

I Like it When It Works or Predictable Functionality

Martial arts students follow their instructor's guidance. If he/she says that repeating Kanku-dai 10 times will be good for their hip flexibility, they do it. If he/she tells them that *mawashi-uke* (roundhouse reception) in *sanchin* stance is the best way to deflect blows to the head and torso when one is not sure of the exact target, students will repeat *mawashi uke* from *sanchin* hundreds of times.

Once they are well trained in solo movements, Sensei asks fellow students to attack them. Those who have practiced Kanku-dai notice that their hips move more smoothly when they block and retaliate; those who have practiced *mawashi-uke* notice that they can, indeed, pick off a punch even if they do not know its exact target in advance. The student is pleased and feels an appropriate pride. In this way, the instructor earns the student's respect, and the art earns his/her trust.

We could easily imagine examples of similar scenarios using aiki or judo techniques, as well.

The student is never so thrilled with his study as when he proves to himself that what he has been taught actually functions against an opponent, even if that opponent is a non-violent training partner.

As the training advances, the attacks become more threatening in their speed and power. Perhaps Sensei has to suggest some details for the defending students to apply. When those details make a positive difference, students are bound to feel a sort of joy. I have heard students issue several variations of "I like it when it works!" How could we possibly like it if it did not work?

Now here is the nexus. Does IT work, or does the STUDENT make it work? Obviously the answer can be a little of both. Nothing works without the student applying it, of course, but a student must also have a valid technique to make function successfully. I am not being overly picky here. Consider the difference in emphasis.

To the extent that a technique is technically serviceable AND the student applies it precisely and in the right circumstance, the result is a **predictable functionality**. It is predictable functionality that makes the student feel he can defend himself. If techniques worked only some of the time, functionality would be unpredictable—not exactly desirable in self-defense or even in the simulated self-defense of the dojo.

What kind of technique works only some of the time? Shouldn't they be rare if they were to exist at all? Clearly techniques handed down from training practices that go back hundreds of years are likely to be functional, otherwise they would not have been preserved. *But no technique is functional if applied poorly or applied in the wrong circumstance.* Enter the human factor.

Early in my teaching career, I heard students complain after a failed attempt at applying a technique, "It does not work!" It had worked for me and for other students, but suddenly the technique was at fault. I replied with, "A beginner often says, 'It doesn't work.' An intermediate says, 'It's not working well.' A more advanced student says, 'I am not working the technique well enough.'"

Certainly there are techniques that are more efficient than other similar techniques. Often they are more difficult to do and therefore can seem ineffectual at first. How much work is a student willing to do to make a technique work? If he needs self-defense tomorrow, somewhat inefficient techniques may be efficient enough. If he wants to master his art, however, super-efficient technical execution is what he wants. To make those more difficult-to-apply techniques function with predicable functionality, the senior puts in the time and effort where a junior expects his technique will do all the work for him.