

Plateaus

In the traditional martial arts, ranks are the most obvious plateaus. In addition to belt ranks, there are also broader plateaus: beginner, intermediate, advanced. Plateaus of another kind are junior student, senior student, assistant instructor, instructor, dojo operator. There are various honor titles, as well. These are all external markers for what is supposedly demonstrable development in skill and knowledge. Skill and knowledge is fine, but what about the personal development, the character building for which the traditional arts are known? You might recognize a plateau within yourself, but when you reach it, few if any of your friends and fellows will be shaking your hand, taking you out for a meal, or throwing a party in your honor.

Let's consider the idea of staying with some sort of training regimen (albeit a changing one) over years and decades. That takes a lot of mental endurance as well as the more obvious physical effort. To simply put on your *gi* after you have had a fight with a loved one, or when your child just flunked out of seventh grade, takes a sort of "attitudinal stamina", sometimes called "intestinal fortitude", that many people fail to have, and no one considers a plateau; but, ask yourself if you could have continued your training in similar circumstances when you were a only beginner or intermediate. Haven't you really used the martial arts to develop a sort of mental endurance that you would not have even considered earlier in life? And is that not a sort of plateau?

Your initial motivation for studying a martial art was your own; the arts did not help it develop. But then you found that in order to benefit from the arts, you had to make some sort of serious commitment. That too was mostly from your existing character, aided only slightly from the benefits the arts proffered up to that point. Now, having committed to studying budo and having followed through with actions that manifest themselves in (a) your attendance, (b) your personal training, and (c) your supplemental learning (books, videos, seminars, etc.), your personality and your budo begin to merge. Do you choose your actions or does the training you chose years earlier create a foregone conclusion that those are the actions you will choose?

Motivation produces **commitment**, which in turn produces **action**, which then makes further motivation quite a bit easier—a nice causal loop that is part of any personality building sequence. In other words, when you reach a plateau, the next plateau seems a little more reachable.

Plateaus are related to goals and goal setting, but too often when we think of reaching a goal, we use the term "plateau" to imply that we are stuck on a ledge in the middle of a mountain climb. A plateau need not be a negative concept. So what if you are on a ledge? Use the time to take a well-deserved rest and enjoy the view of the valley. Think of all those guys who not only never made it to the ledge you are on, but never even set foot on this or any mountain path. Whether it is on this specific ledge or not, at some point you will have reached your final plateau. That is not a bad thing; in fact, you may now start again either on another climb or in helping others reach the plateau you have reached—and perhaps go beyond.

A reporter once asked Roberta Peters why, after decades as a prominent coloratura soprano, she decided to give up singing in favor of being an impresario. She was at the top of her game, after all, and had no

experience whatsoever in putting shows together. She said simply that she had already climbed the famous soprano mountain. Peters would no doubt find it nearly impossible to be as successful at her second career, but having reached lofty plateaus, she did not let herself be stuck there.

By the way, you can't get stuck on a plateau unless you first have climbed to it.