

But I Still Can't Defend Myself! Part Two

There is another way to look at this concern. Consider the person who really cannot defend herself, but thinks she can. After a year or so of training, an old boyfriend who had one to many brewskies playfully accosts her. She finds that, although she can manage to be angry and feel strong, she still can't extricate herself from his grip. When she panics and starts striking him, he laughs and considers the blows mere annoyances.

She is like the person who, after three lessons of a martial art supposedly geared to teaching street defense, bragged to her friends that she had learned how to get out of a front choke or a lapel hold. One of my students tried to explain to her that there was more than one defense and that actual success in self-protection is not just memorizing solutions to situational aggression, but she would hear none of it. She *wanted* to feel that she could defend herself. Reality was just an intrusion.

A similar thing happens with the martial artist who enters his first tournament after a few months training, takes home a trophy and returns to his friends with stories of how much butt he kicked. The friends think he must have become one bad dude in the last few months and make sure he comes with them when they go into the seedier portions of the city. Exiting an all-night establishment, with two friends, he is accosted by four denizens of the city who ask for the contents of his wallet. He tells him in a few four letter words to return to the sewer from which they came when he finds himself hovered over by the leader whose breath reminds him of his dog's kennel. A quick knee lift followed by a head butt (both moves illegal in tournament play) and the trophy-winning champ is hunched over a bunch of trashcans, his friends having retreated inside.

In a very real sense, the martial arts failed these people, not because the arts lack the appropriate techniques, but because their teachers made them feel confident in order to keep the dues flowing, or because they wanted to feel suddenly invincible rather than gradually more able.

Rude awakenings happen because, for one reason or another, some people believe they can defend themselves against almost anybody, any place, any time, and in any circumstance. Would it not have been better if they had felt that they could not defend themselves and needed another year or so to feel confident?

Of course, the ideal situation would be for a martial artist to feel respectful of the abilities of any other human being, but somewhat proud of their own abilities, as well. Confidence should not be conceit, however. The reverse emphasis — proud but somewhat respectful — does not give the same results.

Ironically, it is healthier both for the martial artist's physical person and for his personality if he feels just the littlest bit unconfident. Another way to say this is that modesty can conceal power, but any show of power cannot conceal modesty.

An old saying from Inazo Nitobe goes: "Etiquette is power in repose."

Next time, we discuss a concern often voiced by parents: "I want my child to be tough but not to be a bully."