Why Perfection, although Impossible, is Important

To err is human, yet we still seem to step confidently forward as if we could, at long last, achieve perfection.

Perfection is freedom from error. We praise dancers whose performance is not only emotionally but also athletically perfect (at least to our spectator’s eyes) and we praise basketball players who never seem to miss a 3-pointer. We measure even the lowly averages of baseball players against the ideal of batting a thousand even though the highest of averages was back when Ted Williams was in the 400s. We love to see perfection.

Yet, perfection, ironically, is not necessarily our highest ideal. We prefer singers and pianists who affect us emotionally rather than those that render each written note perfectly. We prefer diving catches in baseball, rather than the shortstop, who positioning himself correctly in the first place, never has to show an athletic extreme. We prefer kata performances that make us envision the fight rather than those illustrate photo-worthy postures.

Still we aim toward perfection if only to have a standard to measure the students against.

There are martial arts that concentrate on form and style, sometimes to the detriment of fluidity, effectiveness, and variety of technique. Then there are martial arts that concentrate on variety, often to the detriment of a form that provides stability and power. An example of the former is a strict TKD or Shotokan pre-arranged one-step. An example of the latter is a typical Kempo pre-arranged engagement. Of course, by using the styles as examples, I cannot account for the many TKD, Shotokan, or Kempo systems that train both form and fluidity, both structure and speed, but I think my examples are more often accurate than not.

Picture the very fast, very powerful stepping punch defended by an upper block that is so focused it could dislocate the attacker’s elbow. For a moment the attacker and defender form a tableau of precisely weighted front stances, and a precisely angled thrust and block. Click—excellent for the next edition of the instructor’s handbook for students. But the form is so rigid and the focus so lasting that any real attacker would spring away and follow up with something more rapid and less focused. Now envision a fast but not so ideally formed attack defended by an outward leap into a semblance of a cat stance followed by a step inward and a barrage of backfists, elbows and pokes from no particular stance at all. The flurry is impressive, but less powerful than it could be. Although the attacker does not have time to adjust to such a rapid flurry, the blows do not seem telling enough to put him out of the fight.

Obviously, you are thinking, the idea is a marriage of both extremes. True, but our topic is Perfection, so I want to take a slightly different tack on the way to that honeymoon. Attempting perfection is the way we learn to make at least adequate what we do in less than perfect circumstances. To assume one can achieve perfect form in an actual combat engagement is not only fanciful, but also dangerous. Here I will fall back into topic 34b—you have heard me lecture on this before—there is a difference between the martial and the artistic that
traditional martial artists, almost universally, ignore. As I said in a recent Master Class, when you have perfect Uechi, Kempo, or Isshin form, that great! You will please the artistic gods of Uechi, Kempo, or Isshin with your representation of that system. But if, in performing your perfection, the opponent decks you…well, the martial gods of Uechi, Kempo, or Isshin will be less than joyous. If it seems I am siding with the street tough ersatz-JKD boys or the ring-tough MMA guys, you are right—but only partially. Since training in traditional martial arts is training for perfection, it is important we understand the value of attempting something that, in the end, cannot be achieved.

Here is an analogy: let us create a moral code that does not compel its followers to act in a way that others consider immoral, but guides them to be good people. We can call it the Ten Commandments, Ralph’s sacred guidelines, or the Law of the Pecos—the name is unimportant. He who adheres perfectly to the moral code is not, per force, more successful in the live-a-day world than he who skims around its periphery, but without the code, there is no periphery to skim around, no direction to go, and the likelihood of more immorality under the excuse of amorality. Whereas, even if people fail occasionally at achieve perfect adherence to the code, they contribute not only to their own satisfaction, but to the well-being of those in the society around them.

Performing a perfect TKD or Shotokan one-step engagement or a perfect Kempo combination may be a method to go beyond style in an attempt for martial (i.e. self-defense) perfection, but in order to enter into that marriage, one first must perfect or at least attempt to perfect the system one represents. Once one nears that sort of semi-perfection, one can also see that failing at systemic perfection is human. To forgive that imperfection by merging with another system in theory or in practice may even approach the “divine”, following the path of art onto the path of martial without giving up the attitude of achievement and…well…self-perfection.