



Left: Odom with his longtime teacher, James Roberts (center) and Roberts' son, in Roberts' dojo in Northern Virginia. The calligraphy on the wall now hangs in the dojo at the Norfolk Karate Academy.

Below: Cook and Carter work on self-defense techniques.

The martial arts, however, can also teach you how to deal with more common conflicts: the everyday violations that upset your personal harmony, from aggressive drivers on the Interstate to surly clerks or co-workers.

Hyams recalls that before he started studying karate he would often react with hostility to such disruptions. He subsequently learned *never* to lash out in anger – for that is the surest path to self defeat, not to mention regret.

I can't claim to have mastered these lessons, nor do I believe that earning a black belt will necessarily bring every student to a state of Zen-calm. But I've seen enough to know that it provides a framework that can *help* you get there.

I thought about all of these things after Odom presented me with my yellow belt, and I often think about them still as I put on my gi to go class.

How long will I stick with this? I'm not sure. Life sometimes gets in the way, as they say. Some students have been waylaid by injuries, others by waning interest or lack of time. I myself have a history of quitting such endeavors. But Odom says that if I stay on track I could have my black belt by the end of 2008.

The prospect remains inconceivable. But to dwell on this would be contrary to the spirit of the whole enterprise. Two ancient bits of wisdom come to mind. One is an old Chinese saying that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a

single step. The other is the notion that it is not the destination but the journey itself that matters.

I was mulling over these two ideas when I went to see Odom in his office a few weeks ago to interview him for this article. At one point in the conversation, he showed me another work of calligraphy that had been presented to him as a gift. I asked him what it said, expecting that it would be some poetic gem of ancient wisdom.

In a way it was, but there was no aura of mysticism to it.

"It says, 'Shut up and train,'" Odom told me with a smile.

I smiled as well, understanding that no further words were necessary. ●



It was such a minor hurdle compared with what I had witnessed a month earlier, but it was significant for me, nonetheless. It was a psychological mark of progress, after all, for all the reasons I mentioned at the outset of this article. It was also a good time to take stock of the benefits of what I'd been studying.

There is the exercise, of course – and the fact that, as many students have noted, karate is a far more *interesting* way of working out – and therefore more motivating – than many other forms of exercise are.

There is also the gratifying sense of being a part of something – part of a group of people who take an interest in one another, and part of an ancient and revered *tradition*.

And yes, there is the fact that I am learning to fight after all these years. I don't know whether there's a warrior instinct in all of us – or even in the heart of every male. But

there's a streak of it in me, and channeling that is healthy.

Most important for me, though, are the effects on the mind – the development of concentration, patience and the ability to remain calm in the face of threats. When Hyams, who studied with Bruce Lee and other masters, wrote in *Zen and the Martial Arts* that karate helps us deal with conflict in everyday life, he wasn't talking exclusively about physical confrontations. Studying karate and related disciplines can certainly prepare you for such encounters. Hyams ends his book, in fact, with an anecdote about a run-in he had with a hostile stranger one night in Los Angeles. He remained calm and ready to fight if need be, he says. But since he was neither afraid nor anxious to prove anything, he was able to resolve the dispute with words and avoid an escalation of violence.