

Yet So Far...

We are chronologically nearer to our “ancient masters” than we are to the social traditions of our own culture (the founding of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Independence Day, or even Veteran’s Day) or the founding of our national pastime, baseball. Although we prefer to think of these masters as “ancient”, I would suggest that we are not so desirous of conformity as to strap on a straight jacket along with our gi.

For traditional martial artists, “ancient” is more an adjective of respect than of chronology. We recognize that Kano, Funakoshi, and Ueshiba, among others, not only founded traditions that many follow today, but were also the transmitters of traditions that do, in fact, date back to much older times. Kano’s judo dates back to Tenjin-shin’yo-ryu Ju-jutsu (founded 1830) and Kito-ryu ju-jutsu (founded circa 1600). Funakoshi’s Shotokan has its roots in Okinawan Shorin Karate, which hails back to Shuri-te (circa 1700s), which in turn hails back to Chinese Chuan-fa of centuries before. Ueshiba’s Aikido has its source in Daito-ryu Aiki-ju-jutsu, the roots of which can be traced back to 800 AD.

If those dates are not “ancient” they are at least old—older than you or I, or our grandparents. In other words, they are older than anyone we ever knew. Life being as short and fragile as it is, human beings naturally honor that which lasts longer than one lifetime; thus traditions, the arts that convey traditions, and the people who have maintained and passed on those arts are also honored, even if the people and the versions of the arts they represent are not as ancient as the pyramids nor likely to be as long-lasting. We value them, hoping they will break with convention and last longer than the Colossus of Rhodes or the Lighthouse of Alexandria did. By maintaining a tradition through various changes of culture, we break with the human “tradition” of change. Conservative ironically becomes liberal, for in order to maintain a tradition, the tradition must adapt. Liberal becomes conservative, for in order to adapt, one must set up conventions that will last longer than a Garfield presidency, yet do so without electing a “president for life”, i.e. a tradition that over-binds its adherents.

When we put photos of our founders on the wall of the *kamiza*, we put them in the same honored positions that people put photos of ancestors in their homes or of former CEOs at work. We are saying, “The thing we do has lasted a long time. Let’s keep it going.” We would not do that if our former CEOs were crooks, our ancestors were thieves, or our founders were unknowledgeable or unskilled. Oh, sure, one or two businesses really don’t care if Smedley Mudlash fired his workers before they could collect pensions and a few families don’t care that Great Granddaddy Rossannidanny burnt Indian villages to extend his fields, but by and large, we honor our past because it is honorable and because the people in it were knowledgeable and skilled. That reality inspires us to be just as honorable, knowledgeable and skilled in extending those qualities into the future.

Our traditions are therefore very near to us even if they came so far.

Non-traditional martial artists do not want tradition to dictate the kind of wine they drink, nor do they want to be stopped up in a barrel. Makes sense to me. Traditional martial artists do not want to be lost in the

vineyard without a map and feel that some aging in restrictive oak might just produce a higher quality result.

Also makes sense to me.

“But, the process might go out of date,” argues the non-traditionalist. “The quality does not,” responds the traditionalist. “If we have come this far in cultivating a quality crop, let’s not pick the grape before it is time nor age it for less than a month in modern plastic drums.”

We do not want our having come so far to be soured by our over-valuing the near.