

December 24, 2007

Dear Colleagues, dear Students, dear Friends:

As the New Year approaches, I have been reflecting on my almost fifty years of involvement in the martial arts and the reasons why so few of us who started around the same time are still active today. This year, I intend to give you some practical advice based on my experience and observation so that you can continue a study that will make quite a difference in your life.

My teacher, Mochizuki Minoru Sensei, lectured us frequently on the importance of cultivating “*ki*” as early as possible in life. Sensei often scolded young people for their passivity, conventional attitude, and lack of curiosity. That was in Japan, but I have been observing the same phenomenon here. As parents and as teachers, we are responsible for training young minds and bodies. We can only teach what we have experienced for ourselves. For that reason, we have to develop those qualities in ourselves first, and this process must begin early in our training.

First crucial advice: *do not wait until the brown belt level to start developing the qualities of a black belt*. This means that we have to start working on acquiring good habits from the white belt level.

What is a black belt? A black belt is a student who has reached the level of maturity that enables him to continue his study without relying on motivation stemming from external factors, such as ranks, titles, praise, rivalry, etc. A black belt draws his motivation from inside, from the knowledge that every difficulty, every challenge is an opportunity to develop himself and prepare for greater challenges down the road. He knows that technical and physical challenges are tangible opportunities to develop skills that can also be applied to deal with mental challenges.

A black belt is a student who develops every dimension of his being. Everything we say and do – how we live, whom we associate with, what we eat, what we wear, what we drive, etc. – eventually reveals our intentions, our true minds. A black belt makes sure his words and actions remain consistent with his thoughts – first for himself in order to establish a firm foundation for his practice, and next for others who look at him for inspiration.

The process leading to becoming a black belt includes the cultivation of *ki*. Cultivation of *ki* is based on training oneself to develop three skills: *anticipation, cautious thought and decisive action, and wisdom to stop*. These skills require finding and tapping a certain form of energy, and the form of energy necessary to develop those skills is concentration.

Most of us are good at concentrating on the things that we like or are forced to do. However, true concentration can only be developed through challenges and physical and mental discomfort. We do not have to look for those conditions; they are present in our daily lives and provide us with countless opportunities to practice. There is no short cut, no easy way, no medication to take, no one to do it for us. We are on our own. When we do not develop these skills, we find ourselves neglecting or abandoning our training and other commitments.

The most common cause of slacking off and abandonment is boredom. Boredom is the indication of lack of concentration. Its opposite is agitation, which is also due to lack of concentration. With practice, we learn to note that state of mind, identify it, and shift to concentration. Eventually, it becomes a reflex, and periods of boredom and agitation become shorter and rarer. They won't disappear, though, which is a constant reminder that we have to maintain vigilance and keep training.

Concentration when used to develop those three skills brings self-confidence. Self-confidence is the quality of mind which results from the knowledge based on past experiences that whatever happens, we will do our best to overcome the situation.

Concentration and self-confidence are like muscles: they develop with practice. We should distinguish concentration from the kind of stimulation that comes with excitement, which is a temporary emotional state of mind. We should also make a clear distinction between self-confidence and arrogance which is an indication of insecurity.

How do we develop our ability to concentrate?

At the dojo, every session starts and ends with *seiza mokuso*, sitting meditation. During *kangeiko* (early morning winter practice) and *shochugeiko* (summer practice), it can last as long as forty five minutes. Children are required to practice *seiza mokuso* for one to five minutes. Some children are quite agitated and cannot stay more than a few seconds without moving. However, with regular practice, they improve. In the case of adults, it may be more difficult. Some know how to fake it by not moving their bodies, but the chatter of the mind becomes so intense that they may not be able to deal with it. However, with practice, we learn to see ourselves as we are and start putting things in order. It all boils down to concentrating.

