

The Quest of Ten Thousand

By Master Mike Branch

I read a little story one day, whether referring to horsemanship or Karate, I do not recall. Where and how I heard it, however, is irrelevant because I have found the philosophy of the two is interchangeable. The story went something like this: One day a student was very eager to show his teacher something he had been tirelessly working on for weeks. The student had spent many hours perfecting the particular technique, and he desperately wanted his teacher's appraisal and approval of his hard work. The teacher granted permission for the student to perform the technique and patiently watched as the student proceeded with his demonstration. When finished, convinced of its flawlessness, the student said to his teacher: I bet I've practiced this a thousand times! The teacher looked at the student and, much to the student's chagrin asked: "Why have you not practiced it ten thousand times?"

After reading that story and discussing it with a friend, it occurred to me that in order for one to become efficient at something it probably takes a thousand repetitions. In order to become perfect, or master something; surely it would take at least ten thousand studied repetitions. That thought process caused me to set a personal goal: I began a personal journey, or "quest of ten thousand."

I decided to take my personal competition kata, or perhaps better stated; the kata I choose to compete with (that is a thought for another article) and try to complete ten thousand repetitions of it and see what I could learn along the way. I knew it would have to be more than just numbers on a calendar, so I began a study of the history of the kata (Chinto) as well. With the study of the history, I found many different styles as well as names for the kata, such as: Chinto, Chinto No Te, Anan, and Gankaku, etc. Some of the styles, names, and variations didn't even look the same, but they all gave respect to the legend or history of Chinto.

I also knew that each run of the kata had to be meaningful, thoughtful, and performed with precision. I knew that if I hurried through them simply to reach a number, my practice would not only be filled with mistakes, it would look sloppy and I would end up with a terrible looking kata. It has been said, "Practice doesn't make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect." With that being said, you could say that my "quest of

ten thousand” became a double mission, the fulfillment of reaching ten thousand and perfecting my kata.

It has also been said, “Perfection doesn’t exist.” Now that I have finally reached the end goal (as far as numbers go), in addition to realizing just how big a number ten thousand is, I further realize that I have yet to perform a “perfect” kata. I should perhaps reconsider the title and call it: “The Quest of Ten Thousand, or; The pursuit of Excellence.” Come to think of it, excellence may be a more attainable goal than perfect.

The thought of practicing hurriedly or sloppily scared me because I know that practicing something wrong will only instill imperfection. My studies on leadership have taught me that in an emergency situation or times when adrenaline is high, the human body will only perform what muscle memory will allow. So then to me, practicing imperfection or sloppiness is what I think would come out during competition. I don’t want to go there.

Physical limitations certainly have their role to play as well. However, we can still do all that we can or what our individual attributes allow in order to execute excellence in the pursuit of perfecting our kata. There is also a mental approach to kata. I would like to share with you some thoughts on how attitude or mental approach might help in this pursuit, should you choose to undertake your own quest of ten thousand or pursuit of excellence.

In my studies on leadership, certain qualities in a person that encouraged others to follow him or her were always pointed out. They are virtually the same qualities that have helped me to develop partnerships with horses over the years. I have discovered at least eight of these qualities that will also help to ensure excellence when we are performing kata, especially in the competition arena, and definitely on such a quest as the goal of ten thousand. They are: vision, courage, commitment, responsibility, honor, focus, distinction, and humility. Let’s look at each one individually.

Vision

We must first have a vision for executing a perfect kata or reaching a set goal (e.g. ten thousand). I believe a vision of perfection is necessary in order to ever come close to achieving it. As Chris Kyle said in the popular movie *American Sniper*, “aim small, miss small.” For me, a vision has two parts: *mission* and *passion*.

With mission, the vision for a perfect kata (not that I have ever done one) produced a mission - a mission to complete ten thousand repetitions. The quest of ten thousand then produced the ability of being able to perform without having to “think” about the next move as much as in times past. In fact, I could probably write an entire article just on what this “vision” has produced.

Passion: this is something that ten thousand repetitions will certainly allow you to discover, discover what you might ask and whether you truly have it (vision) or not. I never really considered just how big the number 10,000 actually was until I took the plunge and dove into it. The process of day-by-day performing kata after kata can possibly grow wearisome. That is, of course, unless you are passionate about your vision. This passion will be your biggest influence along your journey; as long as the passion is alive and burning, you will continue your mission. If your passion turns out to have been only a passing crush, you may never arrive at your intended destination.

Courage

The vision, which created or inspired the mission (Quest of Ten Thousand), brought to surface the word; “courage.” You have to have courage to take on the challenge of many things that you encounter: It takes courage to even begin a Quest of Ten Thousand. It takes courage to take on such a task as competing against your peers.

Everyone wants to do their best, so you realize that everyone is training and working hard. If you are not careful, self-doubt will arise, so then that too becomes a battle. Some people are better equipped physically; some have more time to train, etc. Likewise, you have to have the courage to train around injuries that are bound to arise. You may also face different forms of criticism.

Realizing these things, rather than cowering to the fear of perhaps not being as adept as some, you study. You study each stance and transitions to and from each one. You study each hand movement and the timing thereof. Your study is not only on the physical moves, but also on the history and applied principles. In the end, you know your kata, and it’s not really about competition anyway – it’s you becoming a better martial artist. Now then, this produces another quality worth looking into: commitment
Commitment

We are already familiar with “commitment” or we would not be who or where we are today: a martial artist. You are committed to the excellence of your kata. You get up multiple times a week, and whether you feel like it or not, you practice. You go through run after run of your kata even when you don’t feel good, always remembering, not just to get numbers: but because you are committed to excellence and the only way to perfection is through keeping your commitment. You are committed to keeping up with your numbers. You are committed to the fulfillment of your vision. Having the courage to be committed to such a vision will cause you to become aware of yet another quality: responsibility.

