

Means and Ends

In the martial arts, we aim toward goals. A short-term goal may be learning a technique or a kata. A medium-term goal may be obtaining a black belt. A long-term goal may be a feeling of mastery. However, most martial arts were created for the purpose of self-defense, so an ultimate goal for many martial artists is the confidence that they can defend themselves.

Dan Inosanto (a senior Bruce Lee student and long-time instructor) reportedly said something like, “None of us can be sure that our arts will protect us; all we can do is train as if they will.” In my opinion, we lose site of the ultimate goal (and Inosanto’s wisdom) because we fall in love with the means, rather than the end.

The means toward the ultimate end of self-defense is our style, our system, our curriculum, and our school. Certainly, I would advocate for fidelity and loyalty to the means that transports you to the end-goal, but concentration on those means can also blind you to the ends.

Since we enter the dojo ignorant, we must accept what is taught as valid. To do otherwise would be to say that we are there to be taught, but we don’t want to accept what the teacher proffers. Eventually, our skills increase and we become grateful for what the dojo and style has done for us. We are ignorant of other means, but we are sure that *our* means—our style, our dojo—has advanced us. If you were on a winning football team, you might understandably think that your team’s training regimen, its playbook, and its coaching brought you that winning season and therefore should be revered. However, if you assume that the second-place team does not have a play or two you can use, or a regimen or two you can borrow, you should be careful that the fourth-place team doesn’t sneak past you in the play-offs.

Previously, I have written articles on “majoring” in one art, but becoming familiar with others. Okay, that breadth of concentration will help you toward your self-defense ends. I have also written on testing your techniques rather than assuming that tradition has proved them functional. Yes, that also will help you toward your self-defense ends. I have written on broadening your interpretation of what you study to include striking, standing grappling, ground grappling, weapons, and even health/medical training. These, too, will help you adjust to more potential self-defense situations. But, this time around, I’d like to emphasize something else. I’d like to advocate for avoiding a certain complacency that creeps in when you know your system has made you a winner.

Your style or art has improved your fitness and your skills. And because this is true, you are loyal to it. To some degree, this is understandable and laudable. There is certainly nothing wrong with team loyalty—in fact, without it, there can be no team spirit, and without team spirit, a winning season would be difficult to attain. There is nothing wrong, for example, with

respecting and supporting the university from which you graduated, nor is there anything wrong with valuing the dojo, style, and system that you have studied or are now studying. However, concentrating on the value of those means does not advance you toward the ends you purportedly wish to achieve.

Loyalty to the means may keep you from applying the means to the ends.

I'll flesh out examples of this irony next time.