

Character-building Budo

Although a martial art sometimes seems to produce more than its share of characters, it also can positively enhance the character of its adherents. One might ask how. Is there some magic potion woven into the fabric of a heavyweight gi or dyed into the cotton of a *kuroi-obi* (black belt)?

I think the answer is fairly simple: we improve our characters when we strive to succeed at a worthy goal. Many systems of budo have the unique attributes of not only providing worthy goals, not only motivating along the way, but also addressing aspects of the human psyche not obviously related to the physical skills of the martial arts. Think about the traditions and customs of your martial art as well as the physical skills you must learn and the trials you must endure. Where else is politeness mixed with potential destructiveness? The armed forces, you say? Correct. And where is historical knowledge mixed with athletic skill? The university, you say? Okay, correct again. And where do personal interactions, even with people one may not initially like, mix with support and encouragement? Certain business climates, you say? Right. Now put them all together and they spell AFUBC...er...traditional martial arts.

To be accurate, the martial arts do not build a better character; rather, they dare the student to build it himself. The arts are the repositories for many different kinds of tools and varied scenarios in which to use those tools. If a student resists the opportunity to better himself, it is not the martial arts that have failed but the student. Martial arts study is a lot like psychological therapy. The psychology can't make you better if you don't enter the therapy wanting to get better. Martial arts don't convert Peter von Petulant into Tommy McTolerant unless Peter is sincerely looking for a name change.

Not surprisingly, the tools depend on the user. I have been long noted for my incredible skill at carpentry. I would prefer to Elmer's Glue a screw hole rather than find the appropriate sized screw to secure a joint. I tend to favor duct tape over hinges or other fasteners, and I have been known to use a chisel as a screwdriver and the inverse. Also not surprisingly, if I build something, you can be sure that it will stand the test of days rather than decades. Since I don't especially enjoy carpentry, I make sure that someone else is responsible for any of my carpentry needs greater than tightening a door hinge.

People enter the martial arts for various reasons, but more frequently than one might expect, they are looking for unofficial therapy. They want to improve themselves and they know that facing a worthy challenge is one way to do so. They often discover that they are weak in more areas than they originally recognized. If they are not self-aware and honest with themselves when they enter training, they may never see themselves objectively, thus, although they may improve in many ways, they may never address hidden character weaknesses that they refuse to recognize.

In the traditional martial arts, as I have written in several essays, we never reach perfection. Rather, we are thrilled that we have improved in some recognizable fashion. We improve not only because we sincerely

work at improving but also because Sensei and seniors seem never to be satisfied with what we show them. We present ourselves for criticism willingly and on a regular basis in hopes that we can conquer that something in us that resists doing a proper sidekick or crossing the legs correctly in Heian Yondan. That is why a promotion in rank means so much to us: it is an acknowledgement that we have strived and have succeeded. Sometimes, however, we weary of being corrected and would like to have the pats on the back outweigh the barks of correction once in a while. This is the point in which the budo dares one to build his/her own character.

If it is only by adversity that we achieve, then it is also true that adversity comes when we think we should be rewarded more and tested less. The Japanese have a saying: "If a nail sticks its head up, pound it down." When it comes to students on their path along the way, I don't agree with that ancient Japanese wisdom, because I understand the difficulty that achieving worthy goals presents. If a nail raises its head, I do not think it should be pounded into the floor, but neither should it expect to be raised to the status of Thor's hammer.

Character-building budo means the nail (a.k.a. the student) should look forward to a little Elmer's glue or duct tape once in a while and continue to be the best nail it can be. Otherwise some Sensei with carpentry talent will remove it and replace it with a wood screw.