

# The Bond between Instructor and Student

Ms Richard lotua

Martial artists often begin their training looking for something more out of life, and for some practitioners, this is achieved through developing a special bond with their instructor. My topic is The Bond between Instructor and Student.

This essay is dedicated to my club Tribal Taekwon Do and all my students past, present and future, our Tribal family for the overwhelming support I have received throughout the years. In the time that this essay was written Tribal Taekwon Do celebrated its 7th anniversary.

I recall an article I read many years ago about the bond that sometimes develops between instructor and a particular student, the author did not go deeply into the subject, but where he was coming from remained with me ever since. I can't say that, as a student myself, I ever had that connection with any of my instructors that he spoke of in his article. I've had close relationships – sometimes very close indeed with my instructors that flowed into the social side of my life. What the author was alluding was more akin to the bond that was often shared between parent and child.

Can a bond as such be formed in this day in age? In this modern world is there room as it is of litigation and paedophilia, for such old fashioned concepts? If the dojang were not so populated by kids, and if all those teaching martial arts to the public these days had received a full and proper education in their art, perhaps we'd see this bond happening more often. Then again, maybe I am being naïve that a special friendship could ever be commonplace.

A love such as this and I use the word 'love' deliberately requires a level of maturity in both parties if it is to form, grow and last. Such trust and mutual care is rare outside of the dojang, so why should we expect it to be less rare inside the dojang? With a high percentage of marriages ending in divorce, while others remain intact for only financial and religious reasons, opening our emotional side to another person is clearly a scary business fraught with the dangers of abuse. For some, it is a recipe for disaster. However, such relationships do exist in martial arts even today, and given the gender of most practitioners, they exist mostly between men. Life and 'do', as always act as opposing mirrors, reflecting that which appears in the other. Thus, our pursuit of something inside the dojang has always been inexorably linked to the life we live outside it. Whether we like to think so or not, we don't change suddenly when we enter the dojang in our dobok and ti; instead we remain the same person we've been all day dressed in our civilian clothes doing our day to day business. The activity the education and the cultivation that are the hallmarks of the 'do' are things that awaken feelings inside us, from such feelings comes a realisation that what we thought, felt or imagined before has somehow changed. What we choose to do once these small thresholds are reached, and we become conscious of them, determines the progress we make. It is quite possible to visit the dojang for years train, sweat, then return home, and never take a single step forward as a human being. Even among those attempting to train deeply, the relationship I am addressing can be considered extremely rare.

Sadly it's those whom spend their life in martial arts splashing around in the shallows that reflect more accurately the common connection between the instructor and student.

As long as so many in martial arts see themselves as 'service providers', then many of those searching for some deeper meaning to their training will fail to make the connection with someone who can help them find it. For while there are many people who can teach, there are not so many who can inspire. While there are plenty that can explain, there are few that can display. And while there are countless others who say they know what they're doing, few can do it over a long period of time. Instructors do just that: instruct. They pass on mechanical movements and physical postures in exact amounts. An inch too high here with a block, a fraction too much weight their in a stance. And that back foot: is it up or down when executing a punch? All very interesting I'm sure, and enough to keep many people working hard and other's employed, for a long time to come. However, from such instruction comes only information about how to move our body in a particular way.

In my experience, those who train this way become brilliant at training in Taekwon Do or any martial art, though not so good with 'Do' or the 'art' itself. They can train perfectly for hours on end, for days weeks, months at a time, but often fail to grasp anything but the obvious. If this what we've been looking for then we've achieved nirvana. Yet being exceptional at training won't lead to the kind of relationship this essay is addressing, that will only happen when the fighting techniques are placed in the context of life. In truth, it does not matter what style we train in, or where. What matters is the instructor's depth of understanding in the art they are transmitting, and the hunger in the heart of the apprentice who wants to learn.

While students may be a 'clean slate' when such a relationship begins, teachers always have to be well educated in their subject and well rounded in their lifestyle. As they will be the ones driving the relationship, they need to have the purest intentions from the outset. So if, as students, we are open to a relationship like this, we need to find an 'instructor'. Finding an instructor to guide us is a subject I hold strong opinions on, and in my mind there is a marked difference between a 'sabum' and a mere instructor.

Great caution is required before we approach someone we trust. The lessons that need to be taught and learnt are difficult and fraught with danger.

Forwarded are some excerpts an author by the name of Paolo Coelho who wrote a book about a teacher-student relationship. 'The Pilgrimage'

In his book, Coelho relates a tale that illustrates very well the difference between a student and 'instructor'. The story tells how he is following his teacher along a path once walked by pilgrims across Northern Spain in medieval times. He is relying on his teacher to guide him, though from the outset he is warned that he will have to make the journey by his own efforts, and in this way, discover his own path.

Someway into the trek, they come upon a waterfall. Together they stand at its base, looking up. Then, the teacher dives in the water and disappears for a while before emerging from the water at the top of the fall. He had made his way there behind the curtain of vast flowing water, so even

Paolo could see his teacher progress; he could not exactly see how he did it. It was now his turn to make the climb, and he soon discovered that the force of the water is much stronger than he imagined.

