

The number one primary concern of new students / or their parents is always price. This so wrong it is not even funny. I know we live in a day and age where everyone looks for the best deal, or a that special discount...but sometimes you get exactly what you pay for. When I first began teaching all I wanted to do was teach this thing I love to others and have a family of black belts one day. I did what most instructors do and offered classes as the lowest price...which was \$30 a month in 1992. I didn't care about the money and as I would soon find out I had made a major mistake when I almost had to close my doors in 1993!

As a dojo owner and head of a system you don't just have the responsibility to teach your students. You have a higher responsibility which includes insuring the dojo will be there for many years to come so students do not waste their time training with you only to show up one day and find you closed (which happens all the time in martial arts). Although teaching martial arts by tradition means you live a life a poverty and servitude, you have to make enough money to maintain a safe and quality dojo, as well as pay your bills. In this article we will examine the three types (as I have classified them) of martial art schools and the eventual future of each school. We will examine how I have come up with our pricing for classes. We will examine what the "real concern" of prospective students should be when looking into enrolling either themselves, or their children in a school. These are all items that I have over 3 decades of experience with and have been through schools of each type, or owned them.

Part 1: Not choosing a good school - instead choose a good program and instructor.

Many people read all these internet articles on "Choosing the right martial arts school" or just join up with the typical YMCA or Parks-N-Rec programs in their area believing they are getting top quality instructors for their training. If I were to do it all over again here would be my top 5 list of what I would look for (if I had the knowledge I have now):

1. Meet the instructor in a private setting away from classes, at their office to see if they are some one I would want to learn from or have my child learn from. Many people never meet the instructor, they just come in and asked how much and sign up. If you are going to join a martial arts program you need to know what kind of person the school owner is. If they do not have time to meet with you, then they do not care...nor never will care about you. If they smoke, drink and party or show signs of the "I am better than you" attitude...you should run far away and fast. If their office and school are a mess, run down or show signs of disorganization then you can bet the instructor has not mastered self discipline and there for can not teach it to you or your child. If they look like crap or like they show no pride in their appearance...get away now. An instructor should look the part they are teaching and have personal etiquette as well as manners.
2. Check the instructor's credentials. As I stated in the other articles many black belts have popped up on the grid since the Karate Kid explosion in the mid 1980's. There are also hundreds of bogus martial art organizations out there with no verifiable lineage or quality ratings. There are only a few left today that are verifiable but these few are linked to either the Kodokan in Japan, the Kukkiwon (Tae Kwon Do) in Korea or the World Martial Arts Ranking Registry in the United States. Hall of Fame awards and world martial art championship titles are nice, but if you are not learning from an instructor who has verifiable black belt rank in a real system of martial arts, or several then you are not truly learning the martial arts but rather something they made up.
3. Check out the school. It should be heated and air-conditioned. The floor needs to be clear of bags and training equipment. It should be nicely decorated and clean. There should be adequate lighting and mirrors on the walls. There should be a visitors area, bathrooms and changing rooms. The floor should be padded or they should have a padded area if they teach grappling or throws of any kind. If there is an altar or shrine in the school it will be up to you but that is a sign of Buddhism and me as a Christian would ask about the religion of the Sensei. I have trained with sensei who are both Buddhist and Taoist and the training was great. I have no problem with this as long as they do not try and teach my the religious aspects nor expect me to convert. The first time it is brought up...I am gone.
4. Find a school that is full time if possible. A part time instructor does not dedicate his life to teaching others the arts but rather wants the security of a full time job and no matter what they say they they teach to make extra cash and as a hobby. I look at it this way: If I am going to see a Doctor for

something that is life threatening, I would go to the best specialist there is...not just some doctor at a local clinic...regardless of cost. The martial arts are a lifelong pursuit of training, not just a hobby. Find an instructor who has the credentials as "specialist" and verify them.

5. Talk to their students and take a trial class. Sure you can not tell what the martial arts are about from one, or event three free classes but you can get a feel if the instructors are good and the school suits you. If the students are mean or rude and talk about fighting then I would recommend you get as far away as possible since fighting is not part of the martial arts, but rather self defense is. Make sure that you never join a school where the head instructor is lower rank than a 5th degree black belt. It used to be that you could not even run a school until you were a 4th degree black belt but now there are black belts who have just gotten their belt, took some stupid instructor exam and opened a school down the street. There is so much to teaching the martial arts beyond just earning a black belt...it is a science...a way of life...something no one under the rank of 4th degree black belt understands.

Part 2: What is a fair price, what is cheap and what should you pay for martial art lessons?

