

## Art or Attitude?

Visited by a Model Mugging instructor, a small athletic-looking woman, I was showing her a reception that I preferred over those commonly taught in the style of karate I had been ranked in. She didn't think much of reception and when she asked me to apply it to her attack, I was happy to illustrate how it would work. But the ferocity of her closing distance and slamming an incomplete punch into my face surprised me and, frankly, made the reception fail. In an actual fight, I probably could have picked her up physically and thrown her into traffic, but in this case, her Attitude had beaten my Art.

A fighter has to have what boxers call “that killer instinct”—a willingness to finish off a weakened adversary; but martial artists are taught to withhold that killer instinct until it absolutely has to be released. Even Muhammad Ali, in his second fight with Jerry Quarry (1972), waved in the referee rather than beat a helpless but game boxer. It wasn't the only time he, even with his deep desire to be the greatest, tried to protect his adversary. In my opinion, this ethical streak contributed to Ali's fulfilling his own desire of being “the greatest”. His early braggadocio detracted from it.

Some people don't see things this way, of course. We still hear tales of how tough some karate tournament fighter was (rather than how skilled was his technique) or how no one messed with scary Sensei Cyril Superbo even though his kata was more like chopped chum than sliced sirloin. There is nothing wrong with being a redoubtable opponent, but if one's attitude is scary enough to fend off foes before they find a foothold, is it really budo or a social mean streak enhanced by gastrointestinal distress?

Does anyone ever brag about one's sensei's skill if it is not related to flattening an opponent? Doing so would smack of praising a dancer for a beautiful *tour jeté* and thus seems too artsy and decidedly un-martial. So when we see an eighth degree black belt, we assume he can shove a fist down our throats, not that he can impress us with his precise body control. Our respect, in other words, is based on his physical dominance, which in turn is based on our own repressed fear. In other words, no matter what our skill level, if we don't own a martial attitude severe enough, we envy those who do.

I think we should, in fact, respect those who can summon a martial attitude, but we should also respect those who can perform to a high standard, as well as those, if I may slip in a third category, who can teach well. (More on [Art, Attitude and Instruction](#) in a later article.)

Let's not get respect confused with envy. We envy those who may have skills and attributes we wish we had. We respect those who present an ideal we think appropriate, even if we have similar characteristics ourselves. I suspect that martial artists praise the tough-guys in their ranks because they themselves are not as tough as they would like to be. They seldom envy the peak performers in their ranks even though they may pay them a grudging respect. In other words, they know that the peak performers represent a physical ideal and that ideal is at least *approachable*—one can do kata well enough to pass an exam, for example; but we don't believe

we have the intestinal fortitude to summon intestinal distress along with a social mean streak at a moment's notice. Thus, we bow to those who can, even if they are not coordinated enough to press their own uniforms.

First, I want to know if the guy we find laudable has skills of a relatively high quality; second, I want to know if he has a martial attitude; third, I want to know if he can turn that attitude on or off at the appropriate time. I would prefer that he can turn it *on* rather than he has to turn it *off*. Simply said, I respect those who balance the art with the attitude, the art taking the dominant position, the attitude brewing below to fire up the art when necessary.