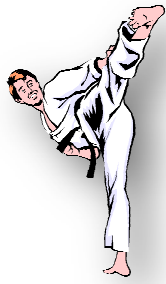


The Case for Less



If you could talk to a fish and tell it that the ocean has boundaries, that fish could actually feel trapped in the whole ocean. But if the fish realizes it could spend a lifetime swimming and never be in the same place twice, then it would no longer feel trapped. -Mark Salzman

Michael Johnson runs. I'm sure that's not all he does, but that is what he does, and he sure does do it well. It's a wonder that he doesn't feel trapped in the ocean of running, imprisoned by years of repetitiously studying something so utterly simplistic that even children do it. Anyone can do it. If I wanted to, I could go outside and do it right now. So why don't thousands of people come see me run as they do for Johnson? Because my running exemplifies mediocrity, and mediocrity, because it abounds, rightfully interests no one. Watching Johnson run is seeing a man who's found within the

simple act of running an ocean of technique. Watching me run is seeing someone who has as much insight into running as he does into poker - which judging from my recent losses, isn't much. But it's easy to attain mediocrity at many things, just as it's easy to feel trapped within an ocean because all you need to do is think of one thing: it's boundaries. To see the infinite world within it, however, now that's a bit more challenging.

Unfortunately, we martial artists too often stray from that challenge. Sure from a certain perspective, the arts are very much about facing challenges - challenges to that most precious of all things, health. In fact, one might argue that martial arts practice is more about facing challenges than most other endeavors. Yet without taking exception to this martial spirit, I nevertheless see many practitioners feeling confined within their oceans. Consider for a moment all the kicks on which a student might be tested for black belt - front, side, [turning], back, [downward], crescent, hook, [reverse] hook, [turning]

back, [jump] front, flying side, flying [turning] and so on. All this is learned in the span of a few years. And all the this while Michael Johnson just runs.

Consider another example: [patterns]. It's hardly unusual for instructors to require that students learn one new [pattern] per belt, and many instructors require more than that. From a certain perspective, these different [patterns] reveal the ocean of possibilities of basic kicks, punches and blocks, especially because each [pattern], through its different combinations, demands different coordination. Of course, there's something to be said for this approach, and I'll be the first to acknowledge that all practice makes you better. But does each successive [pattern] really demand higher skill? Remember that doing many [patterns] improves your skill if only by repetition, but doing more [patterns] doesn't necessarily require advanced skills.

What if we changed the emphasis of training from valuing more to valuing better? [Quantity vs. Quality]

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What if instead of basing progression on more [patterns], we based it on better [patterns]? While suggesting that only one [pattern] be studied between white and black belt obviously leans toward extremism, consider nevertheless the merits of placing each portion of the [pattern] under a microscope. For white belt, the student would study the [pattern's] foundation - footwork-focusing on stepping, weight distribution, posture, etc. At yellow belt, the student would continue practicing footwork while separately learning the upper- body techniques , devoting particular attention to hand position, chest position, fist tension and so on. Perhaps [green] belt would prove to be an appropriate level to first allow the student to combine the lower and upper body into one coherent form while instructing him in the how's and why's of the interplay of the two.

Having now scrutinized the [pattern's] raw techniques, the [blue] belt student might put certain techniques within the [pattern] into combination, doing several

movements in bursts. Upon reaching [high blue] belt, the same student might be scrutinized for posture, for tensing and relaxing when appropriate, and for balance. Red belt would pose a new challenge, of course, perhaps demanding increased speed and power, sometimes practicing for one, sometimes for the other, and ultimately for both. For black belt, the student might learn breath control. Of course, for each rank the student would practice *bunkai* (practical application - step sparring and self defense) from the [pattern] to keep the concrete and the theoretical harmonious, and so that upon reaching black belt, the student has applied each movement repeatedly.

Kung Fu instructor Jon Funk once wrote, "What may seem like secrets to the inexperienced are really just technicalities that require practice and mastery." So I ask you, Which of the two methods of learning reveals more technicalities? To the inexperienced eye, who is more magical; he who does many [patterns] fairly well or he who does one exceptionally well? Would you rather watch me do

many things poorly, or would you rather watch Michael Johnson run?

Think of it another way: Say you and another black belt meet. If you're the one who studied one [pattern] as described above, would be impressed by the many [patterns] the other could do? Would it impress you to see many [patterns] performed without your understanding breath control, posture, balance, speed, footwork, technique, and bunkai, or would you just consider it memorization? On the other hand, if you could do many [patterns]but saw just one performed with the skill beyond your comprehension, would that impress you?

Do a single [pattern] as Michael Johnson runs. Discover a million lifetimes within the ocean of that one [pattern], and the world will come to see you.

-Author, Steven J Pearlman, Black Belt Magazine, September 2009, page 74