

Unexpected Learning Experiences

What if, in performing our martial skills, we could not make a mistake? Wouldn't that mean that we had mastered the art we set out to master many years before? Feels good, doesn't it? But wouldn't that also mean that our learning is completed—as in done, finished, *terminado*? Not such a good feeling, wot?

If we were suddenly perfect, there would be no need to improve. Now that we have attained martial perfection, it would be our job to help others improve, right? But we would not be as skilled at teaching as we were at performing, so we would again be in an imperfect state, making all sorts of mistakes in correcting the mistakes of students, who are making their own mistakes in trying to perfect themselves so they won't make mistakes.

Now, what if we play a little Neuro Linguistic Programming on ourselves and reframe those mistakes (both ours and our students') as *unexpected learning experiences*? Doesn't that feel better?

Sometimes unexpected learning experiences are as simple as “Gosh! I don't want to do that again,” or “Note to self: try 350° to cook the chicken next time; 500° makes it rubbery.” But mistakes do not solve themselves by either inverting what one did or didn't do. Sometimes mistakes turn into learning experiences by their motivating further research and experimentation.

How do you perceive your mistakes? Almost everyone learns from mistakes, but not everyone learns the same way and with the same attitude. Do you kick yourself, knowing you should do better? Do you become angry towards the person or entity that required the task that you goofed up? Do you kick the inanimate object associated with the mistake as if it was the object's fault, and *dammit* the object will improve if only you spank/kick/swear at it? We have all done all these things. Usually the absurdity of our response has to do with our cultural background, our upbringing, our level of rationality, our emotional state and the resources, and/or the time we have to spare correcting ourselves.

I believe that the more fervently we wish to achieve, the more likely we are to forget that our mistakes are for learning. As a result, we concentrate on our failures more than the path toward our eventual success. Mistakes, annoying as they are, are stepping stones along that path.

We can learn no other way. Oh, we picture the ideal learning environment where a kind teacher shows us the way, where we imitate his/her actions, commit them to memory, and are immediately successful in all similar actions from then on. The problem is that, even if we had access to such an ideal environment, the actions we think similar to what we were taught are often not so similar in reality, so we have to tweak what we know and sometimes reassess our paradigms of knowledge altogether.

It is one thing to repeat basics and adjust the form of your physical movements as the instructor requests; it is quite another to be at an instructor's level of learning. At a high level, you have no one to copy. But you still want to acquire skills—skills for which there is no simple format to imitate and for which you might need to develop new reactions or sensitivities.

When a beginner, your learning was to follow up a down block with a reverse punch and a round kick; as an advanced martial artist, you want to develop your skills such that when you make contact with an attacker, he is instantly off-balanced. The first begins as a simple matter of solo imitation and progresses to a fluid delivery, performed first alone and then with a partner. Later, a beginner improves his timing by practicing the combination successfully in either *ippon* or *jiyu kumite*.

Now consider the second, more advanced skill—a relatively simple looking one-step sparring routine where the defender has to both avoid the punch and off-balance the attacker, not for the miniscule time it takes to throw a reverse punch, but such that the attacker is completely under the defender's control. Imagine the amount of unexpected learning (those incidences that you used to call “mistakes”) it will take to refine that single, simple, yet very advanced skill.

Embrace failure. It may be your only true path to success.