

Using Fantasy

King Sejong (1397-1462) was one of Korea's finest thinkers. He placed great emphasis on scholarship and education, promoted cultural, economic, and scientific research, and instituted Han'gul, the Korean ideography. He is known for saying, "A person who falls on the ground must use the ground to get up."

In the same way that speeding on highways is not desirable but police must speed to catch a speeder, one must sometimes use the undesirable to produce the desirable. Every revolutionary worth his Che T-shirt will agree to that premise. In the traditional martial arts, even those arts that attempt to train their adherents in the most functional of self-defense responses, idealize their simulated combat engagements. In a sense, they use fantasy to rise out of fantasy.

Consider those who, at least at first glance, do NOT use idealized simulated combat engagements. Who are they? Boxers? Wrestlers? MMA competitors? Model-mugging students? Street-survival aficionados? Cops? The military? Boxers use combinations and bag-work so that they do not wear-out their sparring partners even if they do wear padded gloves and headgear when sparring. Wrestlers use drills and techniques applicable to specific mat situations to train for a more free-flowing interchanges on the mat. MMA competitors do both. Model-mugging students crank up their willingness to yell and strike out but against a padded golem of an opponent. Street survival guys simulate realistic situations in non-deadly circumstances. The police and soldiers while training face similar "realism" problems and solve them in similar ways. In each case, there is an element of either simulation or idealization or both. In other words, all martial arts/self-defense students constantly deal in fantasy.

Unless they want to fight most of the time and take a chance of living a much shorter and more painful life, martial artists of any sort must simulate. Whatever one simulates has to be replicable in order to be taught. That means it has to be in a specific form, but a specific form is, almost by definition, an idealized form because combat never comes in a predictable shape, size, or action. In other words, martial artists of any type must use the ground they fall upon to get up.

Some martial artists, who claim that they are teaching self-protection, use the ground but never fully rise. Others spring up ready to absorb another lesson. How do we prevent ourselves from crawling around in fantasyland and instead use fantasy to spring ever upwards. I can think of only one method: by clearly understanding what is fantasy and what approaches reality. Let's say we are performing a basic one-step, prearranged sparring drill. Unrealistic: we know who will attack, when, with what anatomical weapon, at what speed, at what level. Realistic: we must deal with basic timing, distancing, and make our block move the attacking limb. As the one-step sparring drill becomes more advanced, we move an unrealistic item to the realistic column; for example, we may still know who, when, and at what speed a person will attack, but no longer know at what level or with what anatomical weapon. A different drill may take us back to basic one-step sparring while taking away our knowledge of when the attack will come, and perhaps add a faster, more intense

attack. In each drill different items are unrealistic, while others are more realistic. We never get to full realism, not even in full contact free-style sparring, which has its own unrealistic side. In each case, we “use the ground to get up”, but we get up differently each time.

The realism comes about only in our mind’s ability to integrate the drills while concentrating on the real and subduing the unreal. All martial arts use fantasy. If you are interest in martial arts as self-defense, ask yourself: does my martial art use fantasy in a way that allows me to spring into reality? Or do I stay close to the ground, hoping that it will provide a pleasant resting place for my martial dreams?