

Sensei Says

#11 - October 2001

Originally printed in the BMAI Newsletter "Best Times"

Since I was first able to read instructions I have done my best to try to understand them. As you know, instructions can sometimes be very confusing. There is one particular set of instructions I spent a long time trying to figure out. As a child playing in the bathtub I wondered exactly what the shampoo label meant. Was I really supposed to take it literally? "Wash, Rinse, Repeat." If I followed the instructions exactly I would be stuck in an endless loop, washing my hair for the rest of my life!

Well, I now realize that I am stuck in an endless loop. For over 10,000 cycles now of "Wash, Rinse, Repeat!" And I understand that I will be washing my hair for the rest of my life!

What great wisdom, "Wash, Rinse, Repeat." Like the words of a stern teacher, commanding and disciplined, perpetually demanding us to never give up when we practice.

To learn martial arts we first have to learn how to practice. Correct practice is a state of being. It is an awareness of our entire self. Once we have learned how to practice one thing, we can practice anything. (That doesn't mean we'll be good at it, just good at practicing it.) Some will say, "Practice is boring." Sorry, I don't buy into that excuse, because I used to think the same thing. Practice is not boring; if it seems to be boring then the person hasn't learned how to practice. Practice, in some ways, is just like washing your hair.

Wash - This is the active part of practicing. When performing the technique wash away everything that doesn't belong so the only thing left is the pure technique. Be thorough and don't rush; make sure to cover every inch. The perfect technique is already in you. You just have to clear away the mistakes to find it. But, scrub too hard and your hair will fall out!

Rinse - Now we remove all evidence of the technique we just did. We are not washing anymore, but washing away the wash. This is the time after the technique when we slowly cleanse away the residue of the previous technique and return to normal. Even though we are not performing the technique, we are actually a little better than we were during the last move. Just like in the shower, we are not thinking about the thousands of times we have washed our hair in our life, just that it feels great to be clean!

Repeat - This, of course, is the hardest of the instructions to follow. It is also the most important. This is the step that keeps the cycle going and helps us continue to improve. We might repeat immediately, or wait days, months, or even years. But the directions leave no option if we want to improve, "repeat!"

Life is full of repetition. Most of our time is spent doing things we do nearly every day of our lives - like washing our hair. While variety may be the spice of life, repetition seems to be the main course. And it is repetition that has to be the core of our martial arts practice.

Getting better at something takes practice. So, how do you improve your ability to practice? By practicing, of course!

- Alan Best