

Cultishness

A rising mass movement attracts and holds a following not by its doctrine and promises but by the refuge it offers from the anxieties, barrenness and meaninglessness of an individual existence. –Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (1951)

Does this sound a little like some martial arts schools or organizations? Can you relate to being a member of an organization for the purpose of escaping from the meaninglessness of a solitary existence?

But then how do we differentiate a mass movement from a popular pastime? If you enjoy playing basketball in the evenings with friends, does that mean you need your team around you to give meaning to your existence? Well, maybe. By definition, every group activity takes away from one's solitude. The question is, "Does your aloneness feel meaningless?" There are those who come to martial arts training because they want a group activity and seek some sort of identity beyond their own singular personality, but many, who are perfectly happy with their meaningful existence, come to train in order to enhance their skills and knowledge. This distinction is important, otherwise every school, every group activity could be categorized as a "mass movement".

Hoffer writes, "Mass movements are usually accused of doping their followers with hope of the future while cheating them of the enjoyment of the present.... No real content or comfort can ever arise in their minds but from hope." I don't think that practicing martial arts usually cheats the practitioner of present enjoyment, but I do think it is the hope for skills and status yet to come that gives the student comfort. In many martial arts schools, the student's long study is rewarded with status. Often, however, that status is not concomitant with an appropriate skill level. What Hoffer says about mass movements may be true of martial arts in general *unless there is measurable skill to back up the symbols of achievements*.

I am interpreting Hoffer's "mass movement" to be what we now call a "cult", so I should confirm the definition of that term. My dictionary reads that a cult is "a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object; a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister; a misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular person or thing." I find it a little disturbing that, *sans* the religious element, traditional martial arts can be perceived as "devotion directed toward a particular figure or object" and the dojo as "a relatively small group of people having...practices regarded by others as strange". Gosh, good thing we don't kneel and bow to an altar.

Of course, what distinguishes traditional martial arts from a cult or a mass movement is the fact that people are free to come and go as they wish, the headmaster is always accessible and will answer all questions reasonably, and that conformity, although encouraged, is never demanded. Hmm. Okay, people can come and go as they wish. But wait! Does that mean that the armed services are cults? They venerate the country that they serve and its head of government and they cannot come and go as they wish. One might ask then, "Is that veneration 'misplaced'?" We might consider World War II Nazis cultish but not World War II Allies. However, both were devoted to their cause and both had charismatic leaders. The definition seems too subjective doesn't

it?

So what delineates healthy self-discipline that is practiced in a social atmosphere from an unhealthy cult or mass movement? Obviously: “Health”. But the health of a practice can be determined only if one has had previous experience with it. Since individuals seldom have had previous experiences with healthy vs. unhealthy practices, it is up to the collective experiences of society to decide what is “healthy”. Unfortunately, societies, looked at from the perspective of history, don’t always do a good job on this account. Collectivist and sectarian governments always claim to be healthy both for the individual and society in general, but we see them as the worst examples of what mass movements can be.

We are stuck trying to individually evaluate our martial arts, our dojo, and our teacher. The martial arts may not be a cult, but they have cultish elements and only a rational student and a rational instructor can keep the arts we honor from being something dishonorable.