

Efficiency and Laziness

I remember the first time I was fully aware of efficiency. It was a little puzzle given to elementary school students in some kiddie magazine that the teacher made available during “rest time”. Johnny had to deliver five newspapers and the student was asked to map out the most efficient route (i.e. the route with the fewest overlaps). It was the kind of thing that made sense to me instantly: do a little route planning first and less work later.

A couple of decades later, I was working as the gymnastics director of an all-girl section of a summer camp. Fellow instructors actually became upset at me because it looked as if I had much more down time while they were chasing their charges around camp trying to complete a day without having to tutor a junior instructor about how to handle a camper. My secret was simple: I spent a much longer time before the beginning of camp interviewing my junior instructors and planning both the regular weekday and potential rainy day activities in advance. I spent the first week of camp getting all my junior instructors on the same plan, and thus could afford to be more relaxed. (The complaining counselors saw it as “lazy”).

Fast forward a couple of decades and people were asking me how I stayed in shape as a man in his mid-forties. “Well,” a friend would interject, “he’s a martial arts instructor, so he works out all the time.” Of course, I taught and trained only a couple of hours every evening (not all the time), but even those hours were not very taxing. My budo had become efficient enough so as not to be physically taxing—and that’s the way I wanted it, of course, but that meant that my efficiency was actually getting in the way of my staying in shape. I joined a gym and worked out three times a week trying to tax my muscles in way that my efficient budo did not, in order to keep in shape.

I took the efficiency learned in elementary school and tried to apply it to everything I did. Pretending I was an efficiency expert, I made sure I organized my house cleaning, my errands, and many other incidental items of daily life in a way that minimized my efforts. Minimal effort and maximum efficiency, after all, was one of the mottoes of Jigoro Kano’s Judo, the first martial art I had studied. But there was an unintended consequence that crept into my efficient universe (in addition to efficient technique not providing a strenuous workout) — efficiency made me lazier than I should have been. It was not “laziness” as misperceived by certain camp counselors, but a resistance to doing something that took extra effort because it was not efficient.

Let’s say I normally put my car keys inside the garage entryway before I go upstairs to the living area. Carrying groceries up, I forget to leave my keys in their proper place, then, knowing it will require a separate trip downstairs just to put the keys where they belong, I either get angry with my own inefficiency or plan to place the keys somewhere obvious so I will remember to take them the next time

I go to the garage. In other words, my love of efficiency made me too damn lazy to just run down to the garage and put the keys where I wanted them.

Why is this even remotely important for a martial artist? Because: as important as efficiency is in martial arts (and I think it is quite important), even more important is avoiding being too lazy to go the extra mile (or the extra 14 steps to the garage). An efficient karate self-training session, for example, might go through basics, kicking, and, say, ten kata. It seems less efficient to repeat Bassai, for example, and thus not have enough time for the three Tekki kata. But what if you perform your Bassai rather poorly today? If you are too lazy to repeat the kata, it won't get any better and you will never become efficient in its execution. That also means adding a little time for the Tekki kata, as well. If you are too lazy to flesh out your training with the little extra it needs, you fail on the side of just a little laziness and therefore begin the slow evaporation of your efficiency.