

Learning by Imitation 2

But many of us first learned a kata or a waza by copying a book or video, if not a teacher, so what is the distinction between those who successfully learn by imitation and those who imitate, fail to integrate, and as a result, pass down more Poo Doo than does MoPoDo?

First, let's recognize there is a difference between students who learn skills via imitation and those who master skills at a level where they may pass them on as teachers. Most students are happy if (a) they can do a movement they could not do previously and (b) if that lets them pass an exam. Most masters are not happy until they fully understand a kata or waza at a level where they can compare it with another kata or waza, analyze it, re-synthesize it, and teach it at both a beginner and an advanced level.

I have witnessed teachers with master rank grab a few skills from a book one day in order to teach them the next. Most teachers of any subject do this once in a while (since they cannot know every aspect of every subject at every level), but if this is one's modus operandi, I suggest that one is a master of PooDoo rather than of budo.

How one first learns a kata or waza and what it takes to fully integrate one's knowledge are two different things. Not having access to a Goju teacher, I "memorized" a few Goju kata so that I would be ready to get more detailed instruction should I meet a seasoned Goju person who did not mind sharing or trading knowledge. Luckily, I met several over the years. I made it a rule not to teach a kata that I had initially learned from a book or video until I had reviewed at least three versions of the form, and most importantly, a competent teacher of the art from which the form came reviewed and approved my performance. This is much the process that long-distance students go through: they learn a kata from the federation's publications or from a session with an instructor, practice it, and then have it reviewed first on video and then in person. If they had to learn every item in person from their head instructor, they could not afford to be his student since thousand-mile commutes are somewhat prohibitive. This process contains periodic checks from knowledgeable instructors, forcing the student to be honest with his own skills or lack thereof. However, when a high-level instructor learns this way, he has no outside reviewer, so he must be honest with himself first and seek an outside review from a reputable source whenever possible. I learned Wanduan (Wando) from a text, and kept practicing it, until I met Hanshi Patrick McCarthy, the author of the text, and asked him to review the form. He was now performing a more complicated and older version of Wanduan, making me feel I understood the simpler version while unable to match him move-for-move in the newer version. I still do not publicly teach the original form, even though I have been practicing it for over 20 years.

In the 1980s, Soke Don Angier showed me and corrected me on a simple off-balancing drop that I understood technically but could not perform consistently. I spent 10-15 minutes after class two or three times a week for three years, repeating the movement, varying it, and trying to understand its niceties. Not only do I attribute the movement to him when I do public seminars, but I admit that my execution of it is less than perfect. It may be good enough to impress students who do not understand what's happening, but it is not good enough to make me feel it is mine. Once I integrate it into my skills to the extent that it is so familiar and comfortable that YouTube critics can tell me it cannot really work, then I know I have mastered it...at least to the first degree.

Yes, one learns by imitation, but only when one integrates one's learning into one's comfort zone can one reach any level of mastery. Similarly, only when one integrates a movement seamlessly into one's art can one's art be worthy of being passed on through those movements.

Next week: Worthy of Being Pass On.