

Have You Ever Had to Use It in the Street?

Next to “I’d hate to meet you in a dark alley”, the wording I hear most from non-martial artists is “Have you ever had to use it in the street?” It is an innocent inquiry, of course, born of a fascination with someone who has unusual skills and the dedication to have developed them, but it reveals an all-too-common misunderstanding of budo. Budo is not a tool you draw from a utility belt or a weapon you draw from a holster. Well, it is, but most of the time, it isn’t.

My wise-guy answer is usually something like, “I use it every day. Gosh, I’m even using it now.” Of course, the idea that budo may be a character builder is often lost upon those who think that martial arts exists only for self-defense, sport, or maybe cool fight scenes in unrealistic movies. If we put my sarcasm aside, however, in order to address what they really wanted to know, the answer for most of us is still less than cinematic. I had to defend myself twice: once against a friend whose fooling around turned into a surprise attack (so I didn’t know it was a friend) and once with a hothead who decided I wasn’t backing up my car quickly enough so that he could exit the convenient store parking lot at a hotheaded pace. The first resulted in an instant *ippon seoinage* that helped the friend decide that he would not be attacking me from behind anymore; the second resulted in a non-Mexican stand off when hothead pulled a hidden weapon from his car. Less hotheaded than he, I nodded and re-entered my car to exit the parking lot. In each case, the instant of decision (*kime* in Japanese) was also an example of what some people call *nakaima*. Literally translated, it means “the center of now”, but it is sometimes rendered as “the naked instance of now”.

Non-martial artists are fascinated with the legendary ability of martial artists to react in an instant and even perceive an attack before it materializes. To the extent that martial artists (who are not officially out in no-man’s-land protecting and serving) develop that sort of sensitivity, it is a result of dojo drills in which punches are not just symbolic stemmed-out thrusts, but hard, fast, intense attacks coming from various angles and/or various aggressors. The more martial artists experience these drills, the more likely they will develop attack sensitivity and instant response. Ironically, however, an early perception of a pending attack is exactly what the impressionable non-martial artist does *not* want to hear about. When I cross the street twice to get to my vehicle in a way that circumnavigates a crowd of unsavory types gathered at the curb along a more direct route, I am exercising my martial art trained awareness of a potential attack. Those inquiring non-martial minds want me to have *less* awareness so that I will have to exercise my rapid reactions in the naked instance of now. They do not understand (and do not want to understand) that the naked instance of now happened several moments before, when I first recognized the potential danger.

Many of us are enamored of action movies in which the hero, despite his awesome skills at avoiding conflict, is caught in an unavoidable confrontation and has to wipe out at least three antagonists before moving on to the next dramatic scene where the odds against him are even greater. The non-martial artist is more interested in the hero’s awesome physical skills than in his skills at avoiding conflict. He asks you, “Have you

ever had to use it on the street?" so that you will describe a scene that is dramatic and dangerous enough to appear in a movie, no admission charged. He gets a small thrill, lives a more exciting life through you and maintains his safety at the same time. (No one wants to attend a movie in which the blood could actually spurt from the screen and dirty one's best Grateful Dead t-shirt, let alone a fist burst from the screen and render one too bleary-eyed to watch the rest of the movie.)

"Have you ever had to use it on the street?" is really a polite social query that obscures the real statement: "I wish I had your skills, and your dedication to develop them, but I'll settle for second hand cinematic fantasy."