

THE TAINTING OF THE BLACK BELT

HAS THE BLACK BELT LOST ITS PUNCH?

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INTRODUCTION

It was sixteen years ago, but the memory is as fresh as if it were yesterday. It was that long awaited trip to the Big Apple, New York City. My companions and I had labored for nearly three years. We had put in countless hours in the dojo. We had several tournaments under our belts. And now the coveted hour had arrived, the hour of maturity, the final test; the black belt exam. Were we ready? Had we prepared adequately? Did we have the endurance, the recall, the instinctive response, the mental command that this much heralded exam would require?

At twenty-six years of age, I was fully aware of what I had signed up for. This was no childhood game, no sideline hobby, nor a reaction to some physical abuse encountered at the playground. This passing from the kyu, or “boyhood” level in the martial arts to the dan, or “manhood” level was not to be taken lightly. I had read a few books on the martial arts and I knew what the black belt, or expert level, carried with it. The traditionalist view required a tremendous skill level and balance prior to the awarding of the belt, and we were all hoping that we would be found worthy.

The dignitaries were assembled. Several upper level dan ranks sat at the examination table, while approximately thirty students from around the Northeast sat in the formal, though somewhat uncomfortable sawari position. I had never seen a dan level exam, and rightfully so, but I had heard and read much about them. Now it was my turn.

An hour and a half later the five of us from the Mid-Hudson Valley team were headed back to the subway and the train north. It was over. We had all passed. This was clearly one of the more memorable moments of my life. Memorable, yes, but at the same time, troubling. I was disappointed with the comprehensiveness of the exam. Either I was ignorant of what the black belt meant, or something drastic had taken place in the world of the martial arts. My exam consisted of performing three one-step counterattack techniques (a form of shadow boxing with a cooperating partner), demonstrating three forms (hyungs in my Korean style), fighting in a ring with another brown belt for one minute (no contact), and breaking a stack of three pine boards. In all, it lasted less than ten minutes.

I couldn't help but wonder at the motivation of the “masters” in the association to which I belonged. They were clearly very talented and demonstrated excellent skills. Was this the extent of what they experienced in their early days? I hardly think so. Bruce Haines, in Karate's History and Traditions¹, mentions his irritation with “instructors who give black belts for mere hours of practice time spent, or for so-called business and/or political reasons; instructors whose main concern is financial success and who thus charge outrageous fees and who have infected the art with various degrees of ‘questionable’ contractual agreements for the payment of same; individuals who involve themselves in petty bickering over the question of who ‘deserves’ to head local national and international karate associations, ...”

I felt that I was ready for the black belt in the strictest sense of what it really meant. I was disillusioned with my view of tradition and what was now going on in the American martial arts. Since that time, I have come to find that this was by no means an isolated incident. The expectations seem to have been lowered, or the motivations have changed. In either event, the martial arts and the practitioner is the loser.

Added to this was the fact that all I had been trained to do was punch and kick. I was taught only violent responses. This only added to my concern. The writer of Ecclesiastes stated that "...Wisdom is better than strength ..." (Eccl. 9: 16). Sun Tzu echoing the same thought almost 600 years later said that winning the war without fighting is the most noble aim. A well-trained martial artist should be capable of mentally avoiding serious conflict. If not possible, he should be well equipped in passive techniques which should be utilized before violent response is used.

In an excellent editorial, Sang Kyu Shim, the Editor-In-Chief of Tae Kwon Do Times ², gave a view of the true martial arts in the January, 1989 issue. He contrasted the concept of a "sport" to that of an "art". When I compared the current state of affairs in the world of the martial arts to what it was, I became convinced that we have indeed lost the essence of the martial arts.

The purpose of this article is to help you, the reader, recognize this; to help you see the way it was and can be once again; and finally, to challenge you to become a part of the solution.

THE WAY IT IS

Survey the average dojo in America today. What will you find? What rigors are required for belt advancements? How long is a student expected to practice and to what degree is mastery expected prior to a public recognition of rank? Is an eight year old black belt really capable of defending themselves, let alone are they really a black belt in every sense of the word?

What behavior and character is demanded of students in the community around them? To what degree are they mentally equipped? Is there really a basis for monthly contracts for lessons? Do the students portray the total balance and view of life that one might expect of a black belt? What spiritual development is provided?

These and several others are thought provoking questions; questions that ought to make an instructor search inward as to his own motivation and goals.

Recent history can answer several of these questions for us, especially what was intended by the masters of the Far East. Review the probing questions in the previous paragraphs once more. Just how far has the martial arts drifted from its historical roots? Consider the words of several authors and reputed masters of the past.

