

Ignoring the Means

[We ignore the trees for the forest.](#)

As a teacher, I don't want a student to get so hypnotized with his self-image as a *meijin* of self-protection that he ignores the proper execution of the techniques that will get him there. A guy can't run through the forest successfully without taking into account the trees in his path. But he can't stop to catalogue each tree, either. Although concentrating on technical details improves the execution of techniques, individually perfect techniques are not always what is needed for successful self-defense. Often, a combination of techniques (sometimes crude but powerful), completed with a finishing blow or hold down and/or an exit from the confrontation is in order.

There was a ju-jutsu club in a nearby town that taught self-defense via scenarios. Students would indulge in a brief semi-scripted narrative in which, at some point, a student was "threatened" or "attacked". These students learned to respond quickly, without a lot of thought, and with forceful (and effective) techniques. The fact that their techniques were rather basic was relevant to their success. The more basic a technique is, the more physical effort it may take, but the less practice it takes to execute. Inversely, the more detailed and subtle a technique, the less energy it takes, but the more training it requires. This ju-jutsu club produced confident martial artists, but after about a decade of confidence, their fast-and-hard reactions slowed and softened and, like hard-and-fast karate-ka, the younger and stronger among them could overcome the more seasoned in a self-defense scenario. Obviously, they had a clear view of their end goal, but they lacked a subtlety of technique borne of details that might have served them in later years.

They were ignoring the trees (or at least the high shrubs) to muscle their way through the self-defense forest toward safety. They had developed the basic skills of brushing aside the brush but had not learned the subtleties of tree avoidance, climbing, or swinging. Muscles get tired when used in large gross motions. Try cutting shrubs all morning and you will quickly agree. If they had spent their time on technical details, their execution would have taken less energy and they would be able to fend for themselves, even at a relatively advanced age. But they wanted immediate success, and to be frank, they were not wrong in wanting this.

Just as my own students, who tend to be focused on the details, sometimes ignore the wider picture of self-defense, those who *do* see the forest (self-defense), often ignore the trees (techniques).

Obviously, the ideal is to balance both detail and complete execution. This is why, after months of working on details, I will create a drill to test whether students can really apply what they have learned outside of the precise circumstances in which they practiced their

requirements. I have noticed, however, that the sessions in which we cover refinements and details tend to far outnumber the sessions in which we actually apply our techniques—at a ratio of approximately eight or ten to one. Why is that? Are the trees more important than the forest?

More on this next time with “The Balance of Power”.