

Unexpected Challenges

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It is interesting to note that health clubs have replaced gyms and stylish aerobic wear has replaced sweaty shorts. In a similar way, studios have replaced *dojo*. This is because we want our profit without risk and our benefits without toil, but let me assert that, unconventional as it may sound, **sometimes the toil is the benefit.**

You can't lose weight without exercising, you can't build muscle without lifting a weight, and you can't get the full benefits of martial arts instruction without meeting a few challenges. One of my instructors once said, "You can teach karate without having students break a sweat, but they feel cheated." In a way he is right; in a way, I would respectfully disagree. I think there are many people who would *love* to learn a martial art without breaking a sweat, facing a training barrier, making time in their schedule, altering themselves, and would do so without feeling cheated. In fact, they would feel that they earned a rank or a title the smart way rather than they hard way. There are other people, however, who understand that to get the most out of an endeavor, one has to...well...endeavor.

Trying hard implies facing trials. They don't have to be life threatening, resource taxing, or misery making, but they do have to be at least a little uncomfortable. You won't get paid for 40 hours if you put in only 25. You can't make a gourmet meal without some time in the kitchen. You won't get full benefit from martial arts training if you expect it to be a walk in the park, a night out on the town, a non-fattening dessert, and a cruise to the Bahamas.

Any reasonable person who takes the time to visit martial arts schools, investigates the training, and "future-paces" his/her involvement on the mat as I suggest in a previous article, will naturally understand what efforts one commonly puts out as a martial artist. What one does *not* naturally understand are (a) the unexpected challenges, and (b) the benefits resulting from facing those challenges.

The prospect always considers the time he/she has available before initiating martial arts training -- that's taken for granted -- yet is the most challenging area for martial artists once training begins. One doesn't realize that sometimes work, social considerations, family and one's own other interests chip away at one's training so that martial arts, which is not yet a fully develop habit, let alone the "way of life" it can become, is put on the back burner — and then one forgets to turn on the heat. You can't cook up a set of self-defense skills or make a serious change in your own personal development without applying some heat (and thus some time.)

One of the reasons commercial martial arts studios arrange a barrage of small successes (some of them quite artificial) early in their students' development is to get them over the training "hump"

of the first few months or even the first year. In helping students *feel* successful, the studios also help students avoid facing the challenges that make them stronger, more capable martial artists. The first of these challenges is the simplest and the most pervasive of them: regular attendance resulting in regular training resulting in regular benefits. (We'll cover some of these in the next installment.)

Other unseen challenges may be a few annoying little injuries — a muscle-pull, a bruise — none of which cause great pain or are health threatening, but each of which can cause a loss of practice time. Then there is getting along with an arrogant training partner, one who is cowardly, one who loves to talk the walk rather than walk the talk, or one who is so gung-ho that you feel wimpy in comparison. These are opportunities to face oneself. Constant training is not just building muscle or skill, but also facing the fact that mental muscles have to be stretched and spiritual skills have to be developed to reach one's goals.

It is not the punch you see that hurts you, boxers tell us; it is the unexpected blow. So too with challenges.

Next week, we'll discuss some of the unexpected benefits of the budo (martial ways).