

Good Enough To Pass

Most students, no matter what the subject, are looking to “pass”. Passing becomes their only measure of success. They believe (or they fool themselves into believing) that knowledge is a byproduct of passing. In fact, it is the other way around.

In the traditional martial arts, a passing grade for physical requirements should be judged by two generic standards: (1) does it look like what it is supposed to look like stylistically, and (2) will it work in the way it is supposed to work? If we do not have standard #1, there is no art, only simulated mayhem. If we do not have standard #2, there is nothing martial, only an effete imitation of a combat confrontation.

This is a “double standard” in two ways: (1) there are two standards, and (2) they are rather conflicting—or at least seem to be. Observers can’t help feeling that the more beautiful the performance by the testing martial artist, the less effective it would be in reality, or conversely, the more effective it seems to be, the less beautiful it will appear.

Let’s forget the exam for a moment and go back to the training area. When the sensei corrects the student and says something like, “Extend your arm more. It has got to be bigger,” he is trying to make the student look “correct” without explaining the standard by which he will judge that correctness. Often the standard is this: his own instructor insisted (and may still insist) that the techniques be done one specific way. On the other hand, if the sensei corrects the student by saying, “Slightly bend your elbow, otherwise the block won’t work,” he is making a correction of form that, theoretically at least, will improve practical application. The difference between the first performance and the second can be nearly invisible to all but those who have tested their movements.

If junior instructors do not themselves test the movements, they have to depend on their seniors to give them the right form and they have to depend on themselves to remember it correctly, perform it correctly, and teach it correctly. Then they have to depend on their students to imitate it correctly. Often that imitated movement, which is “good enough to pass the exam”, may not be good enough to pass a simple functionality test.

On numerous occasions, I have begun teaching karate students who have sharp movements, good spirit, relatively correct form, but with many minute flaws that make their techniques weak. Perhaps their elbows are not in enough or their eyes are not aimed correctly or they move from their shoulders rather than from their *tanden*. They are shocked to discover that the form with which they passed their last exam in another system, could not survive a simple fingertip press. I am not judging their speed, their visual form, or their strength—just their structural positions. I suspect therefore, that they passed their last exam upon the recognition of their speed, timing and strength. Congratulations, those things are important, to be sure. Now let’s work on structurally correct technique so you don’t have to be quite so fast, well-timed, and strong to have functional karate.

Regarding details, I sometimes conflict even with conscientious teachers who also want their students to have a beautiful but potentially effective martial art. Perhaps they have a different way of making a formal movement effective. As far as I am concerned, that's fine. That is why styles exist—because there is more than one way to do something effectively. However, there are roughly a bazillion ways to do a similar thing ineffectively.

Unfortunately, “good enough to pass” is often a poor visual estimation of easy-to-see qualities while ignoring certain hard-to-recognize details. Only an instructor *who knows what makes the human anatomy function* can recognize those subtle details and use them to set a standard for his karate's aesthetics that conjoins the art with the martial.