

## Through Limitation

“It is through limitation that the master is first known.”—Wolfgang von Goethe

Goethe’s quote sounds a bit like Bruce Lee’s recommendation to “pare away to the essentials.” Alternately, you might conceive the quote to mean that mastery comes from overcoming the adversity of limitations. Both interpretations are worthy of reflection, but in this essay, I would like to offer a third interpretation, that of “limitation as concentration”.

When we are beginners, we are limited, to be sure, but that is because we have little to concentrate or condense so we are far from being masters. Beginners have a limitation of knowledge, a limitation of techniques, and thus a limitation of choices. As beginners improve and become intermediates and advanced students, their knowledge, techniques, and choices increase. It is therefore reasonable for them to assume that a master has even more knowledge, techniques, and choices. There is no doubt that a master has more of each. In a sense, a novice must pass “through limitation” to reach any sort of mastery. That is, he must accumulate. And yet the master, with all his resources, needs to pare down what he knows so that that he can more easily apply it. He does that not only by discarding what is useless, as Bruce Lee suggests, but also by using “limitation” in two ways: (1) Concentration of Information, and (2) Minimization of Technique.

Many masters, rather than becoming more athletic and energetic, become more subtle and relaxed. William C. C. Chen, a master of *tai-chi* once told me that if students of harder martial arts study deeply enough, they will eventually arrive at many of the elements of Chinese internal arts on their own, that is, without officially studying them, but by studying only their own arts. Eventually techniques, too numerous to retrieve from one’s mental catalog when needed, are reduced to a limited number of principles. When these principles are manifested, they no doubt result in observable techniques, but techniques that may escape labeling—techniques that are created on the fly and only vaguely resemble any official techniques. An intermediate or advanced student, seeing such a technique, would no doubt name it and want to add it to his knowledge base. A master, seeing such a technique, would understand what made it work and how the relevant principles could be manifested in any number of ways. His information is concentrated (“limited”) but his resources remain numerous.

Should the master apply a set of principles in self-defense, he may produce a technique, the size of which would ideally fit the situation. Sometimes large, forceful techniques are needed; sometimes small, rapid-fire techniques are called for; sometimes simple, small, nearly invisible techniques will do. However, he would, I believe, attempt to use a little effort as possible in execution. Effort can produce power, but it also produces exhaustion. The smaller and more relaxed the technique, the faster it can be applied and the quicker the fight is over. Many acknowledged martial arts masters are known for having deceptively effortless execution. Kendo dojo abound with tales of how a senior practitioner scored effortlessly on strong, young, vigorous players who thought that speed and strength would win the day. In swordplay (whether the sword is bamboo, wood, or steel)

precision and timing is more important than strength and speed. So too with unarmed martial arts. Of course, the master cannot be too old, too slow, or too weak, I admit, but by working through the limitations of an overabundance of techniques that are kept unnecessarily large (often to teach beginners), and by embracing the idea of a limited set of principles and minimal execution, the master not only can be recognized, he can also enter into a more advanced field of study whose adherents are, understandably, limited.