

Wise Watching

I have often suggested to students, who cannot train because of a minor injury, that they come to class to just watch. They seldom take my suggestion to heart probably because they know they will feel the frustration of not participating. But that very frustration is what changes the quality of their simple observation to something more—let's call it “wise watching”.

Sincere students, relegated to observing from the sidelines, mentally put themselves in the positions of those actively practicing on the mat, but simultaneously seeing the action, whether solo or with a partner, from the outside. This means they can more easily alternate between the subjective “feel” of the technique and the more objective “correct form” of the technique. When they are actively participating “feel” dominates “form”. When on the mat, they may watch Sensei perform his sample technique on Ulrich von Uke, but they know they will soon perform it on their own *uke*, so their watching is less wise than whimsical. They try to get the general gist of the sequence, often paying more attention to the *coup de grace* than to the *modus operandi*. When they are sitting in the spectator area, however, they know they will not get a chance to feel victorious, so each part of the technique tends to draw more attention.

Your watching a technique from on the mat encourages a kinda-sorta-almost-maybe vague absorption because you know you'll be feeling it soon. Your seeing something from the sidelines forces you to notice the detail that Sensei is trying to impart.

Some people learn best by watching, others by hearing, others by feeling, but in my experience, few (even the most visually oriented) watch wisely, i.e. few have a strategy of watching so as to learn. The same can be said of listening. I may give a verbal instruction and illustrate it, but if the student does not listen wisely (i.e. is not especially attuned to absorbing the details of verbal instruction), she will let the words wash over her while seeing the visual example as a whole. It is this whole vision that makes the watching vague.

Try to picture a kata in its entirety. You can review it in your mind sequentially, but cannot picture that 20-to-50-movement sequence all at once. Okay, so you reduce the kata to its individual movements. You can now envision one of those movements, can't you? Well, almost. Often you will see just the final shape of the movement. At best, you see its beginning and its terminus, but seldom see the increments in between.

Now complicate this by putting a partner at the other end of the movement. The partner attacks. You defend using the single movement from your kata. But your intensity, direction, angle, and timing are all inaccessible. You did not record them accurately in your mind so that you can easily replicate them. In fact, it may be impossible to record *all* the possible details, but wise watching can improve your chances of recording the most relevant details. Consider the following wise watching strategy.

1. **Clearly understand the partner's attacking posture.** Does he start in a front stance? Is he throwing a lunge-punch or a reverse punch or some other strike? Often the teacher shows a defense against a rear collar

grab only to find that the student has begun his attack with a lunge punch. In other words, his observation was so vague that he did not even notice the attack.

2. **Clearly note the receiver's position.** Does she have a foot forward? Is he turned sideways or backwards? Is she in a natural or a defense position? Numerous times I have shown a defense in which the receiver is in a given kata position, only to find a student beginning his practice from a ready position.

3. **Clearly note the initial attack.** Is it a grip, a strike, a punch, a kick, or something else?

4. **Finally, ignore the final "technique" itself in favor of the first motion you are to take.** Often people are so enamored of the final technique, they forget how they were told to get there.

If you do no more than take these four preliminary precautions, your observation, whether from the sidelines or from the mat, will become more mindful, more aware, more advantageous for learning. Yeah, wiser.