

When (and If) to Spar

Having trained in the Hakkoryu and Kamishin Aiki-ju-jutsu systems before studying Aikido, it rapidly became obvious to me that the older forms did not admit *randori* (free “sparring”), while Aikido did. To be precise, the *randori* in most systems of Aikido is more like the *jiyu ippon kumite* (free one-step sparring) of karate rather than the *randori* of Judo, in that Aikido’s free play is really a single attack from one or more attackers who do not indulge in give and take like Judo sparring does. Even the more rugged and realistic *randori* of Tomiki Aikido assigns attacker and defender, rather than mutual “opponents”. To the extent that the Tomiki style is realistic, it is also more jagged and less aiki-like. Ueshiba Aikido’s freestyle, on the contrary, can be beautiful and fluid, but seldom has the street-realism that real attacks would have.

The famous swordsman Tesshū Yamaoka, founder of Itto Shoden Muto-ryu, refused to let his students “spar” with *shinai* (bamboo swords) until they had at least 3 years of training. He felt it ruined their form. When I was a novice in Shotokan, our sensei would not let us free spar until we were *gokyu* rank (intermediates), which meant having at least 1 year of training. Even Aikido does not start its *randori* until late intermediate ranks.

Nowadays, both kendo-ka and karate-ka spar as soon as they have completed a beginners’ program. This is probably because kendo and many, if not most, karate systems are sport-oriented, so getting the student into the sportive element as soon as possible benefits that student’s success. Boxing works the same way: Get to know your basics, get in shape, and then get in the ring. Since the goal is obviously winning a sparring match, sparring should be practiced as early and as much as possible; but, what about non-sportive martial traditions, or martial arts for self-defense?

Obviously, if one’s goal is to simply preserve an historical art, no sparring is necessary; but, if one does that art for some level of self-protection, shouldn’t there be some sort of free sparring? Well, to be honest, the answer is Yes and No. Neither in Takeshin Karate nor in Takeshin Aiki have we ever emphasized *randori/jiyu kumite* and yet our Aiki-ju-jutsu students have comfortably handled Aikido *randori* drills and our Karate students have won Karate tournaments. Obviously they had to practice some free attack training in order to succeed, but as previously stated, never have we emphasized it. What is their magic formula? Well, of course, one could chalk it up to personal skill or luck or both, but if I had to pin down one training philosophy that helped them succeed beyond reasonable expectations, it would be this: train to defend oneself in several circumstances and adapt that to the rules of whatever contest you choose to enter.

If you worry too much about your form falling apart because of freestyle, you risk impeding your reactions or making improper reactions to new stimuli. If you train against new stimuli all the time, your reactions will be fast, yet without the proper form, they will also be inefficient. Obviously the solution

combines the emphases. This means training in strict kata or waza and then training equally in kumite, right? Well, sort of. In my opinion, free kumite should be entered into regularly but seldom while various semi-free, semi-unrealistic engagement matches should be practiced much more frequently. The purpose of the semi-free engagements is to better be able to analyze and adjust one's form *and* one's reactions. I have long held that *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) is a more realistic drill than freestyle sparring even though it doesn't seem like a fight at all.

I have also held that aiki waza, done gradually faster and against varying opponents, allows the teacher to correct flaws in movements that would spell disaster in freestyle. Does that mean that every self-defense drill translates directly to freestyle success? Of course not, but ask yourself how much direct training for freestyle success actually translates into self-defense skill.