

## Dynamic Traditionalism 2

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?

Open competition has, since the 1960s, helped merge stylistic preferences and create a place where practitioners of different styles can meet and discuss training in a relatively cooperative way. Often these discussions and the observations of other styles in action resulted in a homogenization of sparring skills albeit not a deep understanding of kata interpretation or of self-defense. That’s why Shotokan whose lunging attacks conformed to the lunging attacks of kendo tended to dominate Japanese competitions, the rules of which were partially built on kendo rules.

As rules changed, the fighter who developed the contemporary equivalent of the Shotokan lunge influenced others whenever he won. Did Bill Wallace, originally a Shorin stylist, not change the kicking style of thousands by coming up with a rational system of sparring based on three dominant kicks? Did the late Joe Lewis, also a Shorin stylist, not influence generations of sparring first through his dominant backfist/sidekick combinations and then through the adaptation of Bruce Lee concepts to full-contact competition?

But sparring methods have long been considered distant cousins of traditional root styles that are informed more by their basics and kata than their freestyle sparring. In what way have those root styles changed and how? Because kata was often taught without detailed interpretation, those who wished to learn interpretations often wondered if their kata had already been changed by sloppy transmission. If a movement did not make sense to them in their own frame of reference, they made up an interpretation that may have required slight adjustments in their kata’s movements. Even lower ranked sensei might make such subtle adjustments to explain movements better. Senior sensei were not adverse to scooping up these little changes if they did not have better interpretations to supplant them.

The dominance of seminars, then later videos, meant that noted sensei had to offer new approaches to old material. That gave them the encouragement to research their art more thoroughly and independently. When central authorities resisted new methods, relatively independent researchers might decide to be completely autonomous and break away either to form a new style or a new offshoot of an established style, say, O’Toole-ha Shotokan, for example. If their new offshoot died on the vine, their independent contributions still might be absorbed, often without credit, by larger systems, thus changing the nature of the traditional root style over time.

I asked, “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?” Considering the above information, I would say we cannot do both. Either we go the conservative route of trusting our stylistic authorities and thus not get important feedback from those actually teaching in various

venues, or we take the liberal route of allowing anyone who teaches reinterpret anything anyway they please until they interpret themselves out of a style and into their own little bailiwick.

The middle ground, and the healthiest place to be, I would argue, is “innovative traditionalism”. This route emphasizes a strong base that should not be changed with every new insight, but that is not adverse to change when insights are rational and seem to benefit the system. Instead of style-shaking alterations, individual researchers can play with variations-from-the-norm. Instead of grand pronouncements of new systems (most of which have only two or three new followers), innovative traditional teachers can feel free to try new things, testing them for effectiveness and then suggesting them for others in the system to try. Stylistic authorities might still wish to approve the items as “official” but, in doing so, they would not be dissuading researchers from discovering other valuable variations within an established traditional system.