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SENSEI'S JOURNAL

Dojo Challenges from Both Student and Teacher's Point of View

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Recognition and Arrival

(Martial Arts Adolescence, Part 2)

Even seniors in the martial arts go through their own sort of adolescence by wanting to be recognized for their achievements. A few of them are the truly unknown masters among us. Most, however, have not mastered their martial arts adolescence as yet, even though they have the rank and time-in-grade to suggest martial arts maturity. Why are there so many martial arts halls of fame in the contemporary martial arts world? Because so many senior martial artists want a pat on the back for the work they have done. A few even deserve it.

For many years, I would attend a well-run yearly tournament that shocked me with the number of awards it gave out. No, it did not boast mini-peewee divisions for each color of belt in traditional forms, open forms, weaponry, sparring, and self-defense exhibitionism. In fact, its divisions were appropriately few. Rather, before the head instructor awarded the first, second, and third place trophies, he gave a giant plaque to his own instructor, then one to each of his assistants. Next, *his* instructor, visiting from another state, gave one to him; then, his assistants gave him a plaque. Following that, special awards were given out! I thought it was a bit too much mutual admiration but I did not realize that this instructor was reinforcing loyalty not only with the plaques themselves but also with public recognition. A wise instructor recognizes his/her students for their accomplishments. That's why Jigoro Kano's colored belt system become so popular in the first place — public recognition.

Every three months or so most students achieve a belt or a certificate that recognizes their efforts and their accomplishments. But once one becomes an instructor, one seldom achieves recognition from those more

senior than he/she. One has arrived at the stage of “recognitionless-hood.” This is the stage that I call Senior Adolescence.

The sensei suggests to the *sempai* (senior students) that maybe it would be appropriate for the students to honor him in some way beyond the daily kowtowing and the weekly polishing of his/her car. In the old days, students, ignorant of the traditions surrounding rank in the martial arts, would present the instructor with a rank upgrade (as if he were a computer operating system that would serve them better if he were more high-end.) Sooner or later, the word got out that students, even vast number of students, could not legitimately promote the old professor. I’ve got an idea! Let’s nominate sensei to one of the martial arts halls of fame, instead. That way, his or her peers will be honoring sensei. It is the perfect solution! That should hold the old buzzard for a few years!

In all seriousness, the halls of fame serve many purposes, not the least of which is allowing various senior martial artists to network with each other. The senior students would be wise to remember however, that no matter how prestigious the connection with other “masters,” an association with a hall of fame also assumes association with hall of fame members that even sensei might consider suspect. The most H-o-F recognition can do for sensei is: (a) give him/her something to publicize in the local paper to draw in a client or two, (2) allow Sensei to make connections for his/her own further learning, (3) balm the battered ego that needs the recognition. What it cannot do is allow the instructor to arrive at his/her next plateau.

For the senior instructor, private plateaus may occur unexpectedly in the middle of teaching a class, counseling a student or solving a problem. The sensei has long past the time when he/she will get a rank advancement every three months, so plateaus consist of insights into learning or successes in helping students, or watching students climb their own ladders of success. However, public plateaus for senior instructors are few and far between. Public plateaus suggest Public Recognition. What can suggest **Arrival** if not public recognition? The answer is less obvious.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, is there a sound? That depends on one’s definition of sound. If sensei achieves some technical or instructional level of self-improvement and no one is there to honor him/her, has sensei arrived? It depends on one’s definition of arrival. You see, in the martial arts, one never arrives. The landmarks we use in the Western world to signify success usually have to do with possessions or with fame. Because Sensei is not perspiring in a Sergio Valente tailored uniform, we tend to mark his arrival by his level of notoriety. We say that notables like Joe Lewis and Bill Wallace have arrived and, even past their competitive prime, are respected elder statesman of their martial arts practices. We say that Steven Seagal and Jackie Chan have arrived since they have both wealth and film notoriety. But what about your own Sensei Esteban? No decades of contact or even non-contact trophies. No movie billboards or even bit-parts. By Western standards, Esteban has not arrived. Yet he is a very skilled instructor and has terrific martial arts technique. By Eastern standards, one does not measure martial arts achievement by notoriety. In fact, once

past the standard belt ranks, one does not measure martial arts achievement at all. One simply notes his skill, bows and goes back to training.

So, what is to be done with the sensei that is passing through the all-too-human stage of senior adolescence? It is up to his senior students to become the adults, just as mature children often have to parent their parents. They arrange a testimonial dinner, give him a plaque of appreciation, send him to a hall of fame event, or publish his name in an article, column or news event. That will satisfy his Western side for a while. If he persists in feeling unrecognized, they wait patiently as he waited patiently for them to get over their junior level of martial arts adolescence.