

Black Belt Thesis

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Seeking Perfection in Forms Practice

There are many ways a student can practice forms in the endless search for perfection. Actually, the more variety in the methods used, the better the forms. This thesis discusses many of these methods and how these methods can be used by the martial arts student, whether beginner or advanced, to improve forms quality. Each method is identified by a name that describes the method, followed by a discussion of the method. Methods are grouped for beginner, intermediate and advanced students.

For the Beginner

Fast & Slow

Do the form extremely fast or extremely slow. Imagine you're practicing a form you recently learned. In my experience, I have always found it frustrating trying to remember the sequence of moves while at the same time trying to execute each move properly. To help commit the form's sequence of moves to memory, I practice the form at the fastest pace I can, ignoring for the moment the proper execution of each individual move. This technique has always helped me to establish the sequence of moves so they become automatic. Eventually, it's as if the body knows which move comes next after doing this kind of practice. The mind is free then to concentrate on perfecting the individual moves. To improve the disciplined execution of the individual moves, practice the form extremely slowly with methodical and deliberate movement. As you do this, imagine yourself as a slow-motion ballet dancer or gymnast, forcing all parts of your body into perfect position for each move, pausing briefly at each one. Success with this assumes that you don't have to think about which move comes next, only how to perfectly perform each move.

Floor Drills

"Floor drills" is the term I use to describe the repetitive practice of individual moves, usually done one by one back and forth across the floor of the do-jang. Examples of this are the warm-up blocks and kicks done routinely in class or the back-and-forth kick practice sometimes done. Practicing floor drills is important because it allows repetition of moves and techniques which only improve through endless repetition. To improve in the practice of forms, each move must be as correct as possible. When practicing forms on your own, choose individual moves from within the form to repeat over and over as a floor drill. For example, to improve the execution of the straddle-stance side punches in Ech Chan Sam Bu, practice this punch back and forth across the room as a floor drill. Such repetition will help you improve your execution of this form.

Use a Mirror

It is useful to practice your forms in front of a mirror to watch yourself during practice. This gives a glimpse of how your moves appear to others, such as your instructor, test board members or spectators. While glancing at the mirror during execution of the form, you are able to make corrections in hand or foot position and in basic stances. Unless you have the proper mirrors set up where you can practice, you will probably have to use this method in class.

By Count

This is a method popular with many instructors, where the student performs the form one step at a time and holds that position until the instructor counts or gives a command. The student performs the next move in the form each time the instructor counts, until the form is finished. This is not the same as low-motion, but rather each move is performed at regular speed with a pause between each one. This allows the instructor to inspect each move individually for the student. It can also be done as practice by the student, especially in front of a mirror. In this method, the student advances one move at a time. While pausing between each move, the student looks at himself or herself to see if all parts of the body are in their proper place. If not, body position is corrected before the student moves on the next position.

Endless Repetition

Last but certainly not least, endless repetition means exactly what it says. Practice the form over and over. As in other martial arts practice, there is no substitute for endless repetition for improving one's technique. Do it over and over. Think of this as the "Golden Rule" of forms practice.

Intermediate

Pick Apart

As the student gains experience, forms take on a meaning which is more than just a random collection of attacks and defenses. Patterns and combinations begin to emerge. The concept of the one-two punch, the block and counter, or the double kick begin to feel "right". The student should begin thinking of forms as organized series of combinations. For example, one could think of Ech Chan Cho Bu as containing a set of three punches, rather than a punch, a punch, then another punch. Mentally, any form can be picked apart and grouped in any combination the student wishes. Practicing this way helps the student perform grouped portions of the form in a natural and flowing manner. Applying this method to Ech Chan Cho Bu, the student may visualize the following three combinations while doing the form: 1) block-punch left, 2) block-punch right, 3) triple punch down the center, and so on.

Different Directions

When practicing, don't start your form facing the same direction every time. We are all used to performing our forms starting from the same position or facing the same way within the Do-jang. In my experience, this makes it difficult to perform well in another location or starting while facing a different

direction. The appearance of the room can become part of the pattern the mind memorizes. To avoid this and become better at forms, practice them in unfamiliar surroundings. Also, practice them facing the back of the room where you usually practice. Face different directions in the room each time you practice the form.

