

## *Customizing Your Martial Art 2*

If it is considered *déclassé* in a traditional dojo to attempt to customize your martial art, how did martial arts get to have so many styles and so many schools of each style? Well, to be honest, people customized them.

Most martial artists have heard of the Japanese concept of Shu-Ha-Ri: conform to tradition, vary tradition, start your own tradition. How this comes about in ways that are acceptable in a traditional dojo is precisely how you, too, yes, you with little expertise but with a tendency to go your own way, can customize your martial art.

It goes without saying that you can experiment with your art and its applications on your own time in your own home with your own partners. That doesn't mean you should come running to Sensei one evening claiming that your new "Kick the Blind Man Standing on One Leg Drill" will replace the heavy bag. If you have come up with a new drill, talk to Sensei privately and, if he thinks it's worthwhile, he may just incorporate it in your training. Whether or not your new insight is incorporated in the dojo training, you can use discoveries you have made in the semi-free sparring drills or kata *bunkai* investigation you do in private. If you keep coming up with your own contributions (assuming they are reasonable and functional), when you get to be more senior, you will not go unnoticed. Sensei might let you teach a class or confer with you about other drills and teaching methods. In this way, you gradually change the dojo to your way of doing things. No, it's not quick, but it is the same type of change that academic subjects go through due to constant student contribution.

Of course, potential rejection is concomitant with attempted contributions. I have had a couple of students who become resentful because I would not accept every suggestion that flashed through their sparkling intellect. Other students have become conceited the moment I did accept a suggestion. In one case, a student quit my federation because, since he contributed a variation of a technique to my willing acceptance, he figured he no longer needed me. He was, in his mind at least, teaching me. Jumping to the Ri (start your own tradition) is not a good way to go through the Ha (vary the tradition) stage of Shu-Ha-Ri.

A safer, more contained way of customizing is trying to apply your theories in freestyle or semi-freestyle sparring drills. Even though certain schools are rigidly style specific and tend to discount out of hand any innovation, contest (even simulated contest) tends to produce the "if it works, use it" attitude even in the most begrudging of purists. Bruce Lee's admonition to "use it if it works" was not really as foreign to traditional arts as one is led to expect, it is just that he was working on fighting techniques more consistently than did traditional schools. That sounds strange, I know, but here is what I mean: Lee garnered around him a bunch of martial artists (a few had no formal training, but most had quite a bit) and put the emphasis less on posture, mechanics, or even practical self-defense, and more on a one-on-one confrontation. Traditional martial arts, for the most part, have to train their students in how to stand, strike, and move smoothly without falling down before they get to self-defense application. Traditional schools de-emphasize Lee's idea of fighting in favor of

“defend and get out”. These techniques and skills therefore don’t work so much in “fighting” as they do in fundamentals and would be unlikely to run into the “if it works use it” attitude, except for small variations of the fundamentals that help one adjust to an unusual partner.

Other schools emphasize sport fighting in which points take the place of poundings. As unrealistic as the sport school may be, they still approach the “if it works, use it” mentality. So, to the extent that your school engages in free or semi-free interactions, you have (surprise, surprise) more freedom — time to try out the things you wanted to emphasize last time Sensei told you to do 5 Kanku-dai in a row.

I know, for a rampant innovative innovator whose innovative genes are innovating even when he is asleep, traditional arts do not seem to satisfy his innovation needs. They innovate, but at a slower rate. And that is why there are many, many traditional, semi-traditional, and non-traditional arts to choose from. Rather than rock the dojo boat, situate yourself among those who appreciate your innovation or just shut up and train.

Good luck trying to find one of the myriad teachers who decided, during the Bruce Lee error, that they could mix and match what they knew from kyudo, judo, and cha-do aiming towards a more pliant cup of tea. Even if they are still around, their arts aren’t. It takes more than a sparkling intellect and a desire to imitate Frank Sinatra to do it your way.

Within the right context, innovate all you want, just don’t think that creating your own customizing kits will result in a car model worthy of a George Barris creation or a plaque in the martial arts hall-of-fame.