

An Ambidextrous Philosophy

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. -- F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up" (1936)

In a Thai restaurant for lunch, I thought I'd try eating with my left (non-dominant) hand. I remember wanting to be more ambidextrous as a kid so I taught myself to shoot baskets and bat baseballs left-handed. I still couldn't throw left-handed, but maybe that was because I never had a glove that fit my right hand. Gymnastics maintained the balance of left and right and martial arts sealed the deal. No, I'm not ambidextrous but I believe I am more balanced than I would have been had I not tried, as a kid, to balance my hemispheres. By the way, eating Thai food left-handedly was not a problem, but I wasn't using chopsticks.

I grew up pretty opinionated. I trusted my own intellect and the traditions that supported the society. I learned, however, that sometimes what I thought was true was not, and that the entities I thought I could trust, I could not. The disillusionment encouraged me to listen to both sides of a point of view (whether or not they were equally presented) before I decided my position. Often this meant that I came down on a third side that no one else seemed to see. It was like one group stood for heads and another stood for tails while I stood for the edge of the coin. That put me on the *outs* from the majority of people and on the *ins* with the few people weird enough to see things my way.

For me, this was an attempt to be objective and to find, to the extent possible, the impartial truth. It was not surprising that I applied this "ambidextrous philosophy" to *budo*. I respected the traditions of the martial arts, but also agreed that when one loses the purpose of a tradition, one unwisely favors unthinking practices over mindful training. I also realized that traditions would not have survived had they not served a purpose, so I was careful not to neglect an apparently meaningless traditional practice until I understood something of its history and context. Over time, I came to the conclusion that mastery is more or less integrating opposites, a conclusion that echoes Fitzgerald's idea of the superior intellect.

I do not think Fitzgerald's quote implies that, by holding two opposite notions in one's head at the same time, one necessarily integrates them, necessarily rides the fence, straddles the median, or muddles his mind in the middle of the road. Rather, I assume that holding opposite notions simultaneously allows one to weigh them fairly, carefully, and over time, integrating them when and if the edge of the coin seems closer to truth than either heads or tails. I guess this is why I do not claim a political party but find myself leaning left on some issues and right on others. It is also why I am not a strict classicist when it comes to the martial arts but a traditionalist, albeit an innovative traditionalist, and why I prefer Bushido-kai to be a *kenkyukai* (research organization) rather than a *shinkokai* (preservation organization). I value tradition, but mainly because it is a great mountain upon which to build one's new structures.

I find that people are intellectually lazy these days. Yes, they are physically lazy, too, which is why we have so many overweight youngsters and oldsters, but I find that intellectual laziness is at least as big a

problem. It is not that people cannot reason, but that there is so much in society that demands their reasoning power that it is easier for them to allow a political party, a religion, a cause, a cult, or the nightly news to think for them. Sorting things out is demanding, time consuming, and takes away from more essential activities whether those are work, family, or vegging out at the movies. Because we need a break from strict intellectual activity, those who would think for us are all too willing to move in and present us with slanted arguments to garner our support, our vote, our contribution, or our little jot of a Nielson rating. Needing a break from intellection, however, does not mean we can give up entertaining the claims of “the other side”.

More on An Ambidextrous Philosophy next week.