

The Real vs. The Elegant

The art side of a martial art aims toward elegant movement and stylistic technique. The martial side aims toward something that will work on the street.

The basic martial art tends to emphasize form; the more advanced tends to emphasize result.

The junior martial artist tends to emphasize strength and power; the senior tends to emphasize fluidity and skill.

As young martial artists, we wanted to be able to kick butt so we put up with the stylistic, artistic, and formal in hopes that it would lead us as soon as possible to a street-worthy, butt-kicking result.

As senior martial artists, we still want to be able to defend ourselves, but knowing that strength and power won't necessarily overcome those younger and stronger, we opt for that which looks artistic in hopes that it will result eventually in a street-worthy, butt-kicking expertise.

What is real, or at least what approaches the real, is training in what works. However, "what works" cannot be taught without taking away from its reality. Even the toughest cage fighter training for the championship match with Two-ton Killer McKilton, does not enter into real sparring matches, let alone real bar fights. In any martial art, as soon as we teach, we create drills and exercises that simulate certain elements of reality, putting the rest of reality on hold. That is completely understandable for practical and ethical reasons. No one wants to knock oneself out before fight night, nor injure a training partner in the preparation process.

However, those very less-than-realistic drills are the routes toward the elegant expression of martial arts, whether applicable to reality or not. Let's say your drill is *chi-sao* (Wing Chun's sticky hands) or *tui-shu* (Tai-chi's push hands) and you get very skilled at the drill. When you engage an opponent at the appropriate distance, he does not stand a chance. Unable to lay a hand on you, you either float him up against the wall or chain-punch him out the door. Your response is highly skilled to the point of elegance, but is it real? Yes and no.

Applying your elegant skills in the correct context allows you to be functional without any phony help from your partner and is therefore real, but the context might not occur in a fight, and therefore is elegant but non-real. The senior martial artist tries to become elegant at enough drills so that most contexts are covered, making his resulting martial skill functional in the real world. The impatient junior martial artist, conversely, tries to sprint through the drills so that he can apply what he has learned in the realist context allowed, usually the ring or the cage. Juniors want to get cracking and then, when most of them get cracked, give up training to sit back and watch the latest pay-per-view match, satisfied that at least they got out there and tried "the real thing". Seniors, having given and taken both verbal and physical cracks, prefer to avoid the easy chair in favor of replacing their slowly dwindling testosterone with a bevy of beautiful—dare I say elegant—skills, that may never be tested in the real world. The irony is that those seniors are the very people whom the aging juniors

criticize as delusional traditionalists who couldn't handle themselves in a real fight. Maybe. I hope the seniors will never have to find out. But fight or not, they have at least developed a high-level of skill, the teaching of which might just impart the skills some young whipper-snapper needs to stave off a bully, extricate himself from a street confrontation, or even get his hand raised in the ring.