

# The Black Belt Book of Life - Topic #20

## Control is the Mark of a Master

In quest to master any art  
and avoid unkind disaster,  
it would be wise to recognize  
*Control Is The Mark Of A Master.*  
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*Only one who devotes himself to a cause  
with his whole strength and soul can be  
a true master. For this reason mastery  
demands all of a person.*

Albert Einstein

*The happiness of a man in this life does  
not consist in the absence but in  
the mastery of his passions.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

*All of your scholarship, all your study of Shakespeare  
and Wordsworth would be vain if at the same time you  
did not build your character and attain mastery  
over your thoughts and your actions.*

Gandhi

**T**he ultimate goal of devoting oneself to any discipline is to master that discipline. To master it is to control it. Because of its dangerous and potentially lethal aspects, martial arts is one discipline that must instill mastery in its practitioners.

Martial arts mastery exists on multiple levels. First, there is the obvious skill of learning to master the strikes, blocks, parries, kicks, punches, moves, self-defense and fighting techniques, as well as open hand and weapons forms. Intrinsicly tied to this is the control of one's balance, especially under stress. Then there is the great task of learning to control one's emotions and mental abilities. No other discipline

teaches one to integrate his body, mind and spirit more than the martial arts. In essence, martial arts teaches one to master himself.

As all things in this dimension have two sides, mastery of one's self also has two sides: external and internal. *External mastery* involves the skills intrinsic to the martial arts system the individual is studying, as referenced above. *Internal mastery* focuses on slaying our inner dragons and fears. Unless we reveal these to others, they are secret and known only to us. For example, we may have challenges with our identity, image, courage, fear, discipline, persistence, unworthiness, weakness, self-confidence, strength, procrastination, follow-through, emotional stability and many other issues. Slaying the dragon or dragons within us is a great aspect of martial arts training. It is impossible to participate in a worthy program and not have any or all of one's demons rearing their heads and engaging us in personal combat. Our task is to challenge them head on, take them on and slay them. In doing so we develop a great sense of personal accomplishment and centeredness that only we can know and appreciate. After all, these are our battles, as well they should be. No one else has to know about them except us.

External mastery not only involves the artistic and physical things alluded to earlier but also to other people and situations - the external dragons. For example, let's say some social crisis occurs. 911 comes to mind. How do we respond? Do we "lose it and fall apart?" Do we freeze in place and become immobilized through fear or just not knowing what to do? Or do we remain centered, calm and balanced, think clearly and take appropriate action?

Then there is the issue of other people preying on us? If we're being assaulted, how do we respond? Give up and possibly die? Hope our assailant doesn't hurt us? Do we try to appease the perpetrator, remembering the wisdom of Winston Churchill who said: *An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last?* Or do we protect ourselves with the best and wisest choice appropriate to the environment, situation and surroundings? This may involve simply speaking to our assailant to back him down, fleeing the scene perhaps, or engaging him physically. This last option requires sagacious and often quick thought and action. In effect, what action do we take to master the situation given all the variables involved?

True story. This is common to us all and comes under the heading of "response to the finger." You know what I mean. One day I was in my car stopped at a red light minding my own business. An oncoming car was making a left hand turn on his green arrow and as the car turned into his lane, thus becoming perpendicular to the forward direction of my car but some thirty feet away, for whatever reason this young teenage guy in the passenger seat put his arm out the window and flipped me the finger as he scowled and attempted to look somewhat frightful. It was pretty funny actually because this event came out of nowhere and was totally unexpected. In applying techniques of mastery, I didn't react in a negative

capacity but rather returned his gesture with a big smile and a wave of my hand, certainly not my finger. His reaction was typical of this sort of misanthrope. He went absolutely ballistic, becoming even more enraged and red than he was in the first place as the car continued on.

In analyzing this scenario, what would have happened if I had returned a finger to him and shouted some unbecoming remark as he went on his way? Nothing likely because this sort of thing happens all the time, especially with young men stuffed to the brim and overflowing with testosterone and foolishness. But the key is that if I had responded in a negative way, I would have moved outside my own center, engaged in an immature and ignoble act while relinquishing control of myself to this kid, an act that could have potentially escalated into something worse. In behaving in such a manner, I would have been nothing more than a dog on his leash - he the controller [the master] and I the controlee [the dog], which is probably what he was expecting, as most people who engage in this sort of conduct do expect. They like to control the situation in whatever way they can. By reacting in a totally different manner - waving politely with a smile on my face, it totally disarmed this kid and collapsed his guard. I was now in control - of myself and the situation. He wasn't, and he didn't know what to do but get madder and hotter and flip his finger more exuberantly.

This whole scenario is an example of exhibiting skills of mastery which we teach at the Karate Institute of America. Behaving in such a controlled way to an external act places us in the driver's seat, keeps us calm and in control of the situation. Others have also used this with equal success, and for the younger generation it is highly recommended because it removes us from a position of being controlled, and therefore being out of control, to being totally in control and not allowing the situation to get out of hand. Another option to having the "finger" flashed at you is to simply ignore it altogether and do nothing. The non-smart thing to do is to respond in kind by flipping your finger back at the perpetrator. That's exactly what he wants. Don't play his game. Make sure you play your game and take him out of his. In this way, you'll be the one holding the leash and he'll be the one on it, i.e., you'll be the master and he'll be the whimpering puppy.

Remember Pythagoras? He was the ancient mathematician and philosopher who said, *No man is free who cannot control himself*. This coincides with Tennyson who advised us to control our passions and Gandhi who adjured us to control our thoughts and actions. Their quotes are placed in the opening to this section. All great teachers preach the necessity of self-control and ultimately of self-mastery.

Martial arts is an excellent discipline to meet these ends. As practitioners, it would be good for us to remember that *the process is the product*. The Black Belt, should we evolve to its level, is a symbol of the *process*, a process that is invaluable to not only our self-protection and well-being in a physical sense, but also to our growth as individuals.

As was stated early on in this book, *martial arts is life*. There is nothing we do in our training that does not have some functional life application beyond the studio/dojo/gym doors, and if all we're concerned with in our training is learning how to beat someone up or defend ourselves physically, we've missed a great opportunity and gift. Remember the phrase, *a black belt without humility is like a well without water*? Well, if we go to the well of martial arts and return with only knowledge related to physical defense and combat, it's like going to the well with an empty bucket and returning with nothing more than a mere spoonful of water. Such an act is a great disservice to what martial arts study and training bequeaths to us who love it so. And at its core, arguably the greatest gift of martial arts training is the gift of self-control and self-mastery because to be sure, *control is the mark of a master*.

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