

The Rewards and Challenges of Traditionalism 2

Pride, Order, Responsibility, and Respect stand out as motivators toward traditional study, but these rewards may also bring their own challenges.

The longer a tradition is preserved, the more justly proud people are of it, but also, the longer a tradition is preserved, the fewer people will understand why it originally became a tradition. Clearly, the original method, custom, or belief must have held value to those who supported it, but as times change, people may have lost the need for the original value.

If certain kata movements, for example, were codified to help unarmed martial artists defend against 6-foot staves, it is unlikely that those movements will have quite the value they had on 18th century Okinawan farms or hiking a 17th century Japanese highway. One might adapt them for use against baseball bats; but would not gun- and knife-disarms hold more value for today's world? This may be a good argument for discarding the movement completely, but it certainly is a good argument for diminishing its importance or adding non-traditional anti-handgun techniques in its stead. It is fine to feel **pride** in a tradition, but it is hard to feel proud of a non-functional technique.

When unwritten traditions establish a sense of **order** in a school of martial arts, they also silently compel the members of that school to obey them without reflection or objection. To be part of the group, one must conform, and yet the very act of conforming sets into motion the idea that what is good for Gary is good for Mary. In other words, studying in an orderly fashion neglects personal needs and personal body types. Among the most orderly of schools, very traditional sword schools, for example, are those who teach the least adaptable of skills.

Although pride in a tradition may engender in a senior student a **responsibility** to pass that tradition down to another generation, it simultaneously creates a fear that he will do so incorrectly. He therefore seldom adjusts or augments what he passes on. And yet a few generations hence, the technique or tradition might demand some adjusting or augmenting in order to be relevant to the situations that new generation requires.

The **respect** that a traditional, well-established martial art automatically lends its adherents may be attractive, but it is respect born not of individual accomplishment or skill, but of the accumulated accomplishments and the legendary skills of those who "graduated" from the style in the past. The longer the style has been in existence, the more people it has trained thus the more likely it will produce extraordinary teachers, athletes, or warriors. No one remembers the *ratio* of martial masters to martial flops that went through the system, only the final number of masters. Ralph Doorknob's new art of Bhodio-do produces two martial geniuses for its 100 students in its twenty years of existence, but that 2% ratio will be unfairly ignored because an established style like Shotokan will produce 30 masters from its 100,000 students (only .03%) in twice the time. People notice only that 30 is greater than 2. A member of an established and respected art must ask

himself if he prefers to be respected because of his art's reputation (that is, 30 other masters' skills) or for his own personal skills.

Is there a reasonable way to mix and match the restraints of tradition with the freedoms of less traditional, more contemporary martial training?

Obviously, my answer is Innovative Traditional martial arts. But why is the main adjective here "Traditional" and the modifier merely "Innovative"? Why not advocate free and creative (i.e. innovative) martial training with just a little respect, responsibility, and order (i.e. tradition) thrown in to produce a sense of pride?

We'll answer this next time.