

A Fundamental Misunderstanding

Consider a previous article called [*Training vs. Studying & The Elevator Speech*](#).

“So what do you do for a living?” — a typical question I might be asked when meeting people. Sometimes I hesitate to answer. I could say, “Retired”, “Part-time writer”, or the vague “I’m a teacher”, but usually I steel my spine and own up to “I teach traditional martial arts.”

Inevitably there is interest since Professional Martial Artist is not the type of job description often reported on government forms or work applications. The interest, however, tends to be overshadowed with presumption. “Oh, so you compete.” No, ma’am, haven’t competed for decades.

“But you teach others to compete.” No, ma’am, I don’t do martial *sports*; I teach a traditional martial *art*.

“Oh, so you teach kids.” Well, I used to teach kids’ classes as well, but now it is only adults.

“Oh, I didn't know adults did that stuff.” (I stare vacantly.)

“I thought martial arts was either for kids or for that octagon thingy you see on TV.” No, ma’am, traditional martial arts are for self-defense and self-development.

“So could I hire you as a bodyguard?” No, ma’am, you’d be better off hiring an executive protection specialist for that. We don’t do body guarding. We study the body in order to understand how physical techniques of personal protection work. We find the study challenging enough so that we improve both physically and mentally. (I don’t include “spiritually” here, as that will inevitably be misunderstood, as well.)

“So you teach street fighting.” No, ma’am.

Back in 2009, when I started *Sunday with Sensei’s Journal*, I wrote an article listing the typical reasons new students decide to study the traditional martial arts (sport, self-defense, self-development, or an interest in Asian culture). Since most of the people I meet never considered studying a martial art, they are understandably lost as to how to inquire further. Instead, their preconceived notions show through. They understand the concept of sport, think they understand the concepts of self-defense and self-development, and believe that an interest in Asian culture must have to do with both Zen and sushi.

Long ago, I developed an “elevator speech” to explain succinctly to a stranger how what I did was not what they thought I did: “Do you know how people study martial arts for sport or self-defense? Well, I create seminars, books, and videos that help martial artists discover even more depth in their studies for a lifetime of self-development.” I thought it was a well-designed

answer that covered my general activities while avoiding the inroads to misconceptions — at least for the duration of an elevator ride.

A more enlightened stranger might say something like, “I envy you the discipline it takes to be a martial artist.” They know, at least, that we train regularly and have to concentrate, but I suspect that they think we meditate for a half hour and then drill in some militaristic formation for another hour and a half. In short, people do not really know what traditional martial artists do, and I suspect that if you described it, they would not understand *why* we do it.

Here is a challenge. Design an “elevator speech” for yourself, even if you aren’t a professional martial artist, and then use it when someone asks what you do after work. See if they really understand or if their preconceived notions cannot help but lower them into a fundamental misunderstanding.