

Flow

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Nidan

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When we first learn a technique, or the nuances of a transition from one technique to another, we have a tendency to break them down into smaller discrete movements. That is only natural as part of an incremental learning process. We are taught that each movement needs to have an effect on Uke so we focus on not missing any of the points. Sometimes when a technique isn't working as well as we expected, we get frustrated and either try to break down the technique even further, or force our way through it. Of course, that quite often makes things more frustrating.

I have heard Shihan Hoggart's voice many times saying, "Stop stopping". Although I thought I knew what he meant, I didn't truly understand what he really meant. That is, until I read a passage written by Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He is best known for his research into "intrinsic motivation" and his seminal work, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.[†] He describes flow as, "...being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one. Your whole being is involved, and you are using your skills to the utmost." One could almost hear Soke Ryuho Okuyama saying a variation of these words.

When we think about what flow is in general, we usually turn our minds to a liquid, like water. We can visualize a creek or river that flows through a path that can be irregular and have various obstacles that disrupt it from its path. Rather than following a straight line and trying to push through an obstacle, water adjusts its course, traveling in different currents to reach a destination. Water flows over, under and around obstructions, changing its direction as needed. Water may slow down, it may even appear to stop, but it is always in motion. When flowing, water can even wear away at obstructions and carry them away to become part of the flow.

This concept is applicable to many facets of our daily lives, including the practice of Hakko Denshin Ryu Ju Jutsu. Regardless of the level we are training, our techniques can work a lot better when Uke is in motion, even if their movement is only slight. We have all experienced the sensation of trying to move an Uke that is on balance and grounded. In Waza and Henka, many of our initial responses to an attack involve a metsubushi to Uke's eyes. Even though we are not really throwing ashes like Samurai would in battle, this type of first response is vitally important. In addition to distracting Uke and having them look away from what we about to do next, Uke's reactionary movement in response is one that we can take advantage of. Uke is moving away from us and is off balance. When we hesitate and stop and let Uke look back at us, they regain their balance and become grounded. We now have to try and move them from that position. Other initial responses, like yielding, steering around, or drawing Uke down or towards us, have a

similar effect. Uke's reaction allows us to not only apply our technique(s) but also keep them moving in a direction of our choosing.

The movements we make need to be continuous and have purpose. They don't have to be fast; they don't have to be explosive; they just need to flow. We need to apply just enough of a technique or principle to have control of Uke. It has taken me a long time to learn that and put it into practice. Prior to joining Hakko Denshin Ryu Ju Jutsu, I had trained in Tae Kwon Do. I had learned that speed equaled power and, in a tournament, equaled points. It has been very difficult to set that philosophy aside. Training for Shodan, I could let speed versus technique slip in now and again. Uke was under control, albeit a little overwhelmed and maybe a little bruised. Training for Nidan was the beginning of a turning point for me. Applying Nidan principles hard and fast have the potential of serious injury to Uke. I had to slow down, for Uke's sake. Training for Sandan, I had to slow down for my sake. I have learned that rushing into and through a technique can also lead the technique to rush away from me just as quick. With no technique, I have little or no control over my Uke.

Now, while practicing Waza or Henka, I try to imagine myself as a river and Uke as something that needs to get caught up and swept away in my "current", like a stick or a leaf. Sometimes Uke moves around a whirlpool; sometimes they bob up or sink down; sometimes they go over a waterfall; and, sometimes they get swept away or stuck under a rock. Uke is trapped in my flow until I release them. As I prepare to test for Sandan, I feel I can not only demonstrate effective technique for Sandan, but transfer this revelation back to Shodan and Nidan. As my training continues, it will help my advancement and understanding of the art if I can keep the concept of flow foremost in my mind.

The next time you hear your Sensei tell you to "stop stopping", thing about being a river. From your first movement to your last, maintain a flow that keeps Uke moving, under your control, until you decide to release them from your current.

Outside of training in techniques, we can all think of the concept of flow in the context of advancing the art of Hakko Denshin Ryu Ju Jutsu. The Hakko Denshin Ryu Ju Jutsu Federation must continue to flow like a river, working its way around obstacles, never stopping its progress. We all contribute to that flow and as a senior student of the art, I can help it along by providing leadership to my students and peers.

^tCsikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row. ISBN 0-06-092043-2

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