

Proper Emotions

Aristotle tells us that “emotions, properly trained and modulated” are an essential part of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), i.e. doing the right thing at the right time. Seldom do martial arts masters mention the use of emotions in their teachings. There are those who tell the student to go emotionally hog-wild in self-defense, letting the techniques fall where they may, and there are those who counsel subduing the emotions.

Consider Billy Jack’s tolerance before he takes his right foot and puts it to the side of the bad dude’s head, or Zatoichi’s patient suffering before he slices and dices the local lord’s legions. In each, you get to see the extremes of the emotional seesaw.

Some who begin the study of martial arts have an emotional imbalance, whether they know it or not. Either they have an uncontrollable temper or they want to avoid confrontation. Martial arts teach enough physical self-control so that a student can, if he makes the connection, transfer that control to his temper. Martial arts study produces enough confidence when facing a physical confrontation that one can, if he makes the connection, transfer that confidence to a social setting. But, properly speaking, martial arts do not teach emotional balance, at least not directly.

Only martial artists with the mindset of cavaliers (mounted knights) realize that they must control their emotions as well as use them – much like they would control the powerful courser they ride upon. With apologies to Mozart, it all boils down to being a “well-tempered cavalier”. A knight (read: soldier, cop, or martial artist, albeit on foot) is a potential weapon. Without the emotion of justice tempering that of courage, that weapon should remain holstered. Without the emotional reserve expected of soldiers, police, or martial artists, that weapon remains constantly brandished, constantly threatening, terrorizing without taking any action at all.

Growing up I had a pretty hot head, but I was bright enough to recognize it and wise enough to want to correct it. In fact, there was a time post-college that I prided myself in my under-reacting to situations in which others might overreact. Being cool under pressure is desirable, but being so cool as to not betray any perspiration makes you too icy to act, and makes those close to you think you don’t care. I had talked myself into not caring so I would not betray un-cool emotions and thus had overdone my attempt at temper modulation. If other people become extremely elated or depressed on precisely the right cue, I thought, they are at the whim of those who know how to manipulate their emotions, whether they be managers, relatives, significant-others, or politicians. I didn’t want to be at anyone’s mercy so I emphasized emotional control at the expense of those close to me thinking I was a pretty cold fish. Girlfriends tend not to like chilled Mackerel and that got me thinking about re-balancing my act.

The other side of the coin (the lack of emotional reserve) shows someone turning tail, not because he is coolly trying to avoid a confrontation, but because he is sweating bullets from the emotion of fear. Unlike me, this person is under-doing coolness under pressure. No one would accuse people like this of being cold fish,

because their emotions dominated. It seems to me that phronesis depends upon finding the balance between a released and a repressed emotion.

All of this begs the questions “How?” How does one balance one’s emotions in an attempt to obtain practical wisdom? The specific answer is probably different for everyone, depending on the prevalence or absence of one emotion or another. But one might begin by assuming a sort of knighthood. If you assume you are Billy Jack, you wait just a little longer than the average motorcycle-riding former Green Beret before taking off your boots to clean the villain’s ear canals. If you assume you are Zatoichi, you wait, not only until you are abused, but until at least one beautiful maiden and one parentless child is threatened as well.

The knight has restricting rules, to be sure, but he enforces them with emotional judgment. The knight has passions, to be sure, but they are released only at the appropriate time.

More on this next week.