

Sure, Self-development, but How?

One hears again and again that the martial arts are good for developing character, self-confidence, etc., but martial arts fail as much as they succeed in self-development. Ultimately the arts are a tool used by the sincere practitioner. Even that practitioner may not know **how** a martial art, when successful, works its wonders on him/her.

It seems the very goal of “self-development” is an amorphous one because it is defined differently by each individual: some want to improve in physical skills, some want conditioning, some want to improve their learning ability, their positive interactions with people, their courage, their self-discipline, or their concentration. As mentioned in a previous article, the vague term “self-development” can be divided (following the lead of the psychologist Dr. Robert Kriegel) into 5 “C’s,” (1) Character and Corporeal Conditioning, (2) Commitment, (3) Courage and Confidence, (4) Civility and (5) Control. But, once self-development is defined, we still don’t know how the martial arts address these items.

In my book, *The Road to Mastery: The Benefits of Budo*, I suggest a number of angles from which martial arts training addresses self-development, in a manner often incidental to the overt goal of the training. Of course, it is important to note that many schools, themselves unaware of how training can affect the person, simply train the student in a specific martial style--if it helps in other areas of life, great. It is a rare instructor who is cognizant of how a training exercise or requirement may affect the student on multiple levels.

Rather than attempting to summarize the book in the remaining few lines, let me suggest a few simple ways in which traditional martial arts can get into the student’s mind while training the student’s body.

There are basically three ways the martial arts go about “teaching” students: (1) by direct lecture and lessons, (2) by analogy, (3) by life-lessons. The first, **direct lessons**, is accomplished by adhering to the art’s traditions, presenting strategic or tactical philosophies, respecting the cultural heritage of the art, and the teacher’s personal interpretation of the teachings. The second and third (following) are indirect methods.

Analogies allow the student to draw an intellectual lesson from a physical example. In essence they draw from what the student already knows. Blocks that bat away an attacking strike may teach us to oppose non-physical aggression in our daily life; receptions that deflect or evade an attack teach us to “side-step” non-physical aggression. Stances teach us that a foundation must be strong if we are to build skills upon it; movement drills teach us that mobility is as important as stability to effectuate those skills. Variations of technique show us that there is more than one way to defend or counterattack, teaching us to “think out of the box.”

Life-lessons occur when the student makes him/herself face personal challenges in order to achieve his/her goals. Preparing for examinations offer some of the most important life-lessons. To prepare for more and more difficult examinations, one must be more and more organized, have more and more discipline, learn to

communicate better with seniors who can help one prepare. This sets a high value of rapport and cooperation. One must face one's own ego, one's desire to achieve, and simultaneously face one's fear of potential failure. One must learn to build oneself up but not get too cocky. This suggests a balance between being nonchalant and driven. Examinations may not teach one anything, but preparation for examination is an invaluable instructor of understanding and facing oneself. And that, of course, is what self-development is all about.

Next time, we will discuss the value of "teaching in detail."