

Techniques Take Time

Obviously, any extreme that addresses a specific need tends to ignore other needs because of limited time—either limited hours per week, or limited years of commitment.

If a student is training twice per week, 2 hours per night, how can he possibly achieve good physical conditioning, the fundamentals of his art, attributes such as speed and timing, *and* a variety of tools to be used in different situations?

Hanshi Patrick McCarthy often mentions in his seminars that Okinawan masters used to say, “Karate is difficult to learn and takes a long time. *It might be three or four years before one masters it.*” (Italics mine.) This statement seems to stand in contradistinction to Okinawan Masters who say that karate is a lifetime endeavor. In old Okinawa, training was more personalized, tended to occur every evening, and each session lasted longer. If a person can attain a black belt after five years in today’s twice-per-week, 2-hours a night regimen, he has put in 200 hours a year or roughly 1000 hours before he earns his *shodan*. If he trained five years in old Okinawa, he would have put in 750 per year or 3750 hours after five years, i.e. 3.75 times the training to have “mastered” the art. So 5 years in Okinawa would equal 15 to 16 in the contemporary West. Fifteen years of training to the modern Western mind means the student would get to wear a red and white belt and might have been appointed a Shihan or Renshi title. No such rank or belt color existed in old Okinawa, so “mastery” probably did not mean having achieved the All-seeing Eye of Agamotto (sorry about the Dr. Strange reference), but that the student was *competent* at most aspects of his art.

Forget for a moment the difficulty of comparing today’s to yesterday’s martial artist. Today’s training may be more widely informed and more scientific, even more efficient, so perhaps the comparisons are less valid than they first appear. In either yesterday’s case or today’s, I would offer the question relevant to this article: **is there enough time to learn both techniques AND attributes such as speed and timing AND stay in good physical shape?**

Back in Okinawa, most of the students were young males. Keeping them in shape (assuming they were eating well) simply meant exercising their muscles any way they could. Kata, one-steps, *makiwara*, and calisthenics would be enough to produce trim, muscular bodies. In today’s West, an abundance of high-carbohydrate foods, as well as a sedentary lifestyle means that the older people (not 13 to 19, but 19 to 69 years old) who visit the dojo will need more extensive training to reach a high level of fitness. That’s hard to achieve by exercising for only 15 minutes during a 2-hour class, twice a week. Often, the contemporary sensei is relegated to advising his student to train in a gym, ride a bike, or run several times a week to supplement his martial arts instruction, thus leaving the sensei with only techniques and attributes to impart to his students.

But techniques take time. Developing associated attributes can be done as certain techniques are drilled time and time again, but the more a student concentrates on getting a technique done correctly, the more he will have to slow down and work on form. The more he works on form, the less time will be devoted to speed and timing.

We have to accept that in the contemporary West, we are not training warriors for the battlefield, nor are we maintaining an ancient tradition for tomorrow's study; rather, we are training people in self-defense techniques and concepts for their own personal self-development reasons. Although we like to think we can produce the finest martial artists since Musashi, Miyagi, Motobu, Mifune, or Mr. Moto, we must understand that we are aiming for that ideal only to make Mr. Smith, Mrs. Jones, and Ms. Adams better than they were yesterday, whether or not they are better than yesterday's martial artists.