

Boredom and Repetition

Boredom with the repetitive nature of training and practice is a challenge facing everyone who wishes to master a skill or an art. Very few endeavors, if any, are so intrinsically fun that all practice seems like play. True mastery requires an amount of repetitive practice so overwhelming as to make all movements automatic and subconsciously controlled, requiring only the most minimal direction by the conscious part of the mind. Countless thousands of repetitions face the student, with improvement coming so slowly as to seem imperceptible. How can we face up to this challenge; how can we retain our determination to persevere and give every single repetition our best effort?

The first thing to do is to reprogram your reaction to boredom; view it instead as a positive sign! When you first begin learning a kata, memorization of the basic movements occupies most of your conscious thinking and there is no time to be bored. Then comes learning the *bunkai* or interpretation, so that you know the practical meaning of all the movements and can visualize performing them against a real attacker. As you work at this consciously, your memorization of it becomes increasingly perfect, until you reach the point where there is no longer any nagging concern or hesitation about forgetting what comes next. Color-belt students, and kids especially, are often inclined at this point to figure they know it as well as anyone can, and should therefore be allowed to move on to the *next* kata. They don't yet realize that perfect memorization of a kata is only the beginning.

Once you reach the stage where you can run through a kata smoothly and confidently, without forgetting anything, boredom threatens, and you should take this as a good sign that you are now ready to *really* get into this kata. What does that mean? Well, for one thing, performing a well-memorized kata can become a form of "moving meditation," where you hold your mind at peace while your body glides effortlessly through the kata. A different state of consciousness can be achieved, which is a very satisfying and enjoyable, even sublime, experience. All the while you are improving the programming of your subconscious mind, your "autopilot."

Another way to constructively avoid boredom is to concentrate very vividly on visualizing your attackers and "feeling" the *bunkai* as you take each one out. Set up a scenario in your mind, wherein you are caught alone in some dark alley by a group of thugs, muggers, drug-pushers, gang members, or rapists. Imagine each attacker's face and clothing. "See" them come in at you, not with the kindly sort of cooperative attacks your fellow students perform against you, but with startlingly quick viciousness (as would happen in real life). Respond in kind.

Yet another constructive approach to staving off boredom is to concentrate on ever tinier and more subtle refinements toward perfection. Know in your heart that true perfection is humanly impossible, and consequently that there is always room for improvement at some level. Study your every move in a mirror. Have a friend videotape your movements from different angles. Study videos of superior performers executing

your kata until you see and understand their points of superiority, then try to match them. Is your head held high and back straight? Are your transitional movements smooth? Is your balance stable and confident? Use slow-motion and freeze-frame replays if necessary to isolate possible points of improvement. When you can't think of what else to improve, ask Sensei, and you will be shocked to learn how far you have yet to go. The occasional private lesson can be a revelation.

The quest for improvement through repetition is *guaranteed* to produce results that will surprise you, but not always at a consistent rate. You can perform a kata every day, and yet go weeks without feeling any improvement. In fact, some days you will think you are getting worse instead of better. Significant improvements tend to come rather suddenly, with plateaus in between. That is just the way the mind seems to work, and there is no point in bemoaning the fact. Accept it and put in regular practice time, knowing that sooner or later you will jump up to the next plateau. Over the years (yes, years) you will achieve many successive plateaus, and will eventually be able to perform the same kata so incredibly well that you are an inspiration to amazed students of lower rank.

The ultimate goal of karate is to become virtually superhuman in your fighting ability. You will be able to defend yourself with lightning speed and perfect technique, without even thinking about it. The path to that goal involves mastering boredom, embracing it, absorbing it, changing it, utilizing it and rising above it. You can do it, if you stop seeing boredom as a problem, and instead visualize it as a milestone to be passed, and a door to go through.

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