

Hot Chocolate Fighting

A Parable of Martial-Arts Improvement and Motivation



by Keith Pascal

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Martial training is serious and injuries are possible, even when “just” practicing.

Safety should always be a number-one priority.

Services of competent professionals should be sought, to help you gain more expertise in judging self-defense situations and learning appropriate training techniques.

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A man clipping random leaves from plants in his front yard occasionally looked up at the teen across the street.

The short youth stood in front of his house in the middle of the level, clean driveway and practiced front thrust kicks, over and over.

An observer might have noticed the contrast, and philosophically labeled



the two people outside as the yin and yang of the street: The man was older, in his 50s or 60s; the adolescent was maybe 17 years old.

Older and younger.

The man obviously enjoyed working outside. He quietly whistled as he pruned the plants in his eclectic garden. The boy's kicks, on the other hand, lacked energy. There was no enthusiasm in his actions.

The man's movements were precise; the boy's ... a little sloppy.

The youth continued kicking, and the man kept pruning in an area of the front yard that faced the young man's driveway. At about the time that the older of the two switched to watering a patch of dirt with recently sprouted seedlings, the younger switched to flying roundhouse kicks. Still, his movements showed the inner disappointment that he was experiencing.

The older man was surprised that the teen could catch air given his lethargic movements. In fact ...

Suddenly, the boy was down. A kick had failed mid-air, and he tumbled on the pavement of the driveway.



The man instantly turned off the nozzle of the hose, and then ran across the street to the fallen youth.

“It looks like you scraped your forearm a little when you landed. Other than that, are you okay?” The man asked.

“I’ll survive,” said the teen. Then he continued, “I think that it’s not in the stars for me to be a martial artist. It’s not just this fall. No matter what I do, I don’t seem to be any good.”

“What do you mean?” The man helped the boy up, and took a look at the scrape. It wasn’t serious.

Just then the teen’s mother stuck her head out of the front door, looking concerned.

Then man waved to her, “It’s alright, Ashley. Your boy took a little tumble. If you don’t mind, I’d like to make him a cup of hot chocolate in my kitchen and talk with him a little.”

In response, she waved back, and with complete trust in her neighbor, let the screen door close, and vanished from view.

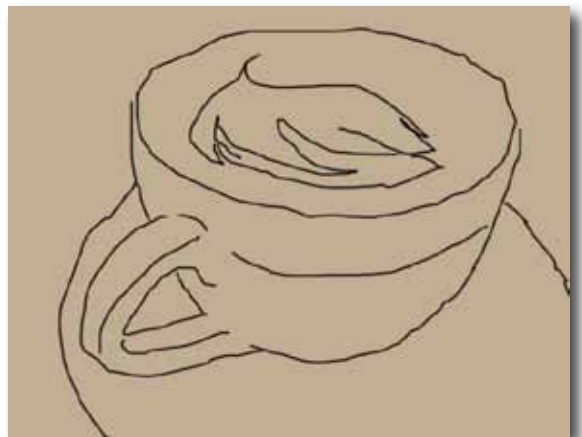
The man led the boy to across the street, up a walkway that bisected the garden, around to the side of the driveway, and in a door. to the kitchen. The man offered the teen a bar stool at his counter.

The young man had forgotten about the scrape on his arm, but the man hadn’t; he handed the teen a dampened paper napkin with sanitizer on it, the kind of wipe you get in a small packet with fried chicken.

As he cleaned his forearm, he waited for the man to give him a pitch about staying in the martial arts.

No such speech came. Instead, the man started talking about making a cup of cocoa.

How curious.



“ ... so, I decided that I wanted the ultimate cup of hot chocolate. Now, of course my first pursuits consisted of locating the best ingredients, but once I created an awesome cup of gourmet, expensive hot chocolate, I decided on another quest ...

“I wanted to be able to create a great cup of steamy, chocolate milk using common, inexpensive ingredients — cocoa and sugar from the bulk section of any supermarket.”

The boy asked, “If the ingredients are the same as everyone else’s, then wouldn’t all cups taste basically the same?”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you? I wanted to see if there was actual *skill* involved in making hot chocolate.”

The man carefully measured out milk in a pyrex container. He poured the milk from the measuring cup into a small, metal pitcher.

He put the pitcher down for a minute and measured cocoa, sugar, and a little cinnamon in to an electric grinder. He added a slice of chocolate from a small bar, left over from Halloween, and blended the dry ingredients for a few pulses.

Then he continued to make the hot chocolate, employing a milk steamer and the powder, measured again, from the grinder.



All of his actions were very precise, but also quick, and efficient.

When he was done, he had two slightly frothy cups of hot chocolate ... made from ordinary, inexpensive ingredients.



“Now, before you taste mine, I want you to think of the last hot chocolate that you drank. Try to imagine the taste of that particular mug of brown goodness. Got an image and taste in your mind? Now, try this cup and try to compare it to your memory.”



The young man sipped the frothy concoction. The taste was wonderful ... the perfect temperature. Just the right sweetness, not sickly sweet. And only a hint of cinnamon.

