

Martial Arts & the Components of Fitness - Six General Principles of Training Part 2

By Chris Denwood

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In the first part of this article I introduced the requirement to employ a structured method of attribute training whereby the general principles according to the components of fitness are observed and then introduced three of these six principles for consideration. In this second and last part, I intend to look at the remaining three principles, provide practical examples where appropriate and conclude how these may be brought together to construct a sensible training regime based around sound judgement.

Principle (4): Recovery

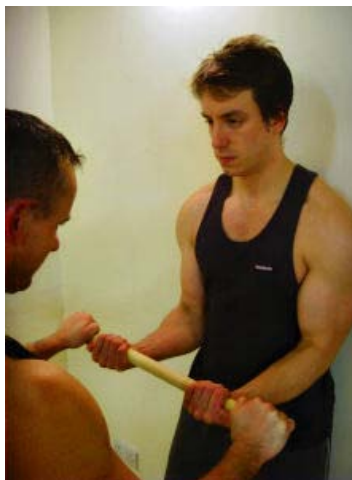
If a training session provides the stimulus for our bodies to adapt, then our recovery in between session is where that adaptation takes place. It's no understatement that recovery is just as important (if not more so) than the actual training itself. Therefore, we need to make sure that our personal training plans take account of adequate recovery time. This principle is very much based on individual guidance, i.e. how you generally feel throughout the week. After a while, you tend to get an idea of how long your body will need to recuperate completely. As one person may fully recover after only a couple of days, it may take a different person twice or three times as long from the same workout. The main mistake that people make here is that they tend to relate their recovery time to either laziness or unproductive living. In other words, they think that if they're not training, then they're not improving. The reality is that the recovery period you undertake can be just as stimulating as your workouts themselves. The key is to use diversity to the max, be disciplined enough to take only what time is required and practice what is termed as 'component recovery'.



(Using dumbbells during push-ups provide an unstable surface to help train the deep core muscles of the midsection, which are vital for the martial artist)

Let me explain a little about diversity and component recovery. If on a Monday you had a hard and heavy lower body session, it could realistically take at least three or four days to recover completely from the workout. So instead of doing nothing on the Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, you should think about using diversity to make full use of your lower body recovery time. For instance, you may decide to have a full day off on Tuesday or to focus on some lower intensity cardio work. On Wednesday, you may decide to devote your hard training to the upper parts of your body and then on Thursday, you may decide to thoroughly warm up and work on some developmental stretching. By Friday, you will have given your lower body adequate rest and at the same time, made that rest period productive by concentrating on other aspects of your training. If you employ the same strategy to all your sessions, you'll find that they'll all filter through smoothly to provide a complete program based on both sensible and appropriate recovery intervals.

For the martial artist, I don't believe that there's such a time as when you're short of aspects to train, so making good use of 'component recovery' is vital in order to cover everything you need to within each week. As well as this, it also provides a degree of variation so as not to make you become overly bored or de-motivated during your training. I know people that find cardiovascular training absolutely mind numbing, but by using the principles of diversity and component recovery, it becomes possible to ensure that almost no two workouts are the same. Plus, it helps to ensure that the body doesn't get used to a single workout (considering the earlier principles of overload and progression).



(Working slowly against resistance in both concentric and eccentric phases of muscle contraction. Weights are not always necessary)

Another important aspect of recovery to consider is the time spent recuperating from illness or injury. It would be nonsensical to train a specific body part while injured, but that does not necessarily mean that you should stop training altogether. I've personally been suffering from an injured ankle for some time however I still train almost every day and am able to still effectively teach six days a week. All I do is make sure that I train around my injury. At this point in time, I can't yet kick a pad hard with my foot, but that does not stop me punching a pad, kneeing a pad, throwing elbows at a pad or for that matter, kicking a pad with my 'good leg'. Unfortunately, injuries are something that martial artists will inevitably encounter from time to time. If you become too injured or ill to even physically train at all, then you can always read, watch instructional DVD's or write about martial arts etc.

Meditation or visualisations are also forms of advanced training that many physical martial artists tend to either completely forget or joke about. This type of mental training is certainly no easy ride since it is quite demanding indeed if performed correctly. I'm sure that by now you have understood my argument regarding some of the barriers that people perceive to exist, when in reality no such barrier is present at all. At the end of the day, what is deemed to be adequate and productive recovery time is very much an individual choice that should be ideally based on sound judgement and experience, rather than allowing sloth or its associated negative excuses to persistently break through.

Principle (5): Specificity

Specificity is all about aligning what you do to what you want to achieve and is based on the application of the 'S.A.I.D' principle, which stands for 'Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demand'. Generally speaking, specificity dictates that you should tailor your training program to suit your individual goals. This may seem on the surface to be rather common sense, but it's amazing how many people don't use this principle effectively and end up developing either the wrong attributes or worse still, those attributes that can hamper progress in a specific field of activity. Specificity is a principle that is quite close to my heart because I admit that in the past, I have wasted countless hours in my training for the simple reason that I failed to aim that training towards my actual goals.



(Developing close-range power is a must if self-protection is in mind)

Specificity is one of the most critical concepts to understand for a martial arts practitioner simply because the skills we need to develop can be quite varying indeed. We have to remember though that in all aspects, we are martial artists, so our attribute training should be structured to develop the specific skills we require in our arts. This may involve tailoring a program to suit or focussing on certain aspects, whilst leaving other less important ones behind. A great historic example of the use of specificity is the various traditional conditioning tools developed and used by the karate-ka. There is the Nigiri Game (gripping jars) used to accentuate resistance training by focussing on the grip. The Kongo Ken (iron ring) was developed to help the practitioner simulate and train many critical actions used in combat. In addition, the makiwara (striking post) was designed to provide a sprung resistance when striking and to develop the attributes required to deliver these strikes correctly.

