

Experience is the Greatest Teacher

With all the ranks, certificates, and trophies displayed on the walls of a commercial martial arts school, how does one determine which are legitimate and which are hype? If you can ask that question, you are on your way to being objective. Ranks, as discussed in previous articles, can easily be inflated. Certificates can be printed and trophies can be bought. Usually, however, certificates have really been presented to the recipient and trophies have really been won; but, how do you know who conferred the rank and what type of competition awarded the trophy? There have been schools that run their own competition then have students display the resulting trophies in the school window. There have been societies that have made it their business to confer as many paper recognitions as possible so that their members can sound officially decorated in order to get newspaper coverage.

But none of this seems to matter! For some reason, people are attracted to instructors with putative high achievements regardless of what it means for the student's own martial arts education. If you enroll in a Chuck Norris school of Karate, you can bet Chuck Norris will not be teaching you. If you enroll in a school boasting shelves of trophies won by its head instructor, it does not mean he/she can train you to win trophies. If you consider a school in which the head instructor claims a tenth degree black belt at 30-years-old, ask yourself if his 20 years of study equates to a rank other martial artists take 50 years to attain. Further, ask yourself if his study between the ages of 10 and 15, for example, counts as much as the years between 25 and 30. In other words, does his experience add up to his claim of achievement?

There is another instructor one town over who has been studying 30 years, has only a fifth degree black belt, has won a dozen trophies but does not display them, and has more certificates from more societies than Levelor has blinds, but keeps them filed in a cabinet at home. He teaches a few dedicated students who at intermediate level would make Mr. 30-Year-Old-Tenth-Degree look like Rick Morainis in a straight jacket. The reason is that experience, not awards, is the greatest teacher.

Experience comes in two forms: repetitive and investigative. A 30-year martial artist with repetitive experience relives the same year 30 times, or the same 5 years 6 times, getting very good at a limited number of things. This is not a bad, just limited. If you want to get very good at punching and kicking because that satisfies your self-defense and/or exercise needs, there is nothing like repetition to give you the experience that will produce long-lasting skill. This may be the type of experienced instructor you are looking for. If, on the other hand, you see self-defense as occurring in several different contexts, concentrating on one of them won't cut it. You need an instructor with another type of experience.

An investigative martial artist constantly explores new innovations, permutations, and variations. If everyone thinks martial arts are block, punch, the investigator tells them that the arts also have subtle locks, throws, pressure points, deceptions, avoidances, energy development and health practices. He/she may be the

one who can teach you the most, but will not necessarily drill you (read repetition, here) in such a way that produces high-level, dependable skill.

Obviously, some balance of both types of experience is preferable for most people.

Let me hasten to add that the mere fact that a teacher may have years of experience of any sort does not itself make him/her a good teacher, I have known students who, as intermediates, were better natural teachers than very high ranking instructors, but experience sure beats lack of experience, and the experience of an instructor (with a little sensitivity and talent thrown in) can offer the student more valuable training than any wall of parchment or any shelf of statuettes.

A prospective student should definitely seek out an experienced teacher, but experience is not measured only by numbers of years or variety of study. The specific experience of the teacher has to be matched with the experience that is desired by the student. Once again, as we have hinted at (or said directly) so many times, the student must know him/herself before he is ready to choose an instructor. If you don't go through the trouble of knowing what you want and why, your ending up in the school that is right for you is a matter of dumb luck. And, in the long run, luck seldom beats experience.