

## Techniques, Training, Arts, and Tricks

I have written on a similar subject previously, and I do hope I am not boring the reader by approaching it from a different angle. This was a lesson for me (perhaps for you, as well) and often lessons must be learned six to twelve times before they “sink in”, and those times need to be in close chronological proximity to take hold fully.

In old martial arts texts translated into English or written in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century English, the Japanese terms *waza* was rendered sometimes as “art” and sometimes as “trick”. The first rendition seemed artful and the second trickier, but neither withstood the test of time. Rather, we almost always translate this word as “technique(s)” today. We’ll return to the artful trick later. For the purpose of this essay, I’d like to delineate between a simple, direct, rather obvious techniques and a somewhat more complicated combination of movements that we also call *waza*.

Let’s say the simple technique is a karate middle inside forearm block (in to out) and the more complicated technique is the same block in a front stance followed by a front kick and reverse punch as it appears in the second half of the kata Heian Nidan. In both cases, we can practice these “waza” alone or apply them with a semi-aggressive, semi-cooperative partner. The solo practice is to perfect the form that allegedly works in the partner practice. It would be illogical to practice solo one way and then apply the movement against a partner another way. Training must consist of applying what we have learned enough times so that one’s body makes unconscious micro-adjustments and so that it feels comfortable reacting with the combination technique.

But what do we *really* do in class? Either we practice solo, assuming that our bodies have fully mastered the correct nuances that would work against a partner, or we practice against a partner, but do so in a perfunctory manner. In other words, we’d rather have accomplished 30 repetitions that look like the chosen waza than 5 repetitions in which the block and follow-ups are applied more realistically and thus require more of those unconscious micro-adjustments.

In any physical activity, repetition of a combination leads to “chunking” the series of movements so that they flow easily as a unit. Thus, the only way to get “better” is to repeat that which you want to improve.

Let’s set aside all of the above for a moment and consider something that will seem unrelated. Assuming we train in martial arts to survive a self-defense encounter, we have expected to learn some tricks that non-martial artists do not know. We chose to train in a martial art rather than to develop our bodies as body-builders might have because we felt that the waza of martial arts would give us a *technical* edge that a *physical* edge would not supply. In other words, we wanted our waza to be “tricks”. (I told you I’d return to this definition.)

Why then do we resist the detailed investigation of those tricks and instead practice them perfunctorily? I suggest it is because we do not want our techniques to become artful; rather, we want to learn *what* to do rather than *how* to do it skillfully.

Now, having presented all this, I would like to posit a simple argument that I have come to believe is true: Although we need techniques both to have something to practice *and* to have something to apply, what we learn during artful practice is what we *really* will apply. The techniques, in other words, are vehicles for the skills. Another way to say this is, the Tricks are the Vehicles for the Art.