

Martial Arts as a True Profession

We think of a “professional” as a person who does something for monetary compensation, but a definition that is quickly falling out of favor suggests that a professional is someone who works at an art toward the service of people. Rosco Pound, former dean of Harvard Law School, describes a “profession” as “pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of public service.” The professional is paid for the work, and sometimes paid well, but his/her job is not primarily to make money but to trade competence in an art toward the end of benefiting others.

Doctors, lawyers, bankers, and teachers were all once considered in the Professional Class. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, college professors may still have that designation, but many non-professionals think of doctors, lawyers, bankers, and teachers, rightly or wrongly, as just another kind of moneymaker. Martial arts instructors have fallen into that category as well, even though I would like to see a day in which the public thought of martial arts instructors as it used to think of doctors, lawyers, bankers, and other types of teachers—as true (and honorable) professionals.

Pre-1977, when I first decided to be a professional (that is, money-earning) martial arts instructor, McDojos and contract selling were just getting off the ground. People who knew me were concerned that the attraction of money would ruin my standards. In fact, it has been the other way around: my standards ruined the facility with which I could make money in the martial arts. I began producing instructional videos in order to supplement a meager dojo income and to extend the reach of my martial arts instruction without having to sacrifice quality. Video instruction is not as good as personal instruction and I don’t offer video rank programs, but teaching via DVD is a lot better than staying in business by handing out certificates when less-than-dedicated students memorize a few self-defense combinations and stumble through a kata or two. I saw myself then and I see myself now as a proud professional in the old-fashioned sense of the word: I teach a specialized art for the betterment of people, and although I expect to be compensated for it, my motivation is better budo, not bigger bucks.

This may seem a subtle difference. Some “professionals” are motivated by money and happen to benefit their clients in the process—that, after all, is the value of well-functioning capitalism. Anyone working for compensation is, in that sense, a professional. But certain segments of capitalism don’t function as well when the consumer cannot make a rational decision. Such segments are in fields that require specialized knowledge; you know like, oh say, doctors, lawyers, bankers, and teachers. One of the reasons The Professional Class has, in my opinion, fallen on disfavor in the eyes of the general public is because a visible minority of them have, sometimes through market pressure, sometimes through political pressure, decided that it was okay to be motivated secondarily by their client’s good and primarily by money. They did not make this decision consciously, in many cases, rather they made it under pressure to pay back a college loan or impress the

partners of their firm. They fudged a little here and there with clients that could afford the fudge and let their ethics slip just enough to get ahead. After a while, it didn't seem like fudging at all, and became the SOP.

Another reason for the disappearance of the Professional Class of an earlier time is that the non-professional professions have been able to profess some impressive specialized knowledge. If you are an auto mechanic, you no longer compete with the average guy who can tune his own engine and change his own oil; instead, you have to take a course in each engine type and how its computer interface works. These workers overlap with the professionals of yore but are still considered "mere" laborers. I suggest that this state of affairs has dropped the professions down to the everyday laborers' level when it really should have raised the specialized laborer up to the Professional Class.

Similarly, martial artists, although not as educated as doctors or lawyers, consider themselves at least as educated as every day laborers with specialized knowledge. They too deserve to be raised to the Professional Class. However, I find many martial arts instructors who are ready to take "professional" salaries are not ready to act professionally or to seek the full expertise that professionals have. To make martial arts instruction into a true profession, the culture would need to demand two things: certification and trust.

More on certification and trust next time.