

# The Six Toughest Opponents You'll Ever Face

## ...And What to Do Against Them

by Jeffrey M. Brooks

**R**emember your first day of training? You walked in the door filled with excitement. You had thought about this moment for months, maybe years, and now you were really going to be a martial artist. You were sure you had the dedication and talent, and you planned to give it 100 percent for as long as it took. Nothing, you said to yourself, nothing was going to stand in your way.

### **Still Feel Like That?**

If you're similar to a lot of martial artists, something strange starts to happen a month or two into training. Instead of being the mysterious, action-packed place it seemed at first, your school now seems kind of ordinary—a wood floor, some mirrors, some weights...

Day in and day out you've been doing your punches, kicks, blocks, and stretches. You've gotten stronger, quicker, more focused. But little by little, you start to find reasons to miss workouts, to hold back. The enthusiasm of your first day has faded—even though you still want nothing more than to be a martial artist, and most of the time training still leaves you exhilarated.

If this describes you, you've already met some of the toughest opponents you will ever have to face. If you've managed to elude them so far, keep on the lookout. These are opponents that every dedicated martial artist, no matter how great, confronts again and again. Opponents who, at times, are tougher, and more deceptive, than the kind with lightning-fast fists and flying feet.

The toughest opponents? You can't see them. They're in your mental attitude. They eventually wear down or stop the training of 99 out of 100 martial artists, from the newest white belts, to experienced black belts, and it's a waste of talent and potential. But if you know how to recognize them, and how to defeat them, you can come out the winner, and go on to a lifetime of martial arts success.

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## Impatience

You can spot the victims of impatience in every training hall—seven days a week. These practitioners never give their bodies a chance to heal or rest. Often they are desperate for promotions, ready or not, and as a result they always try to rush ahead. The result? They burn out, physically and mentally. They get frustrated. They quit.

There is an old story about a student who rushed into the master's school and breathlessly asked for instruction. The master agreed.

The student asked, "How long will it be until I can make black belt?" The master replied: "If you work very hard, maybe five years." The student then said, "What if I train twice as hard, day and night?" "In

that case," the master said, "ten years."

You may be doing battle with impatience right now. Maybe you can't wait to tie a black belt around your waist. Or to deck some guy who's been hassling you. Or to be admired by everyone you meet.

If that's you right now, you're setting yourself up for defeat. To win, you'll have to work on your balance. Every tough, explosive workout has to be followed by a period of healing and rest. In Buddhism this balance is called the middle way. Follow it, and you will defeat impatience.

## Complacency

Complacency is the opposite of impatience, but just as devastating. Students hear that in the martial arts we train for a lifetime, not until some graduation day. That's true. Complacency comes when students take that as an excuse to plod along, waiting until "someday" to start training hard.

In the martial arts, students are encouraged to train with total intensity: "As if there was a fire burning in your hair!" That's the message in the famous saying from shorin-ryu master Shoshin Nagamine, who said, "Karate is a lifetime marathon."

What brought you into the martial arts in the first place? It was probably your desire to become a stronger, healthier person. Do you still want that? If you do, then train sincerely—and realize your dream. If not—why waste your time, and your instructor's time, pretending?

You can't train "someday." It isn't here. You only have today. Use it, or you will lose it forever.

## Comparisons

There is someone weaker than you. There is someone stronger than you. If you compare yourself to others, and measure your ability based on that, you will feel either arrogant or lousy. Either way, it will disrupt your training.

The comparison is meaningless anyway. You are who you are, with your own strengths and weaknesses. Work on them. You're better than you were when you started, and you're going to keep on improving.

Even comparing yourself to yourself is dangerous. You may think you've become a superstar, or that you're on a plateau, not getting

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anywhere. Chances are neither is true.

Look beneath the surface of comparison. Why do you compare yourself to others? It's probably because of insecurity: fear. So do the most courageous thing you can: be yourself. Keep your attention on your own training, and keep going. In the long run you will become a formidable, skilled martial artist. That's what counts.

