

I Can Do That!

It can be rewarding for a head instructor, presenting his martial art to a potential new member, when the inquirer responds, “I can do that!” It means that the instructor and his students have made the training look easy, which in turn means that they are well trained for their ranks. However, usually the potential student’s expression of confidence is the result of an unintended deception. Good martial training results in a practice that looks easy, but the training itself is never quite as easy as the resulting practice appears.

If someone achieves rank in an art that demands relatively little of him, you can guess what that rank’s value might be. Still, there are those who catch on quickly and show high quality skills from the get-go. If Sensei’s level of instruction meets a student’s level of learning ability, the student *can* in fact “do that”. “Doing that” is, after all, the first goal of instruction. It would be silly to study any budo if the learning was so difficult that no one could do it. It is equally silly to study a budo in which the learning is so easy that anyone and his third grader can do it, understand it, and teach it to someone else.

Good budo, in my humble opinion, is a lot deeper and thus a lot more difficult than even the most competent students realize. The fact that, after some training, they can *do* the actions of the budo does not mean they have *mastered* those actions and certainly not the transferring of those skills to someone else. Students often do not realize that a Sensei’s first goal (getting the student to feel he “can do that”) is not his last goal. Too often a student, feeling a surge of personal confidence based on physical competence, also feels that he has arrived. Since his only *goal* was knowing that he “can do that”, he now feels ready to move on, either to a higher rank, to an honor title, to a teaching position, to open his own school, to start his own system.

Having made sure he did not miss the “I can do that” flight, he has ignored learning how to navigate. Having learned to take off and fly right, he has jumped into the cockpit without a safety check, a fuel check, a flight plan, and, oh yeah, having learned to land. Flying will be a lot of fun for a while. One can only hope he hasn’t talked too many passengers into crossing the Atlantic with him. The journey will certainly not be pacific.

After several years in the dojo, the student, now a senior charged with instructional responsibilities, has a firm grasp on what is required for each rank and a sense of when a student completes those requirements with adequate skill and knowledge. He has seen Sensei do this or that a hundred times and is now able to replicate Sensei’s action such that his juniors are impressed. He forgets that, as a junior, he was impressed with a senior who merely knew how to tie his belt so that it wouldn’t fall off while sparring. Juniors should show respect, of course, but a senior who thinks that impressing them is a mega-achievement should ask himself if a vote of all his juniors would count for an extra grain of salt on celery toward promoting him to his next rank. It is Sensei he must favorably impress, not Sensei’s students, most of whom are still wondering if they “can do that”. But Sensei is thoroughly unimpressed with the senior’s attempt to impress the impressionable. The senior has put his plane on an auto pilot named “Look how well I can do that” while he goes about playing flight attendant to those who can barely fasten their seat belt, let alone fly the plane.

Most senior students, having proven they “can do that” do not expect there is much remaining before becoming a master, an instructor, or a dojo operator. All of this time, they could be learning from the guy who has done it all, but rather than seeing another level of learning on the horizon, they prefer to bask in the sunset.

Admittedly, some senior students are ready to fly off on their own, and some, although not ready, will learn what they need on the fly or find someone from a foreign flight tower to coax them in. But most will find a small following, be happy with the impression they make and, when the natural falling off of followers occurs, be stuck on an island in the middle of the Atlantic, out of fuel, trying to stay in contact with anyone who will tune in.