

Adulteration vs. Customization

When I was a young teenager, building models of “customized” cars—plastic models that the builder customized on his own without the help of precut parts and printed directions—was a popular pastime. This reflected what some adults (albeit young adults) were doing with the actual metal and glass vehicles that they owned. They modified their cars not just for greater horsepower, but also to look both cool and unique. This was the early crest of the wave of customization that now manifests itself in a myriad of choices in the marketplace. In the late 1950s and early 1960s it was a socially acceptable way to be just a little rebellious while being creative—and to have at least one thing your own unique way.

Conversely, during that same time period, martial arts available for study were few and decidedly not customizable. If you studied judo, it was judo with no hint of aiki locks or karate blows. If you studied karate, you did basics, kata, sparring and definitely no locks or throws (except for a foot sweep in sparring, and this was rare). If you did aikido, you did not even set up a technique with *atemi* (body blows) and when you executed a hip throw, thus overlapping with judo, you started it with a wrist grip, rather than a grip on the *gi*, often off-balancing your partner with a wristlock.

None of this artistic segregation made any sense to me since each art was supposed to be based on self-defense. And who knows what kind of technique a self-defense situation would require? I kept expecting someone to teach *goshin-jutsu* (self-defense skills) in judo (they existed in kata, but we seldom saw them), *atemi* in aiki, and, in karate, an analysis of kata that made obvious the throws and locks already therein. I waited expectantly a long, long time. Several other students in various other parts of the world evidently joined my advocating for these things because today we all seem to understand both that each martial art concentrates on a limited number of aspects of self-defense, and also that the roots of each art tend to be more holistic than is its contemporary form.

Many of us, now teachers or advanced students, have decided to emphasize those parts of our arts that were not previously emphasized. We are interested in judo kata beyond *nage-no-kata* (forms of throwing); we are willing to add *metsubishi* (smashing of the eyes) to begin, or a rib punch in the middle of an aiki *waza*; and, we understand that karate kata can contain other kinds of techniques besides blocks, punches, and kicks. To some, we are mixing, thus adulterating, our martial arts. To others, we are simply customizing our arts.

Where does customization stop and adulteration begin? I feel that customization is an approach that picks and chooses from options already available within the art or within the researchable history of the art. So, if my karate art delivers a back fist with a side thrust kick but its original form employed a forearm block with a front kick, I feel free to customize my teaching to include the latter as well as the former. Conversely, I suspect that adulteration is, as the term implies, a pollution of the art. Now how would we go about making dirty what is, by Western standards, already “dirty fighting”?

The only way to pollute an art is to mix methods in a way that changes the nature of the art. Let's say we are studying the throws Funakoshi presents in his *Karate-do Kyohan*. Most Shotokan stylists will apply these throws with a sharp, muscular energy that forces the technique on the opponent. However, similar techniques exist in either judo or aiki and are applied by taking advantage of the momentum and off-balancing of an opponent. One could argue, I think, that doing the throws the first way is historically correct Shotokan, while doing them the second way is not. But does that make the second method adulterated karate?

Here a knotty problem enters. What if an art like Shotokan, known for example, for its long-stances and sharp movements was historically taught with shorter stances and more relaxed movements? Or what if an art like Aikido was originally taught in a kata format, like its Daito predecessor, but is now taught in a more fluid technique-oriented manner? Even more confusing, what if an art known for its hardness is supposed to gradually get softer? What if an art known for its fluid cooperation is supposed to gradually become more martial? Those who recognize these gradual changes either historically or in the advanced practice of the art, will consider what they do mere *customization*. Those who don't like customized cars will consider the martial customization to be martial *adulteration*. Those who enjoyed customizing cars as a kid (but still could tell a customized Corvette from a customized Mustang) might have a different opinion.