

Perfunctory & Deliberate Practice

It is often said that to become expert at something, you have to repeat it 10,000 times. However, no one mentions the *quality* of the practice. Although it is valuable to simply repeat a kata or a waza again and again, a mindful, more deliberate practice will produce greater mastery, and I suspect, with fewer repetitions—perhaps only 9,827.

Kidding aside, ask yourself how many people actually practice their martial techniques deliberately? Certainly, when preparing for exam, training partners get together and *concentrate* on what they have learned because they know they have to demonstrate before their seniors who know more. That is, *they do deliberate practice*. But, for the most part, if Sensei says the goal is 10,000 repetitions of Bassai-dai, for example, they figure that class attendance will eventually take care of that. Let's do the math. Let's say you did Bassai-dai twice each class and attended three classes a week, 50 weeks a year. That would mean 300 Bassai-dai kata per year. In 30 years, you would be approaching 9000 of these kata. Is the "10,000" number too big, or is our idea of how to repeat the kata too limited?

That magic "10,000" number has been used in many fields of endeavor—music, sports, and many other skills. Is it only a fictitious number used casually to mean "a whole bunch"?

Being a meticulous dude and having graduated from a university in which I was encouraged to study my subjects in a way that would prepare me to *understand the subject* rather than simply *pass the exam*, I looked upon my martial arts studies in the same way. I studied both the USJF and USJA syllabi of Judo, even re-categorizing the techniques so that they made more sense to me. I practiced my Hakkoryu Ju-jutsu mentally by comparing Aikido techniques and trying to see which waza were more practical. I not only practiced my karate kata but also familiarized myself with similar kata from other lineages and searched for applications in their movements. In other words, I practiced mindfully and deliberately with mental study at the root of my physical training. I may have performed 10,000 Bassai-dai by now, but there are many kata that I have practiced much fewer times and yet I feel I understand them well because of my deliberate practice, not only of karate but also of my other arts.

There is no doubt that when I am tired or want just a physical warm up, I will engage in perfunctory practice, but for the most part, I have engaged in and still engage in a mixture of study and training that is far more deliberate, I believe, than the majority of students or teachers in most martial arts. Before my arm gets tired patting myself on the back, I must say that a number of my martial arts friends have done and continue to do the same. They are not just perpetual students, they are also perpetual teachers, and their star students are themselves.

Think of what it means to practice deliberately. Does it not suggest that your mind is engaged? If your mind is engaged, aren't you constantly observing, evaluating, correcting, adjusting, and repeating the process? Isn't that what a teacher does?

Now think of the best students you have known in any subject you have studied. Have they not been the most inquisitive, the most questioning, and the most engaged beyond what is required in class? This implies that the worst students in these subjects are not engaged, do not ask questions, are not interested in any aspects of the subject except what is required for exam. In fact, some of their “studying” is so perfunctory that it can be called “a vague hope of learning by osmosis”. Since the “10,000” number seems burdensome, they just show up and put the responsibility of their learning squarely on the teacher. If the teacher can get them to do any sort of deliberate practice, the best she will be able to do is admonish them to repeat what they need to know, Oh, I don’t know, about 10,000 times.