

The Rewards and Challenges of Traditionalism 3

Non-traditional, creative martial training with just a little respect, responsibility, and order thrown in to produce a sense of pride is one way to unify the Rewards and Challenges of Traditionalism, but I prefer Innovative Traditional martial arts with the emphasis on *traditional*. Why?

This is a personal choice, of course, and if I had to choose between only two types of martial arts to study, the strictly *traditional* (but non-creative) or the *creative* (but non-traditional), I would probably opt for the creative. Luckily, it is not an either/or situation. I tend to prefer the benefits of traditional budo as long as the traditional factor is not overdone (for example, instructors imitating an Asian accent and being esoteric in their teachings in order to teach “traditionally”), as long as the traditions make sense within the context they are presented, and as long as some creativity is allowed.

In other words, I probably would not be happy in a classical martial art or one that is so heavily traditional that no innovation or personal interpretation is tolerated. And yet, I veer toward traditional martial arts, at least as the term *traditional* applies at the present time.

Rather than reinvent the wheel or the *waza*, I prefer to start with the tried and true, modifying gently and carefully with an eye toward what each modification may imply for future study. A friend and former student of mine, Toby Threadgill (inheritor, Nakamura-ha Shindo Yoshin Ryu) explained this point of view perfectly in an interview with *Aikido Journal* (see [Creative Budo 2](#)): “Such changes cannot be haphazard or taken lightly because they can be detrimental, obscuring the hard-earned wisdom of the past headmasters.”

However, I think a teacher can be much more free and creative *in the way* he transmits the art to students than in *what* he transmits. Sure, certain training methods are traditional, but a modern teacher who sees that his students are not learning quickly enough or as deeply as he would like, can adjust the way he approaches his lessons using his knowledge of presentation and how students learn. As non-traditional as it may be, creative teaching addresses the student’s needs much more adequately than simply saying, “Once again, Funakoshi!” until young Gichin has performed the kata a thousand times (and still may not have understood its intricacies).

Rather than having student repeat with even the occasional verbal correction, I have been known to partner with a student so that she feels the flow of the *waza*. I have stopped practice sessions to test the stability or power of a student’s performance thus emphasizing that the detail I am demanding is both important (and even more precise than the student initially recognizes). I tell stories to illustrate a technical point. I make analogies to other martial arts that a student may have studied or other sports with which the student may be familiar. I have applied a technique to a student’s partner and then have asked him to verbalize what he feels, thus comparing what the student had been doing to what I did. Each student may require a different approach for each item taught. And that approach may change depending on the student’s mood, the class’s make-up, the partner a student works with, my alertness and disposition, and any number of factors that go beyond the student committing the technique to muscle memory. Today these methods would be considered innovative, a

designation I readily accept (although I suspect that they were actually more traditional than we realize).

If the student can replicate a technique because his muscle memory has been trained well, that is a laudable first step. But the memory of muscle is not the command of mind it takes to understand what makes a technique function against not only the training partner, but 95% of people who may have never seen the inside of a dojo.

Within their own context, traditional techniques work well otherwise they would not have been preserved in a self-defense system. Therefore, they are a superb starting place. However, understanding the context, interpreting a variation of martial meanings, testing them in new contexts, and making *henka* (variations) that allow the student to apply the tradition to the current situation takes mind-work that is, at least to this generation, creative and often innovative.