



Learning to Teach
..... Teaching to Learn

By

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Having achieved Black Belt.

What comes next?

What is the next step?

What is the next stage?

After the initial achievement comes the confusion of what to do next, reaching that goal, leaves a void needing to be filled but with what? Getting back into training is sometimes difficult, having applied oneself to the journey to black belt you, find yourself standing at a crossroads wondering which way to go. Which path should we choose, where will it take us, what will this next journey bring or for perhaps for some will they take that step at all or be content to stay at that point.

For most of us, with the passage of time, we find those decisions being made for us, shaping the future in our martial art. I found myself with a wealth of knowledge, which I wanted to pass on to others, but with the dilemma of how I could to do this. I did not want to progress to being an instructor at the expense of my training, perhaps a somewhat selfish thought, but how good would I be as an instructor if I did not maintain my ability. How then could I pass on this knowledge and continue to train as before? A question to which I found there was no easy answer.

Continuing to train regularly, I soon found the commitment to my chosen martial art was merely lying dormant waiting for me to awaken it? Supporting and helping my instructor with the class provided me with the opportunity to pass on some of my knowledge, but more than that I found myself learning from these experiences. I learnt that there is no such thing as "a student", all of us are different in stature, strength, ability, commitment and dedication. But we are also different to teach because of those same characteristics. This has led me to recognise the many different types of student that make up the class in our dojangs. For the purpose of this essay I have tried to describe some of the characteristics that I have observed.

1. The student with natural aptitude

At sometime a student will come to the dojang with a natural aptitude for the martial arts. You will soon recognise this natural ability, and can find yourself being drawn to the student, wanting to improve and encourage this natural talent. It may seem like a gift that this student came to your dojang, but very rarely is the situation that simple.

We must be careful not to focus only on this one student, at the detriment of the others students. Also having a natural ability does not make them a good martial artist, a committed and dedicated student, or mean that they share your enthusiasm. We must be mindful not to overload them with information, but to merely nurture the natural talent and create an interest in our martial art.

Dedication and commitment will only come after time, when the natural talent is not enough to get them by, when they need to draw on an inner strength and the will to continue. At this point you may loose this student, they may decide to give in and leave, for only those who have become committed will continue to train. A lesson we should learn from this is, that ability alone does not make a martial artist, but is merely a part of the whole person we strive to become.

2. The student who wants to please

Also we will come across the student who wants to befriend their instructor, always wanting to help, always keen to be involved, and wanting attention this student will be looking for more attention and encouragement than other students. The student will be looking for confirmation that their techniques are good and what they are doing meets your approval.

All of us need to be encouraged in some manner or other, but this student may need more than others, and whilst trying to maintain an even balance for the benefit of the class, we can easily fall into the trap and do just the opposite. A danger with this student is that meeting your approval can be more important than learning the martial art. When the techniques increase in difficulty the students interest soon declines and they will need even more encouragement to keep them training.

An instructor should at all times be mindful of the needs of his students, providing the necessary encouragement when required. As an instructor we must realise that no matter how much we may invest in a student, at the end of the day it is down to the student. For whatever we achieve, we must achieve it for ourselves.

3. The student with low esteem

A student with a low self-esteem will test the instructors' ability and resolve. Easily recognised, the student with their head on one side, always looking down, pretending not to hear when spoken to, unable to believe in their own ability. The one in the class where you think to yourself "if only they tried a little harder" when in truth, just coming to class is hard for them to do.

Always conscious of someone looking at them, feeling criticised by even the smallest of glances in their direction. Sometimes seeming uncooperative almost disobedient, yet at the same moment thinking "Please don't say anything to me". The longer they train the more you can see potential and improvement, but getting this over to the student will prove a major challenge.

Lifting the students' self-esteem, seeing them come out from their shell, growing in stature, developing as a person, can be one of the most rewarding parts of teaching. However for this student to progress you may constantly need to try to raise their self-esteem. Helping them up that first step does not mean the rest of their journey is on level ground, for they will continually have steps to climb. To them a great achievement seems but a small gain and yet a small set back can be a major disaster.

Balancing these "ups and downs" can be difficult both for the student and the instructor, encouraging the student to overcome the disappointment can require a great deal of patience. Yet this student will continually remind us of our seven tenets, each one of them will stand out and teach us, as we help this student.

