

Customizing Your Martial Art 1

Do you remember “customizing kits”? When I was a kid, there was a period when any self-respecting younger teen made plastic models. The preteens were involved with battleships and aircraft. The pre-driving-teens, not surprisingly, were captivated with automobile models. Because adults like George Barris made big bucks changing the look of certain off-the-assembly-line cars for the movies (and for those individuals who could afford a customized street cruiser), plastic model kits soon became “customizing kits” where you could change a Chevy Monza to look like a Studebaker Avanti if you had the right tools, extra parts from some failed attempts, and the guts to wing it. As a result, you expressed your creativity, became transfixed by the process, and often created a mini-masterpiece that would last at least as long as the Monza model lasted for Chevrolet.

Over the years since I was a pre-driving- teenager, the economy has become more attuned to customization. Niche markets have opened up for all sorts of specialties, and they are not just for those who could afford to modify certain off-the-assembly-line items. You can easily change the color, details, features, and even the functions of the things you want to buy. You can even walk into *Burger King* and have it your way.

Martial arts have been tweaked or twisted, modified or mangled to satisfy consumer desires. It is the way of the economic world. Those things sell best that appeal to whatever people want—no mystery there. Martial arts instructors have learned to create new programs that bring in a half-dozen curious specialty customers in hopes that one in ten will fall in love with the martial art the school was built around in the first place. It is a smart marketing move, as well as a source of income for instructors who really don’t care to modify their art of choice. But that doesn’t mean the consumer is similarly inclined. Accustomed as they are to getting their way in the general marketplace, consumers, as new members of the dojo, are sensitive to items that might not be their cups of white, green, red, black, caffeinated or decaffeinated tea.

Martial arts, because they are human endeavors, change over the years. Private karate training in Okinawan backyards became group karate training in Japanese university gymnasiums. Classes in self-defense held in community buildings became classes in ju-jutsu situated in a proper, traditional dojo. War arts became self-defense arts. Self-defense arts became sport. Sport became business. And business, as we know, adjusts to the consumer.

We live in the twenty-first century and can’t be expected to teach 17th, 18th, 19th, or even 20th century arts the way their founders taught them. It would seem ridiculously conservative to restrict karate classes, for example, to young men wearing *fundoshi* (undergarments) instead of a *gi*, pounding their fists into *makiwara* until their knuckles look like walnuts, while never speaking except to ask the question, “May I clean the *benjo* now, Sensei?” Conversely, it would seem far too liberal to think one can toddle into the dojo in designer sweats,

choose which section of which kata to work on and then take a latté break once one has the general sequence while reviewing which of the distaff members will be susceptible to one's elite, self-created independence.

No, I think it better we fail on the side of traditionalism more often than not. If Sensei says 5 repetitions of *Kanku-dai*, then 5 reps it is. Okay, you can get permission to lower the kicks if you have a knee problem and you don't have to *kiai* too loudly if you've recently had strep throat, but you do what you are assigned to do without independently deciding to skip backfists or substitute cartwheels for 180 degree turns.

In college, having lived on campus for 3.5 years and feeling finally independent from mom and dad, I took an elective course that I would have wanted to take as a freshman if the general education requirements had not gotten in the way. Howard Nemerov, a poet of some repute who was teaching, appropriately enough, Poetry Writing to seniors, gave us an assignment. I don't remember the detail, but it had to do with keeping a certain sort of pattern. I had just read something about noted poets known for breaking...er...experimenting with the "rules", so I completed the poem "in the way the poem demanded", thus excusing myself from Mr. Nemerov's assigned restrictions. Nemerov, evidently accustomed to creative, independent, and immature types, wrote a very nice criticism without too much approbation, essentially telling me that if he gave an assignment, I had better fulfill the assignment. Obviously he was constraining my creative flow, but from then on, fulfill I did. What the hell had I been thinking? Spoiled by my own freedom and the idea of being an intelligent senior in a well-respected university studying under a poet of repute, I had forgotten that I was the person being taught and that Mr. N knew more about writing poetry than the entire class put together, mentally merged, and placed into grad school while overdosing on literary amphetamines.

So it is in the dojo. Don't go into the place if you want to customize your martial art. You probably won't be set upon by wild-eyed troglodytes or Luddites if you choose to suggest a slightly different course of study, but you will get along a whole lot better if you sign-up, line-up, shut-up and accept that Sensei has spent more time cleaning the dojo than you would spend doing a thousand reps of *Kanku-dai*. Oh, and he's done that, too.

Even in a traditional school, however, there is a way to make your martial art more your own. *More on this next week.*