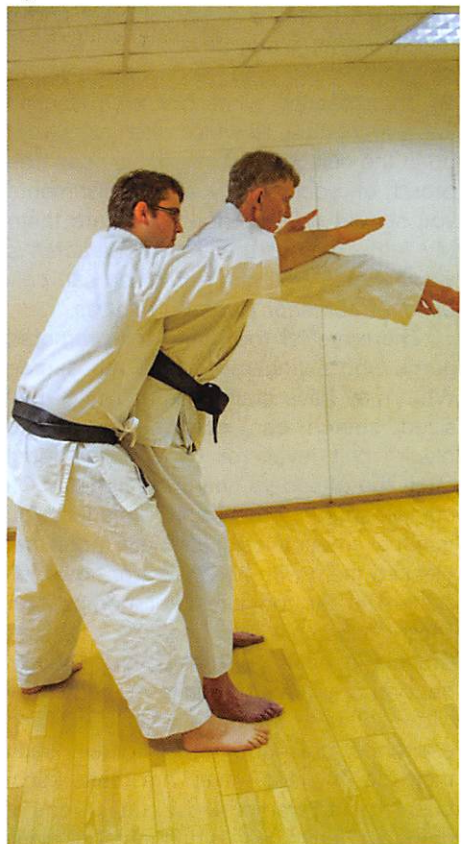


Photo 5. Escape from the bear hug.

Go. Later a black sash would accompany the dan rank followed by the judogi and iconic kuro-obi (black belt) circa 1907. Why did Kano choose white/black? Other Japanese athletic departments such as swimming used a black ribbon to designate advanced competitors. There is no conclusive evidence, but I also believe the influence of Taoism (yin and yang) is a plausible reason for black belt and white dogi contrast. The urban legend of a white obi soiled through blood and sweat as means to reach black color is nonsense. Japanese culture has a propensity for cleanliness.

When Itosu Anko, passed away, Funakoshi picked up his mentors torch and followed Kano's lead. On April 12, 1924, he awarded the first karate dan rankings to seven of his students, acquiescent to Butoku-kai standards. At the time, Funakoshi himself held no rank, although he eventually accepted the title of Kyoshi in 1943 and he never promoted anyone above 5th dan (including himself). Direct disciples such as Ohshima Tsutomu (awarded 5th dan by Funakoshi in 1957) set Godan as the ceiling, never to be surpassed. Others such as Nakayama Masatoshi rose to 9th dan (10th posthumously). Both karate-ka were pioneers with different ideology in terms of relative ranking, so splinters among the core were inevitable (many of Funakoshi's students established their own organizations, styles, and associations). Colored belts would not become in vogue until Kawaishi Mikonosuke (Judo) popularized the concept throughout Europe in 1930's as a visual reward system to correspond with Kyu ranks.

Funakoshi and Kano were educators and understood the political clout and power the butokai wielded. If they wanted their respective arts to flourish, they had to play nice in the sandbox and follow government "suggestions." By the 1930's karate gained recognition after meeting certain criteria, conformities that had been in motion for years due to Japanese nationalism: Karate had to be written as "empty hand" (Japanese), karate had to adopt a standard dogi and kyu/dan rank system, and karate had to develop a sport aspect (competition).

From the beginning, there were mixed emotions on rank. One of Funakoshi's contemporaries, Chojun Miyagi (Goju-Ryu founder) said, "*I believe once dan ranks in karate are awarded, it will inevitably lead to trouble. The ranking system will lead to discrimination within karate and karate-ka will be judged by their rank and not their character. It will create 'inferior' and 'superior' strata within the karate community and will lead to discrimination between people.*" Wow, prophetic. Incidentally, the character "Mr. Miyagi" of Karate Kid fame was inspired by the aforementioned

Master. Robert Mark Kamen, co-creator of the movie, was a Goju-ryu student which explains the philosophy behind this famous exchange:

