

Martial Arts Engagements as Stoicism

Most people think of Stoicism as the attitude of Grin-and-Bear-It. I believe that they confuse Stoicism with the Spartan warrior spirit. Stoicism is much more. While reading Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle is the Way*, I was struck by several quotes and Stoic attitudes that reminded me of my attitudes when learning engagement matches (*ippon kumite* or *enbu kumite*).

Practicing a martial art can be like solo exercise or gentle two-person exercises. Only when the martial art is applied (albeit under controlled conditions), does the mind tense. A practitioner must shift from the mindset of a learner to a performer. He is being unofficially tested, if not for rank, certainly for effective application. And, to be frank, he is testing himself for coolness under pressure. There is even a Japanese term for it: *enryo* (emotional reticence).

Holiday writes, "There is always a countermove, always an escape or a way through, so there is no reason to get worked up. No one said it would be easy and, of course, the stakes are high, but the path is there for those ready to take it." This was precisely the attitude I try to engender in my karate and aiki students when they are first facing free attacks. Inevitably they are nervous. They are both afraid to make a mistake and afraid to get hit, and they know the first may lead to the second. I try to foster the idea that they *cannot* make a mistake. *Anything* they do will create a result and any result can be modified into an adequate defense. Maybe not at the beginning, maybe not instantaneously, but gradually, using the challenge as a learning method, one converts hurdles into stepladders. Holiday later writes, "Uncertainty and fear are relieved by authority. Training is authority."

If you are new at training the skills you need to feel more certain, you will understandably pass through the fire swamp of uncertainty. This is where my preferred attitude of "you cannot make a mistake comes in". It is not only a good attitude with which to surge forward in self-defense. It is an attitude with which one can have the courage to learn. As long as you use your mind to stay aware while your body reacts, you are a step ahead of where you were a moment before.

Arthur Ashe, the great tennis pro, described himself as "physically loose and mentally tight"—precisely what one has to be during aiki *randori* or karate *ippon kumite*. A person who is both physically and mentally loose will be recklessness. If he is physically and mentally tight, he will be anxious or afraid. But if a person is physically loose and exhibits mental restraint, he is powerful and effective.

Nassim Taleb described a Stoic as someone who "transforms fear into prudence, pain into transformation, mistakes into initiation and desire into undertaking." As engagement matches advance in difficulty, how the opponent attacks will become increasingly unpredictable. In a

demonstration, you might know in advance or even request a specific attack, but in a semi-free or free engagement match, the whole idea is to become familiar with a variety of attacks so that can react in non-prearranged ways. It is therefore unlikely that you will react perfectly. But, you *must* react whatever comes. That means, your training takes over. Trusting in it increases your relaxed body, which increases your chances of succeeding. Even if you react imperfectly, even if you get hit, you will not only learn from it, but you also will have the wherewithal to adapt to it.

For the Stoic martial artist, it's all good.