

Pathways

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“Our greatest glory consists not in never failing, but in rising every time we fall”

Oliver Goldsmith

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About Rank Promotions

It seems as though I am remiss in my leadership skills. As almost all of you know, we have a syllabus from which we derive our lesson plans and there are clear “technique” requirements for rank, but what I have not adequately explained to people is how exactly we move from one rank to another in the adult classes. So this month, I want to address that oversight.

I am sure that many of you want a black and white, objective measure of performance that tells you that you are ready for rank. In the real world, however, it is rarely possible to create a rigid standard that is applicable across the board because, we are, well, all very different people.

So let’s say for instance, that at yellow belt you need to perform O Goshi (major hip throw), or Ahp Chaki (front kick). You will be shown these techniques in a variety of different training scenarios and use them in a variety of different applications. As a white belt, however, you will probably not be performing the techniques with grace and skill. Many things will impact the quality of your performance, including, but not limited to, your level of fitness, your level of body awareness, your age, your partner, and your level of interest.

The syllabus merely puts you on notice that you will be shown a specific set of tools and be given opportunities to practice them (and others).

So how do I apply rank across a diverse population?

Over the years the three base ranks (Yellow, Orange and Green), have become really quite simple to me. So here goes:

For Yellow belt...show up, and keep showing up. Technique will come, but for now, just show up with an empty cup. Be willing to learn.

For Orange belt...fall over and be willing to be thrown. By learning to fall over we demonstrate a willingness to face our fears. By getting thrown we are demonstrating a willingness to trust.

For Green belt....show determination and dedication. We all inevitably face frustrations and doubts. Obstacles to training will emerge that may be either physical and/or mental. Face them, overcome them and keep going. Green belt is the rank in which you begin to get truly serious about your training. It shows in the quality of your technique and your resolve on the deck.

In reality, a yellow belt student may end up seeing the same techniques as a green belt student, because we use a rotating curriculum, but the quality of performance will differ between the two ranks. So I am less concerned with technique *per se*, and more concerned with the lessons behind the lessons.

As for the later ranks, the three brown belts: They are a little harder. I expect more mastery, an emerging level of elegance and grace, a sense of understanding and the beginnings of insight. At brown belt, knowing some names becomes more important. At brown belt we can look for quantifiable improvements. At brown belt we can begin to set training goals that will lead us to black belt, because we have made the commitment. Prior to the brown belt ranks, we may say we

More About Rank Promotions

want a black belt, but we do not know what that really means...yet.

The syllabus is YOUR guide. Keep a journal, write down what you have been learning after each class. Check off the items on the syllabus if you want...you might be surprised about just how much you have seen. But do not get trapped by the syllabus. For instance, within the Judo syllabus there are about six different hip throws. If you were training in Aikido all the hip throws would get the same name: Koshi Nage. The names we put on techniques are merely conveniences of communication.

Having ranked in Hapkido, Judo and Ju Jitsu, I have become acutely aware that names change from system to system according to the understanding of the instructors within each system and according to the training principles behind the system.

More than that, names can change within a system. I was trained in Judo in Europe and we had names for throws that are different to the same throw in the United States. Equally, names can change according to the perspective of the observers.

Let's try another example: When is O Soto Gari really Harai Goshi...or vice versa? That's not as easy a question to answer as you might think...especially if you have been to tournament as either a player, a coach or a referee.

What I am telling you, is that over the years, names have become less important to me. Movement has be-

come important. Understanding has become important. Dedication has become important.

So let's take a look at an example that might be applied to a green belt student who is looking to get brown belt. I choose this rank, because it is a big threshold for many people.

If I am still telling that student to keep his/her knees off the planet when doing ground work, then we are not ready yet. Does it matter whether the student is doing a named hold-down, or a named choke, arm-bar or defense? No, not really. What matters is that the student has still not learned to make a partner carry his or her weight. It doesn't matter how many techniques the student can name. The student has still not figured out one of the great lessons of ground work.

