

## The Suzuki Budo Method

Informed Westerners, depending on their interests, seem to be aware of one of three well-known men by the name of Suzuki: (1) Michio Suzuki, the founder of Suzuki Motors; (2) D.T. Suzuki, the writer who made zen teachings more accessible to the West; and (3) Shinichi Suzuki of the Suzuki Violin method. The last taught many boys and girls to play violin magnificently even though others thought they might not have the talent. But “having innate talent” seems to be a more Western idea than many of us wish to admit.

Years ago, at an informal gathering of friends and business associates, one of the men mentioned that he managed a Little League team. “You know,” he said, “you probably have the same thing in martial arts. Out of ten kids, you get one who you really want to coach—one who will really make something of himself.” I politely said, “No, I don’t know.” He tried to clarify, “I mean, don’t you find that most of the kids are just not going to get it.” He was nonplussed when I said, “Nope.” Now it was my turn to clarify. “In the martial arts, we assume that everyone will ‘get it’ eventually, just not at the same rate.”

“But haven’t you ever wanted to just give up on someone?”

“Well, I understand what you mean, but I figure that as long as they don’t give up on themselves, it’s my job not to give up on them.”

Little did I know that I was making the same assumption Shinichi Suzuki made about his violin students—that, by and large, all kids could learn the skills, and all kids could reach excellence in their performance. This does not mean that all kids live up to their potential. Sometimes they find other interests like computer games or social networking, baseball or martial arts. But, if you assume they can achieve, they are more likely to.

Decades ago, I was teaching judo to a boy who had difficulty pivoting fully backward into major techniques like *o-goshi* or *koshi-guruma*. He needed a couple of those techniques to pass his next exam, so after urging him, showing him, and explaining to him, I decided to put two *zori* (flip-flops) on the mat to mark the places he should step. In every case, he still could not get his second foot to reach the correct position. I went home and thought about other ways I could present the pivot to him. The next session, his mother complained to me that little Schmirnov had not received his promotion and he was very, very frustrated. I explained that I was frustrated, too, but that until we conquered the back pivot, he was not going to get a promotion. “But,” she said, “it’s your job to teach to him!” By which I suspect she meant that it was my responsibility to learn for him. Because she did not want her son to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, she took arms against a Sensei of troubles, and by opposing, quit him. Because little Schmirnie did not continue to have faith in himself and his mother did not continue to have faith in me, we’ll never know when Schmirnie would have actually learned the back-pivot. His fault? Probably not. Her fault? Most definitely she was giving in to the Western hurry-up mentality. My fault? Maybe, but I would have liked to have had a few more weeks to try other things.

With this as a background, I ask you: would you rather have a sensei who assumes the Suzuki method even if it takes a frustrating amount of time do the back-pivot, or would you rather have a sensei who, recognizing that Schmirnie-poo was frustrated and that mommy was up in arms, promoted the young prairie dog, hoping he would pivot well eventually? I might go with the promote-the-young-prairie-dog gambit once. Then what? If he still remains pivot-less, further promotions would just dig him deeper into the mat, make him more frustrated, and give mommy a legitimate reason to gripe because he could not do things as well as the others of his rank.

I believe in the Suzuki method of teaching budo, but one must premise that method with the idea that learners should be almost as interested in investing their time and effort as teachers are. I am willing to invest in them, if they are willing to invest in themselves—and in me.