

## From the Teacher's Corner:

### Can You Feel the Music?

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Over Thanksgiving, we were sitting at the dinner table and the conversation happened to drift onto the topic of music. My son who is entering university next year is part of his high-school orchestra band and also a member of the local community orchestra in town. He was asking us about the Music courses at university. He had heard that they were very theory-intensive, where students had to study all the intricacies about music, music theory, and how to read music. We then discussed how it naturally correlates that if you will someday teach music and compose music, you will need a good understanding of how to read music. It makes sense. However, my wife and I also pointed out to him that there are people who play music who have no idea how to read music.

Anyway, shortly thereafter, my wife then related a story from her high school days in Japan. She hung around with a group of girls and one of the girls in their group had this thing for music. She played the violin. My wife said that this girl was really talented. They had asked her if she could play this popular song and showed her the music sheets. She revealed that she could not read music. So, they asked her, "So how come you play so well?"

"Well, I see the music," she replied.

"Yes, here is the music," the girls countered, trying to give her the sheets again.

"No, no. When I hear the music, I see it in my head... in pictures. It's like a story," she said.

They were all flabbergasted. My wife said that this girl could listen to a piece of music once, then play it. But she couldn't read sheet music. I guess it is like Mozart or Bach or people like that who can see the music or hear it playing in their head, unwanted and intrusively. In some cases, they are tormented by the music running through their head. They must write it down to get it out of their head.

What does this have to do with martial arts?

Well, I believe that when you get experienced enough, you start to see the kata as a story. I had mentioned this in my previous article entitled [The Power of Story](#). To refresh our memory, here is what I had written:

*Well, here is what that old professor had to say on the topic of story-telling:*

*"Curriculum can be approached as story-telling... In every story, there is a skeletal framework which involves theme, characters, setting, plot, and resolution. Of central importance is the conflict of the story." (p.9).*

I have some students who cannot for the life of them remember kata. They keep forgetting what move comes next, even though they have practiced it for a while. Or they interchange one move from kata with a different move from another kata. It all gets jumbled up and confused.

For example, they will be practicing a kata, let's say kata 2 for a month or so. Then we will switch to a different kata, let's say kata 4, and do that for a month. Then maybe kata 3 for the month after that. Then we go back to kata 2 and they forget parts of it. They either forget a move completely (i.e., draw a blank) or unknowingly interchange techniques or movements from different katas.

I ask them why? They tell me that all the katas seem similar. Well, yes, they are all part of the same system so they will all share the same guiding philosophy in techniques and tactics.

In another instance, I have other students who cannot grasp the tactical situation presented in the kata. Sometimes we will be exploring a piece of a kata and I will ask them "So what's the next move?" They have no idea. I say, "Well, let's think it through. If this was the last move and the opponent reacted in this way, then what is the next logical move?"

Anyway, you get the idea. My point is, just trying to remember a bunch of moves is like memorizing a set of random numbers, like a telephone number. After 7 digits, it becomes increasingly more difficult to remember longer strings of numbers. Why? Because they are essentially meaningless to you. I have enough difficulty remembering telephone numbers, especially if it is just someone I met and have no real association with.

It has to have meaning for you. You will remember it better if it is meaningful. If a girl that you like gives you her telephone number, you can bet that you will have no problems remembering it.

*Curriculum can be approached as story-telling...*

We remember stories. We remember movies, which basically are stories on film. A kata can be thought of as a story, more or less. Or like a movie.

So how does this relate to what we are talking about?

You can be a technician, learning the moves technique by technique. For example, technique 1 is followed by technique 2 which is followed by technique 3, and so on. Yes, you can learn kata this way and many people do.

But my contention is that this is much more difficult way to learn it. Just keeping the techniques in order will be difficult. That's because they have no meaning as just a number (example: technique 1, technique 2, etc...). Like a telephone number.

Let's look at it another way. Some people learn the kata by memorizing the techniques. Some people perform the kata technically, doing each move perfectly as it is written in the textbook. Others however, learn the kata by seeing it in their head, like a story. They perform the kata through "feel". How do they know what the next move is? They figure it out because it just "feels" right, given the situation, the way this style likes to deal with this type of scenario, and the limitations of the style from a technical perspective (i.e., this style likes to cut in this

fashion so they would never execute a cut from that trajectory, etc...). Is either method bad? No. Just different. But in terms of helping students to learn kata, perhaps one is more effective than the other.

Here's a part of an interview with Diane Warren, a Grammy Award-winning songwriter and one of the most successful songwriters in history, as she talks about the secret of how she writes chart-topping hits:

*Question: Is the ability to write top-chart songs something that can be technically learnt by practicing, or do you need a genuine love for the music to be a successful songwriter?*

*Warren: There are some writers who learnt how to write and then became successful, and others who just knew that they were songwriters and wrote songs. Both are credible. I knew that I was a songwriter when I was little and I was driven to be successful at that skill all of my life. School wouldn't have been helpful to me except for learning piano chord skills for writing. I still don't read music.*

Source: <http://www.songwriterdianewarren.com/>

In other words, she is not a technician. She doesn't read sheet music. She doesn't write the music note by note, constructing it in a technical fashion. She writes by "feel". She writes from the heart. It is not contrived; it is natural. People know when it is artificially constructed. The music she writes moves people, precisely because it is straight from the heart.

So how does this relate to martial arts learning and teaching?

The next time your student is baffled by the next move in a kata or is not able to remember the next move, give him or her an exercise. Visualize the kata. Understand it. Feel it. Live it. It has to become a part of them. Like dancing. You can go through all the steps but at some time, to do it well, you have to just live it, to express yourself through it.

It's all about feeling.