

Intent and Austerity

It is difficult to find the right degree of intent in teaching the budo or in simply leading a training session. Too lax an intent and students will learn only the form, but never the “feel” of the application. Conversely, too intense an attitude will result in simulated self-defense, but may also hinder learning—both of form and of adjusting one’s energy—resulting in inefficiency.

I much prefer a relaxed learning environment simply because I think militaristic training is specifically appropriate to developing gross motor control and for controlling grossly developed people (like young recruits). But occasionally the calm and rational learning environment I prefer has to be interrupted by intensity so students don’t get into paralysis-by-analysis (an Ed Parker term), or nambi-pambi patty-cake (my term) masquerading as budo drills. After days of explaining technical details and having students applying them at medium speed, I’ll call for a few minutes of “intensity one-step sparring” in which the attacker screams his intent to attack and then waits while tension builds. He may release his attack anytime within the next few seconds and it must be full speed and full force. The defender either handles the more realistic pressure or accepts the fact that he needs more medium-speed practice time.

For some martial artists, the majority of their early training after they left the novice class was an exercise in intensity, where they felt their physical well-being was on the line a couple of hours a night. When I was a *shoshinsha* (novice) in Judo, the word “*shugyo*” (“austere training”) meant rapid exchange throwing, or in Karate, it meant unending kata until-you-drop. Been there, done that and found it useful, but now, as a more senior martial artist, *shugyo* means something else to me.

It means to train even though I am a little sore from yesterday’s training or tired from this afternoon’s work. It means to train by observation even if I am too ill to visit the dojo, and to train by mental review even if I am incapacitated in bed. If I take a business trip or vacation and cannot train, I think of it as preparation (that is, a regaining of my capacity) for further training.

In this new view of “austere training”, there may not be the type of intensity that would intentionally bruise a partner’s arms as in *kote kitaie* or other arm-pounding drill, but that sort of focused intensity has morphed into endurance. The sprint has become the long distance power walk (perhaps with the occasional short-distance dash thrown in).

I have no statistics on the matter, but I suspect that those who indulge in focused, dangerous, challenging *shugyo*, although they may be more suited to street self-defense, have a shorter martial arts career. In other words, if you do 1000 punches and 500 kicks per night, every night of training, you will be formidable if kicking and punching is required in self-defense; but, if that sort of “special training” is your regular training, you will soon come up with reasons not to attend training regularly. Special training (especially if it is age-appropriate) is a great way to challenge oneself and should not be ignored, but it is “special” because it is not frequently done. It is amazing how one’s youthful special training (that has gradually been modulated as the

student become older and higher ranked) can be called upon when needed. I remember a seminar in which I was teaching some sort of reception and throwing defense and was “making it look easy” because the attacker, although attacking freely, was coming in at a moderate speed. I kept smiling while talking to the students. The second attacker decided to attack faster and harder without warning. I stopped talking, increased my speed, and slammed his impertinent backside to the mat. Another instructor who was watching said, “Ah! There’s the fire in the eyes you seldom show.”

“Yes,” I nodded, “and it is a good thing.”

I much prefer a relaxed learning environment, but that does not prevent my students from drawing upon their infrequent, but nevertheless important, shugyo training.