

Pathways

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**Our doubts are often traitors
and cause us to miss the good we oft
might win by fearing to attempt
Shakespeare**

When Good Enough, Isn't.

How many times do you hear yourself or someone else say "That's good enough"?

At the risk of being confrontational I would say that the line: "It's good enough" is the tool of a lazy mind. It is always easy to stop our activity and say we have done enough, but I can guarantee you that when you do stop and say that you've done enough, someone else will still be working and going the extra mile. Pat Burris, an Olympian Judoka says that the best always do more than the rest and he is so right. "It is good enough" never gets anyone to the pinnacles of achievement in any field of endeavor. "It is good enough" is the death knell to the opportunity for excellence and a condemnation to remain within the ranks of mediocrity. Unfortunately, "it is good enough" is a comfortable habit and difficult to overcome once established. Those who truly strive for excellence are always in the minority, which is part of the allure of "it is good enough"...at least you'll have a lot of company.

You can read a lot these days about the general quality of a black belt not being what it

used to be. I'm not sure that I buy into the notion entirely, because in every generation there are always both excellent and mediocre black belts. For certain there are many more black belts than there used to be, and I sometimes wonder how much some of these black belts really know about the discipline, dedication and sacrifice it takes to forge a black belt. For sure, I meet many black belts for whom excellence is a watchword of performance, but for some this is not the case. It is all a matter of personal choice. The decision to be a member of the group of black belts who are regarded by their peers as "excellent" rather than average is a personal choice. There will always be those who say that the technique is good enough. As always, once uttered the words cannot be taken back, and it is difficult to alter the resultant mindset. It's a slippery path and one that is all too easy to find yourself upon.

It is a much harder road to say that "good enough" is simply not acceptable. You see the point is really this: We can all reach a certain level of per-

formance, but it takes an effort of will, a specifically intended goal to achieve excellence on a sustained basis. While I agree that everyone should have the opportunity to get a black belt, just like everyone should be given the opportunity to obtain an education, not everyone who is given that opportunity will make the most of it or even achieve his or her own potential.

So it comes down to this: At any given stage of development, each of us has no idea how far our potential might lead us. If we have achieved at one level, then it is time to move on to more challenging levels of performance in whatever our field of endeavor might be. Only by continually challenging ourselves with honesty will we ever come even remotely close to our potential. Only by setting the very clear intent that we will never settle for "good enough" do we stand any chance of ever reaching excellent levels of performance. The elite in any field never settle for good enough, they are uncompromising in their quest for excellence. How about you?

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Moments of Decision

There is in life a Law of Cause and Effect. It tells us that for every action there is an outcome. There is also a Law of Permanent Exclusion, which tells us that once made, a decision forever eliminates the possibility of all other choices and their potential outcomes. There is yet a third law, called the Law of Irreversibility, which tells us that once a decision has been made there is no going back, no matter what the outcome.

This is pretty powerful and potentially intimidating stuff, which could easily lead a timid soul into hiding at home and never making a decision!! Wait...wasn't that a decision!! When we see the magnitude of what we thought were simple decisions, we begin to see the enormous responsibility that we have within each of us. You see, there's no escaping these laws. The fact that we each have a life means that we will be bound by the laws whether or not we believe in them. It's like gravity. You don't have to believe in gravity for it to affect you. Your belief is entirely immaterial. Gravity works.

Most of the time we go through our daily lives making decisions that have no perceived value and yet each decision defines who we are and what we value. Over time

the types of decisions we make become part of our ritualized process and we will tend to repeat similar types of decisions.

It all begins with a thought. Actually it all begins with an emotion, which we translate into a thought, which gets transferred to action, which creates an effect. The action is then repeated or not according to the outcome of the situation and then gets stored as part of a repeatable series of actions we can call our habits. Those habits will define our character to those around us and ultimately our character will define what we achieve in our lives...our destiny if you wish.

At various points on the road of life we come to a juncture and we see it for what it is: Life changing. These choices are big choices that lead us down a completely new road and once begun we can never go back to the old road. There's no point indulging in the "what if's" of life, the old road no longer exists. There only exists what now "is".

I sometimes think that we make a choice, which puts us on a new road and then we wish we were back on the old road so we start making decisions that will hopefully lead us back to the initial path. The fact of the matter is that the path no longer exists...there is

never any going back. There is always the choice of going forward with grace and wisdom, however. At the end of last year, I wrote about the value of kime or decision. I want to touch on that topic again this month.

