

## Adding to the Tradition

*“Without the addition of an instructor’s own wisdom, experience and, most importantly, technical innovation, the art is but a hollow shell of what it once was in just several generations. Without the consideration of modern realities to challenge an art’s effectiveness, it becomes a museum piece whose only modern relevance is that on an historical curiosity.”*

*–Yukiyoshi TAKAMURA (founder of Takamura-ha Shindo Yoshin Ryu)  
from an interview in Aikido Journal, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1999*

Every system’s head instructor or its technical committee innovates. That means it changes, usually subtly, the tradition that it is trying to maintain. If the changes were not subtle, the tradition would be unrecognizable as even a shadow of its former self, in which case the idea of tradition is replaced by the idea of creating a new art in an attempt to create a new tradition.

The challenge for every head instructor is identifying what to change and just how much to change it. Before any non-cosmetic changes are made, it is incumbent upon the principal instructor or committee to test the changes to see (1) if they are more functional than those that they are replacing, and (2) if they are reasonably easy to pass on to students. If they are not reasonably easy to pass on, their functionality becomes almost irrelevant. But it takes time to determine if these conditions can be met. The fact that the head instructor likes (and can perform) the change is not a prerequisite to that change’s transmutation of the extant tradition.

As a result, the head instructor or technical committee may *add* to the system rather than change it. This is a stopgap measure to give students time to train in the new item so that it can be properly tested. This accretion may take two forms: First, a variation might be added to the training without changing the rank requirements; Second, the variation can be presented as an option for fulfilling a rank requirement.

I felt it was my job to constantly improve (i.e. make more functional and less effortful) the methods by which we performed techniques. With this in mind I began to teach new ways to perform certain aiki-ju-jutsu techniques. Inevitably a student would ask me, as most junior high school students ask their teachers, “Is this going to be on the exam?”

“No,” I would respond, “It is just a variation.”

Some students do not see any value in being equipped with more than “one way to skin a cat”, so someone would ask, “Then, why are we learning it?”

“Because I want to see if it works better on several people.” Okay, the reason having been accepted and the method practiced, some people *do* prefer the new method, and so I give them the option to use it on an exam. Even though the technique has not been official adopted as part of the curriculum, it has made some inroads. If, over time, the new method seems to work

better, inevitably some students still prefer the old methods either because they are more familiar or because they work better for certain body types.

The process continues: now the *old* method is the variation, so that the style has been changed, but not radically and not all-at-once. I have found this way of *adding* to the tradition easier on students and better for me because it prolongs the period in which we can compare versions of the technique, giving me the input I need to make a final decision.

Ironically, usually I do not have to officially decide. Over time, if my assessment of the new method is accurate, the use of the old method fades, but it always remains on the shelf as a variation just in case some student needs it (preferably a student that sees value in being equipped with more than “one way to skin a cat”).