Visualize an Opponent

For the intermediate student, this method becomes very important as skill develops in the practice of forms. The key to realism in performing forms is to visualize an opponent for each move of the form. When you do a block, pretend that someone just tried to punch you and you're defending yourself. Position the block where the imaginary opponents arm would actually be, and with the force that would be required to stop the attack. When performing a kick, picture a real opponent and where you would actually kick the opponent. Concentrate on kicking at a location in the air where you would expect that point to be on your opponent. While performing Pyong E Dan, I like to imagine that in the opening moves of the form, I'm actually grabbing an opponent's collar as I draw him toward me and punch him in the ribs and then do a side punch to his face.

Random Order

Most of us practice our forms in a certain order. We start with the easiest form then move through all the forms we know all the way up to the one we just learned. When we practice this way, the mind begins to memorize this as one big form! The student must be able to do any form chosen at random without hesitation. One way to practice this is to have someone pick a number at random. Assign numbers to the forms you know, like 1 for Ech Chan Cho Bu, 2 for Ech Chan E Bu and so on. Whatever number is chosen, practice that form. You could also just pick forms yourself in random order to practice. The point here is to break up the usual sequence.

Videotape

If a camcorder is available, the student can videotape himself or herself practicing a form. The camera never lies, so the student can quickly see weaknesses after looking at the recorded video. Keep repeating this process, first recording, then looking at the video. Each time, correct specific things that don't look right on the video and try again so you can see if you are making the proper corrections. Another good idea is to ask senior students if you can tape them practicing the form, so you have a video of how the form should look.

Describe Moves

The instructor should be able to ask you to pause at any point in any form and ask you to explain what that move is, how to properly execute it and what its purpose is. To do this, visualize the proper way to execute each move. I often "pretend" by inventing a situation where the move would be useful. This helps me to better perform the move. For example, in Pyong Sa Dan there is a group of moves where you do a side kick with elbow strike first to the right and then to the left. I like to pretend that I'm in a dark alley being attacked by two bad guys, one to my right and one to my left. I imagine myself dealing with each attacker in turn, delivering a side kick to the solar plexus followed with an elbow strike to the

temple. If I'm asked what these moves are supposed to be for, that is what I describe. As a reminder, though, the student must first learn what the "official" interpretation is for each move. It's OK to invent your own as long as you already have learned the "official" version. If there is any move in a form that you don't understand, ask your instructor.

Endless Repetition

Once again, what goes for the beginning student also goes for the intermediate student. Endlessly practicing forms over and over is absolutely necessary to improve the look of one's forms. I can't stress this point enough. In class, students usually are asked to perform each form one time only so the instructor can see what progress is being made. This is not a substitute for forms practice! The student must practice on his own as well.

Advanced Techniques

Eyes Closed

As a student advances further, the finer points of each form can be improved. One such point is the floor position during the form as the student moves around. How is it that you finish a form facing the right direction? It's because you are "cheating", that is, you can see where you are in the room at all times while you do the form and make position corrections as you go. As an advanced student, you should be able to maintain proper positioning simply because each move in the form is executed correctly, not because you make corrections as you go. To force yourself to improve on this point, practice your forms with you eyes closed. This will help you to improve your sense of body position. The result is that you will improve the precision of your movements about the floor as you do your forms, without having to make corrections as you go.

Backwards

To do a form backwards means to perform each move in reverse order, that is to perform the last move first and the first move last. An advanced student should know the sequence of moves within any form without having to go through the entire form to remember. By practicing this method, the student will be able to properly answer if the instructor asks something like "what move follows the three forearm blocks in Pyong Sa Dan?" To practice this method, position yourself where you would normally be when you finish the form. From there, perform the last move of the form, followed by the second to last move, and so on, until you reach the first move. You should end up in the position you would normally be in after you execute the first move of the form. This method is very useful for remembering the sequence of moves in a form.

Endless Repetition

If you thought that advanced students no longer need to practice forms over and over, think again. Always, this is the only way to improve the practice of forms or to maintain forms skill and knowledge. When the student fails to practice forms on his or her own over and over, it shows. Likewise, when the student is diligent about practicing forms over and over on his or her own, it also shows.