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SENSEI'S BLOGS:

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Correction, Criticism & Learning

What is the relationship between these things and why is it important to be able to distinguish them? As both a teacher and a student, I believe it has helped me enormously to understand these concepts.

In the Dojo in particular I am very aware of the need to separate these aspects of teaching and study. In my experience a correction is advice that I provide to a student (or receive as one) regards a fundamental aspect of the practice. I correct them against the 'image' template I have in my mind's eye or against the 'feeling' template in my body. The fundamental aspect will usually involve posture, centre, tension, use of the eyes, distancing, timing, rhythm or something similar. The correction aims to draw attention to an aspect of the practice (action, behaviour, feeling) that the person may not be aware of at that time. Alternatively they may be aware of it, yet have found no way to address it.

The spirit of correction is one where the teacher makes the effort to assist me as a student to adapt myself to a standard or expectation in which I am already engaged through the commitment I made to Budo when I joined the Dojo. It helps me realise my goals inherent in that commitment (so I am grateful) and satisfies the teachers' role of preserving intact the standards and expectations of the Ryu (school).

My experience of criticism has been one where, as a student, I have failed to take into account the correction/s I have received. This may have been for one or a variety of reasons - I already 'knew better' / it wasn't important / surely was already doing it / was doing a lot of other things right so didn't need to worry about it / didn't understand it / couldn't do it / didn't have time to make the change / thought I had already done it etc. For whatever reason, the teacher had made a conscious choice to invest in me by following up the correction with criticism. The spirit of criticism is still very much a caring one.

Perhaps we can tend to feel negatively about correction and criticism – as if they were 'bad' and then that maybe we are 'bad' as well. On that basis often we react poorly to them rather than recognise the gift that they are.

I recall very well an epiphany when training with Nishioka Sensei in Hino Dojo a few years ago. Sensei had made the exact same correction quite a few times over the period of 3 or 4 days to a point where it had become genuine criticism (accompanied by the sharp reminder of a whack or two). My self talk had neatly concluded that he must have some problem emerging with his memory ("have you forgotten already that you must have told me the same thing 20 times at least!") when suddenly my mind opened.... and I realised that the reason his corrections had continued and become criticism was very





simple. I hadn't taken it on. Following straight on from that realisation was the awful knowledge that his self talk must have been going along the lines of... "What's wrong with this person? Is he deaf, stupid or both!? I've told him this 20 times at least!!" A humbling experience. I wanted to apologise and reassure him that I would try very hard not to make him think I was stupid again.

And that brings me to the final point – learning. Being corrected is not learning. Receiving correction and saying 'Hai' or 'Osu' is not learning. Adopting a correction is not learning. Even accepting criticism is not learning. My experience tells me learning is what happened in the story above - when my mind opened and I understood what was required of me. I began the journey of learning the point Sensei was presenting for me. Learning begins when my mind, body and spirit integrate a lesson.

My real feeling is that learning is less an event that can be spoken of in the past tense.... and more of an active, organic process that has no end. Sometimes I wonder whether, at this early stage in my life (no snickering), I have really completed learning anything at all.

And that feeling keeps me curious and excited about my world and my training. See you in the Dojo.

David

