

The Ingenuity-Contribution Loop

Another comparison of quotes from Aiki Master Yukiyoshi 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) “Some young students...have misunderstood my admonition to use ingenuity. They do what they like, such as trying to come up with all kinds of new techniques....”

How can we add to a tradition and at the same time not come up with “new techniques”? If you're using your ingenuity, doesn't that mean you will at least try out “what you like” rather than practice the tradition?

We can easily explain away Sagawa's apparent contradiction by emphasizing “young” in the second quote. Perhaps he means only younger or less experienced students should not attempt to invent techniques or “do what they like”. Certainly even the most liberal-minded instructors will agree that the less experienced the student, the less she should try to contribute to an ancient tradition with her own variations. That would be presumptuous, to say the least. In order to really be ingenious, a junior student would have had to master the material she had been learning. That does not necessarily mean, however, that senior students are, by virtue of their seniority, in a position to “come up with all kinds of new techniques”, either.

I remember studying Kamishin Aiki-ju-jutsu in the 1970s and stumbling upon a throwing variation that I had not seen before. When I met the founder of the system, Albert C. Church, Jr., I asked him if what I had created/discovered was actually a technique. He responded, “Sure!” without a moment's thought. I patted myself on the back for a few seconds, proud of my ingenuity, when I realized that I had asked a question intended to mean, “Is this technique employed in our system?” whereas he was responding with a more generic, “Well, it throws the guy down, so it must be a technique.” Frankly, it felt nice to be creative, but I was far too inexperienced at the time to think my creativity might contribute to the system. Years later, having practiced and understood the Kamishin requirements through *yondan*, I was able to add supplementary requirements to my school's manuals and Shihan Church was gracious enough to accept them as the new manuals for Kamishin Aiki. Had I been strictly conventional, I would not have been able to contribute to the tradition. Had I been nothing but creative, I would not have learned the system well enough to know how to contribute to it.

Acceptable ingenuity is not simply about your seniority in the dojo, rather it is also about your coming up with a method or a practice that seems to work better than the existing method or practice and then getting others to accept it, not by actively selling it like a commodity, but because in practice its value is irrefutable. Unfortunately, because of politics, or at least federation bureaucracy, your innovating a contribution to the style is unlikely to happen unless you are not only highly ranked, but also a head instructor. How else would you be able to influence the stylistic leader or a board of seniors that makes the technical decisions?

There are endless stories of styles that change regularly because their controlling boards use a change of technique as a method to encourage student allegiance. They are saying, “Stick with what the authorities say in order to maintain recognition or legitimacy.” One a plane back from Okinawa, a Uechi stylist was opining on his systems latest “correct version” of the basic block *wa-uke* (circle reception). A very senior practitioner who

spoke Japanese leaned back over the seat and said, “No worries. It will change back again in a year or two. They are just trying to keep you on your toes and loyal to their orthodoxy.”

Change should not happen for this reason, but martial traditions tend to lack a method by which meaningful change *should* happen. I suggest that systems consider Ed Parker’s requirement of having each black belt candidate write an essay about his art. Sure, only one in a thousand might offer technical innovations that are worthy of influencing the tradition, but required essays would provide a source for change, a way to attribute changes to the innovator, and a reasonable way for the innovator to reach those that make the final decisions.

All ingenuity does not necessarily contribute to the system, but all contributions to the system should have had some path through which the ingenuity can flow.