

“You Can’t Remember What You Don’t Understand”

--Dr. Jordan Peterson, clinical psychologist

Can you think of a time when you reread a book you had taken notes on years before? One section suddenly stands out to you but you had not noted it upon your first reading. Obviously, you are more experienced now, know more, and now the section relates to your current level of knowledge, so it is easier for you to understand because you can relate to it. When the student (you) is ready, the teacher (the section of the book) will appear. This is not a revelation to us, but what maybe somewhat shocking is that you had *no memory* of reading such an important passage years before. You had no memory because you didn’t understand/relate to it.

Karate kata and Aiki waza are, in a way, like sections of books. They replicate, in idealized fashions, that which martial arts founders wanted us to remember. Those founders were scholar/athletes who not only developed martial systems, but at least to some extent, experienced the combat that those systems are founded upon. They fought, or defended themselves, learned and made a record of the movements and principles that worked for them. Why? So we could learn without having to fight the same battles.

We certainly remember how to repeat their karate kata or aiki waza. We may remember them well enough to pass an exam or even pass them down to others. But we cannot perform a karate kata or an aiki technique feeling what those founders felt, experiencing what those founders experienced. We cannot perform those techniques relating to them as their originators did. In fact we have to try to do it in reverse. We have to do what they told our progenitors to do in order for us to get a semblance of what they felt doing it for the first time. We repeat the instruction hoping that the movement and the emotion will result in a fuller understanding. Once we begin to understand the movements and can relate to them as self-defense, we can then remember them, not in the superficial way we remember to step to the left first, or use a back stance rather than a front stance, but in a deeper way.

You remember feeling the horror and shock of 9/11, don’t you? And the closer you were to the tragedy, the more deeply you remember it—because it happened to *you*, even if indirectly. You also remember visiting a holocaust memorial and what you learned about Hitler in WWII, but that genocide does not feel as painful as the 9/11 attacks, even though, by many measures, the holocaust was a larger, more prolonged horror.

Now let’s assume your grandparents lived in Germany in 1939. They suffered in a concentration camp, were eventually freed, and told their tales to their children and to you, their grandchildren. In this case, you might remember visiting that holocaust memorial even more

intensely than you remember the events of 9/11. Why? Because your family helped you fully comprehend and relate to the latter, while you may not have known anyone who died in the 9/11 disaster.

Okay, snap out of the history lesson and back into the dojo. The reason that kata practice without application produces artists and not warriors is because simulating the experience of the combat is much more difficult when practicing solo, while aiming for perfect placement of the left back stance. The reason that aiki practice often produces artists and not warriors, despite the two-person application, is because *uke* necessarily cooperates with *tori* to help him safely set the movements in his muscle memory. If uke never resists, if the intensity of his attack never increases, tori might as well be doing a solo kata.

I am an advocate of solo karate kata practice and of slow, careful aiki partner practice. But I also believe that martial artists must experience *a martial understanding* before they “remember” their art. They do that by relating, as gradually as necessary, to ever more challenging attacks.