

# Abuse by Teachers

## Martial Arts; Abuse by Teachers

In Martial Arts groups particularly those leaning toward a tradition which have a more rigid hierarchy, there is often a tendency to form an unhealthy relationship to the teacher. This unhealthy relationship develops when the teacher establishes a co-dependant relationship with the student in which they become a foster-father or foster parent or “Guru”- not in the true sense of the word but in the sense of a perceived infallible authority. It usually happens very gradually. And it usually happens with lots of stories and tales of hyperbole from the teacher and/or the careful cultivation of mystique and “inferred secrets”. If the student already has a strong respect for authority or an authority complex he is more vulnerable.

The emotional bond between the teacher and student in these cases is developed through alternating abuse – be it physical or verbal- with praise or reward. One can see the same situation in military boot camp with the screaming sergeant who tests the recruit with continual verbal abuse and then “graduates” them or with a person who is married to an alcoholic. The main formula here is the abuse, the reward (or apology) and then reaffirmation of the bond whether through praise, recognition or some other sort of “reward”. This is not about necessary discipline to teach a given skill, nor is it about an “Initiation”- rather it is about a false discipline which is disguised abuse-which merely keeps the student or soldier coming back for more orders or “training” and in essence centers on teaching obedience to an authority figure. I have seen Tai Chi teachers keep a student coming for years to learn a form which is taught entirely without context – no tactical application and little or no genuine systematic esoteric training either. These students have years of sweat and lots of money out of pocket and have sometimes played the “go-for” for years too-running errands for the teacher and doing manual labor, etc. Some students, thinking they are doing the right thing sometimes keep this practice going for twenty years or more. It can be difficult to pull out of the situation as personal bonding gets stronger over time. And Tai Chi is not the only art that does this, it can occur in any art or any relationship involving authority. I know some of the arts which use ranks, which have much more “hands on” training than most Tai Chi done today -can enforce the same politic on the student teacher relationship simply through the politics of its Black Belt practitioners... All the martial arts, when poorly taught- easily configure into this model of abusive bonding linked with feudal bureaucracy. The emphasis on controlling the students- maintaining a hierarchy and parceling out information as though it needs protecting and “needs to be appreciated” is always seen in these situations. Of course this approach backfires and is actually a way to retard the student’s development and merely increase his frustration while preventing their tactical development and keeping them handy as slaves! One teacher said, “It is all social”. I heard another one say “It’s all about COMMUNITY”. Sounds good, but is it a healthy community we are talking about here? There are many examples of unhealthy “communities” as seen in the psychological malfunction of families as well as companies and corporations.

So what is the answer to this sort of sociopathic behavior? First of , I think it is important to teach martial arts as crafts-as “hands on” forms with plenty of contact drills-whether it is Karate’s “One step sparring” or the more choreographed complex drills like the Yang family Tui

Shou (not the tournament variety) or San Shou- or Aikidos “cooperative throwing”. And these things should all be taught with reasonable conditioning and increasing difficulty levels progressing toward realistic combat techniques. And they are NOT usually taught that way. So I blame the Pedagogy not the “Art” per se. And many times they do not do this for whatever reason... One must be clear about what is abuse. In a tactical class there are bound to be sprains and uncomfortable training. Bumps, bruises happen. That is not what I am talking about. Here I would say broken bones and permanent physical damage are abusive and unnecessary. A teacher who has to hurt a student to teach him is suspect. On the other hand-there are some tough students from certain backgrounds who will not hesitate to “deck” a teacher. There are indeed some children who have killed their parents—and we must be clear about this in our own heads, as teachers. WE DON’T KNOW WHO IS WHO. Students and parents need to realize this. Some students will hurt the teacher if he does NOT hurt them—especially in the beginning in order to establish “pecking order”. If a student has been raised in this way-that is with “Pecking Order” that is their dynamic. This is the enigma every coach and martial arts teacher faces. How can we teach correctly without hurting someone or offending someone? How can we protect ourselves, our art and still maintain authority and convince our students of our expertise—without physical intimidation? And at this point the competence of the teacher comes to the fore. This is the test of a good teacher- who also must not be a punching bag for his students! The forms which some teachers espouse as magical operations (“my Chi is stronger than yours”) are tactically savvy through their body geometry and correct leverage. For a teacher not to acknowledge this clearly (perhaps they do not know themselves- If they do not- should they be teaching?) is to keep the students in the dark. To add mystical explanations about Chi or Physics or Morality or Community merely gives the student a set of symbols which can lead nowhere but to frustration and confusion. When a student is given vague and undefined ideas to work with, which are never connected or are connected in the wrong sequence then the student becomes conditioned to think in a vague, disconnected way. Think about this. A teacher has the power to limit the number and type of symbols and ideas a student can work with. So the teacher, if he or she is any good must constantly be growing out of their own preconceptions if the student is to do so. It is a real challenge! If a student’s thinking can be kept vague then they fall into a mind control situation or what I have heard one man call “Occult Bondage”. That is, they have become conditioned to think only within a restricted range of symbols or ideas. I have heard some students say, “I only do Tai Chi for health.” Now, please –extend that thought out a bit to it’s logical conclusion—how can you be healthy if you do not practice self defense in some way? Yes, I know what they mean...but it is still slightly warped thinking! Is not staying alive the primary thing? Culture comes from leisure but to have leisure one must be alive and stay alive! RESPONSIVENESS to the environment is the key. Responsiveness is the soul of all martial arts. Survival and Life must come first. If you are on the train track and the train is coming- get off the track! Forget philosophy here, or better save it until after you get off the track. I recall the master Judoka Trevor Leggett emphasizing to me, “The future of Budo (Japanese for “Martial Art”) is in Response”. So even as an old man he had a plastic ball on a string hanging from a doorway. He would use a wooden sword to hit this ball-while it was swinging. So he kept his reflexes up—his responses were alive!

After that THEN when there is leisure time, higher cultural ideas, arts, crafts and other goods can be cultivated. But do not mistake one for another. A person who cannot respond to an attack who has studied a “martial art” has simply not studied a martial art but has studied MOVEMENTS

WITHOUT CONTEXT. Or perhaps MOVEMENT AS A MEMORIAL TO WHAT MEN USED TO KNOW. Bruce Lee saw this and he was right about it. I on the other hand had a teacher who was a street fighter in the Chinese Boxing tradition, who used Hsing-I and Ba-gua. And he understood the philosophy as well. Apparently Lee never trained with a man like that. So while he could deride “Classical Martial Arts” and I can see what he means/meant—I also know there are people who have and do know what these arts are for-how they are used—physically and psychologically— and they know how to train responsibly. That is teaching students how to respond to one another in combat and in life. If the health angle is espoused one need not do movements which are derived from a martial context at all. One can do Yoga or weight lifting or Physical Therapy. Dance is particularly good, though it has less tactical context (depending on the dance of course) and a much broader range of movement and therapy. My main point in this article is to make clear that martial arts (that is arts centered around war) require tactile training with a variety of partners over time in genuine techniques which are practiced with increasing difficulty targeted to killing not “fighting” (unless of course you are talking about a sport). Once a person lets go of the actual purpose of the training the training very quickly becomes something else. And in our society “martial arts” now connotes, fighting in a ring with weight divisions, the learning of the ritualized behavior of other cultures and the preservation of certain forms of movement and their accompanying techniques of psychological manipulation for good or ill. It is up to the teachers and students to change this trend-and develop realism WITH understanding and a clear progression of skills.