

Henka

As most Japanese-style martial artists know, *henka* means “variation”. We see henka sometimes in upper level rank requirements or in upper level kata movements, but seldom do martial artists get to practice henka except when they are unconsciously applying some on-the-spot variation in a self-defense drill.

In my opinion, the concept should be introduced as soon as the basics are learned and henka should become the major part of training after shodan is achieved. Unfortunately, there are martial artists who consider a dojo’s recognition of henka as license to create their own method of performing a kata or waza whether or not the henka is dutifully studied. The presumption of freeing students’ applications before their mastering restrictive fundamentals tends to make the sensei favor more stringent basics and less access to variations for fear that students will not follow the tried-and-true guidelines of the style.

These rather conservative sensei have a valid point, but they must also realize that overdependence on strict stylistic orthodoxy not only makes the *preservation* of a style more important than the *practical application*, but also it may prevent certain students from doing effective techniques at all.

Two quite different examples will illustrate this idea.

I once had a karate student that performed his knife-hand block at an extreme body angle, an angle that, if applied by other people, would have weakened the block. However, the standard angle tested weak for my student and the unorthodox angle tested strong. If I had compelled him to follow the orthodox rather than the variation, he would have become stylistically wise and application foolish. Instead, we explained his variation to the student body as one that worked well only on a very few individuals, while proving to them that the orthodox would work better in almost every case. This did not restrict them from practicing their preferred variation in *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) or other drills because, after all, I had introduced them to Shorin and Shito methods in case they needed them in certain circumstances. It did however establish a functioning baseline while introducing the idea of functioning variation. That’s Functioning Variation, not variation for its own sake.

An aikido black belt, excellent at her orthodox waza, who had come to study aiki-ju-jutsu with me, was helping one of the white belt students, who happened to have a karate background. He had been taught to lock his punch and stabilize his stance at the end of his thrust. Her technique could not move him. She had the skills, but had never studied variations of those skills such that she could apply them in this situation. Having been restricted to “perfect form”, she was unable to aspire to perfect function.

Almost all self-defense is henka! Rarely is a technique performed the way it is taught in the dojo in a real situation. A friend, who served as a body guard in for the U.S. State Department and before that

as a San Francisco police officer, told me that every once in a while on the street a technique works picture perfectly—just the way you learned it in class. But most of the time, you couldn't even imagine the scenarios you can get into, let alone the idealized response to those scenarios.

Henka should not be about modifications that allow you to avoid the hard work of learning the orthodox technique, but they *should* be about analyzing various factors that would necessitate an adjustment to orthodoxy. After all, how do you think styles came about in the first place?