

Choice and Choicelessness

Many martial artists started their martial careers either by perusing phone books (these days it would be websites) or asking friends in which school it would be best for them to start martial training. Some chose their art because the school was most convenient; others because it was what a friend studied. Still others chose for more considered reasons. Sometimes the appeal of an art is so great, one cannot resist it any more than one can resist buying the puppy that licks your hand in the pet store. In this case, it seems like the art chooses you, but despite the puppy example, what is common among these situations is that they are all *choices* that, whether made rationally or emotionally, result in a school membership. During the early years of that study (and often for years after), choice ceases.

It is only natural and expected that *shoshinsha* (beginners) have little or no choice about what to do and how to do it. Beginners are new recruits and because they volunteered, they volunteered to be ordered around. I don't mean to make this sound unnecessarily callous, but although Sensei can be kind and considerate, he doesn't usually give the student the choice to respond to his directive or take a coffee break until he's in a cooperative mood.

This is not true only of martial arts (activities with a military aspect), but also of any learning situation. Perhaps in the most informal learning situations, the student can tell the teacher, "I learn best with three examples before trying it on my own," but in the average structured teaching situation, especially those teaching more than a few students, the teacher or the system decides the method. The student has negligible, if any, input.

In the *budo*, the Way directs you because the Way is established and the teacher knows what he has to convey, in what order, and how he has to convey it. If you want to go up the martial hill, you follow the martial master, because frankly, you don't know the way yourself. Sure, some teachers use creative teaching methods (thank goodness) because they understand something about how a learning mind apprehends, but there are far more instructors that drill using their style's preferred formula rather than adjust their instruction to fit the individual. And, in either case, the individual has little input.

Later, when the mountain peak is at least in sight through the clouds, the path can, and in my opinion should, become variable. The kanji for *dan* can be interpreted as "carving steps up a cliff". Each carved step is perforce one's own. Often the experienced martial artist chooses not so much the direction as the specifics of the climb.

For the majority of martial artists who study one system, in one dojo, under one teacher, and are trying, as best they can, to assimilate the myriad lessons presented to them, variability of the path and a personal choice is hard to imagine. For others, who have been exposed to additional systems, group seminars, and YouTube, the personal way is being formulated within even if the student is not yet experienced enough to take his own path. Unfortunately, the standards by which even an experienced person chooses his advanced training may be as

elusive as was the initial path through the foothills. Unfortunately, people are often attracted to techniques of skilled practitioners rather than to the training that will enhance the skills they need or want to have. When martial artists are not sure if they are training for tournament, self-defense, self-development, because the instructor looks so cool, or because it is more fun three nights a week than McDarby's Bar, even the more experienced among them will be uncertain how to enhance their mature development.

At this point, they may fully understand why "choicelessness" was an imperative right after they entered the dojo, and for quite while thereafter.