

10,000 Techniques

I have often heard it said that aikido has 10,000 techniques. The number, of course, is not to be taken literally; rather, it stands for “a large, undetermined number”. But in Kenji Tomiki’s little volume called *Judo (Appendix: Aikido)* first published in 1956, he states that aikido has “a large number of techniques, 2,664 in all, including offensive and defensive to be applied in sitting or standing positions, or with the use of a weapon, such as the sword, spear, or club.” Today, however, most aikido practice consists of about a dozen or so techniques applied against half a dozen blows and perhaps a dozen and a half grasping attacks. (The aiki bokken and aiki jo waza are considered separately by aikidoka and are organized in kata as well as disarms.) So, how does one determine what is called “a technique” or what is called a “variation”?

When I teach a seminar using a minimal motion throw against a punching opponent, sometimes I roll my wrist, sometimes I move my hips, sometimes I drop weight onto a slightly bent knee. Sometimes I use an overgrip, sometimes and undergrip. Often, I do it from outside uke’s arm, but occasionally from the inside. Are these all separate techniques or variations of one?

As soon as we are specific about how many techniques an art retains, we have to be specific about how we measure a technique. Instead, in the martial arts world, we simplistically assume we know what a technique is. Kano made *uki-goshi* (floating hip) a technique separate from *o-goshi* (major hip), which makes sense since each uses a different set of skills; but, if the different skills vary only slightly, why not simply call those techniques variations? Do we really need a separate technique for *tsuri-goshi* (lifting hip) and *koshi-guruma* (hip wheel), for example? Aren’t they simply *o-goshi* using somewhat different grips?

Conversely, aikido categorizes a standard rotate-the-hand-over *kote gaeshi* (forearm reversal) using the same name as an undergripped rotate-the-hand-from-below version that other styles call *te-hana-odori* (hand flower dance) or *te-kagami* (hand mirror). Obviously, this is because uke’s forearm is reversed in a similar way; but why then do they not categorize *shiho-nage* (four corner throw) as a *kote-gaeshi*? It turns uke’s forearm over into a similar, if higher, position, doesn’t it?

Categorizing techniques is like trying to state how many “kinds” of automobile exist. What is a “kind”? Do we count all makes from all countries? Do we count all models of all makes? And how many special editions, sub-models and model years should figure into the mix? What separate one “kind” from another? Do SUVs count? How about trucks? Motorcycles? Or are they more generically “vehicles” but not officially “automobiles” even though they are self-propelled (the definition of the term “automobile”). We find the categorizing of cars helpful, but only to the extent that it does not confuse us with detail. Similarly, labeling a martial arts movement “a technique” is helpful in order to

concentrate on a certain skill applicable to a certain situation, but if we stress ourselves over where a variant ends and a new technique begins, the categorization that was once helpful breaks down.

Just as we wouldn't use a motorcycle to do the job of a truck, or a truck to cross the country in a pack with friends (except in the '70s during the convoy craze), we would not use a kata or coordination drill, for example, in place of a technique, nor a technique in place of a kata or coordination drill. As soon as the lines between techniques are harder to delineate than truck vs. motorcycle, it is time to redefine terms.

Aikido has a figurative 10,000 techniques precisely because those techniques are “a large, undetermined number”, and because their delineations are difficult to define. It's not the number of techniques that count, nor whether or not we count variations; rather, can we use the set number of techniques we are given in enough “kinds” to handle the situations we might face?