

Aborting the Movement

I remember the debates in the letter departments of martial arts magazines during the Bruce Lee '70s. Because Lee challenged the effectiveness of classical martial arts, readers made sure they jumped on his bandwagon claiming that any movement from any art that was not Jeet Kune Do was foolish and ineffectual.

In those days, the “letter department” was as close as we could get to the Facebook debates we all pretend to enjoy now. Sure, you only read a couple of opinions rather than dozens, and sure, you had to wait a month for a response, but the message, albeit edited by the magazine, got out.

In one letter, the writer was bemoaning the utter impracticality of the traditional karate upper block (and, by implication, basic blocks in general). An astute reader wrote in saying that the critic simply did not understand the idea of blocking: you don't actually use the entire formal block in real self-defense; instead you use the “fast section of the block”. If I can extend his argument a bit: the formal movement is meant, at least in part, to exercise the muscles and challenge the karate-ka to make large movements fast enough to work in one-step sparring so that the “fast section of the blocks” would be that much faster in an actual encounter.

Since those days, I have come up with other reasons to preserve the traditional way of practicing blocks, but I would like to revisit the “fast section” argument from another angle.

Why complete the whole movement (whether it be a block, a strike, or a throw) when just a section will do? The obvious answer is: “to learn proper body mechanics and to reveal the places where the partner can potentially resist or counter”. Okay, now that traditional training is back on sound footing and we trust that the way we practice will produce functional results, let me ask that first question and two follow-up questions: (2) Why not learn when NOT to force a completed movement? (3) Why not use an incomplete, but functional technique to develop more minimal responses?

I have noticed both in my karate and aiki-ju-jutsu classes that the movement students are practicing hypnotizes them. To some extent, that is because they want to fulfill the complete assignment and because a completed technique is the ideal during an exam. But if Leonard Leon Uke happens to slide on his face during a takedown, would it not be more prudent to accept that un-ideal finish as a victory rather than twist your body into the correct formal posture while leaving Mr. Uke behind? If L. L. Uke has NOT gone down, does it make sense, either from a training- or an examining-perspective, to force the official technique upon him in its entirety?

One always has a choice between following through and using just enough of the technique to get the job done. The guiding principle, I think, is that during training one should

practice following through unless (1) pressed for training time, (2) concentrating on a detail, (3) it would be superfluous, or (4) it would be forced.

Uke, L. L. can be helpful here. If he strums along with the complete technique when he does not have to, he's dancing to the wrong tune. If he does not inform his partner that he could forgo the entire string section and get by with a ukulele, he is stringing his partner along.