Responsibility

When you set a goal, you have a responsibility - a responsibility to yourself, to your vision, and to everything that goes with it. It is totally up to you to see it through all the way to the end. No one else can do it for you. Being a person of responsibility means you should be “response-able.” That is: able to respond in situations that might otherwise cause a “reaction.”

There is another word that contradicts the word response. That word is “react.” People who are not responsible people tend to react rather than respond. The reactive person may blame others when he or she does not win. They may criticize the judges, refuse to shake hands with an opponent, throw their kobudo bo on the floor, etc. We have all seen the difference in people that define those two words. The responsible person understands his/her responsibilities and does not blame others when things do not go as planned. The responsible person realizes that it is totally up to them if they succeed or fail. So, they stay committed to the course they have set to fulfill their vision. If something does go wrong, they do not blame anyone. They respond by taking personal responsibility for their actions. Being response-able also means that you maintain the next quality in our outline: honor.

Honor

Honor is perhaps the quality that will ensure everything we stand for. Honor proves our vision, courage, commitment, and responsibility (as well as the remaining qualities) are truly a part of who we really are. Honor produces respect for others. The Bible teaches us that: “a man that hath friends must show himself friendly...” (first part of

proverbs 18:24). Likewise, I believe that if we truly have honor, we will show respect where respect is due. When people observe our character, the honor and respect we show to others will reflect right back on us from like-minded people. Honor produces truthfulness. We must be truthful with ourselves as well as about ourselves, and we must be truthful to others. If you are on a quest of ten thousand, be true to yourself. After all, it's a personal goal with only yourself as the true judge and beneficiary.

One thing I have learned from training horses for many years is this fact: horses never lie. A horse maintains its honor and integrity at all times no matter what the cost. They do not know how to be any other way. I believe that we as humans, as martial artists, could take a lesson and understand that if we make sure to always maintain our honor and truthfulness, we will receive a high mark of respect from others who are watching us as we endeavor to fulfill our vision. Honor, in this respect is perhaps a synonym for character. I have heard it said: "Character is who you are when no one is looking" but.... know this; someone is always looking.

Focus

The next quality that I want to consider is focus. We all know that in order to perform a great kata, our focus must be good. In fact, that is one thing a judge may point out, or perhaps one of your peers has said to you: "Wow! I love the focus you showed during that kata." In Isshin-ryu, we have, as part of our eight codes, two quotes that go hand in hand with this. They are, "The eye must see all sides," and "The ear must listen in all directions." To me, our Isshin-ryu code here is telling us that we must be focused people. It also causes me to understand that while one is "focused," he/she must maintain "awareness" of everything else. We have to be focused on the vision. In this case perfecting a kata, or reaching a goal of ten thousand. But it could be for anything. In fact, this whole outline can be for anything you want it to be. In this case there are so many things of which to be aware. Things like: stance, hand technique, timing, balance, sequence of technique, and breathing.

The list goes on and on, but you hang in there because you are courageous and responsible. You are committed, and you are a person of honor who is on a mission to fulfill a vision. You are seeking perfection and so you know that your kata must be distinct, which brings up the next quality: distinction.

Distinction

Google defines distinct as: “recognizably different in nature from something else of a similar type.” Moreover, it says: “readily distinguishable by the senses.” I love both of these definitions because, and especially if you’re competing in a large division, you need to cause judges and participants to remember you. But we must always make sure that what they see is excellence. Some of the ways to become distinct are: Recognize all of the above-mentioned qualities and maintain the character required by each.

1. Become set apart, set a higher standard for yourself.
2. Present yourself in an extraordinary manner.
3. Show excellence in everything you do.

Remember, you are an Isshin-ryu black belt; represent our style with excellence. When you represent with excellence, it will spill over into your performance. It will reflect on your dojo. It will reflect on your sensei. You are a person of honor. Now you are not just doing it for yourself - you are doing it for all the thousands that you represent. Be excellent, be distinct. Once distinction is achieved and all the afore mentioned characteristics are brought into perspective, I believe that we can now perform, at the very least, with finesse.

Humility

When you are out there enjoying the success that maintaining these qualities bring, when you are standing there receiving a trophy or a promotion, remember you are who you are. You are where you are by the grace of God. You have been gifted. You could be in any other situation that some other unfortunate person is in. Perhaps you could be unable to rise to the challenge that you have placed on yourself. But you are here right where you are enjoying the fruit of your labor. Be thankful. Give glory to God Most High, and give honor to everyone else who may have helped you on your way: your sensei, your peers, your fellow competitors, your judges, your spouse, siblings, and all the others. We don’t do it alone.

I hope somehow these few qualities mentioned give light into what it has taken me to

pursue excellence (not that I have attained, but continue to pursue), to reach this final goal, to fulfill this “Quest of Ten Thousand.” Again, not that I have ever perfected anything, but I am on a quest. I know that reaching a goal of ten thousand doesn’t in itself qualify a perfect kata.... But perhaps it is a good start on, or as I stated earlier: “The Quest of Ten Thousand, or The Pursuit of Excellence.”

One last thought: with the reaching of the goal of set numbers and realizing that perfection has not been achieved; the journey will continue. I hope that this writing has somehow inspired you. As for me, I will continue to reach further, I will continue to endeavor to be the best that I can be as I traverse this path, this path that once was the Quest of Ten Thousand, perhaps should now rightly be called: “The Pursuit of Excellence....”

-Mike Branch