

Liberate Yourself from Hero Worship

By Phil Elmore

Bruce Lee wrote a famous article called "Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate" in which he basically called out the entire martial arts establishment. In the course of a single essay, he made his intentions and his attitude clear: *tradition* didn't matter to him. Doing things the way they'd always been done *because they'd always been done that way* wasn't something he thought important. Bruce Lee was a pioneer in the modern martial arts and, thanks to him, countless people study martial systems today that are much more effective than the traditional strip-mall dojo curricula that coexist with those more realistic programs. Lee wrote,

Unfortunately, most students in the martial arts are conformists. Instead of learning to depend on themselves for expression, they blindly follow their instructors, no longer feeling alone, and finding security in mass imitation. The product of this imitation is a dependent mind. Independent inquiry, which is essential to genuine understanding, is sacrificed. Look around the martial arts and witness the assortment of routine performers, trick artists, desensitized robots, glorifiers of the past and so on – all followers or exponents of organized despair.

Most martialists would agree with these words, in spirit if not to the letter. The irony, however, is that many among our ranks venerate Lee and people like him every bit as much as the traditionalists whom Lee excoriated venerated tradition for its own sake. How else could Lee have become the patron saint of the

modern martial arts if he was not being held up as some über-authority? How often have you seen something in self-defense condemned or justified on the basis of what Lee would, wouldn't, did, or didn't do? "Well, Bruce Lee did (or didn't) do such-and-such, so this is (or isn't) okay."

This isn't a phenomenon specific to Bruce Lee. The self-defense field, because it involves violence, is something that involves, attracts, and plays host to many adherents who have wildly different levels of real-life experience. Those that have "been there and done that" automatically feel they have some greater handle on the truth, on the speculative and prescient (and therefore inexact) science of training for success in self-defense. "You will (or won't) encounter this in self-defense because that's what I did (or didn't) encounter," they will tell you, and their having been there and done that is presented as the end of the matter.

The problem with this attitude is that it dismisses both critical thinking and reality in favor of hero-worship. When *authority* becomes our benchmark of what can or cannot be *considered*, we stop bothering to *think* about what we believe and start simply placing our toes on the lines drawn by those willing to drag a foot through the dirt for us.

Take the average combat veteran, for example. While the service and sacrifice of such men and women cannot be denied, the experiences of any one person do not embody the

reality of war or of a given conflict for all others who served. How many books have you seen in the stores lately from those who've served in Iraq? Compare and contrast the books by soldiers who are proud of their service to propaganda pieces like *Jarhead*, which blame the military for the protagonist's obvious mental problems. Yet every one of those authors has been there and done that – so how dare we criticize? How dare fellow veterans to disagree with one another?

Even the “experts,” the authorities, disagree – vehemently and vociferously – with one another. Consider, for example, the almost ancient arguments between, say, Jeff Cooper and Rex Applegate on point shooting versus the “modern technique.” Here were men who definitely knew their craft, men who are acknowledged as authorities – yet they didn't agree with each other! So who was right? What credence does each man's respective authority give his opinion?

The fact is that truth can only be determined by critical analysis of the available data, and even then it can only be determined *within context*, against the *limits* of the available data. Let's consider Bruce Lee again. Jeet Kune Do is, in most of the incarnations I've seen, a fairly athletically demanding style. What Bruce Lee could do, many “ordinary people” could not do. Bruce was also somewhat notorious for not wanting his students to be better than was he, so his training suffered accordingly. Yet Lee was an

authority, by anyone's measure. Surely he was *right*?

As students of pragmatic, effective self-defense, we cannot allow *authority* to be the arbiter of what is true or what we will consider. Chuck Norris wrote, in one of the many iterations of his biography, of a low-level competitor who defeated Norris in a sparring bout simply because he wanted it more. Norris was overconfident and he lost. Yet who would give the martial arts opinions of the low-level stylist greater weight than the opinions of Chuck Norris? Who, when listening to both people speak in the same room, would even bother to consider the words of the relative novice when Norris was in the room and is clearly an *authority*?

When your willingness to consider another person's opinion is based on the content of that person's resume, rather than on the substance and presentation of that person's opinion, you've fallen for the trap. You've allowed authority to become your arbiter, substituting it, substituting credentials and resumes, for your responsibility to consider ideas critically. You've taken the easy way out; you've let someone else's opinion be good enough for you when you should be determining things for yourself.

Heroes are idols and idols are objects of worship. Something or someone worshipped is rarely known for its ability to stimulate intellectual growth and development in the worshipper. An idol is venerated rather than questioned. It is trusted rather than challenged. It is held *up*

rather than held *to* (a standard). The idol becomes the arbiter; it dictates rather than teaches.

We, as martialists, must liberate ourselves from hero worship. It is fine to have role models. It is fine to respect those who have contributed much to the field of self-defense. It is fine to consider carefully and to weigh more heavily the opinions, conclusions, and assertions of those who have greater experience. It is *not* fine, however, to engage in logical fallacies, such as *ad hominem* attacks or appeals to authority. When we are presented with an opinion or an argument and our response is to demand why or *how the person presenting that argument dares to express it in the first place*, we are worshipping idols rather than thinking critically.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in the introduction to *Twilight of the Idols*, wrote,

There are more idols than realities in the world... [T]o pose questions with a hammer, and sometimes to hear as a reply that famous hollow sound that can only come from bloated entrails – what a delight for...me, an old psychologist and piper before whom just that which would remain silent must finally speak out.

...This little essay is a great declaration of war; and regarding the sounding out of idols, this time they are not just idols of the age, but eternal idols, which are here touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork: there are no idols that are older, more assured, more puffed-up – and none more hollow. That does not prevent them from being those in which people have the most faith; nor does one ever say "idol," especially not in the most distinguished instance.

Take up your hammer. Sound your idols. Question authority. Consider ideas critically and don't dismiss any on the basis of logical fallacies.



Photo by Phil Elmore

How many of your idols are hollow?

