

“The Thing Worth Holding On To Would Not Have Let Go”

The title quote is from a poem by Rupi Kaur (thanks to Allison Reynolds for this). It was written about lost love. Obviously, I intend to turn this blog page into a source of relationship advice, since, as everyone knows, having three or more black belts makes anyone an expert on Religion, Politics, and Romance.

Actually, the quote goes along with some other articles I have done on the Zen discipline of accepting what is. Rather than give that discipline a passive connotation, as if budo spirituality meant not caring what happens, let me wax philosophically (albeit not religiously, politically, or romantically) on the concept.

We are all born with a nature of self-interest. Then, something happens to us! A death, a betrayal, a desertion, a loss of some sort. Our reaction is often either blaming ourselves (“How could *they* be wrong? After all I have always trusted them”), or blaming the others *in the process of* blaming ourselves (“They did not deserve my trust, so I must have been wrong to value them so highly”). When we accept what is, it seems that we are going against our self-interest. After all, why should we not combat that which hurts or demeans us?

Maybe we can learn a lesson about life (maybe even about religion, politics, and romance) from the martial arts.

In the dojo, we oppose pseudo-attackers who are trying to punch us out. We know that this attack is part of the process of building our skills and that it must be treated with respect—but not with inaction. Would we be better if we did not accept the practice attack at all? That would result in an injury that would prevent further training. The attack is therefore an opportunity.

First, we work on our own skills with no attackers in threatening distance. We may fail as much as we succeed. Our efforts either fail at first or create insufficient success in small increments before we will moderately successful. Skills are not delivered to us suddenly. What if we opposed the insufficient success or initial failure? Then we would not experience skill building at all.

We also accept suggestions and corrections from our seniors and teachers. What! How offensive! What do you mean my back-stance is too square and my Bassai-dai is too plodding? I’m not going to put up with such disrespect! I’ll just walk out the dojo door. Really? If we oppose these suggestions and corrections, we have no way to learn, improve skills, or succeed when a pseudo-attacker attacks.

Okay, we may now understand the advantages of “accepting what is” without seeing it as against our natural self-interest. But what about “The thing worth holding on to would not have

let go”? If we apply our budo study to life, we can learn how to accept loss. In the dojo, occasionally a student, maybe even your training partner will quit for any number of reasons. You may express consternation and try to change their mind, but ultimately you know that they have to go for their own reasons, whether or not you agree with them. You find other training partners and accept the reality of your friend departing. Your zen acceptance knows that if it was worth holding on to them, they would not have let go.

It is a lesson the dojo teaches every year to someone. Imagine how often your sensei has had to learn it. Are you ready to apply it to your life? Sayings like this give us a little comfort when we have felt hurt and disappointment. It is often a tough row to hoe, but accepting a difficult reality (and the freedom people have to choose their own reality) is the only way our self-development can be tested, exercised, and at the same time, improved.