

The Rewards and Challenges of Traditionalism

Readers of these essays may be tired of my referring to myself as an innovative traditionalist. It is a middle ground, a golden mean if you will, that strikes some people as too close merely sitting undecidedly on the fence. However, I look at Innovative Traditionalism as a way to avoid what one person called “the tyranny of the OR”. Often, especially in these times of political and religious extremes, we think in terms of “if you are not with me, you must be against me”—compelling a choice in others in order that they avoid your enmity (without yourself having to reconsider a choice you may have made years before when circumstances were very different). Either/or. False dichotomies do not support rational decisions.

Being faithful to an extreme can be a way to avoid choosing, embracing what one’s faith/party/system/cult/style/group stands for in order find kindred spirits and camaraderie at the expense of thinking for oneself. Fidelity to one’s chosen tradition, therefore, may entail embracing concepts and actions with which one disagrees in order to support that which one wishes to advance.

When I chose to study martial arts at 17 years old, I recognized that I would need to adopt certain traditions that I did not fully understand, and some I did not like, during a time in which I was rejecting other societal and family conventions. Admittedly, I did not have a choice of studying non-traditional martial arts since no such thing existed in 1964; however, I was aware that I was consciously choosing to be bound, at least to some degree, to traditions, customs, conventions, and habits rather than having them impressed upon me by a family heritage or national culture, about which I had no choice. I came to simultaneously understand the value of tradition as well as its limitations.

The longer a tradition is preserved intact, the more justly proud people are of it. Certainly people confuse their **pride** in the *longevity* of the tradition with pride in the *content* of the tradition. Perhaps that tradition should have been reviewed more critically, but one sustains the feeling of pride because one knows that the tradition must have some lasting value if it has lasted so long.

Another value of traditional study is **order**. That is, traditions bring with them conventions and customs that act like unspoken rules. Because they are unspoken, no lengthy rulebook or burdensome policing of these “customs” is necessary. The “penalty” for ignoring them is a verbal reminder at one extreme and an unofficial ostracism at the other. Even non-traditional martial arts create in-house traditions to maintain orderliness in training. Whether you line up by rank and bow to a *kamiza* wearing white *gi* or show up in shorts and T-shirts and shake hands with each other, your art establishes an order that not only makes the training safer, but also becomes expected by its students. The more it stays consistent, the more it become a tradition.

Being part of a traditional art engenders, at least in the most senior practitioners, a sense of **responsibility** for passing on the art to junior students of today and perhaps of many tomorrows. In junior students, it creates the responsibility of being worthy of having been accepted within the tradition.

If the tradition has a laudable reputation, mere adherence to it (or membership in it) transfers its inherent **respect** to you. Certainly there are both practitioners and events that can subtract from that automatic respect, but generally speaking, your reporting to another martial artist that you are a Shotokan or Goju stylist will garner more respect (even from those who don't favor Shotokan or Goju) than your reporting that you study Bhodio-do or GreganDharma.

Thus, among other benefits that studying a traditional art may bring, Pride, Order, Responsibility, and Respect stand out both as motivators toward traditional study and also rewards for having partaken in that study.

But these rewards may also bring their own challenges.

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