

Carnegie for Your Melon

“The deepest urge in human nature,” writes Dale Carnegie in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, “is the desire to be important.” Not true of everyone, in my opinion, but certainly true for a great deal of people—and especially for a great deal of martial artists. Many people study budo for both self-defense and self-development but settle for pseudo-self-development in the guise of rank, as if rank measured how far one has come in personal improvement in areas outside of the dojo. These people see ranks and titles as a measure of relative worth. But Carnegie also quotes Emerson: “Every man I meet is my superior in some way. In that, I learn of him.” It is pretty difficult to feel important if you feel that every man is your superior in some way, or conversely stated: it is easier to feel important if you feel that, at least in some way, you are better than the next guy.

If you cannot measure up to Mr. Jones next door in income, intelligence, or other gauges of worth, maybe you can find something he doesn't do, and become better at it than he. Enter the martial arts. Many martial artists, unable to attend college, become teachers of an esoteric Asian art, thus achieving a status they would not be able to achieve outside of the dojo. Many martial artists, unwilling to join the army or the police, satisfy themselves with winning an in-house sparring championship one Sunday. They then assume they are tougher than the average dude on the street who, after all, has neither joined the troops *nor* has a sparring trophy.

You build your feelings of worth, value, and significance by reinforcing either your status in your chosen activities or by reinforcing the status of those activities themselves. This is a key concept, so let me say it another way: you feel better about yourself if you are a big fish in a little pond or if your pond is the most important pond in the forest.

Most martial artists, eager to feel better about themselves, strive to improve their status in their activity or their little subdivision of that activity. Few understand that, in becoming a bigger fish in a small pond, they may be diminishing the importance of the pond itself. Many martial artists are proud to wear a black belt until they go to an open tournament and find themselves outclassed by the brown belts. They boldly go forth with several gold stripes on their black obi until they attend an open seminar and find that several *shodan*-holders know more and perform better than their multi-striped seniors. Because certain martial artists surge forward to be large fish in their not-so-large ponds, they make their pond look like it produces large fish with only a little meat on their bones, and thus is not a very important pond.

Carnegie also quotes Lao-tse: “The reason rivers receive the homage of the mountains is that they keep below them.... So the sage, wishing to be above men, puts himself below them, wishing to be before them, he puts himself behind them. Though his place is above them, they do not feel his weight; though he is before them, they do not feel injured.” When Shodan Simon sprints to become Sensei Simon, he is gratified that his

status has increased, but is unaware that he has decreased the status of the martial art he represents, and by extension, the traditional martial arts themselves.

Another way to say this is: If you understand self-development as both Dale Carnegie and Lao-tse understood it, you'll constantly improve, but take pains to prevent yourself from getting a swollen head.