Perhaps all that has really happened is that I have come full circle to where I started in Judo. My original instructor was all about movement and application and much less about teaching technique. I didn't really start learning techniques by name until I hit the middle ranks before black belt.

There's another aspect to rank that I feel almost obliged to talk about. When I was coming up through the ranks, it never dawned on me to compare myself to others. It took me 13 years to get to black belt. Now admittedly that included three university degrees and three countries in the time frame, so my training was

sporadic and varied, but that's not really the point.

The point is that I was measuring me against me. Did I know more as a brown belt than I did when I was a green belt? If so, all was right with the world. I didn't look to see who got to brown belt before me, or what rank people held who were training with me...none of that mattered. We each walk our own path. I am responsible for my path. That is all that matters.

Another aspect of my training, was that I have always trusted that my instructors were not whimsical or capricious. I always accepted that they knew more than I did and had insights that I could not see. I still feel that way...even after forty-plus years of training. I'm not saying that to make you think I know a bunch more than you do...I am saying it because it speaks to the 'empty cup' philosophy of training. We could argue that I was naïve, but there has always been a level of trust with my instructors. I come to class to learn. If I learn, rank will eventually come. As I look back on it, I can see that some instructors with whom I trained ranked me too quickly, some too slowly. So what?

All that really matters is that my goal is that every time I step on the deck I do so with an empty cup, and every time I step off the deck there is something new in the cup. ☺

"The universe is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper."

Eden Philpotts

Something to Think About

I want you to take a minute and look at yourself. Oh, and answer these questions.

We tend to think about ourselves as the sum of our senses, thoughts and feelings...but are we?

Our senses come for perceptions based in the physical world. This is hot, that is cold, that way is up, that down and so on. Basically, our senses tell our physical bodies how to negotiate our way through our living environment. Specifically, the physical self monitors for threat and safety and guides us towards self-preservation. Interestingly though, you will replace every atom in your body within something like a two year interval...so, in a very real sense you are not the same person you were two years ago. Your physical self can be looked at as a renewable and regenerating container that moves and records our perceptions of reality.

I was playing a computer mind-control game the other day called "Wild Divine." It is a biofeedback game that teaches you to control your heart rate and breathing. One of the exercises I was playing was designed to control the path of birds as they fly across the screen, using nothing but your breathing patterns. As I played along, I had an interesting insight...our thoughts are like birds that fly across the sky of our mind. How often do we stop to control them? How often do my thoughts control my actions? Am I really my thoughts? If I

can watch myself having a thought, am I really my thought? What is my mind field, when there are no thoughts to distract me?

From perception and thought come emotions. We create emotions moment-by-moment as an interaction of mental neurotransmitters that affect our thinking process and hormone secretions that control our physical state. But our emotions change all the time...I was angry ten minutes ago, now I am happy. I was sad yesterday, now I feel loved....we all know this roller coaster. But are you your emotions?

Again, just like thinking, you can observe your emotions and you can exert control over your emotions...if you choose to do so.

In our children's classes we tell our children to focus the eyes, the mind and the body. It's all about learning 'self-control.'

So what is self-control and how does it work? At one level of investigation, the term 'self-control' implies that there is something controlling the self. If we are not our physical selves, and we are not our thoughts, and we are not our emotions, then it implies that these are all expressions that we allow to exist. So who is 'we' in this case?

Look at it like this: I am not the twelve year-old boy who started Judo. He only exists in my less-than-accurate memory. As far as I am aware, no other sentient being in the universe shares my memories of that

child in the way I see them. And yet, that boy created ripples in reality that have impacted thousands of people over the years.

As I am now, I am a function of my memories, my thoughts and feelings and my ever-aging body. But I am also an *observer* of these phenomena...none of them *define* me.

In any given moment, there is almost unlimited potential of who I might choose to be, but then I make a decision based upon my accumulated experiences and perceptions of reality and all those potential possibilities collapse into a single outcome...*me* in the moment! But I am still only the observer of me doing the collapsing into a recognizable human who interacts with my perceptions of reality through my expression of senses, thoughts and feelings....all of which are unique to me in this moment in the entire compass of time.