One of the potential outcomes of knowing that your life took a left turn is that you can regret the decision and wish you could go back and undo it. Another potential outcome is resignation: That you lost something that you cannot get back and that while you know what you now have is not as good, it's all you've got, you'll make the best of it. A third potential outcome is acceptance of our imperfection: That we are incapable of making fully informed decisions and will therefore make mistakes, but each outcome brings with it a gift of learning and a gift of growth if we ready to accept them. There is an element of letting go too. The road that your life is on is the only road you will ever have, all the other roads in your past are gone, it behooves us to let them go and to focus on the journey that we are currently occupied with.

The three laws are at work every minute of our lives whether we believe in them or not. It is your decision what you will do with this knowledge.

Life isn't measured by the number of times you breathe, but by the times that take your breath away.

George Carlin.

Gloves and Excellence

This article is a continuation of the one that began this issue of "Pathways."

When I was a child, my mother used to tell me to do everything as well as possible. Even if it was just putting on my gloves, I should do it as well as possible. Of course, I didn't listen. But the message did go in....probably because it was repeated often enough that I couldn't forget it. As a child I rebelled against the idea and did as well as I needed to, but never did I do anything as well as was possible. I was always in a rush to move on to the next thing. There is a balance point here. I was always eager to learn, but once I had achieved an understanding of something I would want to move on. My nemesis was math. I understood the notion of arithmetic, but actually knowing the right answer was not important to me for some reason. I was always in too much of a hurry to take time to get it right every time. So what if I was a couple of digits off, it was close enough.

It was not until I was older that I realized the painstaking precision and dedication to self that are necessary to achieve excellence in anything worthwhile.

My very good friend Eric Welch dropped a phrase on me last year that has been rattling about in my mind for several months: Amateurs practice until they get it right; professionals practice until they cannot get it wrong.

These two threads are obviously linked. Anyone can put on a pair of gloves, few people even think about it. Fewer people still, actually grade the exercise and consider whether or not they could improve upon the performance. Yeah, I know....it would take up way too much time and I've got more important things to do. But do you? Do you really? If you are

truly present in each action of life, truly mindful of the "Now" of each event as it transpires in our daily existence, how much more careful would we be in our interactions with those around us? How much more careful would we be with the work that we do for others, with the products that we produce from the labors of body and mind during a work day?

It all goes back to my lead article on doing something well enough and moving on.

As we get ready for our Black Belt rank tests in Judo and Taekwondo this Spring, I would ask each of you to look at every action that you do in the dojo and see if you can improve upon the performance. I am sure that each of you can. I know I can. I know that many of you work really hard to develop the skills that you have acquired in your training, but I also know that not one of us is so amazingly good that we have reached our potential. Black belt is a great watershed. It is a great moment for self reflection, for some deep seated honesty. There is an opinion that martial artists do not really become students until they reach black belt. Indeed, several years ago one of my black belts used the analogy that getting to black belt was like sharpening a pencil and moving beyond black belt was like learning to write.

So, as we prepare for the rank tests this semester: How sharp is your pencil? How neatly will you write? How much effort will you take to do the job as well as possible. In every form you learn in Taekwondo and every Judo throw there are hidden lessons. You can learn the techniques until you can get them right or you can keep at it until you cannot possibly get them wrong. You can keep practicing until you write your actions with a natural grace that be-

speaks untold hours of devotion.

Maybe I am playing catch-up with myself. Maybe I am attempting to undo the failings of my younger days. It does not really matter. The past is done. There is only the present and the opportunity that it presents. What does matter is that every punch, kick, throw and joint lock is studied for quality, efficiency, effectiveness, grace and beauty. I cannot accept that I have reached my best.

So here is the next part of the equation. You can put your gloves on day after day and never even notice that you are in fact putting your gloves on. Conversely, you can put your gloves on once, and improve upon the process the next time. You see it comes down to having the same experience over and over or having a new experience with each repetition. If I simply go through the motions of a throw or a form, I am simply repeating a well-learned pattern, but I have ceased to derive any real benefit beyond whatever fitness benefits there might be within the exercise. When I visit the event as a new motion to be refined with every execution, I am no longer simply repeating a pattern: I am getting better.

