

“Am I getting any better?”

A learning tool by Colin Wee

Learning the martial arts is difficult. Beginners first have to choose amongst the myriad of options, and then after enrolling into a school, have to deal with the background noise debating which style is better. In the face of some progress, beginners have to deal with learning difficulties, performance anxiety and organizational expectations.

What makes it difficult for you to focus on the things you've been taught?

When is comparison appropriate?

Each style has different measures for success.

Here, an instructor talks about top-level expectations. How do these prevent you from doing better?

Intermediate martial artist: I've been practicing for about a year, and seem to be getting somewhere. While my confidence still needs improving, my technique seems to be good.

However, every now and then, I doubt that I'm getting anywhere. Outside the practice hall, I've got so many questions. I'm sure some of the other students have the same feeling, but they look like they're improving faster than I am, and they don't show any uncertainty.

Maybe if I get a little more one-on-one training with an instructor I'll improve a lot more. But I don't see any chance of this happening.

Senior belt: It's sometimes hard to distinguish between the intermediate belts and the senior belts in terms of physical performance. Students at my level seem more willing to try different things during encounters; and perform a little more consistently whilst tested.

Practitioner from another style: The guys from our school who've been training about a year are definitely more confident. I'm sure if the intermediate students were pitted together, we'd win hands down.

Junior instructor: We're giving the intermediate belts most of our time, but they're not going anywhere fast. It's almost as if everyone hits a plateau at this stage. What happens is that if they stick through it, they get a whole lot better. If not, they quit or take an extended vacation.

We try real hard to explain them the thought processes and strategies behind what makes us successful, but for some reason it doesn't stick. One or two of them can't even see past their feelings of inadequacy to recognize some of their strengths.

Sure enough six months later, and a few intermediate students less that when they had started, the group notices a deep change in attitude. Practice sessions become less about physical technique than about application and strategy. Ironically, however, the stress on strategy early on may have contributed to the intermediate student's performance anxiety.

*What is the
'mental game'
you need to form?*

*What type of
distractions do
you face?*

*Do you focus on a
technique? Or do
you focus on your
target?*

*What chance do
you have to win if
you don't have a
winning attitude?*

Intermediate belt: As you can see from the color of our belts, nothing has visibly changed. But somehow we're starting to think less about the 'critical success factors' about each move and just using the martial arts the way it's supposed to be used.

In fact just the other day, I was working out with one of the senior belts, and he was using a gimmicky move trying to pull a fast one on me. All I did was to focus on my target and use a real basic move. Winning was that simple.

Junior instructor: That's how it is when you start to get good. Most students who start learning the martial arts get so focused on each move that they get blinded by the minutiae. It's that, or they make the wrong assumptions about each technique and ultimately end up confusing themselves.

It's when they start to assimilate the techniques and learn to go with the flow that they realize that each time we pit ourselves against an opponent, that opponent is also human and is also struggling with certain concepts of warfare.

They are actually starting to go with the flow and figure out that there's more to the martial arts than physical fitness, flexibility, and endurance. There's mental awareness, strategy, and flexibility.

Intermediate belt: Sure I still wonder whether all of this will work, but for now I'm remaining positive and focusing on doing my best.

Learning and using a new tool, whether a physical skill or a corporate approach, creates complexities for the user beyond the ability to learn or the intellectual ability to apply such concepts. The beginner needs to contend with when he/she needs to apply effort in learning, and when he/she needs to stop trying so hard and 'go with the flow'. The beginner also has to filter diverse subtle and overt distractions from all quarters; the least being "defensive routines" (Argyris 1990 p. 25) that are "antilearning" (p.25) like relying on limited skill to protect oneself from embarrassment. This is the quest to form the thought processes of more seasoned practitioners; and it is ironic that only the adept practitioner can truly form a "beginner's mind" (Suzuki-roshi 1970) to learn without the clutter a beginner faces. This is not to say the adept does not have independent thought, it is to say the adept knows when to turn it on, and when to turn it off.

This document is an adaptation of a 'learning history', used in certain consulting circles to chronicle a retrospective event in a company. The document is used to guide an open-discussion by exploring multiple perspectives of key stakeholders, and looking at the included prompts.

Bibliography

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References

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