

Application Over Theory 2

Read the first entry in this series: *Application over Theory 1*.

A theoretical martial art and a practically applicable martial art are, more times than people readily perceive, two ends of the same spectrum. In my karate manuals, I write about the theoretical *embusen* (martial line) of a kata vs. the actual *embusen* — the first being, for example, an H-pattern which, upon closer examination, only appears to be an H, but is actually closer to a broken H with a broken arrowhead set upon it. The former (the theoretical) is the more generic pattern our minds imagine; the latter is the actual pattern.

But that which is real is not necessarily the applicable or the practical. If you can't get your mind around the "real", how can you apply it? Ever try to do a new kata imagining the actual, more complicated *embusen*?

In the same way, we practice traditional martial arts in a theoretical way, through idealized kata (solo forms), idealized *oyo* (applications), idealized *kumite* (engagement drills), or idealized *waza* (techniques). The supposedly down and dirty, practical martial arts do the same thing albeit less formally. Boxers work combinations, hit the bag, and jump rope, all idealized practices that have to be adjusted to the reality of the ring. Wrestlers practice takedowns, whizzers, and sit-outs, hoping that the situation used in practice will occur on the competition mat. Cage fighters do both. Their training is NOT really application, but it IS applicable to reality. What makes the competitive art seem more real to the uninformed observer is that the gap between practice and application is not as wide as it is for a traditional martial artist. In the ring or on the mat, you have a dozen situations you have to prepare for, not a thousand.

Between combat sport and traditional martial art are the street-systems like Jeet Kune Do. They drill in patterns and exercises that are decidedly NOT the same as application and they also spar wearing equipment, which attempts to SIMILUATE application. Does the street-system favor application over theory? Yes and no. Certainly the street-system aficionados favor application in their philosophy of training, i.e. they are not training for competition or for exhibition, but they also favor concepts and training indirectly so as to draw out reactions appropriate to the situation at hand.

It seems logical then to assume traditional martial arts are on the conservative, i.e. theoretical, end of the martial spectrum, that most of what they do looks good but is more art and idealized engagements than practical self-defense. Ah, but how else does one broaden one's spectrum of possibilities if not by doing idealized movements, applying them safely and then hoping, like good JKD stylists or well-trained cage-fighters, that one will be able to adapt to the situation at hand? (Don't confuse traditional arts that train as sports for those that train for self-defense. The traditional arts as sports fall into the category of boxing and wrestling and, yes, even cage-fighting. Because they are non-contact, they seem unrealistic in comparison, but they train for a limited set of engagement possibilities in semi-predictable circumstances.)

Traditional arts for self-defense use contact only in control drills, not in sparring, so critics who favor application over theory think of them as theoretical (for this read "fanciful"). But it is precisely these arts that

are training theory FOR application, idealization FOR practicality, formalism FOR free flowing adaptation. Why then don't application-advocates see it? I suggest it is because of two simple facts: (1) non-competitive traditionalists tend to be satisfied with their arts as handed down, rather than seeing how the given form can be adopted toward more realistic situations, and (2) most traditional martial arts approach only one or two aspects of self-defense, the whole subject being too vast to treat in one type of training. Karate features punching and kicking from a arm to leg distance, ignoring all the escapes, throws and locks in its kata. Aiki features throws and locks from a moderate distance, ignoring infighting and grappling. Judo features grappling, both standing and on the ground, but ignores the real possibility of punches and kicks. Each art takes as aspect of self-defense and concentrates on it. Only old and very involved Shaolin arts cover a broad spectrum and they are often too vast to master in their entirety in less than a few decades.

What is practically applicable then is the art that one can master in a relatively short time. But that art must perforce be incomplete and thus not cover many aspects of personal protection.

I can almost guarantee that the martial artists who see a minimal motion aiki clip on YouTube and react with "Complete and utter nonsense," not only is ignoring the context, but does not see the irony: it was never intended to be complete at all. That which is perceived as nonsensical says more about the perceiving senses than the applicability of a traditional martial art.