

Spiraling from the Base and the Steeple Chase

The assistant teacher asks, “How long must I train colored belts before I can teach the senior class?” The advanced student asks, “How long must I train in pre-arranged one-step sparring before I can go on to free one-step sparring?” The intermediate asks, “How long must I do basics before I can skip them and go on to kata application?” I suppose if I answered “7.3 months” it would seem too long to them, but at least they would accept the answer. As it is, I say with only a very small tinge of sarcasm, “Never.” They think I am being the esoteric sensei, but I am telling the truth. Sure you can spend less time on basics, or pre-arranged sparring once you’ve done the exercises for decades, but you never outgrow your need for milk, that is, for the foundation that both fortifies you and with which you are building.

After what seems to be a long slog up the foothills, the tree cover thins and the peak is in sight. Now, according to the geometry we all learned in high school, straight up would be the shortest distance to one’s glorious arrival at the top. But geometry does not account for leg muscles, joints, and the time it takes to hammer in a safety line. Taking a path that coils around the mountain at a lesser incline may measure twenty times longer but it is surer and takes in more sights along the way. It may be necessary, even desirable, to climb vertically from time to time, but if you think you will get to your goal more quickly by taking a constantly vertical route, you just may be fooling yourself. Even if you get there a little faster, you may find the quick climb was not the experience you needed.

A fellow instructor and I were once sharing a student when I explained that he was a good student but was dying to learn advanced stuff before spending time at a more basic level. “Can he handle the basics?” my colleague asked.

“Yes, pretty well, but...”

“Then why shouldn’t he learn the advanced stuff?”

Okay, let’s be a little more precise here. I am one of few teachers who introduce advanced material along with intermediate material so that students see what the intermediate develops into. But I also think that jumping solely to the advanced material cheats one of a foundation that one will need again and again to stabilize one’s development. Jumping to advanced material also makes the student think he is better than he is.

The student we shared eventually studied exclusively with my colleague and then left after a few months because he wasn’t getting the training he wanted at the rate he wanted it. In other words, he wanted to sprint straight up my colleague’s mountain rather than taking a more careful, circuitous path.

One seldom leaves behind what one is taught; rather, one builds on it. So perhaps the mountain-climbing analogy does not serve as well as a building analogy. When the building seems a little tipsy, one checks the foundation. It is difficult to accept, but sometimes one has to partially deconstruct the building in order to rebuild the base. If you want to build the steeple first, fine, but you will still have to build the rest of the structure and haul your spire up to the pinnacle. My point? Inspiration does not replace perspiration.

Kids want their first rank right away. Intermediates want to get to the black belt material sooner than the sensei wants them to. Assistant instructors want to be masters before they've mastered basic, intermediate, advanced, and instructional skills. Oh, they think they have already mastered all that, but the reason they joined a dojo or signed on with an instructor in the first place was for the instructor to both teach them what they needed to know and judge when they had mastered enough to move on. The instructor, if he is a good one, got where he is not simply by gaining rank at a vertical sprint, but by spiraling up from the base so that he could review each lesson, each skill as often as possible on the way up to the peak.

There, he may have the wherewithal to construct a building—perhaps one with a steeple that others chase by trying to go straight up the mountain.