

Like Second Nature

After teaching my forty-third review of the details of one-step sparring, trying to get students to relax and respond with ease, I reminded them that although we may leave training on this subject for a while, we must always return to it because just when they think they are getting good, they will forget to do one thing or another and will need the review. “I want to make receiving, off-balancing, and retaliating like second nature.” The, the old Lerner and Loewe song from *My Fair Lady* niggling in my noggin, I sung, “Like breathing out and breathing in.”

Agastya, his clever teenaged mind realizing something I did not, said, “Actually, that would be first nature.”

“Hmm,” Bill rejoined, “so what would be second nature, then, eating?”

“Why do they call it second nature, anyway?” I asked, “I guess it is supposed to be almost as natural as nature.” In that case, of course, breathing out and breathing in, as Agastya suggested, is a poor example of “almost as natural as nature”. Flinching is natural and I was trying to get the students to react with *ippon kumite* as naturally as they would flinch, but little in martial arts is really natural, so we develop trained responses instead. I would suggest, however, that even the second nature of well-trained responses has a way to go before it is truly like nature and that, with proper training, people can integrate their first-natural flinch responses with second-natural trained responses. In fact, Sensei Vince Morris (International Society of Okinawan/Japanese Karate-do) has made a career out of showing how kata movements can be thought of as formalizations of natural flinch responses to attack stimuli.

But the skills we learn in *ippon kumite*, notably Distancing, Recognition of Attack, Timing, Deflection of Attack, Target of Retaliation, et al. cannot all be based on natural flinches. Rather, the initial reception, especially when taken by surprise, is based on a flinch response, which when educated, can be rapidly modified into a trained response. The flinch is first nature, the well-trained response is second nature and converting the flinch into the trained is first-and-a-half nature. Unfortunately, for many martial artists, the flinch is considered an incorrect and undesirable initial response. They would prefer a trained response that in application would actually be closer to third nature, precisely *because* the desirable, stylistically proper form is unnatural.

How can an artificial *ippon kumite* ever be natural, near-natural, or even second nature? Ah, this is one of the mysteries of karate, sayeth the wise sensei. One trains, sayeth he, until it becomes natural.

Let me address this a little differently by saying that Yes, artificial karate movements can eventually become more natural, but seldom do they become “like breathing out and breathing in”. Instead, the training gets into the muscles and mind such that it comes out as educated flinch responses, still flinching mind you, but in a way that appears less like a Nervous Norviss and more like a Celluloid Chuck Norris. Too often, we think that since we train repeatedly to attain perfect form, we will respond with perfect form. Sure we will, if only the

attacker attacks with a perfect lunge punch after having taken a ready position directly in front of us (and if Sensei is around to say “Go!”)

In actual application, once one has a moment to breath, one may be able to deliver a perfect sidekick or reverse punch, but in the heat of a sudden attack, it is more likely that one will react, at least for the initial moment, like a new passenger on the haunted hayride at Halloween. We can never know, therefore, if how we might react will work. We can only know if what we intend to react *with* will work.

This subject is continued next week in “Falsifiability”