

Limiting Choice 2

Students are so eager to learn something new that they sacrifice depth of knowledge. 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". And thus modern martial artists are forced to be rebels if they wish to be well rounded.

You would think that once the well-rounded martial artist became a teacher, he would set up a regimen to broaden his advanced students' knowledge, thus both limiting choices for new students while lessening limitations as they become more skilled. Sounds like a pretty good system, doesn't it? I certainly would have liked to study in a school that allowed me both concentration and variety. Unfortunately, many students are spoiled by their own riches.

Traditionally in Western culture, individuals are held responsible for their own decisions. As a result, they bristle when those who think they know more make decisions for them. This attitude may be healthy for independence, but it contradicts the very nature of schooling. Imagine a junior high school student arguing that she doesn't really need to know math since she is going to be a French major in college anyway. In her myopic view of reality, she is right. In a wider view, taken by more mature people (and most educators), she is wrong. If she had her way, there would be no math and all *Français* until she graduated high school. Of course by then, she would argue that because of her fluency in French and her summers spent in Lyon, there is no need to go on to college. She could easily get a high-paying job as a translator at the U.N. without any further study of French literature or that silly medieval French that French majors in college study.

Her study of one subject in depth has provided her a certain expertise, but she has no supporting knowledge base. She will be able to earn a living, but as soon as the U.N. discovers her "expertise" has stolen from her wealth of knowledge, she'll be out on her lack of years. Perhaps she will be able to get a job in the newly opened Walmart in the suburbs of Montreal, but not as a cashier or in the back office, because her math is more than a little *faible* (weak).

In Asian culture, the senior is always right. That means that Japanese junior high school students study strictly what the curriculum demands. As a result, they are well rounded and knowledgeable by the time they enter college. Conversely, in martial sports, it is usually the unconventional Westerner that scores on the conventional Asian, *but only if he has had enough of a conventional foundation*. He has the advantage of knowing what his Eastern counterpart is likely to do. In self-defense, it may not always turn out the same way. If the Western rebel is a jack-of-all-trades, he may more easily adapt to an unconventional situation, but "jack" is also another word for knave. Just when does a variety of knowledge become Mastery rather than Foolhardiness? How much should martial learning be limited and how much should it be broadened?

Asian cultures have learned creativity and thinking-out-of-the-box from the West. Western culture has not learned, in my opinion, the virtues of the Asian tendency to limit choice. Both are needed in martial arts. Sensei Chuck Merriman once told me that although his students practice basics every class, he tried to vary the

way they practice so they do not get bored. I do the same thing, coming up with combinations of basics that challenge the black belts as well as they white belts. A good teacher teaches to his students' level and gradually brings them up to his own. That should also be true when trying to balance the student's need for variety with the value of in-depth knowledge. If you don't get that depth from your instructor, it is difficult to get it by yourself. Occasionally some students can do it, but for most people, a missed opportunity for limitation means a less-than-ideal foundation and/or a less-than-sturdy structure, even though (or because) it is built with a variety of materials.