

Training Toward Perfection

Time will be important to the man who has no patience.

Waiting for a loved one, 10 minutes is a long time.

Training for perfection, 50 years is just a beginning.

—WONG Chung-yen (teacher of Chatan Yara)

Martial artists know there is no such thing as perfection. There are moments of near perfection, there and gone, but one never arrives at perfection. Still, committed martial artists keep training long past the age where their bodies are capable of the perfect kick, the perfect kata, or the perfect kumite combination.

Training toward perfection may be pie-in-the-sky, but it is, after all, pie. At the risk of mixing metaphors: we may miss the mark with nearly every shot, but we will never hit the mark without firing.

How can anyone delude himself so completely that he trains toward a goal that has no deadline and is impossible to describe? Every book or CD on goal setting tells us to set high but realistic goals so that we may be encouraged by achieving each step along the way, but perfection is neither realistic nor does it seem to have measurable steps. Goal setting tells us to describe our goals in detail—the clearer the image, the more real and thus the more motivating it becomes, but perfection is indescribable and remains admittedly, consciously, undeniably unreal. Goal setting insists that we set a deadline so we can both measure our progress and be stimulated to action by the impingement of time, but the only deadline that pertains to perfection is the “dead” part of the line. Still, dedicated martial artists strive as if they could succeed and if they will live forever.

So many times in articles like this one, I have alluded with disapproval to the fantasy world some martial artists live in. I have advocated testing one’s training to make sure techniques work in the way we expect they should. In short, I have championed those traditional martial arts that steer clear of self-delusion. Yet I train, as do so many *budoka*, toward becoming a martial arts *hanshi* (pastmaster), not for fame’s sake, but to be the best I can at what I do.

We martial artists aim at mastery by aiming at impossible perfection while celebrating our forever falling short. When you are ridiculously young yet not too old to be ridiculous, you set your sights on leaping small buildings and being more powerful than a trained locomotive. As you mature, your idea of perfecting yourself is not being the biggest, baddest, or best, but being better than you were yesterday. There comes a time, however, when you lose the vertical trajectory and recall that last year you could spar all six of the black belts in the class, one after the other, while this year you can only handle five of them. Yet you keep training, your idea of perfection being not quite as imperfect of those who do not train. The process is a bell curve and no one, not even the greatest athlete, the greatest master, or the most skillful practitioner ever reaches perfection. But if you train sincerely, learn sincerely, and teach sincerely, that bell curve is just a little higher at its peak, the peak you

left behind you, once you cannot train anymore. Because you kept training, and learning, and teaching, it reaches up more closely toward perfection each generation.

The curve is not really a symmetrical bell curve. It has its own imperfection, which ironically, contributes to the cumulative perfection passed on to the next generation: it starts off low but takes a steep climb over a relatively short amount of time. I have often told my students that my green belts (about half-way to black belt in our system) are about as good as I was when I earned my first-degree black belt. Oh sure, I knew a little more material back then, but I could not perform it with the skill or ease that my students employ, nor did I have the variations and knowledge of principles they have. Their ascending bell curve line is steeper than mine was.

As I have mentioned, the peak of the curve is also higher than the previous generation's. The descending line, although it may not fall off any more steeply than in previous generations, does not fall to the depths of previous generations, nor does it fall off as soon. In other words, martial artists live longer and train longer at a higher level of skill than in previous times.

So the apparently un-measurable goal of training toward perfection can be measured over time. A short-term measurement, however, will be deceptive. In fact, in the short or medium term, perfection may seem to be eluding us. We may look back at the giants of yesteryear and wonder why we could not be as good as they. *Orange* you deceiving yourself? We need to compare ancient *apples* with current ones. We may not be as skilled as was Itosu or Mabuni, but are we as skilled as their average students were? I suggest that we are. I suggest that, with a few exceptions and detours, every generation raises the final level at the rightmost down-slope of the curve, skewing the perfection of the bell in favor of the perfection of our fellow martial artists.