*Daniel LaRusso: Hey, what kind of belt do you have? Mr. Miyagi: Canvas. J.C. Penny. Three ninety-eight. You like. (laughs). Daniel LaRusso: No, I meant... Mr. Miyagi: In Okinawa, belt mean no need rope to hold up pants. (laughs; then, seriously) Daniel-san, karate here. (taps his head) Karate here. (taps his heart) Karate never here. (points to his belt) Understand? Daniel LaRusso: I think so.*

The real deal, Grand Master Demura Fumio (Shito-ryu), was Pat Morita's stuntman for the film.

#### Enter WWII.

At the end of war, General MacArthur dissolved all military related organizations in Japan, including Dai Nippon Butoku-kai. In one fell swoop, the flood gates opened, and during the early 1950's, associations formed left and right by the dojos in each style, each with authority to rank. Big brother could no longer oversee or regulate the industry, and a "title" wave soon to hit the US shores. It was a sea of chaos that Robert Trias and Nakayama Masatoshi tried to regulate. The USKA (United States Karate Association) and JKA (Japan Karate Association) kept things in check, but with no true governing body, it was still the Wild West. Have you ever seen the movie Catch Me If You Can with Leo DiCaprio? Con men of his image were common in the martial arts field as it was a lucrative business opportunity. Decades and thousands of associations later, there is still no honor among thieves.

#### Soke Cocktail:

Directions: Shake pride, greed, and ignorance over ice cold ego and stir. Just add students. Soke, not to be confused with Sake (although it helps to have a sip or two when encountering grandstanders) is commonly referred to as head of a family or house in Japan. In America, the title is controversial and raises red flags. The pseudo Soke starter kit typically includes a resume full of multi-10th degree black belts, 15+ hall of fame inductions, and a VHS series of secret waza to supplement the new style they have created. Mind you, I know certain individuals who deserve this moniker, but then again you don't hear them bragging or selling memberships, so this isn't their concern. Or is it? The damage done by counterfeit karate-ka is crippling the arts with fiction.

Soke is synonymous with the term iemoto (family foundation) of a traditional Japanese art. In Japan, this title is rarely used and only applicable to very old martial arts (koryu). The fact remains karate is NOT an old discipline, so why do we have soooo many Soke in America? Rock beats scissors of course. It's just

another rung on the vanity ladder to prove who's top dog. They've punched their ticket into the Supreme Eternal Grand Master Poohbah club; one part boasting, two parts marketing—all status. With 300+ million Americans to target, it's not hard to find naïve students who will follow a master in BS.

Without going into a dissertation, Soke originally had no connection with martial arts at all. Soke was a quasi-political title often held by the head of the family while the successor (Soke) was responsible for the "secret transmissions" of the clan. Basically Soke is heir from generation to generation. Over time, Soke also included the rights to familial items such as art, plays, and poetry etc. Like the Rockefellers or Carnegie's, the Japanese upper class aristocrats held court like a corporation. If you're not familiar, tune into the HBO series Succession, some American Soke would fit right in. All kidding aside, an exuberant number of martial artists claim to have "inherited" these highly guarded ancient teachings despite not being of Japanese descent or a direct family member. That's right, all the secrets have been willed to Soke Joe Sixpack of Ohio. Seems a bit absurd, right?

Others, who can't verify credentials, find the Shodai Soke route as the path of least resistance. Adding the Shodai (first generation) to the title is a quicker way to reach Soke stardom. It's madness; someone makes up a system, rearranges some kanji and poof, a new style is born. A bit pretentious don't you think? Worse yet, 20-somethings are getting in on the action. Why not, nobody can stop them from the make believe, it's as if we are stuck watching Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Soke Pokey practitioners swiftly move round and round, in and out of hypocrisy where respect is demanded, worship appreciated and blind loyalty required. The music is loud—so loud they become tone deaf. It echoes, "You put your ego in, you pull your credibility out, you put your arrogance in and you shake it all about." As the volume reaches dangerous decibel levels, it's too much for some to bear; others double down.

