

Refuse of Antiquity

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For the last few weeks, we have been addressing the needs of the beginner. Our goal is to consider the needs of novices, intermediates and advanced students, so it is time for a change of pace. This installment is more philosophical in nature and addresses the experienced martial artist.

In the introduction to this series, I stated that I consider myself an innovative traditionalist and that traditionalism is like a pipe conducting the flow of life-giving water. Without the restriction of the pipe, the water cannot be conveyed, but the pipe is of no use if clogged with the refuse of antiquity.

There are many examples of a “loose restriction” in Samurai culture. The fashion for the samurai was to wear a kimono (not a gi), the sleeves of which were billowy and could easily get in the way of a sword draw. In his billowy sleeve, a samurai carried a folded band (*sageo / tasukigake*) that was taken out, held in the teeth, and wrapped in a figure-8 around the swordsman’s shoulders to restrict the excess fabric. By being thus bound, he was simultaneously freed to draw and cut without restriction.

A *sageo* was also used for securing the scabbard (*saya*) to the belt (*obi*). If the cord bound the scabbard too tightly, it could not be thrust forward to facilitate the draw (*nuki*) or the re-sheathing (*noto*), but if it were absent or too loose, one might lose both the *saya* and the sword with it. The right amount of restriction freed the samurai to draw efficiently.

Similarly, the divided skirt or hakama that samurai wore instead of trousers provided plenty of room to move, but also billowed at the bottom and had to be restricted in times of battle. The samurai armor was protective but light so as to strike the right balance between security and mobility. In both examples, just the right amount of restriction produced freedom of action.

One may point out, of course, that if the samurai were not so bound by their cultural traditions, they would not have worn clothing that needed adjustment to give them freedom. One could argue that, if the refuse of antiquity did not clog them, they would have more easily achieved efficiency. This is no doubt true. We can see the global picture since we are both culturally and chronologically removed from the Japanese *bujin*. Modernists in the contemporary martial arts feel that they see the forest regardless of the trees and look past the restricting traditions of old. They do not see the contemporary restrictions that bind them.

Modernists will argue, for example, that old practices like kata and the one-step engagements that make kata come to life do not help a person in self-defense. They argue that one must spar as close to full contact as possible to get the sense of reality in one’s self-defense training. Certainly, kata and one-step sparring have their limitations, but the modernists do not see that **self-defense is not sparring**. They have been unknowingly restricted by their culture’s preference (especially in movies and pulp literature) for bar fights and brawls. To the extent that self-defense is a very spacious one-on-one bar-fight, free sparring is indeed a better training tool

than kata application. To the extent that self-defense is being jumped in the combat zone of a city, sparring will not help. Kata application fills the bill more precisely.

So where does that leave us as martial artists who have inherited Eastern traditions that are sometimes nearly a thousand years old, but who live, work, learn and teach in a culture that is neither Eastern nor ancient? Our culture is much less restrictive than cultures of old. We have many more choices, and we have choices within the choices. The samurai were samurai because their class status was, for the most part, inherited. Young samurai men could not choose to be merchants any more than young samurai women had the freedom to become *daimyo*.

As contemporary martial artists, we have the liberty to choose a sport-art, a self-defense system, a self-development martial art, or a martial art as an exercise method. We may choose a sport martial art and then have to decide whether we prefer sport judo, Olympic tae-kwon-do, full-contact fighting, tournament karate, kata competition or Tomiki Aikido. We may choose to study a self-defense system and then have to decide whether our idea of self-defense is battling in an alley brawl, escaping a mauler, surviving a mugger, wreaking havoc on a rapist, or merely decking the disrespectful. Then we have to match the school to our definition of self-defense. We may choose to engage in a self-development study and then have to decide between a karate school that teaches kata as moving meditation, an aikido school that emphasizes cooperative group training, a physically challenging tae kwon do workout, or a mentally challenging aiki-ju-jutsu workout. If we choose a martial art for exercise: what do we mean by exercise? Aikido training does not use a lot of strength but it can be a taxing aerobic workout. Goju karate, on the other hand, often employs a number of supplemental devices that build muscle and stamina. Sport judo can be both aerobically and muscularly exhausting. Which is best for our idea of exercise?

In order to recognize the true value of a chosen martial art, one must know why it was chosen. Too often, a person gets caught up with emotionally defending his choice — a choice he may have made for less than defensible reasons. It is silly to argue “my art kicks better” if your image of a self-defense situation is being held down by a gorilla. It is inconsistent, at best, to suggest that your martial art has the superior muscle building workouts if you need to develop lung capacity instead. To choose a specific martial art, you must be objective rather than defensive, rational rather than emotional. You must see both the good and the bad, both the preferred and the non-preferred. In order to be a well-developed martial artist (by one’s own definition of “well-developed,”) you must objectively decide what are pipes and what is the refuse of antiquity.

Next, What is the distinction between Martial and Artist?

Comments regarding "The Refuse of Antiquity"

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I would like to add that though I am a modernist, much of what I know is based on what went on before my time. The most important aspect to survival in a life and death situation is mindset. If a person trains with a realistic sense of what can actually happen to a human being when struck or dropped with true righteous intent and proper technique, most of the argument about tradition vs. modern blurs into near insignificance. I totally agree with you concerning the bar fight mentality and might add the sportfight mentality is similar. A shuto to the side of the neck is no sport.

Delivery by a well-trained person can be fatal. Nuff said.

Thank you for your understanding and spreading the truth.

Yours, John Perkins, www.attackproof.com