

Randori Thoughts
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a nidan essay

Ajame!

The explosive action of a randori begins with a shout. Three attackers rush toward one defender from opposite sides of the mat. Left or right? Advance or retreat? Many decisions, very little time.

I am occasionally asked how to handle the sometimes overwhelming practice of randori. With multiple attackers coming from all sides, it can be hard to remember even the most basic aspects of one's training. It is all too easy to fall back on bad habits and to get trapped in your own head.

There are many components to a good randori, but all of them are present in every part of our daily training. As always, it is good to focus on the basics:

Posture. When I am hurried or feeling out of control, I notice that my posture tends to suffer. I lean forward, take a rigid stance, let my shoulders hunch and my arms tighten. If I looked at myself in the mirror, I would immediately see that I am out of balance. During randori, this manifests in several ways. My awareness is focused on one person. I clash with their incoming energy. I get panicked and feel as if nothing is working. My breath is restricted. My vision is narrowed.

If I remind myself to stand up straight, keep my head up, and breathe, everything becomes easier. My balance is better, I can turn more easily, and I can see my surroundings. It seems obvious, but it is surprisingly hard to do in the rush of the moment. Working on my posture is probably the one thing that improved my randori technique more than anything else.

Attitude. Because of the initial setup, we often assume that a randori is three people attacking one person. If you are the one person, then naturally you are on the defensive. This is backwards. A randori is three people out of balance being manipulated by one centered person in control. Rather than waiting to be attacked, I decide who to approach first and where I want to place them. When I have dealt with one opponent, I move on to the next without pause.

I must be generous with my energy. A throw happens because I have the intent to throw. If I am tentative in my throws, keeping the attacker at arms length, perhaps, or clinging too firmly to their arms, they will not feel compelled to take the fall. If I am having trouble with 'sticky ukes', I look to myself to see if I am holding them back in some fashion. If I move into their space with clear intent, they will move as well.

Timing. The speed of a randori is under my control. If I allow the attackers to approach in a group, I have very little time to spend on each person. I feel rushed, my breathing speeds up, and my vision narrows. However, if I move so my attackers can only approach me one at a time, I find I have plenty of time. This is where strategy comes into play.

If I time my throws properly, I can place each person in the way of a second person so I have the time to deal with a third person. Cross trafficking reduces the number of simultaneous attackers and forces my opponents to change their course. Ideally each throw clears a space so I can deal with the next person. By moving to the open spaces, I create distance, which in turn slows everything down to a pace I can manage.

One of the reasons I find randori to be a useful training exercise is that it forces me to be in the moment. During normal training it is easy to either think too much about how a particular technique should be performed, or to zone out and lose focus in the repetition of a familiar movement. In the compressed moments of a randori, I must pare my technique down to its essentials while simultaneously expanding my awareness to encompass everyone on the mat. There is no time to over-analyze, nor to allow my mind to wander.

When the practice ends, I try to keep that feeling of intensity and wider awareness with me as I leave the mat. Sometimes life outside the dojo can feel like a randori, but if I can maintain my composure and keep my thoughts clear under pressure, I will be able to create the space I need to see a way forward.

Yame!

*Storm approaches
Blend, breathe, throw
Droplets falling*