

## The Sand Pile Model

There are famous and thus enviable people in every human endeavor. The field of martial arts has its competition stars, its well-known authors, and its *meijin* instructors. We assume that they are famous because they are “good”, not thinking through what it means either to be good or to be famous, or even if fame is enviable.

The road up the mountain, whether the mountain is success or fame, is not so much a road as it is a line of sight. And the mountain is not so much a mountain as it is a pile of sand. Picture yourself at the beach. Instead of scooping bucketfuls of wet sand to make a mound, take a couple of bucketfuls of dry sand and let it drop a few grains at a time on one spot. It will, of course, form a mini-mountain, but in doing so, its base will spread out as its peak rises and falls, rises and falls. Having emptied your buckets, imagine an ant-sized climber on the mountainside. He has no ropes or pitons and no ledges or crags to hold onto. As he climbs, the mountain occasionally slips out from under him, sometimes bringing him down a few body-lengths, sometimes sliding him to the base.

I am always amazed at those in our culture who happen to achieve fame. Many not so worthy people have hired a helicopter to take them to the top, and look like they are in a pretty enviable position. I am even more amazed at those who climb up the mound themselves, but I am absolutely astounded at those who manage to stay balanced at or near the sandy peak for decades. Bravo, bravo, bravo. It is a difficult mountain to rest upon since it seems to constantly change shape and threaten collapse.

While success and fame conform to this model, being “good” (i.e. being skilled) does not. Unless one lets oneself get ridiculously out of shape or out of practice, “good”, although it may not become “better”, seldom reverts to “no-goodness”. Skilled seldom degrades to unskilled. I am likewise amazed at how good some famous martial artists are. Joe Lewis may not be young enough to compete against heavyweight kick-boxers any more, but his skill and knowledge are sometimes only short of astounding. I am even more amazed at those whose skill has had a long duration. Bill Wallace still kicks like nobody’s business, despite a couple of hip operations that threatened to slide him to the bottom of the pile. And I am astounded at those who not only stay at or near the top yet continue to be worthy of the position—masters who are still involved with research and self-improvement. Sure, someday we will all get too old to kick like Wallace or spar like Lewis, but let’s hope that we continue to do whatever it takes to maintain our skills and grow if we can. If not, then that skill in the martial arts worthy of making us famous or successful is probably built on sand.