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The Essence of Karate-do: Sankido Example

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Abstract:

Aim. From the perspective of the “humanistic theory of martial arts” the author explains a deeper sense of karate-do. He answers five questions and presents his own school and style of karate.

Method. It is an expert judgement, the effect of long-term participatory observation.

Results. The essence of karate is removed from the notion of winners and losers, trophies and prizes because the real opponent of a student is the self. This was the main purpose of karate even if this psychological target was misunderstood all over the world for different purposes.

Conclusions. 1) Karate is an extreme form of physical conditioning that can be practised by men, women and children. It develops aerobic fitness, strength and maintains flexibility through a progressive training method. Training that must be done only under the supervision of certificated masters or instructors. 2) Karate is also one of the most efficient forms of self-defence which is very important in today’s society. Through learning basic kicks, punches and blocks, students learn specific combinations of techniques that are applied in particular situations. Students are also taught to develop an inner awareness for avoiding potential threatening situations. 3) The study of karate develops both discipline and concentration, skills that can be used by children, students, artists and men or women in all walks of life.

Introduction

Although a part of the speech was presented by Cynarski [2013a], the author was asked to consent to the publication of his opinion alone and in its entirety in the quarterly “Ido Movement for Culture. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology”. Humanistic theory of martial arts, the warrior’s path anthropology, and philosophy of martial arts [Cynarski 2004, 2013b: 9-54, 2013c] give here a theoretical right perspective. The pedagogical and educational dimensions are here very important, too [cf. Egami 1980; Wolters 2005; Cynarski 2009; Figueiredo *et al.* 2013]. It stems from the unique symbolic values stored in *karate-do*.

The spiritual and symbolic dimension of martial arts are justified by the fact that this is an area of symbolic culture [Cynarski, Obodyński 2009; Sieber, Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2008]. Karate-do does not need any sport competition. In my opinion karate, as well as many other martial arts, should not be turned into sport because its rules are in contrast with the etiquette, formality, ritual courtesy, respect and search for a harmonious internal and external life.

This paper was prepared in response to questions raised by Prof. W. J. Cynarski. There were five questions:

1. What is the main purpose of the *karate-do*?
2. What are the trends in karate (in Europe)?
3. How is karate spreading – how many people are participating in different countries?
4. What is the percentage of people participating in sports karate (for competitions)?
5. How compatible is the karate now practised in your country with its Japanese and Okinawan origins? [Cynarski 2013a].

It is an expert opinion, the effect of long-term participatory observation and the method (competent judges). The author is very competent (as master-teacher) in some Japanese and Chinese martial arts.

Opinion on the essence of karate

The essence of karate is removed from the notion of winners and losers, trophies and prizes because the real opponent of a student is the self. This was the



Photo 1. Sensei S. Mor-Stabilini by practising *iai jutsu tenshin shoden katori shinto-ryu*

main purpose of karate even if this psychological target was misunderstood all over the world for different purposes.

The word “karate” itself means “empty hand”, but this word has also a very interesting and profound psychological implications. It means that we have the freedom to use our hands in all their potential which symbolizes not only a total liberation of oneself but also the key to establish a harmonious internal and external life.

Today we are living in a mechanized, automated and sophisticated society whose tendencies might develop further. The need of a well-balanced life is extremely amplified and practising karate, as well as other martial arts, should help to build a more stable psycho-physical existence.

However, when karate was introduced to western countries, thanks to the cinema, television and magazines, it was widely perceived as a purely physical art. It was also a competitive sport at amateur and professional levels controlled by individual promoters and organizations. Karate displays a variety of styles, teachings, methods and many other modern styles physically transformed into professional or semi-professional sports.

Now we know that this was not the heart of karate [see: Egami 1980]. Its true essence is to train body, mind and spirit together in order to realize the fullness of human potential. The strict

discipline, respect, courtesy and sincere practice, in order to evaluate the individual and uniqueness of each student, are the main core to keep in mind for teachings of nowadays.

Since the origins of karate are intertwined with Chan or Zen, it can be of interest to all martial arts' students. That understanding its roots can help their practice to become more meaningful. Also the etiquette of karate has been largely forgotten in modern practice. Formality, ritual courtesy and respect must be practised every day in order to cultivate a sense of self-awareness and sensitivity to the feelings of others.

Nevertheless, today karate is an extremely efficient form of physical conditioning, in self defence [cf. Sieber 2011], in developing discipline and concentration. There are direct, tangible benefits of studying karate and they are all highly relevant to the need of people today.

Nowadays karate, as well as western sports such as contact and semi-contact, is spread all over the world and organized in many different international federations. In Europe the number of people enrolled in the different national federations are about two hundred thousand and in the world the number of practitioners should be one million or more. Some years ago the number of the practitioners of karate was higher but today the introduction of contact, semi-contact and full-contact, as well as other disciplines from Japan, China and Philippines, has deeply modified the choice.

The current situation in Europe now is much more confused than before not only for the massive introduction of contact combat sports and other martial arts but mostly because the way of thinking in general is changed. People today are living in a computerized, automated society and more and more a fast world reduces people's spare time. Moreover the lack of steadfastness does not help the practice of karate as a martial art. This kind of thinking will influence the future choices of practising karate. Probably many more or less organized federations wish to control karate as a sport, besides organization for extreme sport such contact to promote semi and professional matches. And probably only little groups of traditionalist should remain to practise this martial art according to its real teachings.