If I am getting better, then by extension, those who work with me will be pulled along in the wake and they will get better if they choose to. If they choose not to improve, then I will not be pulled into the quicksand of their comfort zone.

It is always my choice. And every choice I make about how I put on my gloves affects everyone else around me. I can either choose excellence at every turn or I can simply do what I need to do and move on.

Resolve to be a black belt who chooses excellence.

Calendar of Events:

- ◆ Chappel Family karate School, Judo and Ju Jitsu clinic. Huntsville, AL, February 7th, 2004.
- ◆ Wak Mu Sha Judo Tournament, Atlanta, GA, February 14th, 2004
- ◆ Mississippi Open and State Judo Championship, Raymond, MS, February 21st, 2004
- ◆ Black Eagle Judo Seminar, Meridian, MS, February 21st, 2004
- ◆ Arnold Schwarzenegger Battle of Columbus, Columbus, OH, March 5th – 7th, 2004.
- ◆ USJI High School and Collegiate Championships, Miami, FL, March 19-21st, 2004
- ◆ SMAC Tournament, Greenwood, MS, March 27th, 2004
- ◆ Swamp Classic Judo Tournament. Lafayette, LA, April 3rd, 2004
- ◆ Peachtree Open Judo tournament. Peachtree City, GA, April 17th, 2004
- ◆ Camp Catawba, Charlotte, N.C., June 16th–20th, 2004
- ◆ USJA Junior NtIs, and Coaching Symposium, Chicago, IL, July 10th-12th, 2004
- ◆ Akayama Jujitsu Camp, Biloxi, MS. July 17th, 2004 Tentative
- ◆ USJI Junior Olympics, Ft Lauderdale, FL, July 23-24th, 2004
- ◆ Gentle Wind Judo Tournament, Baton Rouge, LA, September 25th, 2004

Steroids!

I received this e mail from Marc Cohen, one of my Judo colleagues a couple of months ago:

"This happened yesterday while I was teaching about gradual improvement:

Me: (paraphrase) "Getting better is a process. Like lifting weights. If you choose the lightest weight in the gym, it will be easier working out with it, but it will take much longer to improve muscle tone and strength. Try to choose a weight that is tougher to lift, yet still manageable. you might have to work harder to life it, and maybe get fewer repetitions at first, but it will get easier as you practice and then you can go onto the next higher weight". "So, if you want to get strong, choose to work on it rather than take the easier way. Always try to choose a tougher training partner rather than one you can easily beat".

8 Year old child: "Can't we just take steroids"?

Naturally we (the class and I) had a long discussion about that, but it hurt me to know that children are thinking this way. I know it's almost expected, but we have an awesome responsibility."

I'd like to run with this for a few minutes, so please indulge me. My friend Marc Cohen is dead right about our awesome responsibility. Ours is not the easy path up the mountain. No one is going to fly us in to 26,000 feet and let us walk up

the last little bit. For us, the martial road requires that we slog up the entire mountain by virtue of our own effort. There will always be options for a quick ascent, there will always be seeming short cuts. But in reality, there is only you and there is the mountain. If getting to the top is worth anything to you, then it is worth putting in the effort. A black belt has value because of the sweat, tears and blood that turned it black over the years. Of course you can call up a supply house and have them send you a black belt for a few dollars, but it doesn't make you a black belt does it now?

One of the great problems we face in society today is that we stand on the shoulders of giants to see and think that this is the reality of our stature. Today's society has been built by thousands of years of invention and sacrifice by those who came before us. We stand on their shoulders and see ahead. It is the same way with the martial arts. The only way to do justice to our responsibility is to become a giant for those who will come after us, so that they will have a better view than we did.

There are always short cuts, but nothing of value to us or those who follow us will come from taking the short cut to the top of the mountain. Hillary and Tensig slogged to the top of Everest, they didn't get dropped in by helicopter. Would it have had the same value to them or to us if they had? Would the "view" really have been the same? Is there any real victory for self here?

***Taekwondo Black belt rank test
March 29th at 5:30 p.m.***

***Judo Black belt rank test
April 1st at 5:30 p.m.***

Don't miss it!

***Don't forget to order your
sparring gear, you will need it for
regular adult classes at least once a
month in Taekwondo.***

***You can use this coupon for a 10%
discount if you place your order
before the end of February.***