



Knowing the Room


By Jerry Figgiani

For the past ten years I have been traveling and teaching seminars in the United States, as well as abroad. One of the things I reflect on from time to time is when I used to attend seminars as I was coming up in the ranks. I always tried to be aware of not only the instruction being given, but also the etiquette of the instructor. I try to reflect more on this when I am called to teach a seminar. It is a tremendous help to me when I am in front of a large or small group. The one thing I make my focus is to read the room. This is a very important factor in making a seminar successful, as well as any class given in the dojo. I simply call this knowing the room. Knowing the room is important in conveying your message so that both beginner and advanced students can walk away with something knowledgeable from your seminar.

Most of my seminars have been for Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu stylists. The one thing I usually get called for is Bunkai (application techniques).

In the introduction stage of the seminar, I will try to talk to some of the participants to get a feel for what I will be proceeding to teach. One thing I understand is that every dojo has its own set of standards and it is very important to respect that. People often approach me before a seminar because they know I will incorporate throws and take downs and they may not be comfortable doing them. My opening question, in a vast majority of my of my seminar is, do you know how to do a breakfall? The purpose of a seminar is to empower and show possibility, not to discourage. I remember attending seminars where instructors would talk about the old days, and their war stories. Sometimes this would go on for quite a length of time. Being in a leadership position it is important to motivate and try to bring out the best in those who you are teaching. Not to impress them with back in the day stories. Rank will not impress them as well. It is important to pass on your experiences in the martial arts, but in a manner that does not come off intimidating or arrogant. Empowering

them with an understanding of how to make their techniques more effective is the most valuable part of the lesson. Understanding different body types, strengths, limitations and weaknesses all play a vital role in helping the practitioner advance to another level. I have seen many excellent practitioners of the martial arts give instruction at seminars and not be able to convey important principles in developing techniques. A lot of times I have witnessed participants lost in the lessons being given by some of these instructors. Sometimes getting down to their level or having a better understanding of what level they are actually at is so crucial. As I said before, each dojo has their standards in grading. You may come across a black belt that may not know how to apply a certain technique or perform a breakfall. I will often use a basketball analogy; the basketball coach doesn't have to dunk the ball to convey their message in teaching the game. We all know martial arts are not a game, unless it is sport karate, judo or MMA. I have seen plenty of black belts that can throw head level kicks with ease, but cannot explain the mechanics behind it.

I have learned one thing as a student and teacher and that is, it is up to the individual to develop their techniques to the best of their ability. Today MMA has made the traditionalist take a closer look at the effectiveness of their techniques. This is why I try to show the possibilities of developing a well-rounded practitioner. Some instructors teach that you only need one punch, one throw, once kick and so on. What if that one technique does not work, what will your follow up be? Knowing your strengths and limitations will help and knowing the room will help you make for a better, more interesting and successful seminar. 

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