4. The student with a bad attitude

The student to test the instructors' credibility will be the one with an attitude; surprisingly they very often have an aptitude for martial arts. A potential which if realised could be so beneficial to the students' future, in both their life and martial art. On many occasions you wonder why they continue to train; on some occasions turning up to class seems to be an effort; admitting to themselves they want to be there would be a major breakthrough. Yet perhaps we should take time to ask why they come to train.

Very often they have been sent by their parents to “Gain a bit of discipline”, or “let somebody else sort them out”. Both of those statements mean someone has already given up on them.

Perhaps they only need to be noticed; maybe they need a friend, or a role model to connect with. Whatever the reason, an instructor should always remember that his/her purpose is to train their class in martial arts. If in doing this, the student finds what they are looking for in our classes, then we will see a change in the student. It can easily develop into a battle of wits between instructor and student that could disrupt a class. In a larger class this student will not be so evident, only on occasions attracting the attention of the instructor by their actions and attitudes. Yet in a smaller class the effect can be devastating. It can develop into a full-scale battle of wills, to the loss of all the class and the instructor, a pitfall to be avoided at all costs. Will the instructor manage to get the student to conform or will the student rebel against both the instructor and the essence of our martial art. Most of all our integrity should bring us through these ordeals, not unscathed but with a greater wealth of experiences to draw on to improve our teaching abilities.

5. The over confident student

There probably isn't a martial arts class that has not had one of these students, full of their own ability, and overconfident. Describing them like this somehow seems to be wrong, for we all strive to be confident, and to reach the highest level of ability we can attain. So where is the problem with this student, usually it comes down to their attitude or mentality. Whilst confident they have little consideration for others; although able they have little regard for the ability of others; never seeing their own mistakes only those of others around them.

If the instructor can keep the students' “feet on the ground” then perhaps the discipline, respect, humility, and spirit required for martial arts will change the students' attitude in class. With these basic ideals instilled in them, perhaps they can be applied to other areas of the students' life. Once again martial art does not make a new person but merely shapes the qualities that already exist.

6. The student who wants change

A product of today's culture, this student will at sometime appear at a martial art class. The reason for their presence may be difficult to determine; perhaps it is just to find out what it is all about. But for whatever reason they might have to come they seem unable to accept it as it is.

Our martial art is exactly that an art. It is not a sport not a keep fit class, not a social occasion, and not a hobby. It most definitely will become a way of life for those who embrace it fully. But for some reason this student will want something to change, not so much discipline; not such a strenuous lesson, not all this bowing, why all these rituals and all such things we recognise as integral parts of our martial art. Allowed to pursue their quest for change, these students can cause the downfall of a class, sometimes taking students away from their instructor, putting doubt into some of those less committed students, persuading them to change their views. We may never know the reasons for these actions, or even begin to understand why they want change. A difficult situation to deal with, but one thing is certain an instructor should remain true to himself, his ideals and his chosen martial art, for these will support him in the times when difficult decisions have to be made.

7. The unassuming student

This student will never really stand out from the rest in the class, because these students make up the majority of a class, all training to the best of their ability. An instructor will constantly be assessing each of his/her students, keeping a watchful eye on their progress. However it may be easy to overlook the individual needs of this student, who never demands your attention or seems to need that individual encouragement desired by others.

Most of our students are there because they want to be, willing to learn and enthusiastic to take part. Training for their own personal reasons, but all with the same goal, that of black belt. For some the journey will be longer than others, but all eventually find themselves making that final step. Providing the necessary encouragement and information, at the right time, will keep these students progressing along the path to Black belt.

Finally...

I can see that “the student” and “the instructor” are in fact, mirror images of each other. Whilst trying to teach a student a technique, you find yourself analysing your own technique to get it right and thereby teach the student correctly. When dealing with a particular student we find ourselves examining our own beliefs to find an answer. In this way the student unknowingly teaches the instructor far more than the instructor can teach the student.

For the past three years as I have progressed from Cho Dan towards a promotion to E Dan. I have continued to develop as a martial artist and as a person, and I know that I have changed considerably from the person I was seven years ago when I started to train in our Martial Art. But on reflection I find it difficult to identify a particular way that I have changed, after all my ideals and personal characteristics have not changed. Perhaps the sharp edges that formed my character have become more rounded, making me a better person.

Mike Allen

Cho Dan

Tang Soo!