

Making an Argument

The thing that depressed me most about the recent election season was not that people took a position that I may not have agreed with, but that in stating a position, they let their camp do the thinking for them. Canned arguments from partisan websites are meant to sway people emotionally, not to show both sides or to level a logical argument. What passed as arguments on bumper stickers, posters, Internet sites, and Facebook were more like accusations.

In listening to last season's political pseudo-arguments (some of them coming from very intelligent friends), I was reminded of the types of pseudo-arguments people used to make in the seventies about martial arts, e.g. "TKD is the best martial art because kicking is stronger than punching." It seems that everyone wanted to study "the best" martial art—not the best for them personally, mind you, not the best for a certain situation, but "the best". Instead of pointing out that their opponents had not defined terms, defending martial artists just made counter-claims, e.g. "But punching is faster than kicking, so Shotokan is the best." This went on for a decade or more. Guess who made the pro-TKD arguments? Wing-chun stylists? Of course not: TKD stylists made them. Who made the pro-Shotokan arguments? Hung gar stylists? Of course not: Shotokan stylists made them. Instead of thinking objectively about the subject, martial artists thought subjectively about the object, i.e. becoming martially "strong". Instead of giving credit where credit was due, martial artists got their "arguments" from their camp (even if there were no websites to retreat to in those days.)

I do not claim to be a logician or a debate judge, but I do claim to be able to recognize a slanted argument from dusk until dawn (and often have to since news commentary has slipped into slant for the last several decades). In the spirit of getting a few martial artists to be a little more respectful, a little more objective, and a little less self-centered, I offer the following. Maybe this little outline for argumentation will help those martial artists who depend on others to make their arguments: (1) State your premises and define your terms (e.g., "Because to me 'best' means most potentially destructive and because most kicks are demonstrably more destructive than most punches or strikes..."); (2) draw your inferences based on your premises and give evidence for them ("...a martial art that employs a great variety of kicks and practices breaking boards would therefore hold the greatest potential to be destructive."); (3) make conclusions based on the inferences you have drawn ("Thus, it follows that TKD, which practices a great number of kicks and board breaks, would be the most potentially destructive, that is, most powerful martial art.")

People seem to be too lazy (or too emotional) to do the following: (1) figure out what we know to be true (not what they *want* to be true, but what is already acknowledged by both sides); (2) spend some time thinking about reasons for and against one's argument (addressing the opposition's strongest argument makes one's argument stronger); and (3) determine the course of action or conclusion that follows from the known.

Is this too much mental effort for people who study a physical art such as TKD or Shotokan? Is it too much to ask something similar of people informed enough to vote? But wait! Maybe the voters in this last

election cycle were *not* informed enough. Maybe they not only got their arguments but also their “acknowledged facts” from their camp’s websites. If this is the case (and I think it was the case for the “best martial art” arguments of the seventies), wake up and try the other guy’s java for a while. Having either practiced informally or trained in several martial arts, I have a tendency to give credit even to those martial arts I don’t especially favor. Now if we could only get political partisans to do that.