

To Mend the Tear

Because a traditional martial art can change lives, people who want their lives changed are attracted to it. They think they want to be stronger either physically or technically, wanting that feeling of strength in order to cover a weaker fabric underneath. I do not say this as some sort of *shadenfreude* revelation of a flaw, rather out of admiration. There are many people that study a budo without using it as a substitute for physical or psychological therapy, but for a moment I'd like to consider those who consciously or unconsciously want to straighten themselves out with a little self-discipline and a decent physical curriculum.

As an instructor of over 45 years, I can attest to the number of martial arts students who were picked on as a child, the number of women who felt dominated by their father/husband/boss, or the number of people who wanted to face their own special internal weakness. When a fabric is weak, it is in danger of tearing. And many people, fearing that their life-fabric is weakening, look to the needle of budo to mend their lives before it is too late.

Often however, they fail to realize that a needle makes many holes in order to mend the tear. Just as one must inject a curative serum by making a tiny hole in the skin, or suffer small illnesses in order to attain immunity to a more dangerous malady, one must suffer through some aspects of training in order to reconstruct one's life-fabric.

I want to make clear that I do not characterize training in the traditional martial arts primarily as suffering. However, any physical activity worth excelling in can require you to push yourself until something hurts. The more martial the activity, the greater the chance you will endure some suffering. I enjoyed playing football for 11 years, but I cannot say that running laps around the field, climbing up boot hill on all fours, or "submarining" guys who outweighed me by 50 pounds was the joy of my life. However, I could not have gotten to the opposition's quarterback or tackled the halfback if I had not submitted myself to the "suffering" of football training. I do not characterize football training mainly as suffering, either, but I do realize that some suffering has to take place to be competent at football.

I am purposely using a severe term ("suffering") rather than reframing it as "discomfort" or "physical exertion" because it is suffering that people fear. Suffering is the body's way to say "Stop flaying me with that cat-o-nine-tails as it ruins my back's complexion," so we tend to put most discomfort in the suffering category. The less we can endure, the less we are willing to risk. The less we are willing to risk, the less we achieve. That's why there are so few Atlases and so many plebeians. One has to sweat and occasionally strain to hold up one's world.

If you are willing to suffer numerous holes in the stitching process, martial arts just might help mend your life's fabric, but if you are used to Mend-a-Stitch glue or borrowing someone else's fabric when yours needs repair, needling yourself will seem a perverse thing to do even if it were to help in the

long run. The reason I have never gotten a tattoo (besides the fact that styles change and tattoos do not) is that I can't see paying someone to do what I would pay them not to. Not all needles mend fabric. Some just make holes.

So why, then, do I consider suffering laudable? I don't. What I consider laudable is enduring a reasonable amount of suffering, discomfort, and exertion to become a better person, not a more decorated sample of body art or a person addicted to other things needles may bring. All needles (thus all incidents of suffering) are not the same. Your sleeve doesn't complain when you sew it thus ending up with a more stalwart fabric and the knowledge that, although you had to use a needle, you and no one else made the shirt stronger.