In the 1700's, Takahara stated that, "The martial arts are a lifetime study. It is not a matter of months or years."³ Sakugawa, in the 1800's declared, "You will find that your character and personality are more significant than your physical strength and ability."³ In his historic work on Jitsu in 1904, H Hancock observed that text book knowledge and observation was not enough. "The student's motto must be practice--constant practice!"⁴

Ribner and Chin in analyzing the underlying philosophy of Shaolin found that, "...the true martial arts...are a means for developing physically, mentally and spiritually, and not just a fighting method for defeating one's enemies."⁶ When asked how he was able to impart "moral education" to others, Inazo Nitobe wrote in 1899, "...I find that it was Bushido that breathed them into my nostrils."⁵

In the thirteenth century, Japanese warrior Ryoshun made it clear that, "a complete man will be master of both the arts of peace and the arts of war ...".⁷ In that same century, Shigetoki wrote The Message of Gokurakujidono which was "basically concerned with man's moral duties and the ideal behavior for leaders of the warrior class."⁷

In 1645, Miyamoto Musashi in his book on the Way of strategy spoke harshly of those who seek profit and financial gain in the martial arts as he wrote, "If we look at the world we see arts for sale...They are looking for profit." This is "...the cause of grief."¹¹ In the same classical text, the word "Way" (read Michi in Japanese or Do in Chinese-based reading) is defined as, "...not just a set of ethics...for the artist to live by, but the divine footprints of God pointing the Way."¹¹

Gichin Funakoshi, considered by many to be the master's master, wrote, "In fact, true karate-do places weight upon spiritual rather than physical matters..."¹⁰ Duk Sung Son, in his text on the Korean martial arts stated that, 'Tae Kwon Do is essentially discipline; discipline of the mind, the body, and the spirit.' Speaking of the length of time to advance to black belt, he stated that, "...an absolute minimum of two years would be required for exceptional students and three for most."⁹ The ranking system for modern Budo, adopted by the Federation of All Japan Karate-Do Organizations in 1971 provides guidelines for movement between black belt levels. To achieve the level of 7th Dan, one would have to have at least twenty-four years of experience and be at least forty-two years of age. The position of 10th Dan would go to no one under the age of seventy.³ One can again see the emphasis on balance, wisdom and experience rather than just raw physical feats.

In the sixteenth century a celebrated general, Kato Kiyomasa, developed a set of regulations to be observed by samurai of every rank. Captain F. Brinkley, in his book on the samurai⁸ reproduces this list of seven regulations. They leave no doubt that a real martial artist would be well balanced, very self-disciplined, above reproach morally, and not given to extravagance of dress or meal.

Even the man credited by most historians with bringing the martial arts to the Far East made it clear that the spiritual development was primary in the martial arts. Bodhidharma, according to Biographies of the High Priests (645 AD) and The Records of the Transmission of the Lamp (1004 AD) first arrived in China during the Sung Dynasty. He is considered to be the founder of Zen Buddhism, although it was one of his followers, Hui-neng who caused it to come of age. G. Parulski, in his book A Path to Oriental Wisdom speaks of the ability of Zen Masters to transcend the fear of death. With this advantage, “the samurai was able to find a way that suited his everyday life. It gave him motivation to live that next day, even with the fear of death hanging over his head.”¹² Clearly the martial arts did not stand on its own as just a set of selfdefense moves.

Donn Draeger and Robert Smith surveyed the martial arts of eleven Far Eastern countries in their book The Asian Fighting Arts¹². Reading that comprehensive book gives one the undisputable view of the totality of a martial artist. He was spiritual, mental, and physical. He underwent rigorous training and maintained that regime throughout life. Character development was at the heart of the training. The qualities of chivalry, honor, humility, ethics, politeness, benevolence, courage and balance permeated their very being.

It should be clear to the reader, that the martial arts currently being taught and touted in the majority of the world today bear little resemblance to the arts from which they claim they derive their authority. While this author believes that the foundations really transcend the Orient and are rooted in the Old Testament Biblical era of the Middle East, and that the proper and original philosophical base of the martial arts was the Bible, the bottom line remains the same. The martial arts world has some soul-searching to do.

THE WAY IT WAS

Based on a thorough reading of each of the referenced text books, of the Bible and after decades of experience in several martial arts systems, I would like to paint for you a picture of a true martial artist. While this booklet is neither the time nor the place for a thorough treatment of the subject, I believe that you will be able to capture the essence of a Bushi, or Samurai, or Warrior, or Martial Artist.