If you are still with me at this point, it's pretty heady stuff. It's the kind of stuff that makes you look at yourself and see you for who you really are and who you choose to be and also to see the difference between the two.

My challenge to you this week, is to catch yourself in the role of the observer and to see yourself as you are, not your thoughts, or feelings or body, but something else...something more beautiful and something worth getting to know.☺

"The more we study, the more we discover our ignorance."

Percy Shelley

A Moment of Your Time?

Can I steal a moment of your time?
Please?

No, not really.

What?

Actually, this newsletter has been all about time, space and our perceptions of them both.

One of my unstated goals is to be present. To show up and be invested in the moment, without being attached to the moment.

Now that may seem like it's a tad esoteric and has nothing really to do with anything that I have written about this month, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Most of the time we go around in our lives attaching to stuff. For example: My finger hurts, so I feel pain. The pain won't go away, so I am suffering. That's a choice. I chose to attach to my broken joint. In a different iteration of the same stimulus, I am aware that I have much to learn about taking my blocking skills for granted. My finger doesn't hurt, it serves as a reminder that I have an ego. It serves as a lesson. It makes me smile. All these are choices.

Think about the things to which you attach, and which then act like a drag on your momentum in life. Make yourself a list...it'll probably take a while.

Now think about being in the moment. How many times are you fully present in any given day? How many times are you so com-

pletely absorbed in an activity that your mind reaches states of awareness that reach beyond our normal beta-wave thinking and enter the realm of possible inspiration?

Remember my bird example from the last article? I said I had an insight, not a thought. I didn't think "Oh, you know what? My thoughts are like birds in the sky of my mind"...I simply laughed as I was breathing. I saw the obvious. It made me laugh. I'm not sure that I had a logical thought about any of it, until I stopped, recognized what I was doing and lost the moment.

At that moment the birds flew all over the computer screen and so did my thoughts. I laughed some more...I had lost the moment.

So what exactly is a moment?

I remember listening to a lecture once by the Surgeon General, Grace Hopper, who wanted to know the exact length of a nanosecond. I recall the Surgeon General unrolling a length of copper wire and telling the audience that at the speed of light...this was the length of a nanosecond. But is it? At a different speed, the wire would be a different length. And, if we exceed the speed of light, all bets about the length of the wire are off.

So how long is a nanosecond? As long as you want it to be...so long as you remain present to witness it. If, at this point you think I have

finally slipped over the deep end, that's O.K.. My final point is really very simple...

When we are fully present in an action, nothing matters except that action. We cling to nothing, attach to nothing. Thoughts cease and we are awash in the ocean of the moment. It is this sense of presence that I seek in the martial arts. It is this sense of presence I seek in photography.

And...if you are still with me, you will see the trap that I have created for myself. I am seeking something...therefore I have attached to a desire and I have managed to get in my own way.

How often do we do that in life? How often do our attachments and desires hold us back from the very outcomes we would "seek"?

