

The Rarity of Rationality

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For the last few weeks, we have been addressing the needs of the beginner. Because our goal is to consider the needs of novices, intermediates and advanced students, as well, this installment addresses the experienced martial artist.

In order to be a well-developed martial artist (by one's own definition of "well-developed"), one must objectively decide what are the pipes that guide the flow of one's learning and what is the [refuse of antiquity](#) that can get in the way of that flow. Most martial artists don't. They just get a "feel" for the place, the teacher, or the practice.

The Japanese use the term *ki* to refer to the spirit of a school as well as to personal spirit or esoteric energy. A good dojo has *genki* or healthy energy and a not-so-good studio has *byoki* or unhealthy energy. Ultimately, the choice may come down to how you feel about the place, but one's feeling cannot explain one's choice to someone else. If you cannot explain a choice to someone else, I suggest, you really haven't explained it to yourself.

It is a human condition to decide with the heart not the head, a condition that us "rationally-biased" fellows have to tolerate. Suzie is crazy about Sammy and when asked why, she says, "I don't know. I just love him." Pressed by those older and wiser for a more rational answer, she describes his handsome face, his broad shoulders, his ample bank account, his Porsche Tanga, his silly smile, his sense of humor and his sensitivity. Of course, next week when she has a falling out with him, his face is too pretty, his shoulders have become hulking, his bank account and his Porsche have made him conceited, his smile is goofy, his sense of humor is inappropriate, and his sensitivity has made him wimpy. Since Suzie did not know what she wanted in the first place, it was pretty difficult to decide if she had found it. The same holds true with a martial art school.

Few people ever ask themselves, "What do I want from studying the martial arts?" Those few who ask often satisfy themselves with a superficial answer. "Self-defense, exercise, etc." But what do they mean by self-defense, exercise, etc.?

Partially, this is not their fault. Not only are emotions a shortcut (albeit a jagged one) to making decisions, but also rationality cannot be well employed without sufficient facts. Prospective students don't even know what questions to ask, let alone what answers to question. It is the rare prospect that prospects for a martial arts style, school, and teacher that best fits his/her desires.

It is reasonable to assume that once a prospect is enrolled and attuned to a school environment, he/she should be able to make better informed, more rational, less emotional decisions. Sorry. Not so. Sammy Spectator has become Sammy Student and a good student does what Sensei says. In other words, students put their brain on hold for a while. This spoon-feeding period is necessary, but it subtly panders to an all-too-human tendency: letting other people make one's decisions. Sammy is, at this stage, *playing* at being a martial artist rather than *studying* the martial arts. When a student withholds his faculty of rational discrimination, he studies

only in the sense that he memorizes. In the martial arts, novices memorize far more with their bodies than their minds. Only when students become black belts with sufficient seasoning, are they encouraged to challenge and modify, test and customize, compare and contrast, analyze and re-synthesize. That is why it is said that black belt is a beginner's rank. Everything prior is a preliminary. White belt is elementary school. Green belt is middle school. Brown belt is high school. Black belt is college because now rationality sets in. Therefore, Mastery begins only in graduate school.

But a problem also exists in the martial arts schools that attempt to emphasize rational learning too early. Inevitably, an instructor, depending on the size of his/her student body, runs classes that are comprised by various ranks of students. He/she may have to teach elementary-schoolers (white belts) along side graduate students (senior black belts). Instructors try to avoid this situation if possible--that's why there is a special black belt class later in the evening or on Friday nights, for example--but inevitably, especially in small schools, student levels will mix. The instructor is compelled to either accelerate the basic training and give elementary students a taste of graduate work or tone down the advanced training and forget challenging the mind and skills of the black belt.

Ironically, even though it is appropriate that the instructor decide what is best taught in any class, the student unconsciously controls his/her decision. To produce well-trained students, the instructor must bring them through various stages of development, gradually away from the flock of followers and gradually toward individual mastery. [Mastery, I submit, implies integrated knowledge of one's art.](#) That, in turn, implies a full application of one's rationality, which is why a true martial arts master is rare--because rationality in martial arts study is so rare.

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