

Discerning *Giri*

Giri (duty) is pretty easy to discern: whenever the sensei takes a junior aside to help him/her with a technique, he is displaying his duty to the junior. The junior then owes the sensei an *on* (debt) which, by tradition, is nearly impossible to repay. Traditionally these two balanced social interactions are nearly absolute: you owe your teacher an *on* while he owes you *giri* and there will be no arguments, thank you! That's the way it is, period. Students are to be passive in receiving instruction and active in practicing what they learn. Teachers, seemingly passive in practicing what they know, are to be active in what they teach. Teachers take the role of parent. Students take the role of children. Children are ignorant and thus must be guided. Parents are wise and want what's best for their children and thus must be obeyed.

Flash forward to the less traditional and more iconoclastic 21st century West. Students, although sometimes childlike and self-centered, are adults. Teachers, although sometimes wise, don't always want what's best for their students because they themselves may have some maturing to do. If we rigidly apply the customs of *on* and *giri*, we may end up with students who give lip service to their loyalty and sincerity when really they just want what they want when they want it, or we may end up with teachers who act as if they are guiding the students when they are really doing a clever guiding-the-students act.

I was talking recently to Wes Tasker, a man of many arts — a multiple martial artist without being a mixed martial artist. We were talking about how few students in today's world have the patience to really master their basics and keep learning more about them. They want to get to the fancy, interesting, flashy, effective, or what-they-see-as-applicable techniques as soon as possible, discounting the fact that the flashy and effective is built on a base of...surprise...basics. Don't get me wrong: learning only basics and getting super-skilled at them has its own set of drawbacks — the basics have to lead to something besides faster and stronger versions of themselves — but that was not the item of conversation that sparked Wes's phrase "discerning *giri*".

We both have, in many conversations, bemoaned the idea that students are no longer loyal to their instructors, but would rather be jacks of many trades so they can pretend to be master of their own compilation art. "Well, I don't really study a traditional system. I have sort of developed my own, taking the best of the 17 systems that I have trained in." These students, in my opinion, and in Wes's, have failed in their exercise of the *on* tradition. But there is another side to that coin. Many instructors have taken advantage of their position, not necessarily by ripping off students (although some have done so notoriously), not necessarily by using their power to manipulate students (although a few do so less than tactfully), but simply by not teaching them.

Pause for a moment and think of this irony. On one hand, I have complained that students want to learn too quickly and too superficially, and on the other, I am complaining that teachers hold back what they teach. The resolution of this apparent irony is obviously a balance, but it is a balance weighted toward the superior knowledge and experience of the teacher. If it is the teacher who must decide what the student learns and when

the student is pushed forward, it is the teacher who must show the student (a) that it is possible to get where he wants to go via the teacher's methods, (b) that the teacher is ready, willing, and able to take the student there, and (c) that all the student has to do is trust the teacher and work hard. And there is the catch: trust.

As soon as a teacher breaks trust with the student, he gives other students a reason to move on to a more trustworthy teacher. As soon the student moves on once or twice, the newest teacher is convinced that the student is not serious and sees no reason to invest much instructional effort in him. And so the cycle continues and quality spirals down the drain of mistrust. Who started the spiral is unimportant — the argument can be made both ways: “Students aren't serious about learning quality martial arts, so why should I care if I take them for some cool cash by teaching felgercarb?” or “Teachers teach just so much to get your loyalty, then they let you stew in their system for years, rather than teach you anything practical, so why shouldn't I get what I can before it gets boring, and then move on to another system?”

If there is a way out, it can begin only with teachers who insist on improving their standards. The student cannot do it if he doesn't have the knowledge on which the standards rest. But the student can help light the spark in a teacher by having a discerning sense of *on* (debt). The teacher is right to be discerning in how he exercises his duty to his students when he sees students diligent about exercising their debt to him.