He describes the doubt that washes over him as “the sense that weakens us at the moment we most need to have faith in our powers”. Passing behind the cascade to get away from the force of the falling water, he finds the climb is a little easier than he anticipated. It is only when he has nearly reached the top, and realises that he has to find his way back through the torrent, that his doubts return. The force of the water and the thundering noise it makes falling over the rock face is threatening to overwhelm him. Like so many of us when we find ourselves in a tough situation, he started to look for ways out instead of ways through. Close to giving up, he dreams of heading for a place where “there would no longer be any need for the superhuman effort it took, there would only be rest and peace”.

In his struggle to make progress, he lifts his head above the water, but finds nothing he can hold on to. He looks for his teacher, but he is nowhere to be seen. This is when he understands that his teacher will not save him if he slips and falls. He is on his own, making his own journey. He decides to stop fighting his situation and blend with it instead. Letting his hand become “like a fish”, it finds its way through the water to a rock from which he is able to lever himself through the torrent and clamber to the top. Finally reaching the bank, he falls in an exhausted heap on the grass and goes to sleep. Before his teacher had jumped in the water, he had said, “I will make the climb without you being able to see where I place my hands and feet. In the same way, a disciple such as you can never imitate his guide’s steps. You have your own way of living your life, of dealing with your problems, and of winning. Teaching is only demonstrating that it is possible for yourself.”

When a teacher of any discipline finds a student who is willing to follow their lead while making their own path, there is an opportunity for something special to happen. Not only are the teacher’s skills and understanding given freely to the next generation, but also the student is now equipped to build upon those skills and produce something different and perhaps even better.

A French poet and writer Paul Valery once wrote, “The true tradition in great endeavours lies not in doing what others have done, but in finding the spirit which produced such things and would produce quite different ones in different times.”

I am always fascinated by people who insist on freezing the practice they do in a time warp, based on old photographs and stories, people who continue to live in the past, not empowering themselves or their students with options. This kind of thinking is not a tradition, but a living museum piece, and often leads to a life unfulfilled and a promise not kept. Those who insist on retracing their teacher’s every footprint forget the tradition demands that we each make our own mark upon the path. We each take our own small steps forward in life and, in doing so, experience life itself, fresh and for the first time. We can grasp an idea of what is possible by observing our teacher, but they never make the journey for us.

Clearly the majority of people training in Martial arts today are not looking for this kind of education. Instead they are looking for an Instructor; someone who advertises themselves as the

biggest, the best or perhaps just knocks on the front door and signs them up. But the kind of relationship I'm talking about can't exist between those who hawk for trade and offer a free this and that to everyone that joins their academy and the kind of people attracted to such offers. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the man in the plain white training suit and black belt has all of the answers. I believe that more damage is done to the 'art' by well meaning but poorly educated practitioners, than by any other single group in our awesome art.

In my years training I have never been that special student to any of my instructors. There have always been students who could make more progress and understood things far better than me. They were closer to technical perfection and more balanced in the way that they lived their lives, too. Everyone knew who these people were, and everyone knew why they were in that position because they deserved to be. I have been close to my instructors, though, as close as a family in some cases. My first instructor Mr Maorikava Tere and I had a great friendship and after his passing in the 1990s my passion and ambition was of course to follow his footsteps and his teachings, though, I have never considered myself much more than average at anything I have done in life, but when I am around my students I strive to give them 110% in order for them to have tools for them to use in their everyday life, I don't expect them to do things word for word but to take what they can and use it in a positive and pro active manner.

The relationship between Instructor and student is rewarding, if not sometimes confusing. For Westerners especially, we have to come to terms with 'do' in Taekwon Do that seem strange, unfair and even harsh. We have to struggle with the lack of choice we are presented with. In "do" there is only the choice of continuing or stopping; there is no neutral ground. The path we walk the journey we make, the personal battles we fight, and our feelings toward our instructor, are internal things that we alone will understand and appreciate. Drawing our inspiration from the example of our teacher, we understand that progress is possible only when we find ways to make it so for ourselves.

To some it up, may I refer to ITF Taekwon Do encyclopaedia written by our founder, the late and great General Choi Hong Hi page 43, para 8 sentence 3 and para 9;

"The responsibility of teaching those art lies with the instructors, whose eventual mission will be to teach students to be physically and mentally strong and to help contribute to a more peaceful world."

"Certainly a dedicated and sincere instructor is an absolute necessity for any do jang. The do jang cannot grow and mature without a cadre of equally dedicated and sincere students. Accordingly, both instructor and student owe a debt of responsibility to teach each other that can never be paid."

I can't say, as others do that I have produced hundreds of Black belts. I can only admit to helping people reach a level sufficient to wear that colour. Knowing what they went through and knowing the discomfort I endure as their instructor when they have not been successful in personal ambitions forms a bond between us that is not easily broken. Those students young or old, who endure my instruction are bound to me, as I am to them, by ties of blood, sweat and tears. What their feelings are for me I cannot say nor I think I would want to know, and what my feelings are for them as individuals and as a collective and family no words could ever describe and are too personal to share on this essay.