

Means and Ends 3

How a deep understanding of means allows us to reach our ends.

When you were starting school, learning to put pencil to those yellow pieces of paper with wide blue lines bisected by thin blue lines, you first learned to print in capital letters. Next, you were taught to print in lowercase letters, some of which looked very much like their larger counterparts, some of which looked quite different. Wow! How do people read this stuff?

Next, you learned the capitals again, but this time in cursive. Then lowercase cursive. Gradually, you developed your own writing “style”, all based on a rigid block system of letter representation. This gradually results in your personal handwriting.

When you learn to brush Chinese characters, you apply your brush while copying an approved block style of characters before learning a cursive version called “the grassy style”. Eventually, you might become so comfortable with brushing the characters that you can put your own expression into them, converting them into a personalized artistic rendering.

This type of sequential learning follows a natural progression: the simplistic, almost idealistic, that is, the objectively recognizable will come before the more personal or artistic methods. The same type of learning sequence happens in both music and art. In everyday handwriting, we make our signature our own. In art, we express ourselves personally or at least we adjust our rigidly learned skills to address the project we have taken on.

What would happen if we could not rise through these steps to the position of creating our own handwriting? We then would not be able to read the writing of those that *did* develop through the block and cursive styles to a personal penmanship.

In martial arts, we learn “correct” kata or “correct” waza in order to pass exams—that is the block style. At some point the techniques are applied in some sort of engagement match like one-step karate engagements or aiki’s *randori* (free attack)—that is the grassy style. Now, what could be considered the artistic, personal, or “for the project at hand” style? Obviously, it is the style that you would use in an actual attack. But seldom does any martial artist train for truly realistic attacks. As a teacher with more than five decades experience, I can attest to the fact that it is virtually impossible to be realistic in class—realism is not only dangerous, but also difficult to learn from. The best we can do to reach the laudable end of realistic self-defense is to reimagine the means by which we came to this stage.

Sure, there are arts like the various modifications of Jeet Kune Do that attempt to jump into street self-defense without the formalism of block-style techniques. Their means attain their ends more directly and therefore more quickly, but they are nonetheless limited by the presumption that self-defense is a one-on-one fight. Similarly, sport karate is limited by the

presumption that a one-on-one fight will resemble a sparring match. Aikido is limited by the presumption that street attacks will be large and somewhat telegraphed. Traditional karate and aiki-ju-jutsu both assume that the attack will be somewhat formalistic and therefore they fail to adapt their waza to a more likely sudden single attack.

But all these arts can be modified. All these arts can leave the block- and grassy-style behind and can be customized to the project-at-hand. However, to do so, the teacher and/or the student must concentrate *less* on the form of techniques and *more* on the principles that make them work.

Solid block letters may *have* to come first, but even a first grader, superbly skilled in the precision of her printing, cannot afford to stop at the block letter level, or even the proper penmanship cursive level, if she wants to write the answers to essay questions on a college exam. The project-at-hand depends upon the means, but the means must be adapted to attain the ultimate ends.