

The Hammer and the Nail

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Mr. Parker once related a parable about a young carpenter who, after spending a number of years mastering the basics of his craft, moved across country to work for a mid-sized construction firm, hoping thereby to increase his knowledge and carpentry skills. He was working very happily, pounding joints together when the foreman called him over to tell him that he was not performing his job correctly. The young carpenter had been pounding nails by striking them straight on while gripping the hammer at the far end of the handle. This method, he was told by his foreman, was flawed; for, while he held the hammer correctly, he should be striking the heads of the nails with a circular motion rather than hitting them straight on. Although slightly puzzled (after all, his nails were all very well driven in and his joints all looked and held well), the young man adapted his method per his foreman's instructions and found that this manner of hammering also managed to drive the nails in quite satisfactorily.

After a few years, the young man was able to secure a job with a larger crew making considerably more money. This new job, however, necessitated another move across country. One day, while joyfully working at this new job, the young carpenter was called over by his new foreman. "You're hammering your nails all wrong, son," the foreman proceeded to tell the young man, "you need to hold the hammer at the top of the handle, closest to the head, with an inverted grip and then smack straight down with the very top of the hammer." Now, of course, this sounded absolutely ludicrous to the young carpenter, but respecting the foreman's age and experience, he committed to give this strange manner of hammering nails a try. Lo and behold, but this method, too, allowed the young carpenter to drive his nails quite well.

So, what's the moral of this parable? If you said that it was that each of the three methods of hammering the nail was equally valid... **you've missed the nail and just hit your thumb.** Of course all three methods work—that's too easy; the point is that each method was the appropriate choice for its own particular circumstance (albeit that the appropriateness was being dictated by the foremen in this parable). The question isn't one of whether circular motion is superior to linear motion or if striking is superior to grappling. It isn't even a question of whether or not all methods or concepts are equally valid; it's a question of which method or concept is most appropriate and applicable to the situation at hand.

And there's a second moral, represented by the attitudes of the two foremen in contrast to the attitude of our young carpenter. At one level, the attitudes of the foremen could be considered narrow and short-sided. Rather than embracing the young man's ability to perform a task competently in a unique manner and taking the opportunity to absorb such knowledge, each of the foremen—being stuck in their own rigid paradigm of what is correct—force the young man to conform to their methods, thereby losing the opportunity to learn and grow from the experience. The young man, on the other hand,

by remaining open-minded and flexible is able to adapt and succeed in every circumstance. This is how kenpo should be.

Unfortunately, too many of us in the kenpo community have attitudes like those of the foremen. Whether it's an attitude of kenpo's superiority over other arts or of one curriculum or subsystem's superiority over another, such close-mindedness only hampers our own (and consequently, our students') growth and potential. In an art whose practitioners have traditionally prided themselves on being adaptive and progressive, there can at times be an incredible amount of obstinacy and stagnation.

Too often, members of the kenpo community are accused (and sometimes rightfully so) of having a "holier than thou" attitude towards other martial arts and even towards other kenpo systems. While kenpo (whatever the variation) is one way—and in the author's opinion a very good way—of addressing combat, it is certainly not the only way. It is just possible that other arts might have something of value to contribute; if not to kenpo as a whole, then at least to the individual practitioner. For example, many kenpo seniors came to the art with a judo background. Younger practitioners may find that cross training in judo will not only give them an organized curriculum from which to begin to organize their groundwork, but might also open up new avenues of application in their "stand-up" kenpo techniques.

Mr. Parker is often quoted as having said that if one were to line up ten of his black belts and ask to see a particular technique then you would see ten different variations in application, but that each application would be correct. And while many of us can quote this—and many others of Mr. Parker's stories and sayings—it is sad that so many of us, even some 13+ years after his death, have still failed to take these lessons to heart. Instead of constantly arguing over whose version Five Swords is "correct", we should celebrate our diversity and strive to offer our students every opportunity to develop into effective martial artists.

Now, before you think you've just about got this parable all figured out, there's still one more thing to consider. Even though the attitudes of the foremen appear rigid and shortsighted at first, the foremen are still not completely wrong in insisting that the young carpenter utilize their methods. Why? Because there is still one more lesson for this parable to teach. Remember, it's a foreman's job to supervise workers and enforce standards and procedures. The foremen in our example, having more knowledge and experience than our young carpenter, are only correct in insisting that the young man utilize those methods which they know from experience will produce the desired results. It is only by such insistence that the foremen can insure that the end product meets the desired standard of quality, as any deviation from standard procedures or methods could potentially effect the end result.

This is why, as instructors, we insist that our students perform a technique in a particular manner. Not that there isn't value in other methods or variations in a technique, but if we are to insure that our students knowledge has a firm foundation, we must insist on proper, proven construction methods. There is a time to be open to the ideas of your students or

fellow instructors and to learn from them, but there is also a time to be insistent and to teach.

So--not all things are necessarily equal. There are, after all, some absolutes: two plus two will never equal five. And there are times when our student's (or our own) understanding or application is simply wrong. In those circumstances, one must either seek out, or become, the foreman.

What lessons then, have been imparted by this parable of the Hammer and the Nail? First, that MY way or YOUR way or HIS way may not be the ONLY way or even the CORRECT way. Only the unique circumstances of a particular moment in combat can determine which way is correct. Second, we should all strive to cultivate and maintain a Beginner's Mind: inquisitive, adaptive and flexible—open to new knowledge and new possibilities. Third, we must seek out WISDOM, learn to recognize it and work to obtain it and impart it. KNOWLEDGE and UNDERSTANDING are only a beginning, and the first step on the journey, and every new step is also a new beginning.

I have reason to hope, however, as many of the seniors in the kenpo community have embraced these truths and set aside their differences to work for the mutual advancement of the art. It will be up to the younger generations to continue this work. If our students can learn these lessons sooner and better than we did, then the future of our art will be bright indeed

Remember that the nail, once set, will not move or adapt. The hammer, being mobile, can adjust and correct the course of the nail to ensure the nail holds true. There is a time to be a hammer and a time to be a nail; a time to be a student and a time to be a teacher; a time to be the river and a time to be the mountain. Do you know what time it is for you?