

## Contributing Late

It is a sign of an active, intelligent mind that its owner considers him- or herself a lifelong student. Most of the greats in the martial arts, even if they have concentrated on one specific type of skill, are not only teachers, but also active students of that skill. There is so much to learn in the martial arts that, for most students, mastery never seems to be within reach, but some masters are masters because they have realized that even if they consider themselves perpetual students they know some things and have mastered some skills a little better than their peers.

This sort of self-recognition can be handled two ways: (1) a student, approaching a high level of knowledge or skill can see herself as unjustly unrecognized, under-ranked, under-titled, and under-praised, or (2) she can see herself as ready to put her ideas out into the public, thus contributing to the development of other students and perhaps the martial arts in general, even if she is not yet well-known.

Learners, in and out of the martial arts, often fill the former role and seldom the latter. It is easy to think yourself unrecognized. After all, it is a self-evident fact. It is much more difficult to contribute something now and again and keep those contributions going until, by the sheer weight of the contributions, *voila*, you are suddenly a noted contributor.

My senior year in college I was the captain of a rough and tumble flag football team that won that year's championship although we were defeated in the play-offs by a canny grad-school team. I was never the star, nor the strongest, fastest, or toughest of the players, but I did contribute both a great deal of team spirit and some carefully worked out plays that left the opposition rather flat-footed on crucial downs. We had a quarterback, who used to play for Tulane, that could throw the length of our truncated field, and a receiver that could jump like Michael Jordan and catch like Yogi Berra (to mix sports metaphors), and yet I was voted the most valuable player that year. Why? I suspect it was because I contributed whenever I could without worrying about recognition. As a result, my playbook (and a few plays I mailed in a year later from my teaching position in Vermont) brought the team to first place for two years after I had graduated.

As a martial arts student, I could not exactly contribute to the curricula, or adjust the kata, but during my free time I reviewed and analyzed what I had been taught so that I knew style history and kata application almost as well as Sensei. As a *shodan*, I wasn't a lot more skillful than the average shodan, but I knew more and had more material to draw from. When it came time to write my first published article, although it was a little article in a little magazine, I was

able to contribute something of value and that contribution gave me the confidence to go on and share my opinions and skills in other articles, columns, books, and seminars. In order to make a contribution when only a shodan, one has to be thinking, from the time one is wearing a green and brown belt, of what contributions one can make. Similarly, in order to become a recognized master, one has to have made some contributions as a shodan, nidan, sandan, etc.

Oh wait. That's not true. One can also just complain that one is not duly recognized and wait until someone finally acknowledges him before making a contribution. Better late than never, I guess.