

Old Dogs and New Tricks I

When we aspire to a future that is ancient (see last weeks article) by studying the martial arts, we are asking an old dog (the martial arts) to perform rather new tricks (teach and improve a 21st century human being.) Clearly, the old ways cannot be used in the way they originated. As mentioned last time, few contemporary persons want to live in a Shaolin Monastery, till the Okinawan fields, or bow to the service of their Japanese overlord. Things have to be modified. But if we modify things too much, we no longer have traditional martial arts.

We are caught between the rock of traditionalism and the hard place of updating the old martial arts. People have widely divergent opinions about how much things should change. Some of the new tricks in the martial arts world are altered or adjusted uniforms, competitions, and titles, among others.

Since the old white *gi* used by Jigoro Kano's judo students in 1882 had been modified even by the Japanese, others feel they can rightfully follow suit. Japanese karate-ka made early adjustments by shortening the jacket, lightening its weight, lengthening the pants, and adding a belt color. Later, Japanese judoka teaching in Europe added other colors to the traditional white, brown, and black belts. Currently we see a rainbow of belt colors and a similar rainbow of uniform colors with insignias numbering as many as the student is willing to buy. People have their competition or "street" names emblazoned across their backs as if they were pro ball players. Piping and striping adorn the pants. Uniforms are often more fashionable than they are practical, but interestingly enough, they still bear resemblance to the traditional original. Only those who train in Tees and sweats, are really breaking tradition, the others are, well, let's say, *fine-tuning* traditional wear.

Many people feel that martial arts are sports. After all, they tend to be categorized under sports when you try to look for martial arts books in a bookstore or a martial arts site on the Web. But sport is a relatively recent development. Ironically in Japan, competition dominates in what a Westerner would expect to be a bastion of traditionalism. In Korea, where competitive Tae Kwon Do has gotten into the Olympics, students are newly discovering traditional (read: non-sportive) studies, but they are in the minority. To be sure, the old dog of martial training has been taught a new trick called martial sport. Karate and judo people are often called "players" and compete monthly. Even the white uniformed, super-disciplined karate students who call themselves traditionalists compete in traditional tournaments, a contradiction in terms, if traditionalism were to go by the old ways.

Then there are titles. Since hierarchies serve to organize and help people set goals and achieve aspirations, and since the Japanese have a culture that is strongly hierarchical, it was inevitable that titles would arise beyond the teacher-student appellation. The problem is that seldom are objective standards set for attaining a title. Often a title is conferred by a very senior teacher who wants to honor a student or by a board of those teachers. Nowadays, students and teachers simply assume titles, oblivious to the traditional intent of the

nomination. Once upon a time, a *renshi* (master instructor) was 40 to 50 years old and a *hanshi* at least 60 to 70. Look in the phone book for Master Instructor A. B. C. Dario who is 28 and competes with other 28-year-olds wearing a ball cap that reads *Shihan* (Master) across the riser. The old dog of reserve and self-containment is being taught some new tricks.

But there are some other new developments that are less questionable, in my opinion. They are the teaching of martial arts to all classes and ages, the merging of self-defense and self-image through training, and the application of modern teaching methods.

Next time, we will cover some of the new developments in old martial arts that are less self-centered in nature.