

The Same But Different

Over the last several months, I had been emphasizing different creative combinations during the basics portion of my karate class. The idea, I told the students, is to not be locked into physical habits because you get good at certain sequences. This is the inverse of what most teachers emphasize. In karate, drills are meant to repeat a movement or series of movements until the student can do them unconsciously; but this also can result in their doing those movements unwillingly. What good is an automatic reverse punch if the situation calls for a front kick?

Most teachers say the way you train is the way you will react in a stress situation. They have a point. Certainly if you train to back-fist and sidekick, there is little chance that you will react with a hip throw when Boris Badinov's big brother attacks. But what if he blocks the back-fist and is too close for a sidekick? Are you going to depend on your ingrained karate-trained reactions and not creatively adapt to the situation?

My unusual combinations are meant to re-coordinate students so that they can throw follow-ups from less formulaic positions.

In order to adapt, one must make a habit of adapting. In other words, if one's training regimen is too narrow, one will get very good at a limited number of things (for which one might even earn a rank or a trophy) and still not be good at the very thing one may need to put Brother Badinov out of the picture. Conversely, if one tries to be good at everything, one will be familiar with, rather than proficient at, the skills one needs. Is there a middle road?

Although I am a strong advocate of *sogo budo* (integrated martial ways), I realize that not everyone is interested in studying or able to study more than one martial art; however, every martial art one studies for self-protection (not sport, not aesthetics, but self-protection) should be able to fill the bill in the theatre of one's concerns. (In other words, if you study it, you should be able to apply it in the circumstances you studied it for.) If one expects that *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) is one's best road to self-protection, it had better lead to that destination. If *ippon kumite* is our goal, we reach that goal by performing *bunkai* (kata analysis) to dig out applications, and we perform various kata so that we have variations of those applications. We prepare for kata with basics and combinations of basics. But if, in practicing *ippon kumite*, we always follow a back-fist with a sidekick or follow an upper block with a reverse punch, we might as well study just two kata and call it a *kumite-day*.

Habit is automatically doing something the same way each time. So habits can be good because they can free our energies for other things. But if there is a tweak in some expected stimulus, logically there should be an appropriate tweak in the response. Habit can prevent this.

In karate, we are used to being corrected in our basics and in our kata until we do them perfectly (and the same) each time. As a result, we begin to think that the-same-each-time is what solves all problems, but if Judy McPunch was supposed to throw a head-high thrust but mistakenly threw a stomach shot, would you

automatically deliver an upper block in response? Or would you adapt instantly depending with a less than perfect lower-level block?

Even *McDonald's*, the largest, most successful, most pattern-driven system around, changes its menu, its ads, its slogans, its décor, and its training from time to time to respond to differences in the market. Similarly, I suggest that while we are building dependable reactions, we try to build a wide repertoire of those reactions and then, after a long training period, dissolve that repertoire into generic body skills that adapt automatically to new attack stimuli. In this way, we go beyond the style into the art, and beyond the art into self-actualized self-protection. Bruce Lee might have called it form-of-no-form (see the DVD *Form to Formless* for a short exposition of this idea).

We do not achieve form-of-no-form by jumping into unstructured training, but we also miss the mark if we keep our training so structured that we can't react with anything except what we did as white belts (albeit faster and harder). I am not advocating a change in our training so much as an adjustment that will keep the training the same, but different.