

## Right by Rote?

Having the right reaction to a threatening situation is the ideal of most budoka who study their art for self-defense. Since it is impossible to do a dress rehearsal of all possible self-defense situations, traditional martial arts use templates to represent generic self-defense situations. These are standard training regimens like one-step sparring drills, aiki techniques, two-person forms, etc. These may be supplemented with exercises and sparring drills to add enough variation so that students are not hypnotized by the literal, i.e. so they do not think that what they do in the dojo is what they'll get on the street.

Yet, students, being without martial experience and thinking with a bias toward literalness, persist on believing that what they practice is how they will react. That is like saying that a mandatory sentencing, written down in black and white, will punish all guilty parties fairly, as if each were equally culpable, equally compelled, and equally contrite—no judge needed, thanks. Once in a while the mandatory sentence meets the correct transgressor and all is well, but if mandatory sentencing is applied without the oversight of a reasoning judge, it will be inappropriate (either too lax or too severe) the majority of the time.

I do not think that rigidly taught martial artists will respond the way they practice. Rather, they will not know how to respond when the way they practice does not apply. Do an upper block against my face punch. My arm is knocked upward and slightly to the side, right? The attack is recognized as an upper level blow and the correct block is applied. Now, what if I hit you with an angular chop. Would you not angle your upper block to match the angle of my blow? If you would, you have reacted in a way that you usually do not practice yet based on a way you do practice. The upper block is a generic that can and will be adjusted automatically by anyone with reasonable reactions. Not getting hit takes precedence of adhering to a formal style. However, I do believe that martial artists have to be made aware that the maps (standard *ippon kumite*, kata interpretations, ju-jutsu *waza*, or situational self-defense formulae) are seldom the territories (the actual encounters), and that thinking martial artists must mentally contribute to the physical training expected of them.

If teachers want to enhance the chances that students will respond appropriately to various attack stimuli, they must, of course, offer a variety of templates. If your prime templates are kata, the way to vary them is to analyze them and practice the various applications. If your prime template is *ippon kumite*, the way to vary it is to practice other kumite drills that either limit the student's response or create more variations of attack. If your prime template is standardized *waza*, you achieve variety by changing the standard attack or by studying what-if scenarios. Every modification of the standard operating procedure should be explained not as another list of items to be memorized for an exam, but as a variation of training to open students' minds to possibilities.

If you study a textbook on physiology, you have a good idea about how the human body is constructed. If you witness an autopsy, you will certainly be able to tell the heart from the liver; but will you know what to expect when one layer of muscle is peeled back on one side of the abdomen at a certain depth? The color may not be the same as in the textbook, the viscosity of actual tissue may be surprising, and the shapes of organs

may not conform exactly to what Gray's Anatomy predicts. Without the text, we are helpless to identify anything, yet with it, we still need another level of practice. Before we rush into the operating room with freshly washed hands and a fresh pair of surgical gloves, we would profit from more experience, something beyond the texts but short of the actual procedure. Standard kata, kumite, and waza are our textbooks. Non-standard kumite drills and applications are our chance at intermediate experiences.

You can't memorize your way into correct reactions, but common ethics prevents us from engaging in the circumstances we need to get the experience we want. Our only choice is to give up the idea of being right by rote and embrace the idea of becoming more valid via variation.