

the karate way

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Excess Baggage
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"I would like to join your karate school, but I wear glasses, so could I possibly skip the sparring?"

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"I'm interested in *aikido*, but I have very sensitive elbow joints. Could locks and pins using them as the fulcrum not be used on me?"

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"I want to try *kendo*, but I don't think I'd get enough of a workout in a coed class. Do you have any all-male classes?"

Ask a teacher of the *budo* (warrior ways) if any of these statements sound familiar, and you can bet he'll nod and probably add one or two of his own. They are something he hears frequently from prospective students. They are what we might think of as "excess baggage."

When a newcomer appears at the *dojo* (training hall) door, he really doesn't need much other than reasonably good physical and mental health and a willingness to accept with an open mind what he will encounter. However, a new student often arrives believing he has special needs, and he will show up with them, toting them along like excess baggage. He has the very human notion that he is special in some way, that he has liabilities or considerations that others do not have. He feels he must, in all fairness, bring these considerations to the attention of the instructor, so that the latter will be able to deal with them appropriately in class.

Although the beginner is surely unaware of it, even at this onset of his training, before he may have set foot onto the *dojo* floor, he has reached a critical stage in his education, one that is left entirely to his instructor to handle. The teacher can either listen patiently and explain that he'll do everything possible to take the student's needs into consideration, or he can listen patiently and explain that in no way can the student's excess baggage fit into the *dojo* and that, believe it or not, the student will be just fine without it.

If you encounter the first teacher, congratulations; you've found a cheap therapist who will reinforce all of your preconceptions about yourself. If you run across the second, however, count it as a blessing; you have found a true *sensei* who will

teach you things about yourself you never knew.

The fact is, that while one's individual needs and shortcomings may seem very important, they are not all that special. Chances are, if you can walk into a *dojo* under your own power, you are in good enough shape to begin training there. Of course, your asthma or myopia or lack of flexibility may be a problem. But if you had the opportunity to ask him, you'd probably find that the guy practicing beside you is dealing with arthritis, and the fellow on the other side has a slight hip deformity, and the guy behind you suffers from chronic bronchitis. And very probably, they all began their training by thinking *their* problems were as special as your own.

A principal attribute of the martial ways is the broadness of their path. Karate, judo, kendo and aikido were not meant just for the Japanese, or just for men, or just for finely conditioned athletes. They were meant for everyone, but by their very nature, no special consideration may be given to anyone.

Got a bad right knee? Then your kicks with that leg may not be as strong as mine. I've got an injury-weakened left shoulder, so my punches on that side might not be as powerful as yours. But when our teacher counts off the kicks, you must be trying your best even if it's not as good as mine. When punching, I have to do the same. And neither you nor I can do that when we're carrying excess baggage.

There is a door in a traditional Japanese teahouse called a *nijiri-guchi*. Unlike a normal door, this one is only a few feet square. Anyone wishing to participate in the tea ceremony must pass through it by humbly lowering himself and nearly crawling through. The teahouse door is open to all, but to enter there is only one way, and no exceptions can be made, regardless of one's station in life.

The door to the *dojo* is different in appearance, but it is very similar to the teahouse *nijiri-guchi*. There is room only for you to enter, you must leave your excess baggage outside. Whatever you leave behind, you will not miss at all.

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