

## Competition vs. Contribution

In the dojo/dojang/kwoon, there are students who cooperate with one another and those who compete with one another, either for ego satisfaction or for Sensei's/Sa Bum's/Sifu's attention. Some will try to surreptitiously make themselves feel good by making their fellows look bad, resisting techniques applied by students who are just learning, or by going too fast when they know their partner can barely handle medium-speed. Conversely, others will go out of their way to help students while making sure that the head instructor knows that they are "contributing" to the school.

Since the instructor has seen it all before and since the culture of the most schools is one of cooperation, both competition and this type of overt "contribution" hardly deceive him. But, in a culture of cooperation, a student who is "contributing" as a subtle way to stick out of the crowd can hide his true intent a little more easily.

I remember, as a child, "competing" in Sunday school by trying to be the most cooperative and well behaved of the bunch. The nuns wisely told us that the most cooperative would get a religious medallion at the end of the month. Of course, we should have been good little boys without the ethical bribe, but little boys sometimes need a way to harness their competitive spirits toward a positive end. Until they realize that cooperation is as much in their self-interest as it is in everyone else's, they may need some incentives and guidance, thus medallions and other symbols of success can help them on their way.

Schools of martial arts sometimes give awards to those who have contributed a great deal, but seldom is the reward itself the reason that students are cooperative and contribute to the school. Most students who see a culture of cooperation working will gladly contribute to it. Only rarely is some student so in need of acknowledgment or reward that he makes himself a good, if occasionally obnoxious, child. This holds true for adults, as well as kids. Adults seek recognition rather than attention but that is because they have accepted that cooperative culture and realize that the negative attention won't satisfy their needs while recognition will.

The only thing a head instructor can do is let the obsequiously contributive student run his course. To over-correct that which is obnoxious just gives that student the attention he is seeking and would create another false form, one of denials. At some point the student will realize that he is rubbing people the wrong way, or, if lacking self-awareness, will eventually become frustrated that he is not getting extra attention, acknowledgement, or awards.

To this all too common scenario, let us add the phenomenon of rank and hierarchy. Understandably, a student feels a certain pride when he is promoted. That pride may be doubled if he holds a position as one of the senior students. Martial artists are never demoted, but other senior students can certainly eclipse their standing. I recall being the most senior student in my first karate school when

a visitor, who was already a higher brown belt rank, enrolled. Suddenly, I was no longer the senior. I reasoned that this new student might not be able to teach our methods to juniors nor know what was expected of him. I felt it was better to help him out if he needed it, rather than compete with him for the position or for Sensei's good graces. Other students, put in the same position, do not act quite as reasonably.

When a position, rank, or title defines your self-image, you have given up on your character defining the position. Competition may be a healthy thing in its proper context, but a dojo/dojang/kwoon does not survive on it. Ironically, a school is more successfully competitive in the marketplace of membership only when its students are mutually cooperative and individually contributing.