

The Challenge of Intermediates

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The older adult student tends to react differently from the younger adult student. Similarly, the higher ranked or more seasoned student tends to react differently from the lower ranked, less seasoned student. Adults react differently from children, to be sure, but there are certain similarities between children and the younger, lower ranked adults.

Younger, lower ranked adults tend to have misconceptions, even fantasies, about the martial arts. They are driven by images of personal power, athletic prowess, and utter coolness under pressure. The more mature, higher ranked students may have been driven by the exact same items, but their drive is tempered by reality. Although they cannot bench press an antagonist, their study of martial arts has furnished them with stronger personalities than they would have if they had not studied. Although they cannot jump through the rungs of flaming ladders or kick three times in mid-air, their training has made them in far better shape than others their age. They have indeed developed coolness under pressure, but unlike their less experienced counterparts, they do not look for situations to display that coolness.

Both lower and upper ranks are essential for a healthy dojo. The younger, lower ranked group gives the school energy that lifts up its spirits and pushes for more challenges. Juniors believe they can do anything and expect everyone in the dojo to feel the same way. The older group keeps the less experienced group from jumping through the rungs of flaming ladders while kicking three times in mid-air then publishing the picture in their local newspaper.

Younger or lower ranked adults are eager to work on dojo projects seeking a way to distinguish themselves and to contribute to their dojo. Older or higher ranked adults have been organizing seminars, exams, demonstrations and social events for a decade or more. They can do it in their sleep but are not as enthused as their younger, less experience counterparts. The dojo needs the new firecrackers to light a flame under the drooping butts of their seniors. The dojo needs the seniors to teach the juniors how light the firecracker.

Younger, lower ranked students tend to be cautious at first. They want to be respectful both to the traditions of the dojo and respectful to their seniors who have first dibs at getting things done. Seniors encourage them to take part in organizing the annual banquet or the annual fund-raiser. After a couple of years, however, the low ranks are intermediates. They are the workhorses and the unsung heroes of the dojo. The seniors passively guide and get the credit for the jobs they oversee. If they are wise, they pass the credit on to the intermediates.

Juniors actively sprint toward the next project, but are all thrust and no aim. Intermediates prepare them for getting things done in an efficient, organized fashion that sensei would approve. Juniors tend to do things

their own way rather than the dojo way. Seniors know what sensei wants and have created work habits that create the same dependable result event after event. Intermediates offer a balance of senior stability and junior fervor.

What applies to dojo events also applies to training. New blood contrasts with senior stability. That contrast can be cooperative, however. It is the challenge of the intermediates — those too experienced to be juniors, but unseasoned enough to be seniors — that provides a challenge for the dojo.

Juniors want to conform to the dojo norms and are comfortable as followers. If they have too strong a drive to do things their own way, they will not last long. Seniors, on the other hand, have learned to integrate their own ideas to what Sensei wants and have developed training habits that produce competent results year after year. Although intermediates offer a balance of senior stability and junior fervor, it is the intermediate that is most challenged by the need to do things his/her own way.

What is the exact balance between independent training and dojo curriculum? To what extent is a student able to try out his/her own ideas and not run afoul of what Sensei is trying to accomplish? The junior doesn't even consider the problem. The senior has already solved the problem. The intermediate wants to reinvent his/her own solution. The intermediate is feeling his/her skill and power and thus feels more independent than the older or younger group.

There is an old martial arts guideline called SHU-HA-RI. It refers to the three natural stages of development: following tradition, challenging tradition, and starting a new tradition. Juniors follow. Seniors who have not broken away have adapted to the tradition of the dojo and perhaps have modified it over the years in subtle ways. But intermediates, consciously or unconsciously, challenge. Too happy with themselves, they are seldom happy with the dojo. They see training much more completely than juniors and think they have the big picture, but they do but not see training as completely as seniors.

I mentioned in the beginning of this essay that juniors have certain characteristics of children in a dojo. Intermediates have certain characteristics of teenagers. Who is more difficult for a parent to manage? And yet without teenage-hood there is no coming to maturity. Without intermediates in the dojo, there is no vibrancy, no meeting the challenge and therefore no personal development.