This is the most controversial topic, next to credentials a school owner will face. As a school owner you have a moral obligation to provide a top quality training environment, excellent curriculum and keep your own training up in order to provide the best to your students. With this kind of obligation you definitely can not charge those \$30 per month rates. How you set your price is part of being a business owner. Some school owners do not understand the business side to martial arts...and they must if they are going to charge for lessons. Here is how I set up our pricing (keep in mind I am not looking to get rich but I have to provide for my family):

1. Establish your overhead budget. This includes Rent, Telephone, Insurance, Taxes, Utilities and Inventory.
2. Establish the cost of your curriculum. This includes awards, patches and certificates given to students free (not belt testing).
3. Add in your personal expenses (mortgage, insurance, utilities, car payments, etc.)
4. Add these together to get your true monthly overhead.
5. Divide this by the expected number of students you are wanting to have and you have your monthly price.

This is the best way to come up with your break even tuition for your school. Once you hit your student numbers, the rest will be profit, but you must also plan on having profitable seminars, events and fundraisers for your school to help offset special programs like scholarships for at-risk children, Demo Teams and Competition Teams.

Part 3: There are only three types of schools and usually only one type will be around for many years.

These three types of schools are business classes, not martial art classes. I have the chance to train at all three types and I have owned type 1 and 2. My current school is based on the type 2 set up. I have no interest in owning a type 3 school because I will not sell out my integrity, nor the integrity of my system to become rich.

Type 1: Old Master / Broke Dojo: These are the school owners who are fulfilling their pledge as a black belt to teach and promote their art. They typically have small back yard dojo (garages), use park n rec programs or teach at Y's. If they have a commercial location it is typically under heated, damp and worn down. Even though they may sometimes be good instructors they have forgotten the main objective of providing a long life growth system for their art and their students. They often charge cheap prices (sometimes it is because they are bogus black belts, other times because they are not good business owners) and typically have a regular job. Here is what happens: These dojos may last a year or two but eventually will go under or lose most of their students to other schools since the instructors main focus in life is not teaching the martial arts but rather their regular job. In my experience with these type of schools the instructors are often late for classes, close early or have only one to two days a week you

can attend. My first school I trained at was this type of school. The sensei ran it like this until 1987 when he opened a type 2 school but his business skills killed his type 2 and he ended up back into a type 1. By 1994 he was done forever and has never owned another school since.

Type 2: Old Master / Commercial Dojo: These are typically full time schools with a owners who are teaching the arts to both maintain the integrity but also to make a small profit. The important part is the "small" profit. They have maintained their integrity and are not looking at "selling out" in order to turn a profit. Some of the best schools I have ever trained at were type 2's. At these schools the prices are higher than Type 1, but the benefits are worth the extra cost. I personally feel the most dedicated "martial artists" come from these schools. They get better quality training, class sizes are decent and not to big and even the 1st to 3rd degree black belts are excellent instructors. The school owner is focused on providing a service rather than a product. They have the time to keep their own training up, offer private classes to their most dedicated students and go to events to network with their community and help their community grow. This is the best class of the three schools but unfortunately there are not enough of them. This is the smallest and hard to find type of school in the USA.

Type 3: Business Master / Sell Out McDojo: These schools are easy to spot. They often have huge marketing banners all over their locations and typically will offer a black belt club membership to anyone off the street. They do not have scholarship programs and do not negotiate fees but will offer you a 1 day a week training program for a reduced fee (this program is a waste of time). Their fees typically range from \$129/month all the way into the \$300 range. They are always focused on upgrading you to get more money and they will promote anyone who pays for it through the ranks regardless of their academic levels, character development and many times even their martial art skills. The best part is that these are are typically located in big cities, but even Toledo, Ohio and Fort Wayne, Indiana both have these type of schools. The owners are master salesmen and will convince you that they are the best at what they do...which is make money so it is not a lie. I have trained at five of the schools and they may have one to three good black belts but the majority of them are not even at green belt level as compared to my dojo. These schools always follow trends and are constantly changing their programs and curriculum which makes it confusion and hard on students. In short if all you want is a black belt and you do not care about the real meaning behind it, nor that you will get a FAKE sense of confidence in self defense...then join on up, pay those big bucks. Just keep on thing in mind...these schools care more about your money than they do about you which is against the primary principle of martial arts called honor.

In short setting a fair price, running a full time school and making a small profit are all alright for school owners as long as you do not sacrifice the quality, discipline and integrity of your system. Martial arts must come first and business man next followed by black belt third. These are very important and you are here to fulfill your obligation as a school owner to your students. Don't sell them belts, make them earn them. Don't charge extremely high prices but what is fair and you can live on. Be a good citizen and give to the community, make the world a better place and maintain your integrity as both a person and martial artist and you will do fine. Sometimes it is only in the face of adversity that we find our true character.