

Precision as a False Friend

In high school gymnastics, it was drummed into the members of the team that pointing our toes and keeping our legs together was the type of precision that the judges wanted. A great athletic performance without aesthetic precision would mean lower points than a good athletic performance with precision. It was much harder to look good when doing well than to do very well without looking good. I took that idea into my study of karate.

I assumed that karate kata needed to be precise because it would satisfy the judges' aesthetic sense, but for those of us trained in kata who seldom entered a tournament, was not brute power more important than aesthetic precision? Well, yes and no.

I soon discovered that precise movements produced effective technique without brute power. Of course, these movements needed to be correct. Incorrect precision might look good, but will not yield effectiveness. I worked to discover what form or forms were functional and set my measurement of precision around those standards. That meant that, as an instructor, I would be rather nitpicky when students who trained with me had their toe one inch off or their elbows insufficiently inside their blocks. As a result, in order to be promoted in Takeshin Karate, students have to produce functionally precise kata. Precision, in other words, is a student's friend. The problem is that at some point in the student's development, it can be a false friend.

Recently, I was performing Bassai-dai, a kata I have been doing for more than forty years, but I decided to change the pace, the preparatory movements, the hips, and the emphasis. I have written before that playing with one's kata, although not acceptable for exam, would reveal hidden applications to the advance student. And so it was with this kata performance. Because of the way I was moving my body, I saw two or three previously undiscovered applications at each count.

In the seventies, when a few others like me, were encouraging karate-ka to study their kata for self-defense applications, people were convinced that kata were just cooling off exercises. Now everyone accepts that they have hidden applications. Everyone now realizes that if you do a Shito version of a kata, you may get different applications than if you do a Goju version of the same kata. But, because the precision of a kata performance is so important (for exam and so that Sensei can correct you), Shito people never perform a Goju version, and Goju people never play with a Shito version. Their very success at karate by using their favored system and syllabus precisely prevents them from vibrating like a Chen Tai-chi stylist or taking narrow stances like a Shukokai guy. Nowadays because karate-ka are willing to learn from their kata, they are satisfied with that hidden knowledge and are unwilling to learn from a completely

unorthodox rendition of that kata. Just as studying kata for applications seemed foolish decades ago, now varying their kata's precision seems foolish.

I am not simply suggesting studying another style's version of your favorite forms, rather I am suggesting that one should, at some seasoned level of experience, forget everyone's style and jiggle one's body every which-way to see how the previously learned kata will feel when it is rendered differently. No, you won't look like Shito, Goju, Uechi, or Shotokan anymore, but you will be using your traditional karate kata to delve into the depths of a generic, style-free, and rather advanced, budo.