

BREAKING - ONE ASPECT
OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

Presented To
The Black Belt Board of Examiners
The Mountain Academy of Martial Arts

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of 1st Degree Black Belt

August 10, 1985

PREFACE

This essay will attempt to shed some light on one area of the martial arts - Breaking.

It is divided into four sections; (one) the introduction which includes why martial artists break, (two) traditional views and methods, (three) a short and very straightforward nontraditional view, and (four) a summary.

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INTRODUCTION

Tameshiwari is the Japanese word for breaking. Kyok Pa is the Korean word for breaking. These are the words that symbolize one of the most dramatic aspects of the martial arts. To the layman they often represent mystique powers or trickery. To the new student they present a formidable and apprehensive challenge.

Breaking is usually the highlight of most martial arts demonstrations. Spectators enjoy watching forms and techniques, but it is usually the breaking that really captures their interest. Often, during demonstrations, there is small talk and background noise, but when breaking begins, the quietness is overwhelming. The audience is wondering if the martial artist can actually accomplish the task or if he or she will hurt themselves in the process. (3) And, of course if the martial artist is successful, there usually are a few who think it was some kind of trick. The fact of the matter is; that speed, focus, technique, penetration and concentration, is the trick. (1:p.144).

Martial artists break for a variety of reasons. The two main reasons are to develop confidence and to gauge full power techniques without causing unnecessary physical injury to fellow students. (9:p.28) If martial artists used full power techniques on each other when sparring, then injuries would abound and there would be far fewer martial artists. Boards and bricks (the most common objects used for breaking) provide a means of evaluating full power techniques without injuring others. Beginning students often wonder if punches and kicks really work and if they can actually break opponents bones, if necessary. Breaking boards provides a comparison because one board equals a small size bone, two boards equals a medium size bone, and three boards would

equal a large single bone. (3) When students realize this comparison and are successful at breaking, this creates a high level of confidence in their punches and kicks.

Martial artists bow prior to and after breaking out of respect because Asian culture reflects that at one time the wood was a living tree and that all living things have souls. Bricks and stones were also organic at one time and are bowed to for the same symbolic reason. (3)

TRADITIONAL VIEWS

"In the martial arts, breaking techniques are not goals in themselves. They must be part of the total study of the martial arts." (1:p.8)
This is the traditional view that also usually stresses hand and foot conditioning. This view advocates that one should avoid breaking hard objects with soft parts of the anatomy in order to prevent injuring oneself.

Depending on the specific martial art or school, hand and foot conditioning is usually accomplished by repeated strikes on makiwaras, practice boards, pea or sand filled bags and possibly even gravel or iron pellets in buckets or encased in canvas bags. (6:p.37)

The actual amount of conditioning should be based on the results that one hopes to achieve. "It may vary from a few times a week to several thousand times a day." (8:p.45)

The results from such training are the heavy callouses that appear on the martial artist's hands and feet. Eventually, the nerves are destroyed and he no longer feels pain. After the destruction of these nerves and surrounding tissue, blood circulation is reduced in that area, and the joints build calcium deposits to protect the bones against future damage. (7:p.28)

It is also this view that relies on internal strength, which is known as Ki. Ki is developed through meditation and special breathing exercises. Ki originates around the navel area of the stomach. (7:pp.29-30)

Besides conditioning the limbs and using internal strength, the martial artist must develop the proper techniques. This means that the punch or kick must be executed correctly. To accomplish this

the martial artist must practice consistently and repetitively.

After developing the proper techniques, the martial artist should strive for accuracy which is also known as focus. This is the ability to strike an exact spot. After focus comes speed. Speed is necessary because the punch or kick must move faster than the object you're striking. If the object you're breaking moves only as fast as your strike, then it won't break and you end up pushing it and bouncing off, rather than going through it. This is because all materials are flexible, some more than others. "Bricks bend very little; wood and bones have a great deal of flexibility." (1:p.9) Usually, the materials most flexible and bendable are the hardest to break. Objects break only after they are driven past the limits they can bend. In order to break an object, speed and power are necessary to drive it past the limit before it has a chance to recover. (Power comes from the hips, good technique and by putting your weight behind the strike.)

Concentration is also necessary for successful breaking. The mind must be clear of all other thoughts and not wandering elsewhere. A positive mental attitude without thoughts of pain or injury is essential. When breaking, the martial artist should put their entire mind into what they are doing at that particular moment, and then they will accomplish what they set out to do - break. (1:p.9) This is usually the reason why martial artists often fail to break an object they have successfully broken in the past.

