

Proving vs. Improving 2

Ask yourself a simple question: do I care more about proving to Sensei that I deserve a rank or title, or about being knowledgeable and skilled regardless of ranks and titles?

When I was writing a regular column for KICK magazine, I would talk from time to time with editor John Steven Soet, who always had unique insights into the martial arts. One time, along with bemoaning the lack of quality submissions he was receiving, he also mentioned that everyone wanted his sensei to be on the cover of the magazine. It seems that every one of these sensei was an undiscovered gem and deserved national recognition. I commented that one does not create worth by being on the cover of magazines; rather, one is on the cover of magazines because one has done something of worth. In other words, notoriety should not be something one creates by manipulating the press; it should be based on some achievement that the press recognizes.

Those fame-seeking sensei may have wanted renown because, at this point in their careers, they had no more titles or ranks to earn and thought they could “prove” themselves worthy by lobbying those they saw as fame makers, in other words, they were A-students at angling. It may not have occurred to them that by improving themselves, their worth might grow to the point at which a magazine might ask them to be on the cover (or at least be interviewed for an article), coincidentally enhancing their reputation.

Reputation is not worth. The plain truth is that some people are motivated by that which signifies achievement while others are motivated not only by the achievement itself but also by becoming the type of person the achievement requires.

Certainly, studying to ace an exam results in a lot more knowledge than cheating or studying only enough to barely pass, but for most of us, in most subjects, once we pass the exam, we also pass over the knowledge, ending up with a mere residue of what we studied. We are lucky if that residue is 10% of what we were taught. Achieving a black belt in karate, for example, may mean working on those difficult kicks and remembering a couple of those troublesome kata; but will we retain those exam skills once the belt is around our waist? If we do, will we think that the knowledge we retain means we have mastered or even fully understand the art?

In many schools, one of a hundred students is serious enough about his/her art to use the exam requirements as a springboard to higher learning. But that’s what exam requirements were intended to be. The exam reflects the greater study, in this case, a martial style. The student motivated toward mastery (not the recognition of mastery, but real hands-on, mind-engaged mastery) sees the style as a springboard to a greater study: the art. The art, in turn, becomes a springboard toward understanding martial arts in general. Although no one can be competent at every style, most students can use any style to be competent at a wider field of study.

As students, we all want to prove ourselves to Sensei and perhaps to the other students. For most people, this is where their motivation ends. A few students need to satisfy their own higher standards and thus aspire to constant, never-ending improvement (*kaizen*).

If a student who wants to *prove* himself fails an exam, he might try again but is just as likely to find fault with the exam or the examiner. His failures chip away at his motivation and may even result in his giving up the effort. Conversely, if a student who wants to constantly *improve* himself fails an exam, he uses that setback as motivation to work harder at his weaker skills, thus more fully understand the art he studies. Which one of these will become the better master? Which will serve the martial arts better? Which do you want to be?