

Flickered Out

I can still remember him
With love-light in his eyes,
But the light flickered out and parted
As the sun began to rise.

--Laura Nyro, *Stoney End*

Listening to these lines today, I was reminded of former students, both young and old, who entered the dojo excited about what it could bring them, excited about what they could become, only to stick around for a month or two.

There are people who love to begin projects but hate to follow them through. Similarly, there are people who love to begin romantic relationships but don't have the will to continue them (traditionally these are younger guys, but with the divorce rate around 50%, I suggest women may now have acquired an equal assessment in this field). We know a lack of commitment skill is all part of our instant satisfaction society where, if we don't get some sort of vicarious sensual thrill in the first 15 seconds, we change the channel, but taking that has a given, I would ask why we bother stating our devotion to a partner (or a martial art) if experience shows we have difficulty being devoted even to a simple exercise regimen or good eating habits.

Do you think Laura Nyro's guy told her he loved her before slipping away the next morning? Was that so he could have a cozy situation into which to slip the night before? But Holy Disaster, Steamboat Master! If you are paying for martial arts lessons, you don't need to verbally convince the sensei to teach you one night so you cannot to go back the next. Your unsolicited expression of devotion ("I love this art!" or "I'm your student for life!") is not necessary to convince anyone to impart the art's skills to you. So why do people start with not only love-light in their eyes, but also a love-line in their mouths?

I have had many students, old and young, who have made such declarations, and if pushed to define the psychology at work, I would guess that, for the most part, they are simply trying to convince themselves. I say "for the most part" because there are those people who are too immature or inexperienced to know that desire does not equal fulfillment. Desire plus appropriate indefatigable action goes a long, long way to fulfilling goals, but desire itself is just Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.

Obviously, here one can draw the conclusion that contemporary students don't have the salad dressing to spice a side-dish let alone a lifetime of budo, but we've discuss this before and I think there is another line of thought to pursue this time around. Consider the work it takes Olympic medalists to get their just desserts. They sacrifice more in terms of time, money, disjointed relationships (and desserts) than any martial artist does. For the most part, I think they will say the result was worth the sacrifice—not just because of the recognition, personal appearances, and endorsement deals, but also because of what their efforts and sacrifices made them. However, ask one of the hundreds of Olympic qualifiers who did *not* win a medal, "Was it worth the sacrifices?" They have no medals, recognition, personal appearances or endorsement deals to smile about. By

and large they have *only* what their efforts and sacrifices made of them. Many might say it was worth the effort. But, to be coldly honest rather than idealistic, I'm not sure if working that hard would improve me so much that it would be worth the trade off.

Now look at the martial arts. What do they demand? Two or three nights a week and a few Sundays a year for seminars or examinations? Certainly the rewards are not medals or endorsements, but the effort, small as it is, changes your life. And if you are a person who is mentally aware, the effort will become a habit that becomes a lifestyle (which just might include good exercise or eating habits, too.)

If you establish a good torch (like a good romantic relationship), it won't flicker out very easily.