

Dynamic Traditionalism

A tradition that did not change over the years either no longer exists in current culture or has been solidified into a regimented classicism, the purpose of which is not to directly benefit its practitioners but to preserve itself for historical interest.

When you study a relatively traditional style, why is it that different masters of that style, in the same federation, who have studied under the same teacher, manage to teach their own variations of the style? You were held to a standard that says moving your little toe at the precise angle is Right while any other angle is Wrong, and that means that your style's masters were held to that same standard. After all, the style is the style and is not to be messed with, right? Wrong. Traditional martial arts have not evolved into über-styles; rather, they are constantly evolving, albeit while holding on to some fundamental concepts and techniques.

Why should you be restricted to no-modifications-lest-it-ruin-the-style demands while higher ranked teachers are expected to come up with their own wrinkles that may contribute to and modify the supposedly un-modifiable style? Obviously, it is because beginners, even beginner teachers, cannot judge the value and effect of modifications as well as advanced practitioners can. You can understand this because you experienced a similar cultural parallel every couple of years when election season rolls around: one has to be at least 18 to vote. (I would prefer 25-30 as the voting age, but that's another story.) Younger than voting age suggests less informed and less reasoning, so the culture needs to draw a line.

The other half of the modify-or-solidify argument concerns why anyone, experienced or otherwise, should modify a traditional art at all. Hasn't the tradition been good enough up until now to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? Yes, but what about the future? Sensei modify their arts to address current needs, thinking that current needs may be future needs. They do so to benefit their own training in the here and now and, secondarily, to allow the art to prosper in the years to come. Sometimes they make wise decisions, sometimes not.

Sensei Kousaku Yokota has written (*Classical Fighting Arts*, Vol. 2, Number 23) that Funakoshi changed a number of the front kicks in kata to side snap kicks sometime after 1932. Because Funakoshi had already adjusted the cat stance to the back stance, it was easier to make the transition from back stance to side snap kick than to front kick, suggests Yokota. I think this justification for changing to the side snap kick is weak (whether the weakness is Funakoshi's or Yokota's). But whether this was the actual reason or not, it happened, and now Shotokan sensei will not let students use either a cat stance or a front kick where a back stance or side snap kick appears in Shotokan kata.

Yoshitaki Funakoshi (Gichin's son) supposedly altered the comfortable, moderate-length front stance to the longer front stance for which Shotokan is known. He did so both to gain linear stability and to emphasize the lunge so as to score more easily in freestyle—a practice in which his dojo first competed against Gogen Yamaguchi's Goju dojo and lost. If true, his was a logical reason to adjust a prime technique of the system, but

a reason that was thoroughly influenced by the era (circa 1936) and Yoshitaka's personality. Shotokan stylists dominated Japanese competitions for quite a while after that, so one can argue that the change was functional, but even so, it altered the self-defense nature of the art. Whether that change was a wise depends on one's intention in studying a traditional martial art.

Modifications and adjustments are discouraged when they happen in class or initiated by junior instructors because juniors do not have the experience that seniors have. Okay, but sometimes seniors act like juniors. Having the authority to change things does not make those changes beneficial, only official.

But what other way is there to reasonably make changes to a system? How can a style adjust when necessary, and still reasonably insure that the adjustments are beneficial, while still discouraging excess adjustment by anyone with a "Sensei" attached to his name?

More next week.