

Game Excellence

Pat Riley, former coach of the New York Knicks and the Miami Heat basketball teams, made a distinction between an excellent game and “game excellence”. The former describes the result of a player who was performing better than normal. The latter describes a high level of performance that has become normal.

I was struck by this distinction because I have always pointed out to my students that their goal should be to perform their art in such a way that, on their worst day, they were at least as good as is the average martial artist on a good day. Sure, I know one cannot always excel to such high standards, but if one does not set high goals, one will not excel at all. I suspect that this is the distinction between a martial artist who settles for a black belt feeling he has arrived versus one who sees a black belt as the first of his steppingstones.

I have had hard-working students who had set their goals on *sandan* (3rd degree black belt) or even *shodan* (1st degree black belt) and did not want to achieve more because they felt that either it would take too much work or that they could not, in their own minds, maintain the performance quality that rank should denote. The first reason, I think, was an honest one. The second was an excuse for the first, made to seem unselfish. In both cases, the students eventually stopped training. They privately informed me that they were too old, out-of-shape, overweight, etc., and perhaps there was some truth to those observations, but in my opinion, it was because improving seemed not to be worth the effort.

In contrast to these examples are video customers, whom I know to be elderly in one case and semi-disabled in another, that still order DVDs so that they will constantly have a method by which they can add to their knowledge and improve mentally even if their body has reached its limit. If they improve mentally, they can improve as teachers and thus pass on that improvement.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with a student, having reached his or her potential, remaining at the same rank *ad infinitum*. However, I find it distressing that a student *wants to* forego improvement. If you just tread water, eventually your legs get tired and you have made no advancement toward the shore. If you are going to bother kicking, aim your body toward your goal, whether or not your legs get tired during the trip.

Fidelity Investments employed a private motto borrowed from Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the American businessman who was instrumental in improving Japanese business practices after WWII: “*Kaizen*”, or Continuous Improvement [his 14 points of business improvement can be found at <https://www.deming.org/theman/theories/fourteenpoints>]. Our federation, Bushido-kai Kenkyukai, uses the same motto, and Tony Robbins has also borrowed and Anglicized it in his CANI! (Constant And Never-ending Improvement!) It implies that in order to improve, one

cannot simply take actions toward that end; one must also continue to take actions, small and large, constantly swimming to that shore.

In my opinion, there are too many martial artists, having reached a high rank or having achieved the title of master, that, like many black belt students below them, feel no incentive to improve. They have knowledge and skill and can rise to an excellent game occasionally, but if they do not maintain, or at least attempt to maintain, their game excellence, I suspect they cannot retain true mastery.