

Martial Arts Adolescence

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When a student tries to influence the seasoned instructor to get what he/she wants, that student is behaving like a typical teenager. Teenagers test. Good parents endure the tests until their children pass them. The Sensei/Sifu/Sabum must do the same.

I have had thirty-, forty-, fifty- and sixty-year-olds argue with me, less than politely, about exam results as if they were teenagers whose stubborn, unreasonable parent simply did not understand them. Parents are not always right, to be sure, but they are more experienced than their teenagers and they are always accountable for them, thus have more of an incentive to do the right thing. In the same way, an instructor, without getting into the personal life of the student, is at least somewhat accountable for the student he/she produces. In regards to the martial arts and the dojo, the student, is neither accountable nor responsible for him/herself (accept to the increasing extent that the instructor allows as the student matures.) It is this transition from instructor-accountability to student-responsibility that manifests itself in what I call Martial Arts Adolescence.

First, let's define terms. "Accountable" means "responsible to someone else or to others or for something." "Responsible" can mean "capable of taking rational decisions" or "having authority to make decisions independently." In the way I am using the terms, the instructor is accountable for the student like a parent whose child is still too immature to be liable for his/her own actions. When the child or student can "respond with ability" he/she begins to subsume his own responsibility and is released from parental accountability. The word "adolescence" comes from the Middle French, which, in turn, is related to the Latin *allescere* (to begin to grow.) "Adolescent" both empirically and etymologically yields "adult." Asking where adolescence ends and adulthood begins is like asking where your shoulder ends and your arm begins. There is a difference between the two but one would be hard put to point out where the transition is made.

An instructor is like a parent in many ways but he/she cannot act *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent.) Either the student already has parents or is an adult functioning in society — he or she is an adolescent only in the dojo. Adults get irritated when you treat them like teenagers in the dojo, but like teenagers in the real world, they cannot see the bigger picture.

I am lucky enough to have had a twenty-five year student who has operated his own dojo and now (at last!) has the perspective of both the teacher and the student. He had been one of my most dedicated students, but was one of my most trying martial arts adolescents as a twenty-something-year-old green and brown belt. To his credit, he grew into martial arts adulthood and has now had his own martial arts adolescents to tolerate and teach. We get along better than ever before. There have

been many students like him who, as martial arts adolescents, did not stay in the dojo long enough to become mature martial arts adults.

A quick caveat is in order here. I do not mean “adult,” as so many teenagers think of the term, to suggest “serious and drab.” I am as fond of kidding and joking as the next guy and I am as in favor of a youthful maturity as any in the baby boomer generation. In today’s world, “adulthood” smacks of “old,” i.e. something undesirable. In the martial arts world, however, “adulthood” can be read as “seniority,” i.e. something eminently desirable. And here is the crux of the problem of martial arts adolescence: even in the real world, despite their apparent disrespect for adulthood, teenagers want to be thought of as adults. In the dojo, juniors want to become seniors and seniors want to achieve mastery.

In the real world, the age of 18 (it used to be 21) is the demarcation for legal adulthood. In the dojo, first-degree black belt (it used to be third- or fourth-degree black belt) is the demarcation of martial arts maturity. No matter what the official demarcation, however, students of all ages struggle to achieve martial maturity and are frustrated when seniors do not recognize their supposed equality. Sorry students, but it just doesn’t happen that way.

During the ‘80s, I was discussing with a magazine editor why certain well-known and non-so-well-known martial artists got to appear on the cover of his magazine. He told me, “So many teachers think they are great masters. They wonder why they are not being recognized. Their solution is to be on the cover of my magazine — instant recognition. They have it exactly backwards. It is not the cover that makes them recognized masters; it is their mastery that gets them on the cover. If you think you should be a master, you probably are not. You probably are just a heel looking for a newly polished shoe to carry you around.” In essence, he was saying that even seniors in the martial arts go through their own sort of adolescence.

The only solution to adolescence is patience. Time heels all wounds and, occasionally, wounds a few heels. In time, teenagers become adults, brown belts become black belts, and teachers become noticed as masters (or tolerated as going through another adolescence.)

More about the instructor’s need for recognition next time.