

...and the Art is Long

Life is short and the art is long. Opportunity is fleeting, experiment dangerous, and judgment difficult.

—An aphorism of Hippocrates

And, one might add, “The way is deep.”

Ultimately, the lesson to be learned when studying a martial art is “*Carpe diem* [Seize the day]!” You think you have all the time in the world to get better and, frankly, you only have the time that your life expectancy, your health, and blind luck allows you. Many years ago, a student of mine took a leave-of-absence, telling me he’d be back as soon as he set up his new business, six months or so. “Don’t worry about me,” said he, “I’m in it for the long run.” I knew then that I would never see him again. People fool themselves, thinking that they can stop their momentum, especially when they feel it slowing down, that they can take a break and then restart the momentum at will. Well, they can restart that momentum, but it takes more will than many can muster. The way is deep. There is a lot to learn and little time to learn it in.

But another lesson is “Rushing blindly ahead brings misfortune.” One might add that rushing ahead prevents the thorough understanding of one’s lessons. Hippocrates or one of the many medical people who contributed to the aphorisms of Hippocrates also says, “Experiment is dangerous”.

Fortune, as the old saying goes, favors the prepared, so just because you are in the martial arts for the long run does not mean you can afford not to seize the day, yet rushing blindly ahead (that is, seizing the day when unprepared—experimenting blindly) is simply showing that you have not learned the lessons long years of training has provided.

Consider Aaron, a student who always works hard, trains on a regular schedule, supports his school and art, and who, with dedication and hard work, makes up for the fact that he is not the most physically talented or the quickest learner. After 15 years of faithful training, Aaron is shocked to see Brett pass him in rank with only 10 years in the arts and a less dedicated training schedule. Sensei is surreptitiously grooming Aaron to take over his school, but Aaron makes the mistake of expressing his jealousy, cutting back on his training and, quietly disappointed in his teacher, neglecting to support the school in any manner other than attending an occasional class.

Now consider Brett. In Sensei’s mind, although he deserved his rank, Brett was moving too fast, was too rank-oriented, and did not understand the little details that might make him a master eventually. Aaron did—at least up until the point when a character weakness put him out of contention not only for taking over the school, but even for his next rank. Was Sensei being too nitpicky? Was he being too furtive? Or did he correctly wait until the flow of training revealed the real character of the person he had tentatively chosen?

Brett suddenly found himself the highest-ranking person in the school, but was unprepared to teach advanced lessons, to understand student psychology, or to help Sensei in any way except to teach beginners, something brown belts were able to do. Having cared only about his own rank progression, he did not see that

studying in depth occasionally meant slowing down his own movement forward. Aaron, on the other hand, having trained in depth without trusting that his dedicated efforts would produce rewards, squandered his hard-earned status in one sudden breakdown. Both were men of little faith: Brett did not trust investing in the future; Aaron did not trust that the future is always one step ahead. Brett did not see that the art is long. Aaron did not see that judgment is difficult.

For Sensei, as Hippocrates implies, experimenting with any other way but the long, hard, traditional way of judging his own students would have been more dangerous than missing an opportunity to find a successor. The art is long. And, one might add, the way is deep.