

Challenging Variations

My logical "innovative traditional" approach to waza occasionally causes problems with authorities who would rather follow a path than know how to get somewhere.

Several years ago, Mark, a Shotokan black belt who trained under a Japanese Sensei, took classes at our dojo and was shocked to discover that the little variations we taught made his techniques work better and more effortlessly. When his schedule changed he was able to return to his old dojo and, using our methods, found that he could successfully block the young, strong black belts who had overwhelmed him in the past. However, the sensei told him, "We don't do the blocks that way," even though the differences were minor. The Sensei insisted that Mark do the blocks his way **DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY DIDN'T WORK** and despite the fact that Mark was getting hit. Facts don't matter when it comes to blind tradition and the homogeneity of the school.

Of course the school *should* be homogeneous; but I have found that harmonious unity is better when liberally interpreted. Students can gladly adhere to the same teachings if the teaching simply says, "Here is our exam method, but there are many variations you can learn when you are ready." In this way, a visiting instructor would be less likely to teach something unorthodox, rather he would be teaching an unrequired extension of the orthodox.

This same problem exists in political groups and religions. People join groups thinking that the doctrines espoused are unchanging; they become distressed when they find that what they believed was sacrosanct has taken an unexpected turn. Ultimately, in martial arts, variations give students more to choose from and, with more options, students that face a self-defense situation are more likely to do the right thing at the right time. However, many students are paralyzed by choice and want things to be simplified by having the Sensei choose **ONE** way. They may be offended if their choices expand.

I certainly wouldn't like it if an assistant instructor in my dojo decided to teach my requirements his way, but I would have no problem with his teaching variations (1) if he cleared it with me, and (2) if they were described to students as such.

How can an assistant instructor handle the dilemma of wanting to teach a method he has found beneficial but not wanting to leave the orthodoxy of his school? Here are some suggestions:

- (1) don't teach variations to students who don't understand the basics—teach orthodoxy only;
- (2) offer clearly labeled variations to black belts to see how they receive them; and
- (3) constantly reinforce the fact that the requirements are the requirements and ultimately what

Sensei says goes.

I could give you several stories that illustrate similar situations I have been in, some of which worked out and some...well...not so much. But for now, it should suffice to say that guys like Mark should not have to lose a tooth because they cannot make a school's orthodox block work while no one offers them a correction that will make it work. If the school has a problem with a "foreign" method that works, they should at least be able to supplant it with one of their own that works equally well.