The last important aspect of breaking is the proper setup of materials. The quality of a breaking demonstration often depends on the setup. Attention should be given to the distance between the martial artist and the target, and also the positioning of any assis-

tants. (9) Assistants should always hold boards with their fingers in front and their thumbs at the back. Their knuckles and fingers should be parallel to the grain of the wood. Their outside feet are in front and their inside feet are in the back in what appears to be shaped like a letter V. Their shoulders are together with their outside hand on the bottom and inside hand on the top. Their arms and the rear leg is locked. Also, when the martial artist is doing a low break, thought should be given to the height of the object to be broken. (1:p.52-53)

The above concepts are what could be considered the classical or the traditional aspects of breaking.

A NONTRADITIONAL VIEW

The following straightforward views and ideas by Master Hee Il Cho would probably be scoffed at by many martial artists. Considering his reputation as an outstanding martial artist and world known for his breaking demonstrations, I feel that they are interesting and noteworthy.

Master Cho stresses conditioning and technique and he scorns at the notion of a mystical Ki power. He believes, "Courage and commitment - that's the Ki power for breaking." He also says, "They (martial artists) like to pretend breaking ability comes from Ki power. Well where's the Ki power? I've never seen it. Breaking comes from the courage to hit something hard and risk hurting your hand or foot. If they want to say Ki power then I want to say (bleep)." He adds, "When your hands are hurting, it doesn't necessarily mean your bones are broken. Sometimes, if you work at it all the time, your hands will be sore for a month or more. Maybe you won't even remember when your hands didn't hurt. Students come up to me and tell me how their hands are broken, but I tell them, "No, it's just a normal type of hurting. The pain is a normal part of the conditioning." (4:p.16 & 18)

Master Cho also believes that the trick to breaking square boards is to hit them slightly off center. (Most martial artists strike boards in the center.) He states that if the boards are hit in the center, "the boards will tend to 'give' from the force of the blow and resist breaking. If you hit more toward one corner, there will be less give and the boards will crack easier." (4:p.19)

He goes on to say, "A lot of people do breaking with the side of the hand, like a chop. There's more protection for the bones that way. Other people do it with an open-palm strike, which is the same thing. But to break bricks and tile with a fist requires some hand conditioning. I myself went through maybe 10-15 stages of hand conditioning. I used to punch the heavy bag, and I would move from that to punching walls and solid objects...using my feet, too. Sometimes I would hit hard things until my whole forearms would swell up." (4:p.20)

Master Cho is one of the few martial artists who emphasize weight training. (Many martial artists refrain from weight training because they believe it tightens muscles and reduces flexibility.) He believes that weight training adds power to your punches.

Although Master Hee Il Cho shares the same views on conditioning and technique that traditional martial artists do, his other views and ideas concerning breaking are quite different.

SUMMARY

I tend to share some of the beliefs of Master Hee Il Cho and some of the concepts of the traditional views.

I think that conditioning parts of the body are desirable for certain breaks, while other breaks can be done safely and successfully without hand or foot conditioning. Strikes using knife hands, palm heels, elbows (forearm), ball of the foot, knife edge of the foot, heel of the foot can be done successfully without conditioning and without injury if the proper technique is used. Other strikes (more than two boards) such as fist, forefist, fingertips, ridgehand, instep and toes of the foot should be conditioned if injury is to be avoided.

In reality, I think that Ki is the ability to clear ones mind and concentrate on the task at hand, whether it be breaking or free fighting. Once a martial artist has developed a positive mental attitude and confidence (no fear of injury) combined with good technique, breaking becomes a rather easy endeavor. The correct frame of mind is at least 50% of breaking.

I feel that the other 50% of breaking is technique which consists of speed, focus and power. It is estimated that a forearm or fist strike by an average size man is in excess of 600 feet-pounds/second. "This formula means the power generated by the strike is equivalent to move a 600 pound object a distance of one foot in one second, or that required to move a one pound object a distance of 600 feet in one second." (5:p.23)

When a martial artist realizes that his technique has that kind of power and he has a positive mental attitude, it is easy to break hard objects.

Although some martial artists and schools do not break, I think that breaking is a necessary and essential part of the martial arts. As Masutatsu Oyama says, "When you try the speed and strength your daily training has given you in breaking boards, tiles or bricks, you are doing more than just measuring your own ability; you are also giving yourself a chance to reflect on the effects your training has had on both your mind and your body. When you see for yourself that you can break these objects, you know your body is possessed of the speed and strength you were striving for. A martial artist that ignores breaking practice is no more useful than a fruit tree that bears no fruit." (2:p.20)

In conclusion of this essay, I would like to say that although breaking is an important part of the martial arts, it must be remembered that it is just a small segment of an entire art.

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