

Doubt and Tradition

Fukuzawa Yukichi, who providing much of the impetus for the modernization and Westernization of Japan, died in the first year of the twentieth century. He says that the two things that make the West differ most from Japan are **science** in the material sphere and a **sense of independence** in the spiritual sphere. “I see why Western countries govern their people so successfully, why Western businessmen are so successful, and why Western families are so happy....” He goes on to say that, if we could name the origins of Western civilization, it comes down to one thing: **doubt**.

One can argue that by “doubt” he meant independent thinking. The Asian cultures that showed such great respect for their ancestors and elders maintained a steady ethos that functioned well until the beliefs of their ancestors and elders proved inaccurate. When Japanese first discovered a Dutch anatomy book, for example, they were shocked that it differed from the traditional Chinese anatomy books they had been studying. At first they thought Westerners must be physiologically different, but it seemed that Japanese and Dutch had the same body parts, so it must have been that the revered Chinese texts, which had served them for so long, were inaccurate.

It is with a Western spirit that martial artists, starting with Bruce Lee—the perfect bridge between East and West, a man of Asian descent born in the USA but raised in Hong Kong—cast doubt on the functionality of traditional Asian martial arts’ practices. Since his time, Westerners have felt free to thumb their noses at Eastern tradition, not realizing that babies often out-with-bathwater are thrown.

It is not that the martial arts don’t deserved to be doubted. Decades after Bruce Lee shook up the martial arts world, we still invest our time and effort in traditional practices that don’t result in the skills we expect of them. The problem with Western doubt and Eastern tradition is not doubt itself, but that Westerners doubt *as a reaction* rather than after investigating fully. Because Westerners want martial practices to work literally and immediately, they do one of two things: (1) see only what does not work and thus give up on traditional practices, or conversely, (2) blindly believe that tradition will magically make their practices work. Where the Easterner is too trusting and patient, the Westerner is too doubtful and impatient.

I am necessarily painting with a broad brush, so let’s admit some exceptions here. Are there Eastern training practices that produce practical self-defense skills? The answer is Yes. Are there Westerners who are willing to invest time and effort into traditional practices? Again, the answer is Yes. Are there martial arts teachers, in both Orient and Occident that teach rationally and with explanation? Yes, yet again. These answers, however, seem to be the exceptions.

Are there Eastern training practices that do not produce practical self-defense skills? Yes. Do Westerners want their traditional practices to result in instant badass status? Often, the answer is Yes. Do martial arts teachers, in both Orient and Occident, teach semi-blindly, i.e. without a thorough understanding of how their practices produce competent self-defense? Unfortunately, yes.

Traditional martial arts are still extant because they offered something of value to their adherents. In many cases, that value was functional self-defense. However, the standards of any martial art passed down without testable details can be watered down over time so that the art's functionality becomes suspect.

To balance doubt and tradition, I suggest a simple approach that is not necessarily an easy approach: use your traditional art as a base and study the bejeebers out of it. If it doesn't work to your satisfaction, try to understand how it could work with small tweaks. Try to understand in what situation it works best and in what situation it needs to be supplemented. The generic art is the template; your personal study, whether doubting or accepting, results in the application. Doubting your tradition need not mean giving it up; it can mean reconstituting it so that the tradition you transmit is a better than the one you received.