



Indomitable Spirit: *Are we invincible, or what?*

By Scot Combs

In the world of martial arts there is frequent mention of the spirit/mind/body triangle; lots of talk but precious little clarity. If pressed, most of us could come up with adequate definitions for the mind and body portions of the equation, but I believe we'd be hard pressed to define the role of 'spirit' – particularly 'indomitable spirit' – in our arts.

The obvious question to ask here is ... "Why?" Why bother to delve beyond the sport or self-defense applications of our arts? Why go deeper than technique takes us? Like many other activities martial arts can be seen as a small representation of life. Many times we discover that the best stuff isn't where we expected to find it when we began.

For instance, I knew I would love my kids when they were born. It's a natural response to the arrival of a new life. What I didn't expect was to find out how much I *liked* my kids. Just being in their presence, witnessing their small and large successes and failures; to take an active part in mentoring them is a burden so light and full of joy that I can't begin to convey how privileged I feel to be a part of it.

Similarly, when I began training it was all about me. What I wanted to know, what I wanted to learn, how good I could be. Now that I've been an instructor for some time it's all about providing our students with everything they need. That change in perspective is why I believe it is imperative to move beyond ego to something that transcends mere technique. I believe the study of martial arts ultimately brings us face to face with ourselves and our place in the universe. If we approach the internal art with the same focus and determination as we bring to the external art how can we not become better people, better teachers, better friends, parents, communities?

This thesis is an attempt to begin the discussion of how we might define indomitable spirit. It is merely a jumping off point, not a destination. Each martial artist must examine and weigh how the definition of indomitable spirit might affect them. It is an internal workout that can yield positive results if one is so inclined.

It is true that some of the great masters have attached the spirit side of the triangle to Zen. The word spirit is often attached to religious belief or conviction. This type of spirit could be referred to as 'eternal spirit'. While I believe that the sincere martial artist will eventually be led to eternal questions, I don't think this is the kind of spirit referred to by the masters when they use the term indomitable spirit. It seems they are referring to a state of mind or attitude that can be described in terms other than religious.

Some have interpreted indomitable spirit – *fudo shin* in Japanese – as a property that allows us to accurately see what must be done and gives us the persistence to see the task through no matter what. *Fudo shin* is seen as the key that unlocks our unlimited potential. This is the point at which I think the interpretation hangs a left and veers off course. From here indomitable spirit becomes the rough equivalent of invincible warrior and I am not convinced they are the same thing.

Some of the great problems we face in interpretation are language barriers between east and west. Translations between these languages aren't as simple as one might assume. The languages are so different that direct, literal translations are nearly unintelligible. It's like trying to read an Apple computer's hard drive with a Windows based PC. Translators are stuck with the job of interpreting the central meaning of a given text often without the luxury of interviewing the original author. Over the years they have met with greater and lesser successes. Often times, a number of translations are required before the rendered text begins to accurately convey the essential message in its new language.

Language barriers often reveal themselves as terms that a people with shared experience interpret the same way. Imagine how the American term "...hang a left..." might sound to someone with no knowledge of colloquial English. Two questions come to mind; what did this left do to justify capital punishment and exactly what kind of rope might one hang the aforementioned left with? We have a similar problem with concepts coming from east to west. Often we don't understand the deeper meaning in the turn of a phrase and are, therefore, denied the essential intent.

Then we have the problem of interpreting the interpretation. This is like playing the 'Telephone Game' where one person whispers a sentence into the next person's ear. By the time the sentence moves through a room full of people it often doesn't even mean the same thing anymore.

While context gives us some idea as to what indomitable means, it is instructive to see what the dictionary says "...Incapable of being overcome, subdued, or vanquished; unconquerable." Many have interpreted this definition to mean that one who possesses indomitable spirit is unconquerable. Does having indomitable spirit really mean one is incapable of being defeated? Probably not. As I mentioned before, having an indomitable spirit isn't the same thing as being an invincible warrior. I believe the concept of the invincible warrior has been superimposed over the term Indomitable Spirit giving us a muddled interpretation.

