

## **Fundamentality**

**(And This Time I Do Mean *Kihon Waza*)**

In my last article, I talked about instructors returning to the teaching of traditional *budo* in a more fundamental way—a way the Western founders of Asian arts taught them. In this article, I'd like to offer something more basic—something you already know and have heard for your entire martial arts career—the need to do basics every class. I know, I know: between Sunday sermons and weekday sessions with Sensei, you get enough preaching. Well, I hope not to sound too preachy while I offer some observations.

Basics are called basics because you base things on them. Fundamentals are fundamentals because they form the fundament for whatever you are constructing. Many students are convinced that you need only build a foundation once, but homeowners and construction crews know that time and weather can produce cracks in foundations and, if unattended, those cracks can turn into fissures that threaten the entire structure no matter how carefully it may have been built. The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials and the Washington Monument have sunk, for example, only 2 inches since their construction, but even at that meager rate, structural challenges may be necessary in the immediate future.

We cannot deny that the same basics every class tend to be boring and that there is so much more to attend to in any martial arts system. Why not skip the basics and spar, or learn a new kata, a new throw, or a secret armpit tickle point? To answer that, consider how basics build.

Let's say you first learn an upper block. Once you have a few more blocks under your belt, you can practice *renraku-waza* (combination techniques) or *henka* (variations). Specific variations and a few combinations are strung together in clever ways to make kata. You take kata apart and apply portions of them in *bunkai* (analysis), using what you have discovered in *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) or in various sparring drills.

By recognizing this instructional construction, a teacher can hide his basics in order to prevent student boredom. I remember talking to Sensei Chuck Merriman about this in the '90s and found that he "hid" basics from his students much as I did. You can practice basics from different stances, while moving forward, back, or in patterns, in the mirror or with a partner, with or without contact, singularly or in multiple repetitions. You can substitute combinations for basics and vary them the same way. You can break down kata and use the individual moves as basics, or you can take apart a long pre-arranged kumite and use its constituent parts as basics. As long as a senior or the sensei overseeing the practice makes sure that form, dynamics, stance, and power is correct, the units that we call basics can be practiced in such varied ways that they will hide their true nature as simple building blocks.

Frank Sinatra once reported that he would sing the scales very morning to keep his voice tuned up—even after he had stopped being a featured performer. Natalya Makarova, the star of the Kirov Ballet and guest

star at the American Ballet Theatre took a daily company class, along with the other dancers, practicing simple movements like *demi-plie*, *plie*, and *tendu* that every 5-year-old learns.

When I was a brown belt in karate, Tsutomu Ohshima, the founder of Shotokan in the USA came to visit our dojo. As I came out of the dressing room I saw Master Ohshima facing a mirror practicing, not a kata, not a kata sequence, not even a single kata movement, but a basic front stance.