

Traditional vs. Eclectic

Another contribution in helping students find the right school for them and teachers discover what kind of school they really want to have.

In the '70s Bruce Lee, not as a movie star but as a practicing martial artist, shattered many unquestioned “traditions” that Western martial artists held for decades and Eastern martial artists held for centuries. He felt that adhering to a rigid tradition was for non-fluid, non-creative, non-living martial artists and that, by implication, using what works from various martial arts was the best bet for self-defense and fighting ability. From that point on, new non-traditional styles popped up, some good, some poor concoctions of basic techniques from divergent sources.

But Lee’s philosophy also affected the traditional arts so that offshoots or semi-traditional arts arose. They started with a traditional fundament but quickly got into self-defense applications based on no set of concepts, no guiding principles. As Lee said, if it works, use it; and they did.

Really well thought-out non-traditional eclectic arts — the ones that had guiding ideas, like Lee’s Jeet Kune Do — became great training devices for practical self-defense. They boasted greater practicality of application than did the strictly traditional arts. Simultaneously, the really well thought-out traditional arts — those arts that emphasized proper form and execution — became a symbol of excellence in power, speed and balance. They boasted a foundation that could not be surpassed. Everyone in between tried to incorporate the best of everything that worked, only to end up with mediocrity.

No one saw that Traditional Arts did not need to be diametrically opposed to the more modern Eclectic Arts. Eclectic martial artists, who loved excellence in practical application, often had background in traditional arts that gave them their tools. Traditional martial artists, who loved form and idealized technique, needed only ask themselves how that technique might be applied in reality to discover what eclectics were doing.

The battle should never have been between Traditional and Eclectic, nor between an emphasis on Basics and Form vs. Application and Practicality, rather it should have been between (1) a logical, well-formed system that took the student step by step from A to Z, and (2) the pastiche, semi-traditional, semi-eclectic system that attempted to take the student from A straight to Z without any development in between.

Whether it was traditional or contemporary, the system had to work in the way it was supposed to work. Too often the martial “systems” foisted on the public satisfied consumer needs while lining the instructor’s bank account. Quality, in other words, was often sacrificed for marketability.

The item that linked the top-notch Traditional and Eclectic schools was the “well-thought-out” aspect — the use of the mind in setting up a training system and in measuring its results. No traditional or modern eclectic has a claim on the mind in the martial arts. Many schools, trying to be both marketable and high quality, try to be all things to all people. If you inquire whether they have A, B or C, they will claim to have it. If you ask if

they do X, Y or Z, they will claim do it. In trying to be all things at once, they can do justice to no one emphasis.

For the prospective student of martial arts, these schools can be avoided only if the student knows clearly what emphasis he/she would like to have in his/her training.

Of course, you may occasionally stumble upon an eclectic school that studies its arts with traditional depth and analysis, or you may stumble upon a traditional school that looks at its arts eclectically. If so, check it out. It will be a rare breed.