## Fickleness

Plenty of people battle with fickleness. In romantic relationships a person is attracted to someone and thinks "Finally I've found the person I'll love forever." But after getting to know the person, and going out a few times, two weeks or a month later, there's someone new.

It can be the same with martial arts styles.

Many martial artists are attracted to the unknown. If it seems mysterious, they want it. Once it's familiar they lose interest. These practitioners think that they can learn all the styles by studying a few months here, a few months there. But this kind of attitude leads nowhere. Their knowledge will always be shallow. A little of everything may work when you're at a buffet, but in the serious things in life—like true love or the martial arts—it doesn't work at all.

Once you've found a style that's right for you, you have to stick with it—even when the going gets tough. Especially then.

The most formidable weapons you can use against fickleness are commitment and faith—in your teacher, your style and yourself.

There's no way to master a martial art without them.

## Ego

You know the guy. He always has to be the star. The center of attention. The best at everything. The teacher's favorite.

Some people come into a martial arts school looking to be the next Bruce Lee. They imagine the teacher will say "You are the best student I've ever had, I will teach you

privately, you will be my disciple."

Even if your teacher feels that you are his best student, it would do both him and you a disservice to single you out. The fact is, most teachers see lots of good students come and go. That's why it takes not weeks but years of dedicated practice and loyalty before the true worth of a student can be judged. There's no way around it.

What's worse is that by projecting a superior attitude you cut yourself off from fellow students. And they are just as important, or even more important to the day-to-day quality of your training than your instructor is!

There is an old saying that many martial arts instructors learn as a way to deal with students whose egos are getting in the way: "When you see a nail standing up, knock it down!"

Your instructor may be willing to apply that idea to you. If so, consider yourself fortunate. Any good instructor understands that egotism comes from fear. Living fearlessly is what the martial arts is all about.

Paradoxically, joining in the group spirit is the quickest way to achieve your personal best. So if you are struggling with ego, here's what you should do: right now, today, help someone else. Help a new student who is being ignored. Sweep a floor. Teach a class. Be an example of the kind of person you admire. Even if you just go through the motions at first, putting yourself in the service of others will become a habit. And nothing makes you stronger. If you can be relentlessly generous, little by little you will make yourself invulnerable to the attacks of ego.

## Perfectionism

When you begin learning a martial art—or anything—you probably won't do very well. Your form may be off. You may lack focus or power.

As you practice you'll get better, just like the seniors, teachers and masters have throughout history, but if you insist on being perfect right away, you'll never have the patience to master anything difficult.

The Buddhist tradition calls upon practitioners to cultivate *shoshin* (beginner's mind), a mind that is open and free, ready to learn. The poet John Keats had a phrase that describes the same thing. He called it "negative capability," the ability to not know, and not be worried about it, making yourself open to experience and learning.

There is a well-known story about an arrogant student who went to visit a renowned master. The student asked the master to teach him, barely disguising the fact that he doubted that this

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master could teach him anything he hadn't heard already.

Impassively the master agreed to teach him. "But first," the master said "Let's have some tea." In a moment the master placed a pair of tea cups on the low table between them, and began to fill them with water from the steaming tea kettle. The student's cup began to overflow with the boiling liquid. "Stop!" the student cried out, "It's already full, can't you see? There's no room for anything more!"

The master just nodded his agreement.

Leave room in yourself to learn. Give yourself a chance to get it wrong. With your teacher's help—and plenty of practice—you'll defeat perfectionism, while at the same time getting closer and closer to perfection.

## Recognize the Opponents

If you can recognize these six tough opponents—impatience, complacency, comparisons, fickleness, ego, and perfection-

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ism—you can learn extremely effective ways to defeat them, or avoid them altogether.

With each victory you'll win something more valuable than any medal or prize; something more impressive than a shelf of trophies; more rare than any championship—you'll win a lifetime of accomplishment as a true martial artist. ★

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