

The Art, the Martial, and Unconscious Competence

Okay, I get it. Everyone trains in a martial art for his or her own reasons. No argument there. So I can't fault Mary if she wants to master karate kata as a performance art or Barry if he wants to preserve his karate techniques exactly as they were handed down from Kyoshi Kiyoshi K. Oshi. But I would ask practitioners to step out of their arts for a moment and look down at what they see, just to make sure what they see is not something they want to look down at.

Did you begin studying a martial art to win tournament trophies? If so, and you found a school that lets you excel at that, then peace upon you, my son. Did you begin your study to become the person who carries the art intact to the next generation? If so, and you have risen to the position where you can do that, blessed thou art. Most of us, however, began a martial art either to stay in shape (it is more interesting than the stationary bicycle) or for self-defense. If you are in the first group, you are studying the art side of a martial art. If you are in the second, you probably are emphasizing the martial side.

Nothing wrong with a mixed bag, to be sure, but consider what happens to people when they get more mature in their art. They tend to emphasize one aspect over the other and that emphasis might actually get in the way of what they want. For example, I entered judo in 1964 for self-defense. Soon, I got caught up in the sport, so self-defense took second place. I later developed a new motivation: self-development through self-defense. Still later, my motivation was to find ways to make my techniques more efficient and teach the martial arts more efficiently to greater numbers. However, if I did not maintain some emphasis on self-defense, what would I be teaching? How could I reach younger, less knowledgeable students who had not as yet modified their motivations?

I find that most martial arts (or schools of a martial art) have a main emphasis as mentioned in our very first article in this series. That emphasis tends to be self-defense, self-development, sport competition, practice an art form, or a cultural or spiritual study; but most martial arts, at least the traditional ones, have an unspoken overriding emphasis that students absorb unconsciously: self-defense. Students want to be proud of their art and, to that end, want to become exemplary representatives of that art. As a result, they perform the self-defense movements they are taught with an emphasis on the art's signature formalism. A block from a Shito cat stance looks different than a block from a Goju cat stance. Both vary from a Shorin cat stance or Shotokan back stance. Students are constantly told that they are doing the technique wrong if it doesn't look like a textbook photo of their style. As a result of this strict formalistic training, they become excellent representatives of their arts—at least as far as they eye can see—but as such, they have not become full products of their arts. Their bodies can reproduce a representative image their art, but they have not allowed the art to produce them.

“Wait!” you say, “My art has had a BIG effect on me. It has produce a good chunk of the me that is.” Okay, I'll take you at your word. I expect that any martial discipline can strongly affect most long-term students; but I am not taking about your self-development, I am talking about self-defense. Try this. Have

someone in the dojo attack you, even if it is only a standard lunge-punch. React in self-defense. Have a third person take a photo or video of the action. Now, upon reviewing the images, do you look like your art or not? If you don't, do you judge yourself as needing training? In other words, how much are you measuring the reactions you had against the style you studied? How much has the style affected you so that you subconsciously wish you could look more like a textbook example while completely ignoring the fact that the attacker was both stopped and countered? If he was not stopped and countered, then perhaps the art you are aspiring to imitate is not serving its self-defense purpose. If you did stop and counter him, why do you care what you looked like? Isn't the art supposed to get into your nervous system such that it can react instantaneously in self-defense? No one takes a photo of you on the street. If the art has done its job, you made Mr. Nasty crash and burn. *The art has produced you!* Imagine how incomplete your self-defense development would be if you reacted with perfect form, but it was you who crashed and burned.

Mastery (of any skill) supposedly has four stages. The first is **unconscious incompetence** where you don't know what you don't know. Imagine yourself giving a lecture on the history of the glockenspiel. You have never even considered looking at a glockenspiel let alone researching its history, so you don't know what knowledge you are missing. Having become fascinated with the instrument, you begin to research it on the web, thus stumbling on stage two: **conscious incompetence**, where you begin to realize how little you know. After several years of studying the history of the glockenspiel, learning some glockenspiel tunes and visiting the Austrian Glockenspiel Kunsthau, you have become quite knowledgeable, but if someone asks you a question, you still need to look up the details. You are now **consciously competent**. Only after decades of collecting, playing, and reading books about the glockenspiel can you react to a glockenspielian question with an instant, confident response. Congratulations, you are now **unconsciously competent**.

In teaching a recent seminar, I noticed that few of the visiting black belts understood how their own techniques worked. They had become completely comfortable with their art in their own dojo doing the exercises, the kata, and the engagements their style required, but they had not allowed their style to raise them above conscious competence. Instead of following my instruction, they used their art to roughly approximate my movements, and their self-defense failed almost as badly as did that of the beginners. When put in a new situation, their art actually got in their way! Their development had stopped (or at least slowed down significantly) at a stage where they could competently reproduce their art. They had not allowed their art to produce in them that which their art was designed to produce: unconscious competence in self-defense.

As exemplary representatives of their arts, they poorly represented what their arts were created for in the first place. A martial style is a university of learning. Once you graduate a university and are employed in the real world, however, you can't run back to Professor Glockenspiel to find the answer. Your education either helps you perform successfully, or, having been taken too literally, it gets in your way.