

## The Tradition of Innovation

First...a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it. – William James (1842-1910)

For most people, the new is scary. It means the familiar, in which one is competent, may lapse in favor of that in which one is incompetent. Because innovation is often resented and resisted, people do not realize that it is part of the very tradition they follow. That is, most traditions are actually innovative. True, some change more liberally than others, but every traditional martial art, no matter how firmly it adheres to what its founder taught, has changed those teachings over time.

Look on YouTube for Kyuzo Mifune performing judo around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, well after its 1882 founding. Now look at any modern judo competition. The change of emphasis from light, precise movements to powerful, committed movements is obvious.

Find Funakoshi's first edition of Karate-do Kyohan and compare photos of him to those of Shigeru Egami in the second edition: same kata, different emphasis. Now look at modern JKA kata and you will see yet another change. The kata are recognizable, like those done in Shorin and Shito, for example, but they have changed.

I own a 1958 book by Tadashi Abe, the founder of Aikido in France. His aiki looks more like my 1972 Kamishin-ryu Aiki-ju-jutsu than modern Aikido. Not only had O-Sensei Ueshiba developed and changed emphasis but his students embraced his later, advanced, spiritual Aikido over his earlier foundational, practical Aikido.

One can argue that “new” means “improved” or one could argue that “new” means “currently popular”. New is not always better, of course. The problem lies not with the new, but the definition of “better”. All arts have to adapt to stay alive unless they enjoy preservation by historical societies. No art survives if it does not have some modicum of popularity. But popularity does not always guarantee improvement or even quality. It does guarantee, however, a better chance at finding people that want to maintain quality, regain quality, or improve the art with innovation. Popularity, in short, means a large number of adherents. Sticking to top quality practices may not guarantee more than a few adherents. Each method can produce a value, but they will contend with each other in the process.

The more popular the art, the more likely it is to develop factions, each faction serving as a laboratory for development. The smaller and stricter the art, albeit of high quality, the less likely innovation is to occur, unless — and this is an important caveat — the smaller, stricter art recognizes that innovation is part of its very tradition.

The factions of a widely popular art exist in order to seek out improvements or recapture what the very popularization process watered down or lost. Great, but even if successful, these factions remain separated from each other. The factions of Shotokan contribute to Shotokan only as a vague generic entity. Shotokan stylists, to

the extent that they are members of a federation or sub-style, find the contributions of other sub-styles threatening and thus they become a high quality but relatively small sub-set of what could be a grander art. The same is true of Aikido or Goju or Kempo. In martial arts, factions often compete rather than contribute to a whole, thus ironically becoming less popular, except that they carry the name of the more popular foundational style.

*This article continues next week.*