Pseudo Soke are eager to defend themselves. The go-to for damage control is cross-training. It's not uncommon to dabble in multiple styles (an admirable path) earning several 1st and 2nd degree black belts in various arts. Problems arise when those ranks seem to rise exponentially by some illogical compound formula. Regardless, a collective effort is still master of none. Mixing a few disciplines together is just that, mixed martial arts, not a revolutionary ryu. Unless you've had some divine intervention, all "contemporary" hybrid systems fall under the MMA umbrella today. Through

my own interpretation and innovation, I teach a unique brand of Shotokan. I've incorporated elements of kyokushin, capoeira, tegumi, kickboxing, BJJ, and kicking techniques from various Korean arts. It works for me, but at the end of the day my root is Shotokan and my title is Sensei. It is not a newfangled style, just a creative curriculum inspired by Shuhari (Obey, digress, and separate). Shuhari is commonly known as three stages of mastery. First we learn from tradition, then we break from tradition so we can transcend.

Philosophically speaking we are encouraged to evolve, but many misinterpret and don't grasp that combing or modifying traditional techniques isn't the exception, it's the norm. We are not in feudal Japan, and Soke does not mean founder. Unfortunately, it's grossly and loosely used as propaganda, and Westerners continue to exploit the semantics. If you want to be remembered as a "creator" we already have an appropriate English term, "founder." I suppose using the esoteric Japanese title gives the users an ordained feeling, but it's unwarranted in most circumstances.

Honestly, being a Soke in America today is kind of like being rich in Monopoly: Do not pass go, do not collect \$200—go

directly to jail. Seriously, I am NOT saying all Soke are fake, the term exists for a reason (some have legitimate lineage).

What I am saying is that very few men or women belong in the same conversation as Funakoshi or Kano. If you fancy yourself in the same breath, then we can agree to disagree. For the small percentage of genuine Soke or Grand Masters, thank you for your contributions. Legends of the game like Kanazawa Soke (Shotokan) or Grand Master Ochiai Hidehiko (Washinyu) are examples and rightful members of the fraternity. While imposters continue to ride their coat tails, it is flattery we can all do without.

As American karate slides down the slippery slope of sokeship, please ingest the rhetoric with a grain of salt. Make no mistake, this is not an isolated "karate" problem, it's widespread: tae kwon do, tang soo do, kung fu, etc. In the end, I'm reminded of a Pastor who fooled his flock. Television evangelist Jimmy Swaggart didn't do Christianity any favors with his antics, and many Masters tarnish martial arts in the same vein. There will always be those who desire to be a "personality" rather than a "servant." Even if remorseful, the collateral damage is done, however those hypocrites don't represent the majority! Despite the heretics, my religious

faith hasn't wavered and neither has my conviction to be a Sensei. Martial-vanity is an easy rabbit hole to fall into, but it's an alternate state of mind (conscious or subconscious).

Confucius said, "Humility is the solid foundation of all virtues." As a budoka, I want to influence, not impose; earn, not demand; and lead, not command my students. I will continue to count my blessings and not the amount of stripes on my belt. Rank does not define me, the integrity of my dojo does. Although I've technically earned a master title, being a Sensei is all I ever wanted. An average teacher tells, a good teacher explains, a superior teacher demonstrates, but a Sensei inspires.

If my point of view made you question some of your steps, maybe it's time to change the choreography of your dance. It's not too late to turn yourself around—budo, that's what it's all about.

*About the author: Bill Viola Jr. is Amazon best-selling author and creator of the award-winning Sensei Says® life skills curriculum. The Viola family owns and operates Allegheny Shotokan Karate in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania now celebrating their 50-year anniversary (1969-2019).*

*(website) Allegheny Shotokan Karate*

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