Karate Sankido

The karate I practise and teach today is a strict, traditional Japanese style of karate into which I have tried to distil the essence of what I have learned about the following martial arts over fifty years of

studying, practising and teaching.

There were Japanese martial arts, as: *judo* (achieving black belt – first dan), *karate* (*shotokan*, *sankukai*, *shito-ryu*, *goju-ryu*) (8 dan), *nanbudo* (5 dan), *aikido* and *aikibudo* [Floquet 1989], *kendo*, (3 dan), *tenshin shoden katori shinto-ryu kenjutsu/kobudo* (7 dan, and *menkyo okuden* licence in this school from G. Hatakeyama *hanshi*; photo 1) [Otake 1977b; Cynarski 2009: 206-218].

On the other hand there were some Chinese martial arts – *wushu*, *taiji quan* (*yang and chen style*), *xing-yi quan*, *yi quan*, *bagua zhang*, *tong bei quan*. I received a licence of teaching and 5 *duan* (master degree) in two internal styles: *taiji quan* and *yi-quan* [Jou Tsung Hwa 1986].

Karate *Sankido* aims to develop individuals of the highest moral character, individuals who can then make significant contributions the society. Another goal of karate *Sankido* training is to develop strong bodies which contribute to health and a general sense of self-confidence and well-being. To reach the unity of body-mind and spirit it is necessary to return to the origins of martial arts. The modern interpretation of Budo's spirit is to help every student to train not as an isolated individual (no matter how good or skilled he or she is) because only by sharing and learning from others do we ourselves wholly and fully realize our human potential.

As karate *Sankido* is founded on three fundamental principles: BODY – MIND – SPIRIT. I represented it with three circles which is the *Sankido* emblem (fig. 1). This emblem also represents the three heavenly bodies: Sun – Moon – Earth [cf. Otake 1977b: 2-5; Sieber, Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2008].



Fig. 1. The *Sankido* emblem

The solar system in which we find our harmony from the space and we recreate the Earth thanks to the opposite strengths of Sun and Moon (Chinese *Yang-Yin*, Jap. *in-yo*) that fully realize our human potential.



Photos 2-3. *Shihan* Mor-Stabilini by teaching karate *Sankido* [from own collection]

We have seen so far that the precursors of martial arts come not only from a martial tradition but also from monk's quest for spiritual perfection. Also the Buddhist tradition went from India to China and to Japan through Korea and Ryukyu islands and along the way it was transformed becoming Zen in the ground of Japanese culture. Along this way also the physical techniques and exercise of Bodhidharma were transformed, too.

For understanding karate today we may use the word "dojo" as a linking bridge with the past traditions of this art: the word "dojo", or training hall, has its origins in a Sanskrit word "bodhimandala" meaning "place of enlightenment". As such, it is quite different from a gym or a health club because the *dojo* is a place to fasten a sense of community and belonging and give a distinction from the isolated, alienated atmosphere that pervades other places of physical training.

Conclusion

I can assert that karate today has three tangible benefits for the life of the twenty-first century:

1. Karate is an extreme form of physical conditioning that can be practised by men, women and children. It develops aerobic fitness, strength and maintains flexibility through a progressive training method. Training that must be done only under the supervision of certificated masters or instructors.
2. Karate is also one of the most efficient forms of self-defence which is very important in today's society. Through learning basic kicks, punches and blocks, students learn specific combinations of techniques that are applied in particular situations. Students are also taught to develop an inner awareness for avoiding potential threatening situations.
3. The study of karate develops both and concentration, skills that can be used by children, students, artists and men or women in all walks of life.

These are the direct, tangible benefits of studying karate and they are all highly relevant to the needs of people today.

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Istota karate-do – przykład Sankido

Słowa kluczowe: sztuki walki, budo, karate, dojo, wymiar wewnętrzny

Streszczenie

Cel. Z punktu widzenia „humanistycznej teorii sztuk walki” autor wyjaśnia głębszy sens *karate-do*. Odpowiada na pięć pytań o cel trenowania karate, kierunki zmian i diagnozę sytuacji. Przedstawia własną szkołę i styl karate *sankido*.

Metoda. Jest to wypowiedź eksperta, efekt jego długotrwałej obserwacji uczestniczącej. Wyniki. W karate nie są istotne wyniki i porażki sportowe. Prawdziwym przeciwnikiem jest własna słabość lub egoizm. Usportowienie karate utrudnia zrozumienie jego samorealizacyjnego sensu.

Wnioski. 1) Karate jest bardzo dobrym sposobem na poprawienie lub utrzymywanie odpowiedniej kondycji fizycznej. Może być uprawiane zarówno przez mężczyzn, kobiety i dzieci. Rozwija wydolność organizmu, siłę i elastyczność ciała. Szkolenie musi być jednak wykonywane tylko pod nadzorem certyfikowanych mistrzów i instruktorów. 2) Karate to również jedna z najbardziej skutecznych form samoobrony, co jest bardzo ważne w dzisiejszym społeczeństwie. Poprzez naukę kopnięć, uderzeń i bloków uczniowie uczą się kombinacji technik, które są stosowane w szczególnych sytuacjach. Studenci są również uczeni, jak rozwijać wewnętrzną świadomość dla uniknięcia potencjalnych sytuacji zagrożenia. 3) Nauka karate rozwija dyscyplinę i umiejętność koncentracji. Jest to przydatne we wszystkich dziedzinach życia.