In terms of resistance training in general, specificity can be used to tailor the intensity based on what aspirations are prevalent in the individual. For instance, if increased muscular endurance alone is required, then using a relatively lighter weight for a greater number of repetitions would be ideal. Conversely, to develop muscular strength would require much heavier resistances and fewer repetitions. It is also possible to combine these to extremes to obtain benefits from both types of training. Certainly for martial artists, those exercises that are designed to build 'functional' muscle would be most beneficial. For this reason, core development exercises are quite important, since these deep muscles of the midsection are used in almost all dynamic movements.

Specificity allows the practitioner to develop a cross training or attribute development program that is customized to suit his or her specific and individual requirements. Because of this, a substantial amount of research may naturally be required in order to firstly understand what your intentions are, how this affects your physical body and then what exercises are possible (most beneficial) to develop it satisfactorily. For a more fundamental approach to specificity, just try to equate as close as possible to the attribute or skill that you want to improve. For example, if you would like to improve your roundhouse kick then it stands to reason that you should perform roundhouse kicks more often! So throwing 100 back kicks per session will hardly go towards your goal. You can practice roundhouse kicks against the clock, against a pad or bag, with resistance tubes, at varying heights, with different opponents and within numerous combinations. Sooner or later, this kick will become better.



(Pad work can and should be completely 'interactive')

Principle (6): Reversibility

The theory of reversibility states that just as our body physically adapts to the extra demands placed on it through training, significant periods of inactivity will produce negative adaptation or a loss of the gains made in an attempt to return itself to a 'norm', based on the current stress level placed upon it. This is something that should be taken into serious consideration by martial artists, especially during extended periods of recovery from injury etc. As stated earlier, it would be much more beneficial if possible, to train around (not through) a particular injury, rather than having to start again from what may seem as the beginning.

I also think that the effects of reversibility shine through when those who have attained a particularly high rank in martial arts decide for whatever reason, to sit on their laurels and devote less and less time to both the maintenance and improvement of their skills. Personally it has always been my view that each grade in martial arts should be humbly received with even more responsibility to (at the very least); maintain your current standard, if not taken as a challenge to push even further forwards. If this attitude is prevalently displayed, then there will be no fear for the development of karate to ever plateau.



(Clinch sparring can be very demanding and it is a useful attribute builder)

To conclude

In this two-part article, we've looked at a selection of principles that are common to any type of technical, physical or mental training. Martial arts, like any physical activity relies on the positive and progressive adaptation of the human body in line with specific objectives that are often unique to either the art or even the individual practicing. I believe that the beauty of martial arts lies in the numerous avenues of aspects to which positive development can take place and the benefits that each gives in order to develop a functional martial artist.

Of course, principles are of no use unless both intent and action take place too. Therefore, it is my advice that any of your future cross training or attribute sessions are thoroughly planned to include the principles stated above so that they can provide the greatest environment for progress, meeting objectives and ultimately gaining the success you deserve in your dedicated martial endeavours. Firstly, write down these principles and outline how you expect to accomplish each through your training using SMART objectives. Your regime can then be based around the series of 'truths' you've now come up with.

To give a couple of examples, I've listed a very basic enhancement strategy for both a general full body resistance training workout and also a specific workout to positively develop a fully functional side kick. Please note that these are only samples to suggest and illustrate the points outlined in this article.



(The Thai pads are both mobile and resilient enough for hard 'power' shots)

(A) General resistance training enhancement:

1. Overload: To increase resistance and reduce the overall training duration to less than one hour.
2. Overtraining: To make a weekly note of progress and list any apparent signs of overtraining. To get at least eight hour of sleep per night on average.
3. Progression: To increase the general resistance by 2lbs every two weeks.
4. Recovery: To make sure that at least three days active rest is observed for each major body part. To use diversity to ensure that all the whole body is thoroughly trained each week.
5. Specificity: To focus more on the weaker areas of the body (i.e. legs). To use a resistance suitable for a range of between 6 to 8 repetitions. To complete three sets for small muscle groups and four sets for larger muscle groups.
6. Reversibility: To aim to complete at least three workouts per week. To rest for one week after each phase of eight to ten weeks.

(B) Specific sidekick enhancement:

1. Overload: To increase the number of correct kicks performed during each session. To increase the speed and height of the kick.
2. Overtraining: To make a weekly note of progress and list any apparent signs of overtraining. To get at least eight hour of sleep per night on average.
3. Progression: To increase the number of functional repetitions by 5% every week. To complete one extra round on the heavy bag (up to a maximum of ten rounds) every fortnight.
4. Recovery: To make sure that at least two days active rest is observed after each workout and three days rest after the first workout whereby the overload has step increased. To use diversity to ensure that all the whole body is thoroughly trained each week and that no other skill or component is sacrificed.

5. Specificity: To focus at least 60% of every second workout on developing the side kick for a minimum of six weeks and a maximum of ten. If necessary, to use a resistance band suitable for a range of between 15 to 20 repetitions per leg.

6. Reversibility: After a maximum of ten weeks, reduce the amount of focus on sidekick, whilst making sure that the skill is still maintained weekly during normal workouts.

Having the mindful intent to include some simple enhancement plans to your current workouts, or to even start with a clean slate, will provide the bedrock for a sophisticated training strategy based on what you as a martial artist require, rather than making the same mistake as most (including myself) by blindly and frustratingly trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Thanks for taking the time to read this piece. I sincerely hope that you found my words helpful.