

Happiness is Generous Conceit

The martial arts are spiritual as well as intellectual and physical, and yet we seldom see the spiritual expressed except by those religious sects that have developed a martial arts “ministry” of sorts. This is probably because martial arts instructors, among whose students are people of various faiths, do not want to favor one set of beliefs or nudge their students toward some sort of new cult.

We should recognize that “spirit” can be as simple as how we feel about something. Sports teams have spirit. Military units have spirit. Individuals with energy and drive have spirit, whether or not they are religious. An emotion that dominates a person tends to be referred to as spirit.

Let’s say that Sensei Sterling Steel enters the room. He is fit, confident, and anything but stern. His energy is one of self-assuredness but he does not seem to need everyone’s attention or to dominate the goings-on. He has a spirit about him—one to which most martial artists aspire. His friends see him as confident. His detractors see him as conceited. Either way, he has a certain attitude that cannot be denied. Senior martial artists (or those experience in life) can tell if it is an attitude intended to make others think his technique is unimpeachable, or if his technique and experience is of such high quality that it produces the attitude without his even trying. If it is the former (an artificially assumed attitude), the man is probably unhappy and, because he is unhappy, will need something from those around him—attention, adulation, deference, etc. If it is the latter (a natural demeanor), he will go about his business and others will be drawn to him, partially because of what he knows, partially because deep down he is happy.

The person feigning his personal power may not be a Taker, but he is not a Giver. The person who has *earned* his personal power thinks nothing of Giving, even though he does not live for anyone else but himself. Think about that sentence for a moment. I have thought about it for decades. He lives for himself, but thinks nothing of being generous.

Recently, I bought an audiobook called *Code of the Extraordinary Mind* by Vishen Lakhiani. He has a website that helps integrate the book using supplemental video and audio programs. It is a self-development program that begins by challenging cultural assumptions, but it drifts over to and overlaps psychological aspects of personal development that have been called “spiritual but not religious”. Some of us roll our eyes at the idea that “the spiritual” could be tethered to mundane concerns like building a business, having a better relationship, or being more creative. But really, isn’t that what we do without thinking about it in our study of the martial arts? We change our psychology and eventually our “spirits” by devotedly practicing such mundane activities as exercising, punching, kicking, locking, and throwing. Lakhiani and several of his guest presenters often advocate being loving, generous, and caring about others, whether working with them or operating a positively intended business (one that benefits the world). And then, in the middle of his programs, he advocates something that at first appears jarring: selfishness.

He recommends Kamal Ravikant's book *Love Yourself Like Your Life Depended on It*. He extols the value of Sonia Choquettes's method of meditation that she calls "Giving Yourself a Present". He praises Michael Beckwith's concept that as people become more enlightened by *working on themselves*, they see themselves as emanations of a whole that some might call The Tao.

Some martial artists are willing to embrace this sort of non-sectarian spiritualism; some are not. Whether you are denominationally religious, spiritual but not religious, agnostic, or atheistic, you probably accept the idea that human beings emanate a kind of energy that they call "spirit". Now, does that spirit—the spirit we feel when cheering for our favorite football team, our dojo-mate when she is sparring for a trophy, our friend as he goes for a rank, or the spirit that we feel within ourselves when we emerge unscathed from a multiple attacker drill—does that spirit not make us feel happy?

Next question: is it conceited or generous?

More on this next time.