

Limiting Choice 1

Kempo is one of the most varied and rich martial arts disciplines, having a Chinese heritage itself rich and diverse, then adding Japanese skills from karate and ju-jitsu, grappling and even some internal Chinese arts. The challenge for a kempo student is to be a master of self-defense rather than a jack-of-all-arts.

To its credit, by teaching more, kempo and other arts like it give the student more tools with which to deal with more situations. Ironically however, like the shopper entering a giant supermarket warehouse, the choices can be paralyzing. When you shop for food, you want to satisfy three needs: nutrition, taste, and low price. If you pick up the new item and the price seems right, you still cannot know how it will taste even though the label makes it appear enticing. You therefore go about trying to eliminate it as a possible purchase by looking at its contents or its calorie count. I say eliminate it rather than include it because you can't possibly try all the items so the abundance of choice has made you look toward cutting choices from your list rather than adding them or substituting new for old.

In *The Paradox of Choice* (2004), Barry Schwartz writes, "After millions of years of survival based on simple distinctions, it may simply be that we are biologically unprepared for the number of choices we face in the modern world." He goes on to suggest that happiness may lie in limiting our choices rather than increasing them.

But in martial arts, limiting choices has its pitfalls as well. I have seen superb technicians, impressive by almost any standard, completely incapable of handling an attack that they had never considered because their art's view of self-defense is so narrow. A simple example is a karate-ka who cannot deal with someone who grabs him from behind or an aikido-jin who is overwhelmed by a punch-kick attack. It seems that martial specialties like Wing-chun or Uechi that handle short range strikes better than Shaolin or Shotokan leaves them open for medium range combinations, while Shaolin or Shotokan stylists are hampered when an opponent gets too close. Both seem incapable of handling the takedowns or grapplers. Wrestlers, however, have difficulty taking down mobile boxers.

When faced with a familiar attack, martial artists have no problem; however, they are loathed to admit that their brain shuts down when the attack is unfamiliar. In a radically different context, Victor Frankl (in *Will to Meaning*, 1969) writes that when a man's tradition does not tell him what he should do "he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism), or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism)." In the traditional martial arts, we have a little of both: students conform to the rigid tradition that tells them what they should do. But what other choice do they have? Without some level of conformity, there is no way to learn from the tradition that, at least to some extent, has been successful in teaching others what they want to know.

My solution is rather obvious but seems never to be put into practice either by advanced students or by the traditions/arts/styles/schools that teach them. It is this: concentrate on your primary style and then add the complementary aspects of other systems. There are two ways to do this. The **informal** way would have a

student, after a certain skill level is achieved, simply quit his art and take up another. This assumes of course that he can correctly estimate when he has more or less mastered his primary art. The more **formal** way is to have the teacher, curriculum, or style itself officially send out people of certain ranks to study or take seminars in other arts and bring the information back to the advanced classes in his own school.

What I have found, however, is that students are so eager to learn variety that they sacrifice depth and conversely that teachers are so eager to teach depth that they are loath to offer variety. As a result, they limit the student's choice "for his own good". Thus martial artists are forced to be rebels in order to be well rounded.

More on this subject next week.