

The Truth about Martial Arts Demonstrations

Most martial arts demonstrations are not demonstrations, they are exhibitions. They usually consist of well scripted fighting scenarios in which the artists perform amazing self-defense techniques that would make a Hollywood director jump with excitement. The techniques are executed flawlessly and the timing is always perfect. In short, no room is left for mistakes. The martial artists who perform these exhibitions are viewed by the audience as larger-than-life individuals. They are true masters of the martial arts who have achieved a level of expertise that is almost impossible to achieve.

The truth is, almost none of the techniques used in these exhibitions could be used in a real confrontation. Let's take breaking for instance. Breaking is arguably one of the most impressive, popular and difficult acts to perform. It takes a tremendous amount of mental and physical focus to do a successful breaking. However, in a real confrontation, the martial artist doesn't have the time to prepare himself mentally and physically for the breaking. He doesn't have the time to do the 1, 2, 3 count before he strikes the enemy. Furthermore, even if he doesn't do the count, he needs to retract his weapon (i.e. fist, foot, chin, etc.) as far back as possible before he strikes in order to generate enough kinetic energy to break the enemy. This promotion warns the opponent that our "martial artist" is about to crush his or her skull or rib cage. Any fighter worth his or her salt wouldn't wait. He or she would either move out of the way or strike first at the attacker's eyes or throat.

Once in a while an exhibition becomes more than a mere showcase of flashy techniques. It becomes a lesson for the audience. It becomes a demonstration. At the 2005 International Martial Arts Symposium, hosted by Kyoshi Ridgley Abele in Columbia, South Carolina, I was fortunate to witness such a demonstration. It was the attempted breaking of the 5 boards with a shin kick by one of the participant. He attempted the break 3 times and did not succeed. Then he removed one board and attempted to break 4 boards with a ridge hand and again did not succeed. He then turned to the audience and simply said "I am sorry, but today I can't do it". The audience responded with a standing ovation. It did not matter to them that he had not broken those boards. Why? All of us who were there knew what it is like to try and fail. And in spite of his amazing abilities, this martial artist was like one of us. That day, he taught us that even great martial artists sometimes fail and that it was "okay" to fail as long as you keep trying.

This brings me back to my original point that most demonstrations are not demonstrations because they don't teach the audience anything. When my Sensei Shihan Donna Judge teaches a class, she demonstrates the technique she wants us to learn. She demonstrates in order to teach. To me this is what demonstrations are. They are lessons in which we learn more about a particular art and its philosophy. They teach us about the mindset of a martial artist, which is humility.

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