The basic requisite is first to calm our body, which means to stop whatever we are doing. Then we do *shinkokyu*, deep breathing for several breaths, paying attention to the air that comes in and out through our nostrils. As we continue with regular breathing, we maintain closer attention to our breath. When thoughts start swarming into our minds, sometimes for several minutes, we notice them, make a mental note of the fact, and return right back to paying full attention to our breath. With regular practice, we let those distractions come and go without being caught by them and without repelling them.

This training prepares us for the different levels of *randori*, practice with partners. During these stressful situations, we often find it difficult to maintain concentration, awareness, and breathing together. Many students feel comfortable doing pair exercises with a cooperative partner; that is also a good time to make sure that they practice concentrating and being aware with breathing. If they do not practice concentrating here, their next level of *randori* will be rigid and erratic. They may sweat profusely and burn many calories, which lead them to believe that they had a great workout – but it's not *budo*.

Practicing kata or forms is another way to develop concentration. We should frequently go back to kata. *Battojutsu* (quick sword drawing), for example, solo or with a partner, in order to reconnect with our breath, calms the mind in order to be aware of the opponent's body language and

anticipate his intentions, cut him with precision, and return the *katana* to the *saya* (scabbard) while maintaining *zanshin* (presence of mind). There we applied the three skills mentioned above.

Here are some practical pieces of advice to make your budo study interesting to you and to others who make your practice possible:

- Maintain regular attendance. Too many responsibilities, too much homework, too many activities are the indications that you have to: 1- make priorities; 2- get organized. Students who attend class regularly stay up to date technically, and they tend to be able to make better decisions when confronted with challenges. On the other hand, those who suffer from irregular attendance fall behind technically and tend to act emotionally in front of challenges. This is a result of their lacking direct information resulting from being present at one or several events. The subconscious logic behind that goes something like this: “I can’t keep up with others! I’m lost! Sensei isn’t fair! The senior students are a clique! They don’t like me! I’d better leave!”
- Notify the dojo when absent. Children should call by themselves as soon as they are able to use the phone. It teaches responsibility and social skills.
- Discipline yourself to make up when absent. It will help you develop a sense of responsibility towards yourself and others. We know that it is not always possible. It is the *intention behind the decision* that makes the difference.
- If you are unable to participate to the practice, sit and observe. It’s a form of meditation, another way of learning. It will motivate you and help you heal faster.
- Participate in camps. If you don’t like to get up early, which is what we do at *kangeiko*, it indicates that you need to develop that skill!
- Address your teachers and *senpai* (seniors) with respect. Referring to your teacher and seniors as “You guys” is improper. Put Mr., Mrs., Ms. in front of someone’s name when writing a letter. That’s class.
- Don’t lie to your teacher. The study of budo is based on a teacher-student relationship. We all need to have someone more advanced than we are who can give us directions and help us make good decisions for ourselves. If I lie to my teacher, I make my teacher into a liar because if the information I give him is false or lacks certain crucial details, his advice and decision will be false. As a result, others will also lose trust in him. It’s serious. It may take a long time before I can regain my teacher’s trust.
- If your teacher says, “don’t do this, do that” or “stay away from that person” or “those people,” for example, and you have determined through your observation of his life that he has his students’ best interest at heart, you should listen. It doesn’t mean that you have to follow blindly what your teacher said; it means that you have to stop and think properly because the decision that you are going to make will affect the whole continuation of your budo practice and other members as well. Our destiny depends on how we manage the consequences of our past decisions.
- Follow rules and guidelines out of understanding, not obligation in order to get some reward or not to get in trouble. You have to practice thinking beyond what you see. That kind of skill can be developed, and it’s our individual responsibility to do that.

Please do not take this advice as final; rather use them as a foundation to develop your own thinking.

Kaoru Sensei and I send you our warmest wishes for the New Year. Thank you for your constant trust and support of our teaching. May you enjoy happy and safe holidays.

I am visiting my family in Amiens, North of Paris. As every year since 1985, I have been going back to my old dojo for a year end seminar together with Frédéric Bourgoïn, the son of my first teacher, Professor Michel Bourgoïn to whom I am much indebted since he led me to Mochizuki Sensei's path.

Patrick Augé

