

## The Tradition of Innovation 2

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 high quality, the less likely innovation is to occur, unless...the smaller, stricter art recognizes that innovation is part of its very tradition.

In martial arts, factions often compete rather than contribute to a whole, thus becoming less than the whole even while the foundational style remains popular. Meanwhile the smaller, stricter, higher quality (but less popular) art chugs along, happy with its uniqueness, but hoping to survive. The little factions of a larger art try to find a way to make that larger root art higher in quality, but by the very nature of its high quality, at least in most cases, the art will not be as popular. High quality translates to most people as work and potential failure so they opt for less work and more success in the same way they opt for avoiding the new (because adapting to the new similarly implies work and potential failure).

And so we have (1) large leagues that have poor standards but many adherents, (2) large leagues that produce high quality martial artists albeit with very limited skills, and (3) small dojo that produce high quality martial artists with broader sets of skills. The first survives on the sheer perfunctory participation of a large number of people. The second survives because it provides comparatively high quality within the field of large leagues. The small dojo struggles to survive yet is one of the few places martial artists can go to experience higher standards and/or broader perspectives that the larger leagues cannot provide without losing popularity.

After teaching a seminar for a segment of a large dojo that boasted 400 members, I asked the most senior instructor (who had taught in both small and large dojo) about the resulting quality of that large school's student. He said that, although he had not expected it, their sensei made sure that their student quality was among the best in the area. I was impressed; that is not an easy thing to do. But, what were other schools in the area like? It turns out that most of them were into tournament competition, success at which was their measurement of quality. The 400-member school won more trophies than its neighbors. Therefore, the senior's statement was correct. In my personal judgment, the students showed excellent form and spirit. Form, spirit and trophies are the norms by which many contemporary schools are judged, but in my humble opinion, those qualities, although desirable, say little about depth of knowledge, character, or self-defense ability. Unconsciously, this large school had slipped into a convention that could measure "quality" (bravo to them) but was too large to create innovation and fresh analysis that could extend that quality into areas that the martial arts supposedly were created for, e.g. character and self-defense. That's why they hired me for the seminar—to give a fresh point of view (bravo to them again). Given their large student body, they did the best job they could do.

An art cannot be all things to all people, so inevitably popularity and high standards will conflict. Some lucky schools and federations are able to balance both; most cannot. But neither can the smaller, high-quality school. It is stuck sacrificing popularity for quality. The more innovation is allowed, the less standardized the school. The less standardized the school, the more people tend to drift toward factions to emphasize their own

innovations or their personal idea of quality. Thus we circle around from small-group-with-high-quality to large-group-with-low-quality to factions-with-high-quality that face yet again the dichotomy between maintaining quality or popularity. Round and round and round in the circle game.

Now, what about that caveat from this article's introductory quote? What if groups recognized that one must experiment and innovate in order to keep quality high? And what if that innovation/experimentation aspect was built into the structure of the curriculum and the requirements? If a small school can survive by recognizing that high quality needs to incorporate innovation and variation, a large school or even larger federation should be able to survive the same way. But how?

*Some suggestions next time.*