A martial artist was one who understood that he was a triune being. He had a spiritual dimension. He had a mental or intellectual dimension and a physical dimension. He recognized that none of these could be neglected. To be a total man, all three must be cultivated and under constant discipline: the body under control of the mind, which in turn was under control of the spirit. Balance was the key. It was improper to overemphasize anyone of the elements of the man.

Spiritual development was at the core of the daily training. Scripture was read and memorized. Spiritual conversations were constantly occurring between student and instructor. This provided the martial artist with a sense of who he was, where he was

going and what was the value of life. As Wong Chung-Yoh stated to his student Chatan Yara, it provided “the spiritual discipline his brute force so badly required.”³

Mental and intellectual rigors included constant reading and the mastery of the fine arts. Music, poetry, painting and writing were more than just encouraged; they were expected. Studies of strategies and methods of avoidance were common. The masters would not consider teaching a person the deadly physical techniques unless the mental faculties were well in place. Understanding the body anatomy, the repercussions of various attacks, the treatment of injuries and care of the body were critical. They cultivated within their students a thirst for knowledge.

He was trained in withstanding taunting and abuse, in walking away from a fight, and in mentally controlling an opponent and gaining the victory without actual combat.² He learned how to passively restrain an enemy if possible, to respond to physical attack with minimal force, and to easily dispatch an opponent if absolutely necessary. Thus, in the physical arena, the training was thorough and effective. A variety of techniques was at his disposal rather than just one narrow style of counterattack. The physical techniques were to be used only after all other avenues failed. Itosu Yasutsune stated that, “It (Karate) should only be used for selfdefense and as a last resort.”³

Character development was serious business. No master would want one of his students to bring dishonor to himself or his ryu (martial arts system). Thus the warrior’s training insured that the proper character was being developed and being internalized. He would observe his students in the dojo and the surrounding area to determine whether they were ready for the coveted black belt. Character traits desired are well summarized in Bushido – The Warrior’s Code⁵. Rectitude or justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, veracity, honor, loyalty, and self-control are major attributes he looked for. Add to this list instant obedience, respect for authority, proper attitude, responsibility, forgiveness, gratefulness, humility, mercy and diligence and you have the makings of a real martial artist.

This then was the end product, the embodiment of a martial artist.

THE WAY IT CAN BE

As a result each martial arts kai (martial arts organization) should ensure that its ranking system addresses each of these points. No allowance should be made for shortcuts. Those weak in one of the critical areas should not be rewarded with the mark of accomplishment. To do so brings dishonor to the instructor, the system and the martial arts in general.

Each martial arts dojo and sensei (instructor) must seek out an organization with which to affiliate so that he has an authentic set of guidelines and expectations to follow in granting belt advancements.

The book of Proverbs in the Bible is a book of tremendous wisdom. In chapter 22, verse 28 one reads, “Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” Martial artists of old laid down some valuable “landmarks” requiring students to mature in the martial arts before wearing the black belt. Our task is to go back and find those landmarks and to restore them once again to their place of prominence. The Gospel Martial Arts Union has done just this thing. Coursing back through history from the Far East, to India, to Europe, and the Middle East to its Biblical roots, a ranking system has been developed to ensure that the total man is developed.

Every belt level (Kyu and Dan alike) requires growth and degrees of proficiency in the following areas:

- Spiritual
 - memorization of Scripture
 - a personal relationship with God
 - conformance to the standards of lifestyle set forth in the Scriptures
 - ability to be able to defend your faith verbally
 - ability to be able to share your faith with others

- Mental
 - a personal martial arts library of several books
 - participation in martial arts demonstrations
 - knowledge of first aid, class organization, history of the martial arts, philosophy of the martial arts. body physics and legal aspects of the martial arts
 - written exams
 - mind-leading techniques
 - ability to teach the martial arts
 - written character references from employers, teachers and pastors
 - written research papers on martial arts topics
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- Physical
 - fluency in several martial arts systems (soft and hard)
 - passive restraint techniques release techniques
 - falling and rolling skills
 - counterattacks to all kinds of attack
 - fighting skills
 - weapons techniques
 - board and concrete breaking

Students are carefully scrutinized as they train. Their behavior is observed in and outside of the dojo. Their skills are thoroughly tested. The instructors earn no salary for their efforts. The goal is the training of a well-balanced martial artist.

I challenge each of my readers to seek out or establish a similar school. The Gospel Martial Arts Union would be more than willing to help you in this effort. Write us for more information.

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