

Creative and Recreative

Traditional martial artists inherit their traditions mostly from Asian countries, their techniques mostly from previously developed arts, and their training mostly from the modern founders of their styles.

Inherited Traditions. Only after a great deal of historical research can one begin to understand how a cultural habit might have been created or why it endures as a tradition. Investigating these traditions is fascinating and educational, but more importantly, it is necessary in order to determine which cultural traditions should be maintained as an enhancement to training and which might wisely be disregarded. A dojo may wish to retain, for example, the Japanese tradition of hierarchy in order to have a functioning chain of command; however, it may not wish to push that hierarchy into personal abuse in the name of developing a macho spirit the way some Japanese university clubs have done.

Inherited Techniques. Certainly if a technique was used for self-defense in the past, it might be used for self-defense currently, if only we fully understand the technique and the context in which it was employed. Blindly assuming that previous arts taught for the same reasons in the same circumstances that we currently teach is to waste time on techniques that may be inefficient. Conversely, throwing away techniques that do not appear efficient today assumes that we do not care to train ourselves to make them efficient nor discover the context in which they might be efficient.

If you work hard training your sidekick in order to tickle the opponent's goatee but you have Danny DiVito legs, you are ignoring the fact that sidekicks were created to be used against opponents' lower limbs. But if you dispense with high sidekick training because of an alleged inefficiency, you will not develop the flexibility and speed it may take to kick an opponent's ribs, thigh, or knee.

Inherited Training. The gentlemen toward whose photos we bow usually developed training systems to transmit their arts. If we assume the training system is identical to the art, however, we ignore the context in which those gentlemen taught. Miyagi taught small groups mainly in backyards, for example, while Funakoshi's later teaching was to large groups in college gyms. Each transmitted his teachings in a method appropriate to his situation. Each created a system of transmission that we re-create thinking that we are preserving a centuries old cultural tradition when we actually may be preserving a method that has less value in our current circumstances.

In each of the above cases, someone or a sequence of someones created something new. Certainly their creations were not out of thin air, but were new enough so that people wanting to learn their cultures, techniques, and training methods could not find them on every street corner, beach, or farm. As recipients of a very creative martial tradition or set of traditions, we are spared the burden of invention. This is the case whenever anyone produces something of value and offers it to the public. We buy what he/she has to offer if it enhances our lives because trading our labor for it is cheaper and more efficient than is recreating the auto, the television, computer, or smart phone from scratch.

Most of us take what we have inherited for granted. If Uncle Tanoose were to leave you a \$500 K, your gratitude would likely extend only for a limited time. You'd quickly forget that his lifelong labors brought about your riches and you'd soon think that your new car and vacation to Bimini was almost owed to you—after all you went to the dealership and chose the model, booked the vacation, and pulled your credit card from your now chubby wallet. In a similar way, we tend to take the arts we learn as a sacred inheritance at first then later as something that we own. This is the way of the world. I would however suggest that we, the nouveau riche of budo, begin to think of developing the skills it took Miyagi to create Goju, Funakoshi to create Shotokan, and Uncle Tanoose to create his wealth, rather than show up just often enough to get a rank in some re-created version of their original creations.

More on this next time.