

Too Hard, Too Soft

Can a hard technique be too hard or a soft technique too soft?

Sometimes I see people, trying to be strong in their karate or TKD, winding up and straining to put as much external power as possible into technique number 1 so that they can wind up and strain to put as much external power as possible into technique number 2. You might admire their power generation—a board would not stand a chance against them—but would their techniques actually function in self-defense?

Conversely, I have seen internal Chinese martial arts and Japanese Aiki exhibitions in which the subject barely moves at all, but his partner flies away as if attached to a Hollywood stunt wire. It is not that the partner falls for them, but that, in order to generate such a technique, the martial artist must have the circumstance pre-set. It is a demonstration with a *partner*, not self-defense against an *attacker*. Would it work in actual self-defense?

In both cases the answer is “Maybe”—we don’t know until we see the actual circumstance. However, even without an actual scenario as a reference, I believe I can safely answer the topic sentence’s question. Yes, a technique can be too hard or too soft.

In my personal hierarchy of preferences, the softer the technique, the more advanced it is. If I can put someone down, either by throwing or striking, with minimal motion, I feel I am at a pretty advanced level simply because my techniques have become more efficient. That sort of efficiency is my standard of excellence. But efficiency would do me no good if my minimal motion resulted in my being maximally mauled by Mr. Malevolent.

Logically, therefore, many martial artists favor the fast and furious standard of measurement where the harder and/or the more times you can hit him, the more advanced your skill level. In this way of thinking, efficiency is less important than explosiveness. But explosiveness does you no good if the explosion exhausts your dynamite cache and, because it was targeted inefficiently, results in an angry assailant.

The only consistent measurement a martial artist should have, in my humble opinion, is effectiveness. But effectiveness is the one thing we really cannot measure unless, as an initiator of physical violence, we are fond of getting beat up occasionally, starting a few vendettas, and spending more than a few nights in the local house of detention. Because we cannot legally, morally, or physically fight all the time, we are forced to train according to what our fighting philosophy suggests would work on the street. If we like the hard, we train to be mega-hard. If we like the soft, we train to be mega-soft. However, whether we prefer hard or soft, we have no other choice except to keep our training at a decidedly un-advanced mean because extremes are unacceptable, either because they are dangerous or because they are ineffective. So in practice, we do the best we can to explode in explosive hard

techniques, and move minimally in soft minimal motion techniques without recognizing that in doing so we may not be aspiring to our ideal, but actually keeping ourselves from experiencing it.

Too much hard makes one tense and slow, and too much anger makes one single-minded and unable to adapt. Too much relaxation makes one flaccid and weak, and too much pacifism makes one unwilling to act. To those who favor the explosion, I suggest exploding with a mind that is soft. To those who favor minimal motion, I suggest relaxing with a mind that is ready to explode.