

The Correctness-Functionality Loop

Here are two quotes from Aiki Master Yuki Yoshi SAGAWA: (1) “Just because something is traditional doesn't mean that you should simply do it the way it's been handed down. You should continue to modify and add to it,” and (2) “It's meaningless to be happy because you defeated someone. It's more important that the technique is done correctly than whether it worked or not.”

I often find that I gain important insights when I try to understand how a master's mind works even if sometimes that mind seems to be holding contradictory thoughts. Rather than believing that the ability to hold such contradictions is the mark of true intelligence, as did F. Scott Fitzgerald, I believe that intelligent people veer toward rationality and thus, when they seem to be self-contradictory, admit that they may be missing some nuance in their thinking.

In the introductory quote, Sagawa Sensei suggests that traditions should be seen as constantly accreting. To add to a tradition, one must have the courage to at least temporarily oppose it and investigate one's personal perceptions of what is being taught. And yet, in the second quote, Sagawa suggests that the “correct” technique is more important (at least in training) than is a technique that gets the job done.

Doesn't the idea of a “correct” technique suggest a traditionally inherited technique? Doesn't the idea of a functional technique that is not “correct” suggest a personally modified technique? How does one resolve the apparent conflict between innovating enough to add to a tradition yet doing a “correct” rather than a “functional” technique? By what standards can we possibly judge a technique except by “true to tradition” on one hand or “serviceable” on the other?

The tradition is both broad and specific. In Sagawa's case, the tradition of Aiki could be seen broadly as minimal motion, minimal effort actions that result in locking, throwing, or repelling an attacker. Strikes were not disallowed in his Aiki, as I understand it, but were seldom practiced. The specific traditional practice might include certain formulae resulting in movements named as Kote Gaeshi or Kote Hineri. These movements, known as “techniques”, were recognizable (i.e. Kote Gaeshi does not look at all like Kote Hineri), but they also varied according to the type of attack and situation. Eventually, Sagawa's Aiki employed movements that seemed more invisible and thus less able to be named. He was known for his Aiki Functionality but he admitted that he did not do Aiki like his instructor Sokaku TAKEDA. Did he not use Functionality as a measuring stick that would determine the retention or rejection of his innovations?

Of course he did. I would suggest, however, that he would not have been satisfied if he had defeated an opponent were he to do so without using a *broadly conceived* application of correct Aiki. In other words, HOW he defeated an opponent was more important than THAT he defeated the opponent.

This is an argument I make to my own students both in Aiki and Karate. “If you are wrestling your partner down to the ground when applying a technique, you did not need the skills of the art you are studying. Rather you needed strength, speed, and aggression. For self-defense these are probably the most important attributes. So, in that case, by all means, lift weights, work on reaction drills, and beat up the heavy bag as often

as possible. If, however, you are trying to learn to refine your self-defense skills with both the application of specific kinds of technique and the details that make those applications more effortless, **you cannot think of your successful result *while training***. Training is meant for both experiment and failure. On the street, you'll care not a whit about adhering to your art, but in the dojo, you should care a great deal about it.

If it is appropriate for you to innovate, certainly do so, but innovate with the idea of adhering to the *broad* definition of your art. Only then will your innovations be able to contribute to that tradition. Conversely, in pure self-defense, let your training, whether artistic or otherwise, flow out of you so that you prevail! (Looking back on the encounter, you may just say, "Damn! Wish I had moved my hip a little more and my hands a little less. It would have been better Aiki.")