

The Spirit of Shoshin

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When it comes to computers, peripherals and all the neat gadgets that are making their electronic way into our lives and hearts, anyone who doesn't have "shoshin" or "beginner's mind" is out of luck. Even the experts are on a continual learning curve. They may teach, lecture and write books, but if they don't keep up with the ever-expanding body of knowledge and creative applications, they quickly become passe.

As I talk with people in these fields, the conversations are laced with words like "exciting," "ramped up," "expansion," and "scale." The enthusiasm is palpable. These people are clearly having a great time learning new things. They can't wait to see what is coming around the bend - or better yet, to have a crack at creating the next thing coming around the bend.

What about our world of martial arts? How can we achieve and sustain this level of enthusiasm in our training? Just imagine how fast we all could grow if we always maintained shoshin, beginner's mind.

"Shoshin" refers to the spirit, mindset, and posture that we have when we first start learning something. Can you recall as a child how spellbound you were by a roly-poly? Or how fascinating ice was? Or, as a teen, how eagerly you mastered the controls of an automobile? Do you recall the thrill of accomplishment the first time you managed a breakfall?

In various disciplines in Japan, practitioners are advised, "Do not forget the spirit of shoshin." O Sensei directed those of us in aikido to "train with joyfulness." It is clear that he understood the nature of learning.

George Leonard sensei writes in his book Education and Ecstasy, "To learn is to change." He further writes, "At its best, it's most effective, it's most unfettered, the moment of learning is a moment of delight."

When we start studying our chosen art, we often exhibit an adventuresome spirit: "I'll go see anything," "I want to learn that," "Let me try that," "How did that happen?" "I want to hear what you think." We mustn't lose these thoughts, though it does tend to happen.

As we progress through the months and years of our practice, we inevitably become knowledgeable within our pursuit, and our tendency is often to lose the ability to hear what others have to say. In other words, we start to become satisfied with ourselves. We lose our ability to see beyond ourselves, we shut out the new, and we stifle our own growth. We become prisoners of the dreaded "C" word --- complacency.

It is so easy for this to happen. We become kohai and feel a little smug; we have X many years of training under our belts, so we're pretty good; we become senior students and instructors with teaching responsibilities and are expected to have answers. But if we don't maintain shoshin, we will become jaded, and our growth will come to a halt. It is a sad thing.

By maintaining the ability to wonder, explore, listen to others, and to experiment, we are able to take in knowledge above and beyond that which we already have. Just by changing our mindset, the improvement of our abilities beyond those we currently possess is inevitable.

When we encounter an idea that we think will help us improve, we must enlarge our spirit and listen to what we hear, for only then can we draw a conclusion as to whether it may be of value to us.

Shoshin is to have a mind like a sheet of crisp white paper, blank and receptive to the ink of ideas. As the paper absorbs the ink, miraculously the once blank paper is transformed into a letter full of meaning.