

Talent vs. Genius

Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target no one else can see.”—Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer, the first Western philosopher to incorporate Eastern ideas, was known for his this-worldly view of humanity. He believed that Will (personal desires) was what made people miserable, and that only by denying the Will could one escape misery. Although he did not practice Asian martial arts, and although he by no means encouraged a philosophy that I can support, his observation on Talent and Genius is succinct, accurate and, in my humble opinion, is applicable to budo.

His quote explains what I have been trying to explain to students regarding the difference between a skilled student and a master. I do not mean to suggest that every master is a genius, nor that masters can somehow do without skills, rather I want to emphasize that the ability to jump small buildings in a single bound is a skill while circumnavigating the need for building-hopping is the subject of genius.

I look with envy at 16-year olds who can kick quickly and accurately, using their bodies and I used to use my body in high school gymnastics. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to sprint the hundred in twelve seconds or perform a cast-and-catch on the parallel bars again? I could dedicate my training hours to performing sequential tornado kicks finishing with a jump, turn back kick and wow both my peers and my students, setting an aspiration that would dedicate them to sincere training and physical development. However, I think that the fantasy of teenage ability in a mature body is both inspiring and simultaneously unrealistic. Fortunately, the years have a way of converting one's experience from skill to talent and from talent to training-wisdom and from training-wisdom to a state one might call mastery. Those who have once mastered the vaunted triple tornado kick with a jump-spin back kick finish may no longer possess that skill although they can teach it because they have lived it. More importantly those who may never have mastered that difficult kicking combination might still be able to teach it if they have mastered muscle kinesthetics and understand what makes the sequence work.

Years ago, Frederick Lovret in his privately published magazine *Bujin*, defined a master as he who can teach a black belt something new about white belt techniques. Not a bad shorthand definition. So if a master has gone beyond simply repeating a set of skills well and is knowledgeable about martial skills on a more generic level, what then would be the characteristics of a martial arts “genius”? If we adhere to Schopenhauer, the genius must be someone who not only sees a target no one else can see, but also hits that target. Think of geniuses in other subjects—Leonardo, Bach, or Einstein, for example. They not only executed what they did well, but also came up with new wrinkles on old subjects that no one else had thought of—or at least no one else had followed through on. After the High Renaissance, the awesome talents and approaches of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael gave way to artists who arguably had as much talent but could not reach the heights of perfection of the geniuses who came before them. When you can't compete, you change the game. Therefore post-Renaissance artists, in attempt to use the great masters as their ideals, made adjustments in style (notably

Mannerism) that resulted in their being judged by a different standard altogether. Were they geniuses of a new standard or talented “students” who, in trying to achieve an ideal, were bound to fall short of their mentors?

Were the founders of the martial arts iconic geniuses who hit targets no one else could see, or just talented teachers who hit targets no one else could hit at that time? No one really knows, but if we are to assume a higher standard for the martial arts of the future, we had better consider the possibility that some of what we revere as genius might just have been personal talent made public. That does not mean that we stop being reverent, but it does mean that we recognize that talents can be surpassed, especially by those who can hit targets no one else can see.