Movies and TV as well as stories passed down from teacher to student regale us with tales of the invincible warrior. The incantation that propels our hero goes something like this: "...fight with honor, and you will win". Let's take a closer look at this idea. One can assume at least *some* Japanese soldiers during WWII were imbued with indomitable spirit. Despite the aims of their military dictatorship they fought with honor yet Japan eventually lost the war. The force of technology and numbers overcame indomitable spirit.

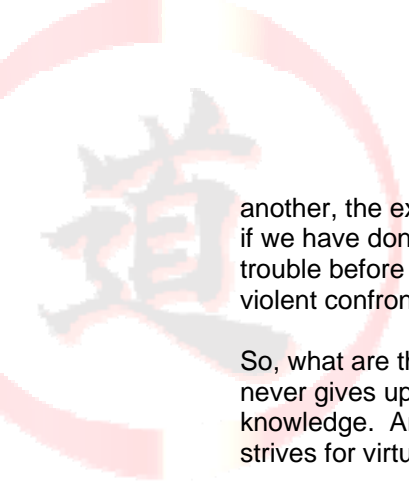
For that matter, we've all known great fighters who lost matches despite having indomitable spirit. I think, sadly, of the time a few years ago when a young Tae Kwon Do champion was killed by someone who hijacked his car and stabbed him with a screwdriver on Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It's easy to see that great skill and/or supreme confidence doesn't always amount to invincibility. Moving from the battlefield to business, we can all find examples of honorable business people who have failed.

The key to clearing up our thinking is in the term itself; Indomitable Spirit; there is no mention of invincible warrior. I believe superimposing invincible warrior over indomitable spirit does a great disservice. For clarity's sake another term must be found to more clearly define what we mean when we say indomitable spirit in order to separate it from invincible warrior.

As an aside, it is important to remember victory and success can be defined in a number of different ways. There are such things as small victories, moral victories and ethical victories which may be revealed in inverse proportion to winning or losing in a contest be it school, sport or business. Internal victories may not be measured by the same standards as external victories.

For instance, one student cheats to come out ahead in a contest while another refuses to cheat and loses. Who *really* won? The person who uses fraudulent means to ensure external victory may gain another "W" for their win column, prizes, accolades and/or money, but by sacrificing virtue for an external victory the cheater has diminished their spirit. In essence, the act of taking a short cut to victory has rendered the cheat less capable of negotiating life at large. Many personal and societal ills could be traced to taking a short cut instead of following the true path. By not seeking the true good, the entire person is diminished. The reverse is true for the honorable student.

Also, the relative values of internal and external victories change as the circumstances of the contests change. In a self-defense situation, where someone is applying unlawful force to



another, the external victory for the defender is paramount. That being said; I would suggest that if we have done our internal work properly we give ourselves a better opportunity to recognize trouble before it becomes a physical contest and are more able to take early steps to prevent a violent confrontation altogether.

So, what are the attributes of this internal indomitable spirit? It seems to me the indomitable spirit never gives up on itself; it knows there is always more to learn and better ways to apply knowledge. Another way to say it might be 'Unquenchable Spirit'. This is the spirit that always strives for virtue – no matter the won/loss record.

The obvious next question is how can we acquire indomitable spirit? One way is via "...the ecstasy of sweating in the dojo" as Shoshin Nagamine, the great Shorin Ryu sensei, puts it; by committing ourselves to excellence, self-discipline and thoughtful consideration of all aspects of martial arts training.

This requires us to go beyond simple technical training. We must dig deeper to consider the mindsets of attacker and defender. We must commit ourselves to researching techniques that will function in the real world and not give up until we have. Moreover, we must consider the telltale signs that warn us of trouble and take action that will prevent a violent encounter.

The indomitable spirit may not result in an invincible warrior. But it can be a catalyst for positive change in us. It can help us see what needs doing and give us the fortitude to finish what we start. The indomitable spirit; the unquenchable spirit expects the best, works for the best and never give in to hopelessness. Perhaps the indomitable spirit; the unquenchable spirit is the spirit of hope.

Thoughts? I'd love to hear them.