

Martial Basics as Home Base

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THE PROBLEM WITH VARIATIONS

To be a master of one trade, you must also be a jack of many. Mastery, in my personal dictionary, includes a extensive knowledge of your art including an understanding of how your art compares to another's and, of course, how it differs. Becoming familiar with another art can make you recognize variations of your own basics.

I urge my students to study variations of each basic movement because basics are the springboards to variations. Variations, in turn, create the repertoire to deal with any self-defense situation. As soon as one studies variations, however, one runs into two conflicts.

First conflict: it seems that a student must immediately forego *tadashii katachi* (Correctness of Form) in order to accept the very idea of variation. If each variation has validity, how can there be any Correctness?

Second conflict: as a student develops a vast repertoire of variations, each of which is valid in certain contexts, he or she will inevitably have a problem integrating the myriad items he/she has learned.

Let us examine these conflicts one at a time.

PHYSICAL PRACTICE AND SYMBOLIC PERFORMANCE

Must you forgo the idea of Correctness if you adopt the idea of variation?

Not if you use Correctness as a functional, dependable home base from which to venture and to which to return. If you use a specific *tadashii katachi* as a reference point, you can easily evaluate its worth while recognizing that it does not cover every situation.

You can practice your preferred method of correct execution, nevertheless, as a method that symbolizes other variations. Your body cannot practice 1000, 100, or even 10 variations at once but each basic technique can be *thought of as if* it were a different variation. This is an essential use of the mind in the martial arts. Your preferred method of performing basics, therefore, becomes a way to practice physically as well as a symbolic movement to play with mentally.

Examples of
variation from
karate: 6 ways
to perform an
inside middle
block:
ABOVE:
01A & B.
hanmi
(half-body);



LEFT: 02A & B.
nino-uke
(parry/block);



03A & B.
makko
(square);

04A & B.
oshi
(pushing);



05A & B.
hiki
(pulling);



**06A, B, & C.
me-ni meinai
(invisible).**



**An example of variation from Aiki: 4 ways to perform *kao-ate*:
07A & B. pull;**





08A & B. elbow push;



09A & B. arm circle



10A & B. circle with hips.

You can turn this mental practice into physical practice when you have the time or the inclination to “realize” the perceived variations. You then apply the symbolic base-movement in one or more of its concrete variations. In other words, formal practice takes a specific stylistic form while informal application uses variations based on that specific form.

Even if you do not “play” with your basics, your art’s kata or pre-arranged waza provide many possible variations. A kata’s numerous adjustments to basics force you to realize certain variations every time you perform a kata correctly. You discover further subtle variations a certain kata may not illustrate simply by applying any of the newly realized techniques against different opponents. This is one of the many unrecognized values of kata practice for self-defense.



Heian Nidan’s first movement is actually a variation of an upper block (11A-ABOVE LEFT) or inside middle block (11B-ABOVE RIGHT), an outside middle block (12A-MIDDLE LEFT) and close punch (12B-MIDDLE RIGHT), and a down block (13-BELOW RIGHT).



CH-CH-CH-CHANGES

Turn and face the strange. How you perform a technique depends on the situation, the environment, the opponent, the context, and the goal.





Ude otosu odori a.k.a. ikkyo(14A-G.) has variations in nuki otosu odori (15A-D, NEXT PAGE) and uchikomi odori (16A-D, SECOND PAGE FOLLOWING).



Would you throw the exact same upper block/reverse punch combination against an overhead clubbing attack as against a looping right hand? Would the angle be the same? Would the proximity to the opponent be identical?

What if you were standing on a hardwood floor or a craggy ledge? Would your stance be the same in both circumstances? How about on ice or in mud?

What if your attacker were a 310-pound trucker or a 180-pound sprinter?

What if the antagonist were drunk? Vicious? Kidding around? On drugs? Would your block be the same in every instance?

What if you wanted to subdue the opponent? Knock him away? Knock him out?

Would you not adjust on the fly, taking into account as many variables as you could?



Nuki otosu odori (15A-D)

THE SPECIFICITY OF CHANGE

Let us take the details of each technique above and illustrate how these may change at a higher level. “At a higher level” is a subjective judgment, of course. Here are three ways (among others) a technique may be adjusted “at a higher level”:

- (1) the shape may change,
- (2) the technique may be intentionally “mis-timed” or “mis-distanced” (so it is not misapplied at all), and
- (3) the “negative” aspect of technique may be used.

Now, ask yourself if you could learn each of the movements of Heian 2, for example, with each variation as a specific rank requirement. That would be a lot of material to cover. Even if you could learn the types of variations suggested above, could you learn variations of those variations? At some point, the requirements



Uchikomi odorori (16A-D.

for that rank would become rather burdensome. Too many concretes are too difficult to learn one at a time. To smooth out and speed up the learning process, you have generic movements that suggest most of the possible variations you can discover. These generic movements are called basics.

The fundamentals give us the faculty to quickly learn a myriad of variations to adapt to each new situation. As Chojun Miyagi the founder of Goju karate once said of traditional kata (y'know, that rigid, stuffy practice with no practical application): "Kata are not simply exhibitions of form, they are concrete manifestations of techniques that can be transformed at any time to any form at will and in which the essence of karate has assumed a definite form." The same holds true for the basics from which kata are constructed.



(1) a shape change in the opening of Kata Heian 2:

> to strike an opponent's fist with an intercepting elbow (17A, B)



> to parry while punching (17C, LEFT)

> to elbow strike and punch simultaneously (17D, RIGHT)



**(2) a mis-timed or mis-distanced
technique from the opening of Kata
Heian 2:
> use as block and side strike to head
(18A, B, & C)**



With enough experience in variation, you begin to develop a repertoire for practical use. Soon that repertoire gets too big to employ effectively. It is too difficult to choose a variation from thousands of possibilities let alone try to choose one instantaneously for practical application, but your study of applied basics and their variations at an advanced level has brought you to the study of principles, the next stage in your development. Principles help you organize and understand the variations you have developed all of which are symbolized by your art's preferred set of basics.



(3) a “negative” aspect of the opening of Heian 2 or Heian 4:> receive a punch after the initial movement of the kata and lower arms resulting in a takedown like aiki’s ikkyo (19A-D)