



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

Sensei and Caveats by **David M. Valadez**

Often it is asked: “Who and what is a sensei?” Attempts to answer such questions are varied and numerous. Nevertheless, certain caveats always seem to be present: “Do not make more of the sensei than he/she is.” “The sensei is only a human being.” Etc. Of course, when folks utter these warnings they are trying to block off the possible abuses that may accompany cultic behavior. Yet, I wonder how necessary such warnings truly are. Which do we see more of in the dojo: Are there more times when we expose ourselves to great risk by opening our heart/minds to the guidance of another, or do we tend to be more close-minded in how we relate to our teachers? Can it be true that Modern man, though he is losing his capacity for civility and for intimacy, though he is losing his sense of self-responsibility, though he is losing his capacity to respect and to practice faith, still finds it easy to make himself vulnerable to another human being? Can Modern man, who is experiencing greater and greater levels of self-alienation, greater levels of apathy, and greater levels of disassociation, still muster up levels of humility that surpass what is spiritually necessary and go on to become degrees of humiliation?

I would say the problem of knowing a sensei goes the other way – most of the time. The problem of being unable to recognize a sensei for all he/she is, for all the ways they are different from us, for all of their hard work, their glory, their graciousness, their service, their suffering, their compassion, their wisdom, etc., seems to be the more prevalent difficulty. Caution seems out of place, or at least beside the point. The fact is that most of us come to the dojo guarded and unwilling to risk anything of ourselves. So prevalent is this guardedness and this unwillingness to risk anything of ourselves, that when cultic behavior actually does arise, one most likely finds these very things at the source of that behavior as well.

Perhaps before we warn ourselves of what we “should” see in our teachers, we should concern ourselves with the capacity to see our teachers, period. Perhaps before we note how much they are like ourselves, we should note how different we are from them. Do we train like they? Do we train as long, as much, as intensely? Can we bring the Way outside of the dojo as they can? Can we relate to the art in the same manner that they do? Can we suffer like they? Do we have as much patience or as much endurance? Can we turn the other cheek as quickly as they can? Can we give as much and can we give as much for as long? Can we demonstrate as much wisdom or compassion? Can we practice as much faith or as much humility? Etc.

These questions, unlike the usual caveats, are meant to note difference, not sameness. Sameness does not seem to be the problem, especially as the modern world moves more away from appreciating mentoring models and/or those teachings that can only be transmitted via mentoring models. Yet, difference is the

heart of the mentoring process; we allow ourselves to be guided by someone that is different from us so that we may one day also be different from whom we are now. The sensei/deshi relationship is thoroughly grounded in this reasoning. As for warnings against a cultic surrendering of ourselves to the mentors we have freely opted to be guided by, we should simply say, "You must approach the sensei as you do all things: purely and without ego attachment." Since ego attachment is at the source of both the usually present guardedness and the unusual cultic surrendering of our own heart/minds, such advice should suffice. It should suffice to let us resist the modern trend to reduce our teachers into sameness. Moreover, it should suffice to keep us positive, productive, and, healthy as we expose ourselves to the risk of reaching for our greatest potential.