



Cambridge & Impington Tang Soo Do Clubs



Fifty Thousand Blocks

A young woman who wanted to learn to defend herself sought a martial arts teacher to teach her. She rode her bicycle to a nearby kung fu school, and asked the teacher for lessons.

"Are you willing to practice" the teacher asked.

"Of course," said the young woman.

"Good," said the teacher. "Your first task is to learn to punch. Do it like this." He showed the young woman the first basic punch. He worked with her until her technique was correct. Then he stepped off the training floor. "What I want you to do is practice the punch fifty thousand times. When you have finished, let me know."

The young woman watched the teacher leave. Fifty thousand times! That would take her days. When the teacher was out of sight, she snuck out the door, got on her bike, and rode down the street.

After a short ride, she saw a tae kwon do school. She parked her bike, went inside, and asked the teacher to teach her.

"Are you willing to practice?" the teacher asked.

"Of course," said the young woman.

"Good," said the teacher. "Your first task is to learn to kick. Do it like this." She showed the young woman the first basic front kick. She worked with her until her technique was correct. Then she stepped off the training floor. "What I want you to do is practice this kick fifty thousand times. When you have finished, let me know."

This time the young woman thought perhaps she might try to do the kick fifty thousand times. She counted ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred. After the hundredth kick, she decided she would never be able to do a thousand kicks much less fifty thousand. She snuck off the training floor and went out to her bike.

After a short ride, she came upon a karate school. Maybe this teacher could teach her to fight without so much repetition. She parked her bike, went inside, and asked the teacher to teach her.

"Are you willing to practice?" the teacher asked.

"Of course," said the young woman.

"Good," said the teacher. "Your first task is to learn to block. Do it like this." He showed the young woman the first basic high block. She worked with her until her technique was correct. Then he stepped off the training floor. "What I want you to do is practice this block fifty thousand times. When you have finished, let me know."

The young woman was disappointed this teacher was just like the others. But she really wanted to learn to defend herself, so she began to practice the block. She counted a hundred, two hundred, three hundred. At four hundred blocks she was positive that she understood the technique. She went to the teacher.

"Teacher," she said. "I am ready to learn something new."



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“Good,” said the teacher. “Have you done the high block fifty thousand times?”

“Yes,” the young woman lied,

“Fine,” said the teacher. “Come with me.” He brought the young woman to a beautifully made weapon rack. The young woman looked at the handcrafted tonfa, nunchaku, and eiku. This is more like it, the young woman thought to herself. I would love to learn to handle one of these fine weapons.

“Reach up to the shelf on the top of the rack,” her teacher said. “On the shelf you will find a bo, a long staff. We’ll need it for your next lesson. The young woman reached up to the shelf. It was far above her head. Standing on tiptoe, she felt around until she felt the bo with the very tips of her fingers. She rolled it forward carefully, but as it rolled over the front lip of the shelf, it slipped through her fingers and dropped. She scrambled to catch it, but it fell, hitting her squarely on the top of her head.

“That’s strange,” the teacher said. “Most people after fifty thousand blocks would have blocked that bo automatically.”

The young woman felt her ears grow red with embarrassment. “I didn’t exactly finish the fifty thousand,” she said

“I didn’t think so,” said the teacher. He picked up the bo from the floor, replaced it on the shelf, and walked off the training floor. The young woman rubbed the growing knot on her head, and began doing high blocks.

Fifty thousand blocks is a modern story. It is based, however, on a ancient practice -- a test of the student’s patience. Some teachers made students wait weeks or even years before they would take them on as students. Other teachers would ask students to do chores for several weeks or months before teaching them martial arts. Other teachers would ask students to repeat a single technique over and over before giving them a new technique. These tests were not as cruel as they may seem at first glance. They were, rather, the teachers’ way of seeing whether the new student had the patience and self-control to begin learning the martial arts. They knew that the martial arts, like many new skills, require years of patient repetition to master. They knew that to learn to fight meant first to learn perseverance.

Perhaps we could all learn something from this story, patience is something we need plenty of in today’s world. We are all too keen to learn everything as quick as we possibly can, like taking the train we are so intent on getting there we miss the scenery outside.

Note to students - keep training and one day you will have practiced a technique fifty thousand times and perhaps then you will understand the technique, when you do smile and remember this.

This tale is from the “Legends of the Martial Arts Masters” by Susan Lynn Peterson