

A Meaningful Life

Aristotle tells us in *The Nichomachean Ethics* that happiness comes from rationally expressing what we have decided is good for us. Happiness is not joy or pleasure but is derived from living a meaningful life.

Martial artists seek security and a certain sense of joy in practicing, but what about a meaningful life? Does the practice of traditional martial arts produce happiness by providing access to a meaningful life? How meaningful to a person's life can delivering punches and kicks, or applying throws and locks be, beyond the immediate sense of security and physical fun?

You and I may differ in our judgment of what qualifies as a meaningful life. It is difficult to debate the meaning of someone's life when its "meaning" means different things to different people. What does meaning mean to the person whose life it is? What would make *you* feel that your life has meaning?

What was Aristotle's definition of "meaningful"? Would he accept a subjective definition or one that seemed more widely accepted? For the study of a martial art to produce happiness through "meaning", I suggest that both subjective and culturally accepted meanings of "meaningful" are necessary.

What if you saved someone's life with your martial skills? Would that make you happy? Would it contribute to feeling that your life in the martial arts had meaning? What if you saved your own life? Never been in a life-or-death conflict? Maybe that's because, as a martial artist, you know how to keep out of dangerous situations. Good, that itself has helped save your life, to say nothing of the exercise benefits of budo that have contributed to your personal health. Now that you know you are a lifesaver, do you feel happy? Is your life more meaningful?

Is life's meaning, in your opinion, better measured by contribution or by achievement?

Perhaps we are too desirous of an objective definition and too ignorant of the feeling itself. When you feel you have lived a meaningful life, you are filled with a self-esteem that goes beyond mere ego. I suggest that a life of meaning is achieved by feeling consistently high self-esteem. But this leaves us to another tricky juncture. William James suggests that Self-esteem equals Success divided by our own Pretensions. We feel better, he suggests in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) when we give up that which our egos may want, but which we cannot practically achieve, like being taller or more athletic. One less thing that will disappoint us, he argues, is one less thing that will hold us back from real success. However, Nathaniel Branden in *The Psychology of Self-esteem* (1969) argues that self-esteem occurs when we live rationally and according to our own principles. "Happiness," he writes, "...is the emotional state that proceeds from the achievement of one's values."

I would suggest that the traditional martial arts give us the experiences we need to succeed in something we both enjoy and value. It is not the ranks or the skills that is primary to our feeling of worth, but the getting from where we once were to where we are now. Self-protection (whether is be self-defense or personal health) is a commonly held value, albeit as subjective a value as one can have, and getting there in a manner that helps

other students while representing one's school and art well, while not as grand as snatching a child from a raging river, is life-affirming, and uses a rational egocentrism to benefit others. William James may have a point when he wants us to abandon unrealistic pretensions, but one should pencil in a caveat that aiming high and falling 20% lower is often better for one's self-esteem than aiming low and rising 20% higher.