

Tests of Kindness

The title does not suggest that kindness is being tested, nor does it refer to lenient rank exams, rather it is meant to suggest that certain tests of martial veracity can be of a nature that is more kind than hostile.

Because the martial arts build self-respect, a once healthy pride can swell into an overly high opinion of oneself. Those martial artists unaccustomed to balancing a positive self-image with a somewhat self-effacing politeness can favor the former and ignore the latter. In other words, martial artists can easily fall into an unwarranted conceit. In fact, when the self-proclaimed hotshot martial artist meets an even better martial artist, he seldom admits to being a B- or C-level practitioner, rather, he categorizes the better martial artist as some sort of genius (albeit on the same general skill level as he).

In fact, martial artists are loath to spend time at events in which lower-level practitioners are teaching or are being honored. They feel that association with “inferiors” lowers their standards. Even though they espouse a fellowship of martial artists, they would rather be connected with very high-level instructors so as to elevate their own self-worth by association. How does the true A-level practitioner evaluate a peer without insulting or challenging him, both of which would be unfortunate and undesirable? He devises a test, albeit a kind one.

I have mentioned in a previous essay that occasionally senior martial artists, in my opinion, have put me through my paces without being so impolite as to insult, threaten, or otherwise personally challenge me.

I remember Soke Don Angier asking to learn some basic techniques of my system that I was delighted to teach. He perfected them in about ten minutes. Then it was his turn to teach a basic *waza* that was simple but so precise that I had performed it well only twice within a half-hour. Without claiming superiority, he managed to both show respect to me and to my system while simultaneously establishing his seniority as an A-level instructor. (By the way, I immediately demoted myself mentally to a C-minus level and would still consider myself at that level if he had not told me that he respected the aiki technique of only two people he had met, and that I was one of them.) Okay, I'll accept a B-minus.

In other situations, senior instructors have just let me demonstrate and teach while they quietly sat in the background and watched. In fact, I would not know they were even there if they had not complimented me afterwards (sometimes months afterwards).

Occasionally, an A-level senior will take part in my class and occasionally (and this is very rare indeed) volunteer to be my partner in a demonstration. I usually am suspect of this if I do not know the instructor well because some instructors like to make others look incompetent,

the intended implication of which is of course that by comparison they themselves are outrageously competent. In fact, I have had several surreptitiously rude martial arts students attempt to do the same. However, I am complemented when a senior instructor participates and then quietly gives me a thumbs-up, a smile, or tells someone else that I am worth a second look. Darrell Collins, Harold Martin, Miguel Ibarra, Jerry Piddington, and Leon Jay have done this for me.

This does not suggest that “tests” such as these cannot be challenging, but it does suggest the purpose of the test is not to personally challenge, but to honestly evaluate. After all, what are tests for?