

## Rank, Ego, and Trust

It is human nature to be motivated by goals, and rank is the most obvious of goals. Students seem to discover a concern with rank as soon as they realize that rank is offered. Unfortunately, students often feel that arriving at a goal is more important than changing oneself so that the arrival happens on its own. Paraphrasing Joe Vitale, “They forget that the elevator to success is broken; one has to take the stairs.” They also believe that since the elevator repairman and staircase watchman is Sensei, he must have a secret key to a hidden escalator and maybe he’ll loan it to them (or be shamed into giving it to them).

I recall complaints from a mother of an 8-year-old who had failed his *shichikyu* exam. According to her, I wasn’t watching the same exam as she was. I had not known that being a mother made one an expert in a martial arts system, but since this expert no longer trusted my judgment, I wondered why she and her son stuck around to experience further exams from me. Similarly, I wondered why an adult student, who failed his *sankyu* exam and bitterly complained for the remaining afternoon, seemed to trust me well enough to take every other exam through *yondan* under me. Did he really expect that, if I changed his *sankyu* scores, he (or the others who watched the exam) would trust me *more*?

On the other side of this postcard from the past is my being awarded rank that I thought I did not yet deserve. Do I tell Sensei, “No, thanks. I don’t trust your judgment. I know better whether or not I should be promoted at this time,” or do I just shut up and bow low while planning to quietly earn the rank to my own satisfaction before another ranking period rolls around? To refuse the rank would imply a distrust of Sensei’s judgment. And, if I distrust Sensei’s judgment, why am I sticking around to study until the next ranking period? (By the way, I quietly accepted the rank and busted my butt to earn the next rank in a way that would satisfy my own standards.)

The ego involved in rank manifests itself in several ways. First, there is the concept that “I am not being recognized for my qualities; I am better than he/she/they say I am.” Then there is the idea that “My standards are higher than most people’s; Sensei’s standards are only about average, and I don’t want to be judged on that scale.” And of course, there is the position that “Everyone else may have a *godan* (fifth degree), but I would prefer to remain at *shodan* (first degree); better I be a great *shodan* than an embarrassingly poor *godan*.” Any of these statements might be true or false, but each one says, “I trust me, but I don’t trust you.”

Now let’s consider ego from an angle seldom perceived, that of the instructors awarding the rank. Instructors may be gratified that they are promoting such deserving, talented students, but they also may be promoting students simply to have a bevy of black belts, a pool of junior

instructors, or a line of colored belts that would make their dojo look successful. Both are examples of ego, although the former is more positive pride and the latter more negative manipulation. If the instructor promotes a student for manipulative/political/self-aggrandizement reasons, will the instructor trust his own judgment in the future? Will students trust his judgment in the future? Without trust, can there be a viable, long-lasting relationship?

I suggest that people trust their sensei or find another they can trust. This, of course, is easier said than done, but when trust is present, one need not worry about failing an exam or being promoted too soon. One need not worry about comparing oneself to others, only to those who have already arrived at the top of the staircase (without the secret key to a hidden escalator).