

Mastery and Complacency

No one has to tell you that people who are complacent seldom master anything but complacency. All of us that aspire to improve our arts or ourselves have little to do with complacency. The challenge for us is to notice when complacency is creeping in to our attitudes, because frankly, complacency never breaks down the door and plops down on the Barco-lounger accompanied by fanfare and banners.

Because it is impossible to always be up, aware, and seeking perfection, we just may unintentionally invite complacency into our lives at least long enough to rest on the bar stool. Even marathon runners need to take a break, a rest, or indulge in a distraction, after which action, they may not embrace their return to marathon training quite as enthusiastically. All life-long martial artists are in a sort of marathon training.

How many times, in karate class, when Sensei counts you through your kata, do you perform the kata with your body, while your mind is occupied with an upcoming section of the form, the next drill, or the chunk of BBQ brisket you have waiting for you at home? That lack of concentration is an unconscious invitation to a wider invasion of complacency.

Martial arts students often go to classes with the same type of passive participation that most academic students display in school. The academic students show up, do the required exercises, read what they are supposed to read, and expect to absorb knowledge. They are not completely complacent, but neither are they up, aware, or seeking perfection. Their teachers may work to educate these students harder than the students work to educate themselves. And even teachers become complacent.

How many high school teachers teach from the same notes, and give the same tests, on the same schedules one year to the next, regardless of what the students of each class may have needed to help them learn? Similarly in martial arts, there are “master instructors” who, like their brown belt assistants, drill students on their material, but seldom correct them or explain the Why or How. Ironically, there are also instructors who teach so much with such noteworthy detail that their students experience a diminishing incentive to work on their own, to experiment, or to discover after class is done. In other words, the non-complacent teacher, dedicated to informing the student, can actually make the student more complacent!

If we can't avoid occasional complacency, what can we do to increase the chances of mastering our art? A simple two-fold approach is to (1) practice being mindful when you drill and when you are being taught, and (2) schedule extra time for personal training.

Practicing mindfulness can be as simple as catching yourself when your attention wanders, or as deliberate as taking notes during or after class. It is a dedication to learning that puts the burden of success on you, the student.

Scheduling personal training can be as informal as asking a training partner to stay a few minutes after class to work on a technique or to criticize a movement, or as formal as arranging a private lesson with Sensei or a senior student on a regular basis.

Of course, neither mindfulness during group training or additional personal training can guarantee mastery, but slipping into the complacency of “just showing up” can almost certainly guarantee a failure to achieve mastery.