

Art, Attitude, and Instruction

I think we should, in fact, respect those who can summon a martial attitude, but also should respect those who can perform to a high standard and those, if I may slip in a third category, who can teach well.

Students certainly learn to respect their teachers, but seldom will a student brag about a teacher the way he would brag about a tough guy hero's augmented attitude. A student might even brag about his sensei's skill at kicking or, maybe even kata, but if he brags about Sensei as a *teacher*, it is to only say, "Sensei put us through a workout from hell last night. I was never so sore in my life." In other words, the student has substituted "drill sergeant" for "instructor". The more a martinet the instructor is, the more they will brag, even if they don't especially like the severity of the training. The bragging is a way of saying, "I am tough because, although I don't have although tough attitude, I survived Sensei Corleone's culo-kicking karate class."

Like an albatross around the neck, excellent instructors are yoked by the old adage "Those who cannot do, teach." Sometimes it is true that excellent teachers can teach others better than they can themselves perform. Visiting Shihan Albert C. Church, Jr. (the late soke of Kamishin-ryu) in South Carolina in the seventies, I was asked to teach a class on kicking the heavy bag in the back room of the dojo. At the time, my dojo did not own a heavy bag and we did most of our kicking in the air. Kicking the air is great for show but it does not help one follow through or keep balance upon contact. Still, I was not about to say No to the head of the system, even if one of my knees was injured and I had difficulty either pivoting on it or making contact with it. I drew upon my knowledge of body mechanics and the mistakes student usually make when learning to kick and was able not only to survive the class but also to help a few students with their problem kicks. But I could not kick the bag myself with the form and authority that would have set a good example. In this case, I could not do, but I taught.

There is always some area in which the sensei is not as proficient as he would like to be. In those areas, he may feel obliged to teach students so that they will not be as inept as he, but in most cases the teacher teaches what he knows. He knows it because he *did* it, and with some leeway for age and injury, can still do it. So the idea that he teaches because he cannot do something is more than a little exaggerated. Certainly age and injuries accumulate and Johnny Hotshot can probably do the jump from Unsu better than Sensei could ever do it, but the rest of the class doesn't have the foggiest idea how to coordinate let alone improve the jump, and would not be able to do so were it not for Sensei's previous experience doing it and his skill teaching it. If the student had any self-awareness, he'd show respect for that teaching skill almost to the point of bragging about his sensei.

Teaching is not about what the teacher has done or can do, however. It is about what the teacher can get the student to do. A lot of people think that the skill of a martial art can be taught, but the "killer instinct" or martial attitude necessary in some self-defense situations cannot. I see it a little differently. A teacher may not be able to snap his fingers and convert Caspar Milquetoast to Rod Thrustingham, but he can go a long way to explaining and setting an example for Caspar so he understands his art and can at least summon a modified

martial attitude. Perhaps Rod will always have a nastier streak in him, but I doubt if any teacher was responsible for imbuing that and I likewise doubt that Rod will ever invest his time and energy into his art the way Caspar will. You see, Rod thinks that attitude supplants art when push comes to shove so he is happy with 80% attitude and 20% art. Caspar would have been happy with 80% art and 20% attitude, but as an artist, he is more willing to be taught and thus more willing to even out those percentages.

Next week: "Your Art is Not Self-defense"