

Sensei Says

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Once upon a time in feudal Japan a young man aspiring to learn swordsmanship approached a well-known sword master and requested acceptance as a pupil. The master accepted his new student and proceeded to put him to the task of heavy training. Hauling and cutting firewood, carrying fresh water, cooking, cleaning – these were but a few of the new student's assignments. He was kept busy day in and day out. He was given no time to rest, and little time to sleep.

After about a month the student was beginning to think he was being used as a slave – that the Master was taking advantage of him, and that he would never actually be taught how to use a sword. Just as these thoughts were entering his head, a deep thud and a sharp pain also entered his head. It felt like someone had hit him with a wooden sword, but he saw no one when he looked around.

He thought it best to continue his work and not mention the incident to his teacher.

No sooner had he made up his mind to forget about it when SMACK! another strike hit him in the back of the head. He looked around. No one was there.

Similar unexpected attacks continued for weeks. His head was throbbing, but he was beginning to become more observant. He was constantly watching for the next attack. Inevitably, though, his mind would begin to wander only to feel a WHACK! on the back of the head to remind him to pay attention.

Then, one day while he was drawing water from the well he heard someone behind him. He quickly turned. He was just in time to see a stick hit him in the face. When he awoke he was all alone.

Days later, his hands full of firewood, he sensed someone standing behind a tree as he passed. He leapt away from the tree in desperation. He was just far enough away to catch a glimpse of the Master as he was struck on the head and lost consciousness.

That night the student didn't get much sleep. Every time he began to dream of greatness as a famous swordsman CRACK! right on his head while he was sleeping! Now the attacks came both day and night.

In the proceeding weeks the student began to avoid some of the attacks, catching his teacher as he approached, and avoiding traps before he walked into them. Even in his sleep he became keenly aware of every sound.

Eventually, one day the Master failed in every attempt to attack. Each time the Master approached he found his pupil standing there to greet him. On that day the Master congratulated his student for having mastered the most important aspects of swordsmanship. It was then that his training with a real sword began. Legend has it that the student learned to use the sword quickly and eventually surpassed his teacher in skill and fame.

Though this is a tale from olden times, similar training is carried out in our dojo every day. Students must be aware of their surroundings at all times, noticing all who enter and leave their space. They quickly stand at attention and bow to greet black belts when they enter. The students shout "Osu!" to show they are focused and ready to train hard. If the black belt approaches the student before the student has bowed, it is a disgrace to the student. It shows they have not yet learned the most important aspects of martial arts training.

- Alan Best