Could this be the best hot chocolate that the boy had ever tasted? Possibly ... and all with regular ingredients. Amazing.

“So, you’re thinking of quitting martial arts. Is it because you fell in your driveway?”

The boy answered, “I had been thinking about changing hobbies long before. I’m just not very good at punching and kicking. Maybe because I’m short, I can’t get past the longer reach of many of my opponents. I’m just not sure. I have studied a long time. I thought I’d like self-defense and competition, but I’m no good. It’s frustrating.”

“Before you quit, do me a favor. Come watch this guy I know compete in a fighting tournament. I’m not trying to get you to take lessons from him or anything like that. But I know the man; he’s also short and has no problem making martial arts work for him. Maybe watching my friend would give you some encouragement. I hadn’t originally planned on attending the match, but I’ll go with you, if you’d like.”

“I don’t know ...”

The man cut him off. “Do it as a favor to me. And do it as payment for a fine cup of cocoa.”

Three nights after the hot-chocolate talk, the man, accompanied by the



teen, walked into a martial-arts competition being held at the fairgrounds. When they entered the building, they saw a roped-off ring in the middle, with rows of chairs all around.

The quarter finals had already started; the lights around the audience were low; the only interruption to the darkness over the chairs was a giant, bright spotlight focused on the ring in the center.

The man and the youth found seats in a sparsely filled section. Lots of empty chairs surrounded them. The crowd was on the other side of the ring.

The friend appeared in the third match. Like the teen, this man was fairly short; he wore a dark-gray gi and a black belt. He competed against a tall, athletic man with a white gi who also sported a black belt.

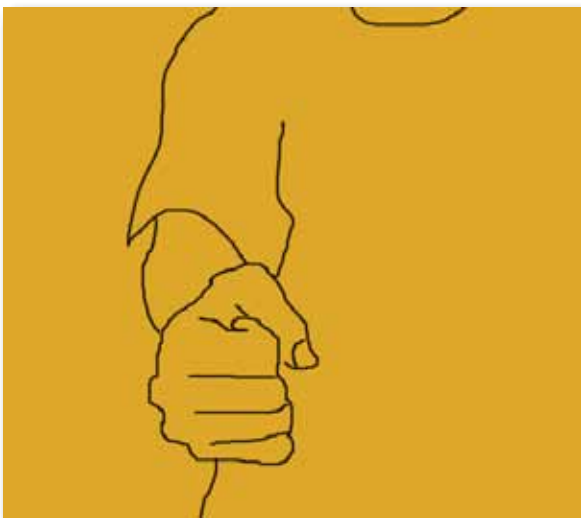
After watching for about 30 seconds, the teen commented to the man, “Your friend is good — clearly dominating the round. He’s a real master of the arts.”

“Hmm. Does my friend have fancier moves than his competitor?”

The teen watched until the end of the first round, before answering. “No, his moves are, well, the basics.”

“What do you mean?”

The young man paused a second before putting his thoughts to words. “He’s just kicking using roundhouses, front kicks, and side kicks. He punches with a vertical fist. There’s nothing magical about what he does.”



The man asked another question. There was nobody around them to hear. “Do you think that maybe he’s using the basics, because there’s no need to get fancy?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you mentioned that he’s controlling the match. I agree with you, from what I can tell. Maybe he’s not using fancy techniques, because he doesn’t have to. It’s just a thought.”

The two stopped talking as the second round got under way. They watched the man's friend circle his skyscraper of a competitor.

Suddenly, he attacked. The attack didn't exhibit blinding speed; in fact, it appeared rather slow. Still, it was effective; he was in, and he stayed in.

In very little time, round two ended.

The teen seemed confused. "How's he winning? He's not doing anything different than what I do. We do the same kicks and very similar punches.

Even his elbow strikes look like mine. And he's certainly no faster. I just can't figure it out."

"Would you like my educated guess?"

The younger of the two nodded and leaned forward.

The man simply said, "He learned how to make a good cup of hot chocolate."

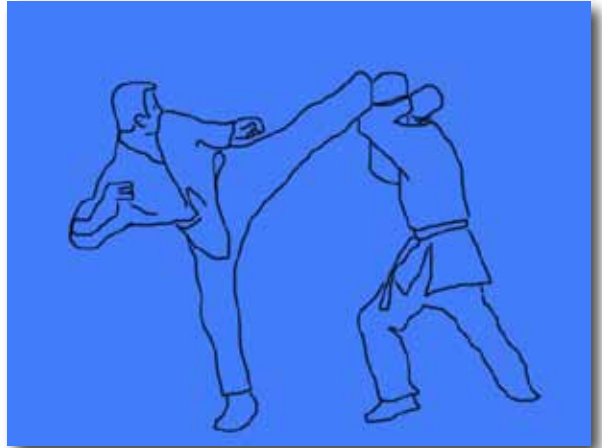
"I'm not sure I understand."

"Well, I can make sense of chocolate in a cup. I couldn't, at first. Sometime ago, I decided that one of my objectives would be to mix a great cup of hot-chocolate milk. In the beginning, I thought that everyone's process was the same. So, I first hunted for different ingredients, but eventually opted for making a great cup of cocoa with inexpensive, bulk powders."

