

Diversity vs. Bias

First, let's stipulate that race and nationality, although they may influence cultural tendencies, do not predetermine quality.

Thank goodness that, as traditional martial artists, we are past the point of holding onto our art's nationalistic biases as if somehow Japanese ju-jutsu techniques couldn't lock effectively when used upon Korean soil, or Chinese sweeps could not work in a Japanese dojo. Arts that only kick and punch can learn a lot from arts that lock and throw and vice versa. But wait! At what point does diversity and open-mindedness let the wolf into the lamb's pen? If your political party has a big tent, are you willing to allow extremists of either column to dilute its message? If you pride yourself in being tolerant, can you tolerate those who are intolerant? It seems that in martial arts, the artistic delineations, albeit artificially segregated, are necessary in order to prevent either corruption, dilution, or just plain overwhelm.

One of the earliest Shotokan black belts under Tsutomu Ohshima once reported that Shotokan has about five years of training after shodan. It doesn't take much longer, he suggested, to learn all the art's material. I would suggest that if you disagree with this assessment, you are seeing a more liberal, more diverse interpretation of Shotokan than he. If you tried to discover a half dozen functional applications of every movement of every Shotokan kata, for example, the journey might take longer. But if you simply learn the kata, kicks, and kumite literally, five years is plenty. Conversely, if you took up a traditional Shaolin art, you would have 50 forms to study (each two to five times longer than a Shotokan form), several weapons sets, and a few two-person sets, as well. You may be well into your retirement years before you began to integrate everything.

If too severe a concentration tends to lead to bias (for example, Ralph Upchuck favoring kicks thus denigrating systems that do not emphasize kicks), too wide a diversity tends to lead to dissolution (for example, Mehdi Ocre studying locks, throws, kicks, punches, forms, free sparring, weapons, and 2-person sets, but performing none with quality or understanding.) What the alternative for a martial artist who cannot afford the time or money to study three divergent systems?

From a teacher's point of view, I can at least offer a reasonable approach. I have always emphasized the learning- (thus the teaching-) philosophy of Motoba-ha Shitoh-ryu's Shogo Kuniba: study one art in depth and become familiar with many others. A teacher can do this in three ways. The first, I'll call **Diversity-within-Conformity**: he can train his students in a curriculum that is narrow and strict while adding supplementary non-curricular studies that are still within the style he teaches. For example, although his system's sidekick requirements contain only side snap kick and side thrust kick, he can add different lead-ins or follow-ups to those kicks and a variety of methods by which a student can execute them.

The second way to offer limited diversity so as to not produce either bias or dissolution is for the teacher to **Sponsor Seminars** on subjects related to the arts he teaches but taught by masters from different arts.

A third way, is for an instructor to require a student to **Earn an Introductory Rank** in another art in order to be considered for a black belt rank in his own art

For a teacher to have the courage to embrace any of these suggestions means he (1) has confidence in his main art, (2) is not afraid of occasionally losing a student to another art, and (3) already has an open mind. I would argue that all traditional arts, properly taught, are necessarily concentrated, but that that concentration need not lead to a bias if the instruction is about the quality of execution.

The need for variety increases as the situations for practical application change. If our art is too narrow, we will function with limited skills, blind to our own technical biases. If our art is too wide, it will tend to be shallow, and although we willingly embrace anything that looks good, we may not be able to use it with the confidence with which we use a narrower martial art.

Next time: Diversity and Multiple Martial Artists