

Why We Train - Part 1

Samurai Story The Student and The Teacher

by

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“The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation, his love and his religion. To him it is all the same – he is always doing both”.

– Zen teaching

I first heard my favorite martial art story when I was new to karate. I re-tell it now to my own students and, not surprisingly, to my personal performance and corporate clients as well. It isn't about dramatic feats of courage or sacrifice -- and it isn't about slaying a dozen enemies or fighting to the death for the family honor. The story is simple, yet it clearly illustrates how useful it can be to apply the martial arts' most fundamental lesson -- personal balance, to life's large and small challenges.

In my second column I'll share some of my thoughts about why we train.

The Student

An talented young warrior goes to the school of a famous teacher, intent on being accepted as a student. The teacher invites the student in, and as they sit waiting for a pot of tea to steep, the student begins to tell the teacher about his enemies, about the battles he has won, those he has lost, and the times victory has been unfairly snatched from his grasp. He talks about the techniques he has mastered, his own students, and most importantly, what he expects this teacher to teach him.

The teacher smiles politely. He watches. He listens. He waits. Finally the tea is ready and the teacher begins to pour a cup for his visitor. The small cup fills to the brim and the teacher, still looking at his guest, keeps pouring. The cup overflows and tea begins to spill across the table, and down, onto the student's lap. After an uncomfortable moment, the student finally jumps up and yells, “Stop, Master! Stop! The cup is full. You can't put any more in.” The master, still smiling and still looking at the student, slowly stopped pouring the tea, and says, “Yes. The cup is just like you. Already full. I will not be able to teach you anything until you come to me with a cup that is empty.”

The Teacher

During the first year of the apprenticeship, the master trains the student in the arts of war on a daily basis. Although much older, and not as strong or fast as the younger man, the master is many times more skilled and experienced. From day one, as the boy had expected, it is never an even match. The training is intense, the pressure is constant, and the old man's wooden practice sword is very, very, hard. Additionally, there is never a time when the student is truly

safe. The master strikes him in the blink of an eye, anytime, day or night – whenever his attention lags or wanders.

In addition to his physical training, the student is also responsible for managing the master's household and affairs. This task isn't much easier. The teacher has many interests and arbitrarily changes his plans from day to day, all the while making countless unreasonable demands on the student's time and energy. Additionally, the student is sent to deal with an endless number of ignorant, stubborn and cruel people, and on one impossible mission after another. Always, no matter how a situation is resolved, it seems to the young man that it was never good enough for the master.

The Student

At some point in his apprenticeship the student comes to doubt himself. For the first time in his life he feels ashamed at his limitations. He becomes nervous and jumpy. His performance as the master's sparring partner gets worse – not better. There are many times that the student wants to just turn and run away. He has brief frightening moments where he thinks of taking his own life. On other days he is more tempted to take out his sword and kill the next person who looks at him in a funny way – the master included.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, the student goes to the teacher. He tells the old man that there must be something wrong with him. Maybe he is ill. The old man knows medicines and remedies – people come to him from across the region to be healed. "Please Master", says the student, looking down, "I am sorry, but I am sick. Please give me something to feel better. There must be some medicine..."

The Teacher

The old man looks at the young one for a long quiet moment, and says, in a kinder voice than the student had heard in quite a while, "My son, you are not sick. You simply need to control your emotions. Right now, your anger controls you. Your fear controls you. Worst of all, you waste your energy worrying about what will happen tomorrow, whether you are good enough, whether you will survive here. You are a leaf blowing in a storm of your own making."

The student is stunned to hear this – especially after all he has endured. He becomes angry, he slams his fist down on the table, and through barely controlled tears of rage yells, "No, Master! That is not true! I am not a child who cannot control his anger! And, I have never been afraid of anything in my entire life! I have had many opponents, and survived many life and death battles..."

Eventually, with effort, the student stops himself, and regains his composure. The teacher, still looking at him, finally says, "I am not the one you need to convince. Your argument is not with me – it is with yourself."

The Student –

That night he lay awake on his straw mat, staring at the ceiling, thinking about tomorrow. Worrying, "what if I am not good enough?"

Eventually, as most do, the crisis passes for the young warrior and the apprenticeship continues.

At some point, as if by magic, the student gains control of his emotions. From then on, he is never angry, he is never afraid, and he never feels anxious. He is able to see the solution to every problem, defeat every opponent who challenges him, and find the answer to each of the master's riddles.

In practice, the old man can no longer toy with him like a child, but rather, finds a true

challenge. Nor can the teacher catch the student by surprise and smack him sharply as he sleeps, or bends over the stove to cook their meals, or stands with his back turned to relieve himself in the river.

From one morning to the next the student never allows a single opening or a single lapse in his attention. His focus is absolute. It occurs to the young student that he has become very much like the master's one vanity – the strange “grandfather” clock the old man had received as a gift from a foreign patron. It is precise, exact, and although it moves constantly, nothing disturbs, or upsets, it. Of his few simple possessions, the master loves this object very much.

The Teacher

One day, the young warrior returns home from completing a task for the master and sees something that shocks him. On the floor, smiling and working with the intensity of a fascinated child sits the master. The beautiful clock lies around him in sections. Slowly, and patiently, he is going about the task of taking it apart, piece by piece.

The student stands in the doorway for a long moment, watching, trying to figure if this is another test. Finally, he asks the teacher why he is ruining his prized possession. The old man laughs out loud, as if delighted that this wonderful student is once again missing the point. “My son”, he says, “you have become very strong, and you are very efficient, but you have misplaced the joy of living and the curiosity that first brought you here. Tell me, why do you think I am doing this?”

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