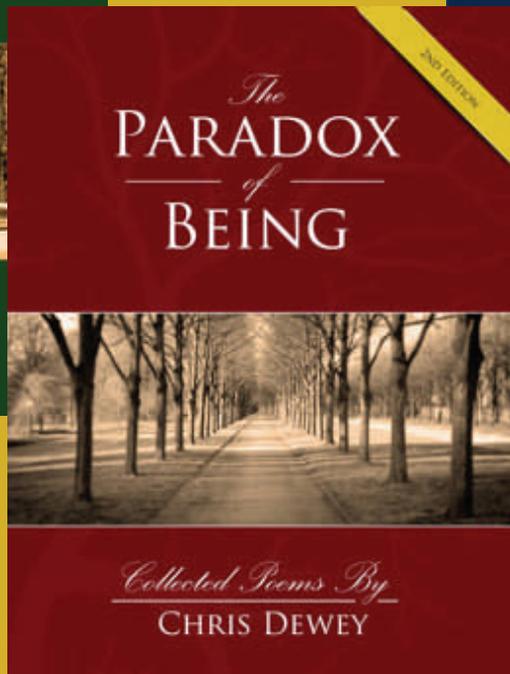
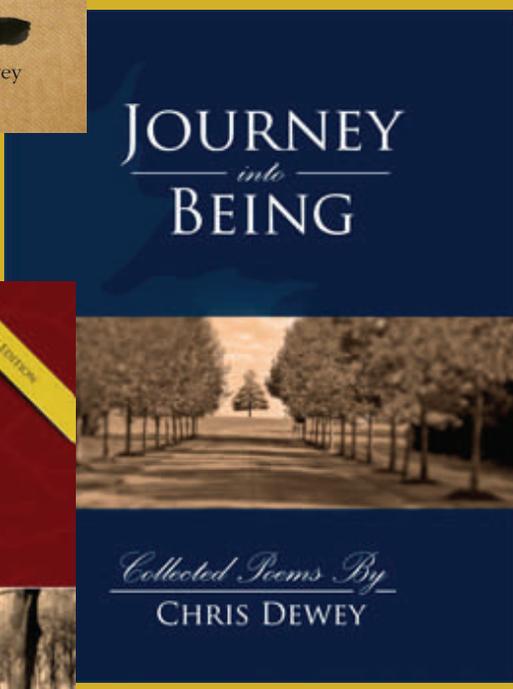
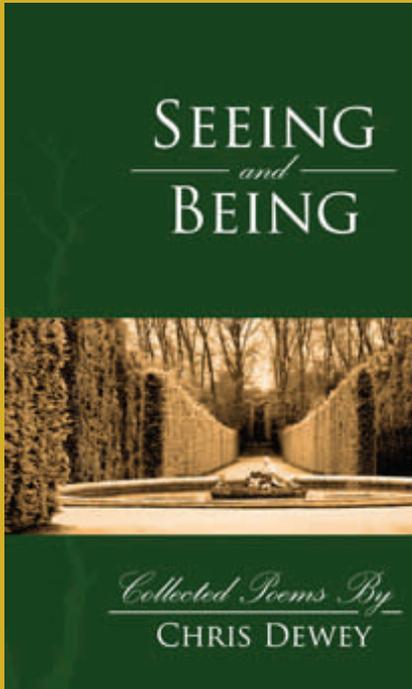
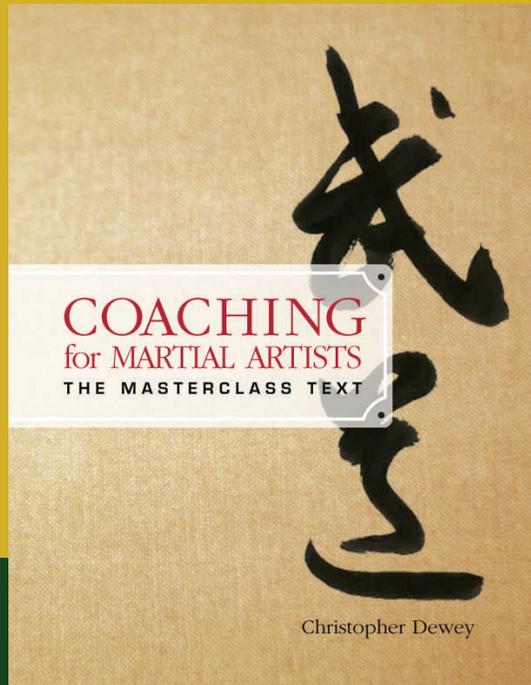
SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ **KICK-A-THON, SPAR-A-THON, THROW-A-THON. MARCH 25TH AT SMAA.**
- ◆ **AKAYAMA SPRING CAMP. TRUSSVILLE, AL. APRIL, 2010.**
- ◆ **SPARRING TOURNAMENT, TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 9TH AT SMAA.**

"If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing birds will come"

Chinese Proverb

**NEW
TITLE**



**For information about classes, books and seminars contact us at
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