

Practice Earnestly

Study extensively, inquire carefully, ponder thoroughly, sift clearly, and practice earnestly. --Zhu Xi

How important is it to be earnest? Wait a minute. I'll ask Oscar Wilde.

Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a tongue-in-check take-off on plays of a certain sort and an ever-present pun as relayed by the title. It may have been important to be Ernest in his play but being overly earnest was, at times at least, sniggered at. So what do we mean when we say one should practice martial arts earnestly? And when does it become over-earnestness?

Some martial artists would suggest that earnestness is practicing as if your life were at stake; others suggest that it is practicing over the long term to enhance your health; but no one suggests earnest practice is dropping into the dojo Mondays and Thursdays because the local pool hall closed down. Nothing wrong with twice-per-week training, but no one would call that earnest training unless each session was for several hours at a pretty intense clip.

Conversely, would we snigger at a practitioner who attends class five days a week, takes special training every fourth Sunday, and travels for seminars every weekend? Is he being over-earnest or is he practicing as if his health, and perhaps his life, was at stake?

In previous articles in this series, I have asked what exactly qualifies as “extensively” or “thoroughly”. It is not easy to define the expanse of an adverb. We all seem to know what earnestness is not, but we falter when it comes to defining over-earnestness. I suggest therefore that we think back to our personal motivations for “studying extensively”, the first of Zhu Xi's admonitions.

We may have had vague reasons for beginning the study of a martial art, but if we have decided to study extensively, our reasons are probably clearer to us than we initially realize. Yours may not be the same as mine and both of ours may change over time, but we know that no one takes on a serious study of anything unless it is either necessary or extremely attractive. In today's world, self-defense knowledge may be necessary but not so necessary as to result in a decades-long study of *budo*; therefore, the choice to study *budo* extensively is a result of some attraction, a desire to better ourselves physically, mentally, spiritually or any combination thereof (see my previous articles *Goal vs. Purpose* and *The Reason We Train*). If that is the case, we are driven to study earnestly by constantly assuming that we *can* get better (or, at minimum, retain certain qualities that age would otherwise take away) and that we *deserve* to get better (which means that we come to the martial arts with a certain amount of self-respect even before we begin our study).

It is possible that long-term, frequent study becomes more a mindless habit than a conscious purpose; in such a case, earnestness will have been replaced by routine (as if the art itself, without any conscious effort on our part, would do the job we originally set out to do). But in the cases where mindless habit has *not* set in, earnest practice means exercising both our capabilities (“we *can* get better”) and our self-respect (“we *deserve*

to get better”). Only by sincere practice, either with intensity or long duration or both, can we constantly meet the challenges that make us what we can be. That’s the importance of being earnest.

The martial arts are not the Marine Corps, despite some martial artists trying to turn their schools into Camp Lejeune, but even a stint in the military does not see one practicing combat earnestly beyond boot camp.

Earnestness is not only intensity marked by concentration or duration; it is also sincerity. The way we get to sincere practice is by sifting clearly what we have pondered thoroughly, pondering what we have inquired about carefully, and inquiring in a manner that will allow us to study extensively. A deep bow to Zhu Xi, if you please.