Cowardice and Backbone

By Michael Tse

Over the recent Christmas holiday, I was just like everybody else and needed to go the supermarket to get food and provisions for our holiday dinner. As you can imagine it was very busy with lots of people everywhere. I parked my car in supermarket car park, went to the boot to get all my shopping bags and was just about to go inside when suddenly my car jerked backwards towards me. I knew it must have been hit and so I looked around and saw a big blue car reversing in front of my car. Of course, it must have been this big blue car that had hit mine.

As I made my way round to the front of my car I could see that the back of the blue car was still jammed up against my front bumper, so I walked up to the driver but his window was closed. I knocked on the window, seeing that the driver was a man with a lady passenger. The driver wound down his window said, “What?” in a rude way. I said to him, “You hit my car.” He then opened his door to check and saw the back of his car and the front of mine were stuck together. He moved his car forward and I immediately went to check my car, as I am sure everyone would do as we care about damage of our cars. The driver and his friend both got out of their car and checked as well. I was relieved to see there was has no damage done and so at least we did not have to make a report.

Meanwhile I looked at the driver. He was wearing a big dark blue over coat and from the way he talked I could tell he had “money”. Then he said loudly, “Oh, there is no damage,” then turning to his friend said, “Let’s go shopping.” He was totally ignoring me and I was little bit annoyed by that. I also noticed his English was not that good so most likely he was originally from another country. I looked him and said, “Although there is no damage, I think you should apologise.”

He was obviously irritated by that and he proceeded to swear at me and then repeat that there was no damage done to my car. His friend also said, “What is the problem if there is no damage?” Then they both continued to walk toward the supermarket. While they were walking I called out across the road “How about I hit your car just like that and walk away!” He looked back and started walking back toward me. At the end he stopped very close to my face and I could tell he wanted to hit me. He was a head taller than me and it was obvious he was trying to intimidate me. Although his eyes looked very tense, he did not hit me. Even though he was so close, I did not back off, but just stood where I was and stared back at him. He angrily swore again and said to me, “What’s your problem?”

I repeated what I said to him and he just kept swearing. Finally he turned and walked back to the supermarket. Then I shouted at him “Where did you come from?” thinking that if he was reminded that he lived here not as a first time citizen but as a guest, he might change his attitude. He

shouted back to me, “ I come from China!” I knew there was nothing I could do, so I got into my car and left.

Of course, most of you will think if he tried to hit me he would be the one to suffer and you might be right. In a situation where I think I am right I will insist and stand up against others even if they are bigger than me. Alternatively if I am wrong, even if they are smaller than me I will apologise. That is the correct principle and that is having “backbone”.

I have seen so many people who think if someone is old, gentle or weak that they can take advantage of them. While these people will dare to intimidate weaker people, when someone stronger or more powerful faces them, then they be like a puppy trying to cheer up the leader of the pack. Chinese say these people, “They hate people who are rich and annoy people who are poor. 憎人富貴厭人窮.” We also can translate this to be someone who is not good for anything but always complains whether others are successful or fail. They themselves never get anything done.

I have a student who once said to me that he felt himself a coward and could not face any threat. In the area where he worked there were gangs around. Sometimes he would catch their eye and they would say to him, “What are you looking at?” He would be frightened and look away. So he was never comfortable working in that area and in the long term it would cause him psychological problems. In the animal world, when one animal is defeated it will become afraid to face the winner again and will sometimes even be forced from the pack.

However, we should not have to live under threat. No one will be happy living like that. If we are not happy, then later we will be insecure and sad. Firstly we will be afraid of one thing and then we will be afraid of many things. Eventually, we will become ill, then very ill and die. Our energy is very interesting, if we are strong, we do not need to be mean or aggressive, we can still be calm. Bullying and being violent does not mean someone is strong. Actually, this shows they are insecure. True strength is equal to bravery. A braver person will not be afraid when they face anyone of any authority. That is true strength.

When I was little and living in Hong Kong, there were many triad gangsters. The gangs liked to recruit new members to become part of their triad. When I was at school, only 13 years old, there was another boy who was same age as me. He tried to become my friend, but in the end he just wanted me to be the member of his triad gang. I knew this was bad but as a little boy I was afraid. Eventually I told my father. One day when my friend brought his gang leader and other members to visit me. My father went to see them with one of his close friends who understood how triads worked. At the end they did not bother me anymore.

At that time, even though I was small, I knew right and wrong. It took me a while to decide to tell my father. For one, I thought that boy was my friend and I was not sure what might happen to him as my father could have called the police. Instead, though, he decided to talk to the gang’s leader. This meant he used wisdom to face the problem. Wisdom is the key to finding the solution of any problem. Having wisdom is just like a master playing chess. When the master makes a move in chess, he will know what the result will be and what his opponent will do afterward. This takes a lot experiences and knowledge. Reading history will help people develop wisdom, because history tells us a lot about human successes and mistakes. Moreover, listening to older people who can tell you their experiences will also help to save us to making a lot of wrong turns if we can listen to their advice.

We all are afraid of certain things, but avoiding them will not help. We need to face them, but we also need to know how to face them. We cannot just use aggression or do whatever we want to try and solve the problems as this might cause more damage. My father was a wise and good man

and went to talk to the gangsters, facing them instead of running away. Of course, they knew where we lived, but I also knew where my friend lived, so the situation was 50:50. My father and his friend must have talk sensibly, so in the end they left me alone. They showed wisdom and bravery.

If we have the problem with work or with family, we should not behave like people do in movies. We should not be aggressive and shout at everything. We need to be calm and find the right situation to talk about things. We also need to think about the other sides' feelings. One important thing is not to just talk about the past. Instead we should try and focus on the situation at hand. As soon as we talk about the past this become personal. We need to be understanding and reasonable and not emotional. Being emotional will not and cannot solve a problem. Sometimes there are certain things we cannot deal with at that moment, so we must either let it go or wait for the right time. Human skill is very difficult as human beings are very complicated.

The other way to build up backbone is Hard Qigong and martial art training. I was insecure and weak when I was young and often I did not understand what other people were talking about and how to communicate with people. I am sure there are many young people and even adults who have that problem. This is because our Qi is not strong. But practising Hard Qigong can build up our strength. Afterwards you might even surprise yourself and ask, "How is that I have that kind of energy and strength?" However, I have seen many of my students change as they develop their Hard Qigong training. I see them become more settled and focused and knowing their direction. I see them also develop their confidence. Of course, it is only when you experience it that you will really understand. Hard Qigong builds up our bones, muscles and tendons. The breathing techniques are amazing and very unusual.

Training martials art such Chen Taijiquan and Wing Chun Kung Fu are also good for backbone. In these skills, because there is Tui Shou and Chi Sau training, this helps us to confront the situation. When we train Tui Shou and Chi Sau we need to spar with our partner, so it is not just training a solo form. Personally I find people who only practise solo forms have problems when it comes to real confrontations and they cannot use the skill they have learnt or if they try, the confrontation becomes messy and the skill is not clear at all.

Therefore, to develop backbone, we need to develop both mental and physical strength and wisdom. Once we have that, we can be confident. Confidence will help us do many things and this is true bravery.