

Martial Arts as a True Profession 2

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.

I paid my fee at the tournament and the clerk asked me if I could pay with cash rather than with a check. The sponsoring instructor was lingering in the background and I nodded hello and asked him, rather too directly, if that was because he would pocket the cash and not declare the income. Unperturbed, he asked me a question, “Don’t you pocket the cash for private lessons or mat fees?” I told him that I try to keep strict books and always declare my income. His response was sincere, “How do you stay in business?”

That got me thinking that the reason I was limping along, even though I had almost as many students as he, was that he looked at ways he could enhance his income and I was playing more ethically than the average martial arts merchant. Income tax is one of the reasons that our ethics are “flexible” in today’s world. They want our hard earned bucks and we think they don’t deserve it, haven’t earned it, and are not going to get it if we can keep it away from them. Most people do this legally, but many skirt legality in order to increase income. No, it’s not just those fat cats—they can save bucks legally; it is the society in general that leans toward protecting themselves from a tax haircut by shaving their own otherwise laudable ethics.

Do you know of a martial arts school that, in order to stay afloat, offers classes in martial practices that the instructor learned last night from a book or video? Ninja weapons are popular so, lo and behold, Sensei Surreptitious opens new extra-fee classes on Suzuki Shuriken and Mitsubishi Caltrops. From a marketplace mentality, he is simply responding to a demand and keeping market share. Because his students see him as a merchant, it makes sense to act like a merchant by selling them what they want. He’ll pocket a few extra bucks by making ninja uniforms and *tabi* requirements for the class. For marketers, there is nothing wrong with this.

Now, assume you were going to a college and, although you were majoring in literature, you wanted to take a course in art history. If Professor Quentin Quadratic taught the course, on loan from the Math Department, having quickly read a volume of Jansen’s *History of Art* the night before, you would be insulted that you were being soaked X-dollars per credit-hour for the course. As a professional, he has no business satisfying consumer demand, even if he used to draw sketches during a boring calculus classes as an undergraduate.

Professionals are those who are certified by some board, state or private, to insure that their standards remain high and that they behave in an honorable manner. Martial arts certification (state or private) does no such thing. It says you passed an exam. Although federation teacher-credentials do exist, many teachers have not been awarded a teacher credential by the federation they are apart of. And, in the cases where they have been awarded such a certificate, it was simply an official symbol of their contract with a head instructor, central

controlling organization, or franchise group, not a promise that their ethics, business practices, and concern for the student is central to their workaday lives.

Although every student wants to trust his teacher, it is not unusual that students eventually recognize less-than-ideal practices even in their own schools. Where does the student turn? I am not about to suggest a state- or province-wide martial arts overseeing body—they do not work, in my humble opinion, since they simply lay another layer of politics on the already too political actions of a dojo, federation, or franchise. Rather, I would like to see instructors, proud of their school, their students, and their own teaching skills, assume, of their own accord, the mantle that doctors, lawyers, bankers, and other types of teachers proudly used to wear, “pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of public service.” If you are going to be a Professional, be professional!