

Duplicating Technique

Traditional wisdom tells us that in order to master a technique (get it into muscle memory) we must practice it 10,000 times. This seems excessive to me. If every technique had to be repeated 10,000 times, when would we have time to learn anything new, varied, or complementary? Still, we know (although we don't like the idea) that repetition, at least of basics, is the only way to get them to be better. You don't get good at something by *not* practicing it.

This means that in each practice we duplicate techniques dutifully, even though we know that the exact image we are duplicating may never be used as we practice it. We have no other way to get reactions into our body. Then we try, as best we can, to apply these techniques repeatedly on different training partners so we can get a feel for them when there is another human being opposing us. Of course, every human being is different, so we cannot duplicate the application exactly, but we approximate a replication in order to feel subtle varieties within the repetitive theme. This is necessary because we simply cannot improve at applying techniques only by repeating identical basics.

Knowing that students easily become bored when duplicating anything, wise teachers try to throw variations into their drilling basics, kata, or applications. The idea is to have students duplicate techniques while being aware of something else. In other words, the body will be like the wheels of a train while the mind is watching the changing scenery. I remember Sensei Chuck Merriman comparing notes with me about teaching basics and applications. Each evening, he had students perform the basics differently and, when it came to kata analysis, he would provide a stock method then challenge students to see another application for the technique.

Since I teach often budo in seminars, I have the luxury of addressing audiences who are unfamiliar with my concepts, drills, principles, and methods. So, theoretically at least, I can do a seminar in Europe on a subject I may have already covered in Texas and, to my new audience, there will be no sense of repetition. And, as a seminar teacher, I do not have to concern myself with how much they are repeating what I teach—their mastery of the subjects I introduce is up to them; I just have to make sure that I do not duplicate Seminar X the next time I teach to Audience X.

For me, the complicating element is shooting videos of these various seminars. I cannot submit Subject X to DVD in the same way twice even though I may be teaching the subject to an entirely different seminar audience. This makes me acutely aware of duplicating material on DVD and forces me to take an original approach to a subject that a seminar audience in Germany may desire, but that I have taught two months before in Canada or Texas. Bill Wallace has made a career of teaching a limited set of concepts, all centered on kicking during karate sparring. He managed to approach the subject in so many different ways that many dojo would invite him back again and again, not only so students could master the material, but also to get a fresh perspective on it.

Unfortunately, seminar students, although they may be black belts, are novices at the guest instructor's material, otherwise they would not be as interested in attending. In a dojo, a teacher can leave novice instruction to new black belts, intermediate instruction to mature black belts, while he himself teaches higher ranks new things about basic techniques. Often a seminar instructor does not have that luxury. If only there were a way to gather black belt seminarians together and build on their instruction so that the teacher could teach advance material and minimize duplication. If only there were master classes for experienced students so that they would not have to always duplicate the same waza for the second 10,000 times. Wait a minute! That gives me an idea....