



Reflections on Virtual Training

By Ken Phillips

I'd like to take a moment today and share with you some reflections on my journey from Jyukyu to Shodan at the Mattson Academy. Since my training journey has been entirely online (with the exception of Winterfest where I tested for Shodan in person) my hope is that this brief article will serve to motivate, and encourage a positive perspective on, our collective Uechi Ryu training experience.

Virtual training is many things. Some aspects are very challenging, but I sincerely believe that virtual training also provides us with a great many advantages. I propose that, through an emphasis on individual ownership, we can leverage these advantages to mitigate the impact of the challenges

we regularly face.

Challenges and Advantages

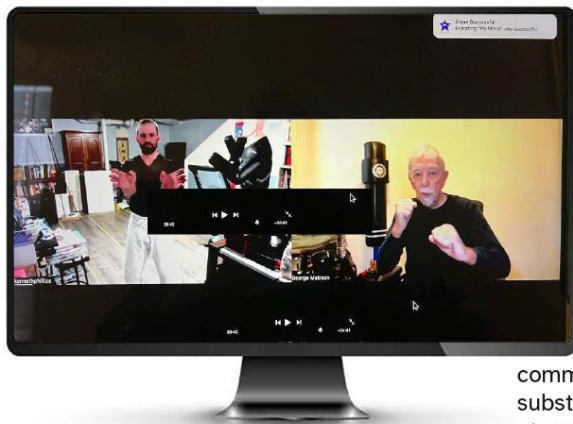
First, a bit about the challenges and advantages of Virtual Training. When I first began studying at our school I was concerned, thinking I would miss out on all the things I remembered enjoying at my childhood Taekwondo dojo. How would I make new friends if the community was to be confined to video calls? How would I spar? Over time these concerns have evolved and solidified themselves into less concerning, more approachable challenges. For me, these are the most recent iterations of the challenges of virtual study:

1) Partner drills must be practiced with inanimate or invisible opponents.

2) My wife doesn't really know what she's looking for when "checking" my Sanchin and just uses it as an opportunity to punch me.

3) Prolonged solo training can inspire fear of testing one's hard work against another human being, or in the presence of other human beings.

Clearly then, since #2 is obviously my attempt at a joke, and "lack of community" did not survive (for me) as a concern (more on that below), we're left with two challenges that present themselves for consideration: Partner practice without a partner and worry about one day doing partner practice with a partner. Another way to think about this might be: If I don't get to practice fighting a real person how



can I trust that I'll be ready to fight a real person?

Let's hold this thought to the side for a moment and look at some of the advantages of Virtual Training: By virtue of recorded classes and pre-recorded course content I can get my Sensei to demonstrate a technique as many times as I'd like. Said content is clearly organized and readily accessible at my convenience. There is no back row—regardless of height (I'm shorter than the average bear) or rank, everyone gets to be in the front row on a video call. There is scheduled individualized attention

and feedback. So how do these technical or logistical advantages help address our shared need for community, or our solo practice concerns?

Community

The essence of community is not simply proximity or frequency. The essence of

community is in the quality and substance of one's interactions. The etymology of "community" shows us that the root structure and origin of this word is based on the Latin *Communitatem*, "a noun of quality...meaning 'fellowship, of relations or feelings, common possession or enjoyment.'"¹ While brick and mortar dojo can provide this, our community is based on the individualized ownership of our own

training process in a way I've never experienced before. It is possible that all the other places and people I've trained with were just that bad, or the more likely explanation is that the collection of schools that make up the IUKF are just very, very good.

In former dojo, I remember trying to use the wall mirrors to catch the instruction while being grouped with other karateka to practice, and then hoping one of the instructors circling the room would stop and provide some insight. I remember gauging my own progress by watching and competing with my peers. My focus was on doing what everyone else was doing and trying to do it better than they could. This competition was the essence of my fellowship and common possession of training with my community.

According to the French historian and philosopher René Girard, competition is an important part of our human experience. He writes, "*It is because of this unprecedented capacity to promote competition within limits that always remain socially, if not individually, acceptable that we have all the amazing achievements of the modern world.*" However, he also points out that competition poses a great risk to progress, stating, "*...rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are the cause of the rivalry and instead become more fascinated with one another.*"²

Much like my former experience, I became more flexible, stronger, etc. (the benefit of competition as progress, equated here with partner training) but I was focused on being as good as, or better than all of the other (insert color here) belts. This reveals a flaw in me more than it does a typical dojo setting, but I have found it to be a consistent experience over

On Imitation

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

All are not born to soar—and ah! how few In tracks where Wisdom leads their paths pursue! Contagious when to wit or wealth allied Folly and Vice diffuse their venom wide. On Folly every fool his talent tries; It asks some toil to imitate the wise; Though few like Fox can speak—like Pitt can think—
Yet all like Fox can game—like Pitt can drink.

time, and a prime example of the great risk Girard warns us about. (I challenge you to closely monitor your own internal energy, competitive edge, or desire for victory both during and after your next kumite. How much focus is placed upon winning rather than learning?) As a result, I could perform techniques, but I had no personal ownership of them. My focus was on other (competition) aspects of the community at hand. This is not learning self-defense. It is, at best, learning a certain type of sparring. A great risk indeed.

