

The Disappointment of Achievement

When a new student walks into a dojo, he/she may be overwhelmed with what the other students seem to know. “How can you remember all those movements?” He/she is even more overwhelmed by the senior students who seem to know twice as much and do it twice as well as anyone but Sensei. **New students often don’t believe that they can earn even the first rank.** Either it seems like too much information, or they instantly and unrealistically want to perform the requisite skills like an experienced black belt, or both.

They finally get nudged into taking the first exam, pass it and put a stripe on their belt. Now they are somewhat more confident that the next rank is achievable. Still, that black belt looks terribly out of sight. “Take it a step at a time,” they are advised, and so they do, putting the initial goal out of their mind for the time being and concentrating on the sub-goal, the next rank, or perhaps the skills that will bring them closer to the next rank.

After a few years they have become seniors themselves, but their eyes are still tilted upward. They do not see how far they have come as much as they see how far there is to go. Newer students in the dojo idolize them, but they feel that they are just a little leap ahead of those beginners. In the grand scheme of things, they are probably right. There is so much to learn and such a wide range of skills to attain in traditional martial arts that even a black belt is just a small leap ahead of a novice. It is probably also wise of them to be looking upward with modesty than to look downward with conceit. However, every once in a while, it is good to look down at those beginners struggling toward their first rank. It reminds one how far one has climbed and it helps avoid the disappointment of achievement.

Doesn’t seem logical, does it? You figure that after all that work, you would be overjoyed to get a green, brown, or black belt in any martial art. How could anyone possibly be disappointed? Yet statistically, once the first year of study is past, more students stop training after achieving black belt than at any other time. It is not just because they have achieved their initial goal, but also because they are not the person they wanted to be, having achieved that goal. It is like planning to go to Tokyo for a decade only to take trip to find that it is like Boston. (It is not by the way; this is just an analogy.) The traveler would have achieved her goal, but the goal would hardly have seemed worth the ten-year wait, 14-hour flight, 1-hour bus trip and 20-minute taxi ride when one could have taken the Mass. Pike into Boston in half an hour.

Don’t get me wrong. It is not that martial arts achievement, especially in schools with high standards, is not worthy of praise or celebration, it is just that you can lose perspective when you concentrate on those sub-goals and then look up to see how many more sub-goals are needed to take you to where you want to be. **To avoid the disappointment that modesty brings about, you need another sort of perspective.** It is something like conceit, but not as negative. You simply need to keep a record of your training. A notebook with lessons learned, drills worked on, and skills aspired to. A moment’s glance at last year’s notebook page will make you

realize that, although you are not the greatest martial artist since Bruce Jean-Claude Van Seagal, you have made amazing strides over the months and years.

If you see a conceited, show-off martial artist, I guarantee he is trying to prove his own worth to himself by looking downward. If you see a very modest, very reserved martial artist, it is because he is always looking upward. If you see a confident but quiet martial artist, it is because he keeps a notebook on a shelf. He has to look up to reach it and look down to review it.