

Speaking Softly, Stick or no Stick

These days, society is full of people who seem to need to be tough -- to know that no one will visit upon them anything they happen to find uncomfortable. Their need to feel momentarily superior or at least partially in control comes, in their estimation, from a world that simply doesn't care -- especially about them. In my estimation, it comes from a decided dearth of self-esteem. "If I cannot feel good about myself in some way," they think, "I'll damn well feel good about myself at someone's expense."

These sorts of reactions invite counter-reaction, especially from those with similarly fragile egos. What's worse -- even those among us without terribly delicate self-images can gradually be worn down by these acid attitudes. I remember once, about 30 years ago, when I was walking to lunch from the dojo. Some teenage kids were driving past the intersection. The guy in the back seat decided to flip the bottle cap of his soda out of the window and into my face. I had had a bad day, was rushed for lunch, recently shunned by a love interest, hadn't eaten breakfast, and was suddenly incensed by this creep's casual attitude toward littering as well as his inconsiderate posture toward pedestrians. Without a moment's thought, I lunged a punch through the open car window. It reached 2 inches short of his face. He called out for the driver to run the intersection because there was a crazy man just outside the car. I was indeed crazy for about 5 seconds that day.

Normally, I don't even dream of hitting anyone, anytime, anyplace, but at that moment, his attitude and my disposition came into conflict. If I had assumed that *everyone* was *always* out to get me because some undisciplined schoolboy invaded my personal space, If I accepted that reasoning, I might have a very angry chip on my shoulder even now. Although he had been wrong, I sat seething at lunch, my rational side figuring out how wrong I had been, as well.

I had always spoken softly, never bragging about any martial arts achievement or skill, but I knew I carried a big stick if ever I wanted to use it. The trouble was that I *had* used it or *tried* to, and the actions spoke louder than any braggadocio.

Stick or no stick, it behooves one to speak and act softly. Oh, I know that there will be those creepazoids who think you are weak because you do not act "strong," as if strong was the same as tough and tough was the same as rough. The truth is an inversion of what the creepazoids perceive. Yes, one has to be daring to act tough, but that is because one is *too weak to speak softly*, stick or no stick. You act truly strong by keeping strength in reserve and you do that by keeping calm, speaking softly, and not waving your stick. Let them wonder if you have a little pine branch or a big oak bat.

I once had a student who always whispered. He had learned in business that raising one's voice did not garner attention and that speaking softly got people to lean toward you. Then, if you had something important to warrant their interest, you would find them quieting down the moment they caught wind of your whisper.

Sometimes he whispered and had nothing important to say, but people still stopped to let him talk, just in case he was offering a quiet gem of wisdom.

It takes as much confidence to pull off the soft-spoken, soft-acting demeanor as it does the get-out-of-my-face-because-I'm-a-bad-dude demeanor. The result is more tolerance for others without promoting any sort of counter-reaction. Even if one is not especially confident, the quiet (not reclusive, not halting, not shy, but quiet) spirit helps both the self and society.

Isn't that what you expect from a well trained martial artist? Shhh. No need to answer.

Next time: Why Martial Arts Have Styles