Training and Fighting Against Flesh and Blood

Now we can look to our other concerns related to training alone, and how the nature of our community is the way in which we address the challenge. We must trust our training to be there when we need it. When the goal is to improve oneself and the self also acts as the opponent in competition (the rival), then the cause and the rival become one and the same. One cannot detract from the other like it did for me in the past. How often have we pondered the self as the only true opponent? Indeed, this notion is the foundation of many belief systems and schools of martial arts. Zeroing in on our specific circumstances then, there seems a suggestion is present; that our current training arrangement lends itself to a certain purity of purpose. When we approach our study without competition against another person in our minds, and instead focus only on following the directions we receive, we find ourselves practicing a process of imitation.

According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, imitation reveals the sameness of processes in nature. To Coleridge imitation is a form of doing or being that is more complete and closer to the truth of a thing than we might first suspect. Because it reveals the nature of what is being imitated through the action of imitation. Consider the Karate Kid as a surface level example, the process of wax-on-wax-off reveals the *wauke*.



Now consider on a deeper level that we skip the wax part, Sensei tells us it's a block, but do we immediately understand the nature of the block? How deep has our imitation gone? What else about the nature of the technique will imitation (and repetition) reveal? And so on.

Granted, there are other philosophical concepts that are alive and important here, such as imagination and thought as motion, and dichotomous fallacy. In an effort to not be accused of oversimplifying the issue, please allow me a brief digression.

A Brief Digression

Fortunately for us we can rely on Coleridge again here as he noted that, "(All power)...*must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation.*" (For example, there are schools of the martial arts that teach the entirety of their curriculum through kumite.) However, "*all opposition is a tendency to re-union. Fichte was the first to describe (this tendency) as the progression through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, itself becoming a new thesis, thus continuing the*



Coach George Mattson and assistant Justin Testa with newly promoted Ken Phillips holding his newly earned IUKF

evolution.” (Cheyne, 2021): I know that kumite is important and believe that we will reunify with it (practicing with other human beings) in earnest as we continue to evolve through this

process together. Our current training does incorporate a synthesis through the use of our imagined and inanimate practice partners, but that’s a whole other kettle of karate-fish. For

Ken trained exclusively with the Mattson Academy Virtual Dojo for two years. His in-person, physical test took place at the 2022 Winterfest held in Florida. Ken’s only training, until Winterfest, was his individual, on-line Platinum member sessions, following the Mattson Academy’s coaching system. I’ve been practicing “distance-learning” since 1995, when I came up with a method of maintaining contact with college students who studied with me, graduated, and moved to other areas throughout the world. I sent out monthly videos containing actual classes and invited students to film themselves and send them to me for review. As technology advanced and new methods for interaction immersed, the process became more effective and easier to use. There is no reason for every dojo to not have a virtual program to supplement in-dojō training with an on-line up-grade, allowing

anyone who must take time off from their physical dojo training to continue with an on-line coaching, back-up program.

George Mattson



Video of Dr. Ken Phillips’ Dan Test
<https://vimeo.com/799827808/14e14732ce>

Notes

1. <https://rb.gy/6kruq9>
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mimesis>
3. <https://aeon.co/users/peter-cheyne>

the sake of the article at hand let us say that we are where we are along our path for now, learning the nature of our art through the sameness of process and individual ownership. (Digression over. Thanks.)

Conclusion

Using our workout log, our all-important solo practice, and the courageous submission of our oh-so-flawed-videos, we regularly re-focus our attention to where we are in our journey (and where we’d like to be). More than any other training environment I’ve ever been in, beyond the color of my belt (or even the amount of electrical tape wrapped around it), I feel attuned to the nuances of what I know that I know, and what I’ve yet to earn ownership over. For me, when it comes to the practicality of self-defense, this has been transformative.

When Winterfest finally arrived earlier last year, I was able to put what I’d learned to the test. And I passed. The fear and uncertainty of testing my hard work against another human being, in front of other human beings was there. (But, as we know, courage is not the absence of fear, it is action in the face of it.) The nature of our art, and what my body had learned through imitation and repetition, rose to the challenge, and prevailed over my fear (no matter how much my mind tried to get in the way).

So, my encouragement to you today is this: Trust this process, trust your body to deepen its knowledge as you imitate your Sensei, trust that process of imitation to deepen in and of itself, and if you haven’t already, take the Old Way course! (It is the true ne plus ultra of IUKF Uechi Ryu.) I look forward to the day when we can all get together again and “trading hands” with each other.

Many thanks for reading. 🍵

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