

Blowing Bubbles into the Brew

One of the failings of any traditional martial art is that it favors the art (and the art's continuance over time) over the reason the art was created in the first place—personal protection. One very important aspect of personal protection is being able to adjust to the unexpected. Yet traditional arts are often repetitive and predictable. After a short time training, the only thing new seems to be a new kata or a new kick. After several years of training, even new kata don't seem that new. And, once learned, they are certainly not unpredictable.

I suggest that sensei should blow a few bubbles into their brews once in a while.

Sensei could explain to students that the very structure of a predictable martial art can, with very little adjustment, add in enough bubbles so that students get used to unpredictable circumstances (even if they come from a predictable set of techniques and exercises). Let's start with basics. Okay, same stance, same blocks, same kick and punch, but how about graduating to *renraku waza* (combination techniques) in which the sensei can vary the stance, the block, the strike, the order, side, and direction of the blow. Add angles and various direction of movement and you have what seems to be an infinite variety of ways to do the familiar, many of which can be quite challenging, not just for sequence, but also for balance, power, and general coordination.

Now let's move on to kata—you can't vary those, after all—they must be kept sacrosanct. True, some instructors vary the speed of movement and the direction in which the kata progresses; but, even if the sequence and direction remain the same, what about varying the detail of the technique as if the practitioner is picturing a specific attack? Maybe his down block would not be delivered at the same angle and perhaps he would throw a quick reverse punch or backfist before following up with the kata-prescribed follow-up. What if he were to mentally consider the preparatory motion of a kata of prime concern rather than those movements on which the count is usually placed?

In *ippon kumite* one does not want to disregard predetermined sequence and structure because safety is an important factor, but each session of engagement matches could easily emphasize different unknowns (thus Sensei could vary speed during one session, height of attack during another, and angle of attack during a third).

The class itself might have a comfortable predictable sequence that Sensei could, from time to time, juggle around so that the students are not so comfortable and thus get used to being hyper-aware in a way a normal training session would not typically generate.

The average human being wants a certain percentage of predictability and a certain percentage of excitement and adventure (which implies either danger, unpredictability, or both). Which amusement park ride do you like the most, the tiny train through the elf's forest or the rollercoaster in the dark that takes a slightly different route every time? Very old and very young amusement park visitors would

probably choose the train, but they are not about defending themselves. They are leaving that up to you so even if you are quite uncomfortable with the mystery rollercoaster, you may want to ride it once in a while just to keep your senses stimulated so you know you can handle the adrenalin in your blood and the bubbles and popping in your digestive system.

It's not really the same as personal protection—during even the most varied practice, very little is really at stake—but it is a little like surviving that new kumite exercise Sensei threw into last night's practice just to blow some bubbles into your brew.