"I remember you mentioning that," commented the teen.

"How do you think I learned the right way to make an excellent cup of ®Willy-Wonka type goodness?"

"By copying the experts?"



“Well, haven’t you imitated your martial-arts teachers? Why aren’t your techniques as effective as theirs?” The man wasn’t trying to be rude. The tone and inflection in his voice showed caring, rather than challenge.

“I don’t know how they make this *stuff* work. That’s why I’m thinking of quitting.”

“Imitation only gets you so far. I got a lot further making hot chocolate when ***I noticed differences***: I hadn’t been measuring ingredients exactly; I guesstimated. The experts measured each and every time. They also seemed to froth the milk less than I did with the steam; the milk does taste sweeter when it has been aerated with hot steam, but not so much. I even found differences in how they added the powder to the milk. I think you noticed that I blended the powders in a grinder, first.”

“With a little chunk of chocolate,” added the teen.

“Your passion doesn’t have to be making hot chocolate. You can improve anything that you do in life with a little more *attention* and *intention*. Look, you kick, and my buddy kicks. You employ short, vertical punches, and so does he. Yet, you acknowledge that his techniques are effective, and yours aren’t. There is a difference somewhere. Find those differences, make the changes, and you’ll improve.”



The next round began.

This time, thinking of the man and his hot chocolate, the teen looked for differences between the techniques in the ring and his own.

He saw that the buddy’s roundhouse kick was narrower than his. It also flowed better, going from floor to target in one smooth motion.

He started to notice other differences.

The timing of the punch, even the distance that the man in the gray uniform kept from his competitor.

And then the match was over.

The shorter martial artist, the man’s friend, was declared the winner.



As the lights in the building turned on, the youth stood up.

He was lost in mental images of martial-arts training -- he had so much new material to practice.

The differences were going to take him a long way in his training.

He was amazed how the task of making a cup of hot chocolate could affect his martial arts.

All of this would help him improve. Enthusiasm for martial arts and self-defense restored.

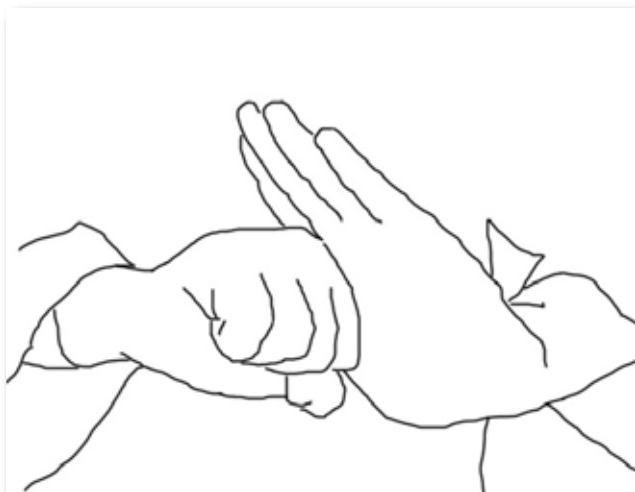
His thoughts turned to the idea of a cup of hot-chocolate made with expensive, gourmet ingredients. There must be martial secrets that were the equivalent of exotic chocolate and spices.

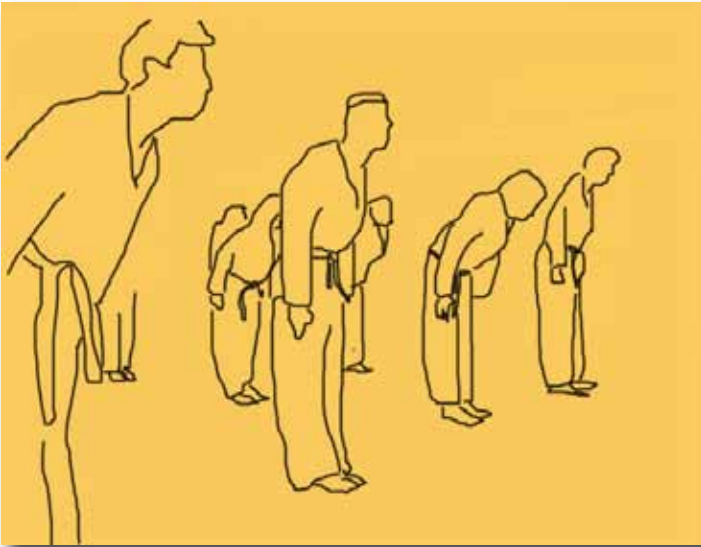
And he wondered about martial artists who knew and used more than just the basics.

He tried to guess where you'd find such a teacher, and if one even existed. He was thinking about this so intently, that he and the man had almost made their way to the ring, before he noticed ...

Martial artists in the audience, the competitors in the ring, the referees, and even the trainers ... were all bowing towards him ... or more specifically, toward the man he accompanied.

They showed respect in one way or another — some with fist to open palm in a martial salute; others stood at attention; and some people bowed.





Everyone seemed a little awed by his neighbor.

This man from across the street was more than a good gardener and an excellent maker of hot chocolate.

###

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