

INSIGHTS INTO KARATE-DO

BLACK BELT THESIS

**ROBERT DELLENGER
SHODAN TEST**

November 12, 1994



世界松林流空手道連盟宗家・会長

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Master and President of the World Shorinryu
Karate-Do Federation

Grand Master Shoshin Nagamine, 10th Dan

Having studied karate-do for only four years, there is much yet to learn, of course. This paper contains some of my curiosities as I make the transition to a Shod. It seems like every rock I turn over has a hundred smaller rocks beneath it. The topics covered in this paper are training, kumite, educating the beginner, the popularization of karate-do, staying with it and the attributes attained from karate training.

Insights into training

How similar are Americans and Okinawans in the way they train? It is a general opinion among American senseis that the training is done a little different in America than in Okinawa. One sensei noted how more polite and cordial the Okinawans were when they corrected his technique. Another noted how much more internal power and focus the Okinawans seem to have. The Okinawans are also regarded to have quicker technique than Americans. That is believed to come from their less lenient training, says Sensei Charles Renfro "We are taught a lot in a short time, the Okinawans are taught a little in a long time".

Many students of Matsubayashi Ryu have heard of Okinawan Sensei Ota's punching power. He breaks makiwaras. On one occasion he stacked six boards on top of each other on the floor, punched and broke the top one, then punched the stack and broke the other five! Of course some American dojos are just as stringent or more so than Okinawans.

If the Okinawans are slightly ahead, could this be due to a lack of communication with them? Sensei Joe Carbonara, Roku dan, feels the communication level of senior members is not as good with Okinawa as they are within America. In an interview with Sensei Matt McCormick in 1983, Master Takayoshi Nagamine made mention of wanting to strengthen the bonds that already existed between America and Okinawa.

A reason for this miscommunication might be that some things are lost in the translation from Okinawans to Americans. Not just because of the language barrier, but maybe also the social differences may imply something different than is interpreted. This was a suggested possibility offered by Sensei Steve Rafferty, Roku Dan. For nine months he lived in Okinawa prior to studying karate-do and noticed the differences in their social cultures. This became evident to him when he returned to Okinawa in 1991 to train there.

We might find more conclusions if we trace back the history of karate-do when it was out-lawed and had to be done secretly. Before karate-do was brought public, it went from father to son only. They probably held some information back. Therefore, in 1904, when Anko Itosu introduced karate-do to the public schools in Okinawa, they got a watered down version of the ancient art.

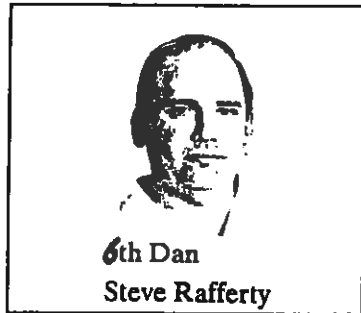
For those same reasons, the Okinawans probably kept a little back themselves from the countries who at one time were raping their women

世界松林流空手道連盟米国東部地区代表者

ジョー・カボナラ 七段



7th Dan, Sensei Joseph Carbonara
The World Shorinryu Karate-Do Federation
U.S. East Coast Representative
Bodakan Karate School
254 Larkfield Rd.
E. North Port, NY 11731
(516) 261-2998

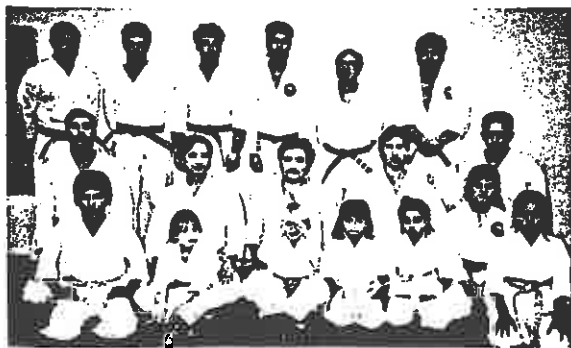


世界松林流空手道連盟米国西部海岸地区代表者

大田 栄 八 六段

World Shorinryu Karate-Do Federation
United States, West Coast Representative
6th Dan, Sensei Eihachi Ota

4th Den
Mr. Paris Blumental
3rd Den
Mr Art Ishii



and killing their people like Japan and the U.S. Japan got Shotokan which some view as a watered down version of karate-do including the U.S. who was probably also given a watered down version.

It was suggested to one of the originators of this idea by a Chinese martial artist that even China gave Okinawa a watered down version of their forms. This is all just theory of course, but theory that if researched might have more to tell. The intriguing watered down theory was shared with me by a Godan named Matt McCormick who has trained for 28 years. He is regarded as a very hard worker among his peers.

It seems the training differences don't lie in the karate, but in the social differences of the countries. The watered down version is interesting, but there is plenty still to learn that is already known of karate-do.

Emphasis of Kumite

How much emphasis should be put on Kumite? Kumite (free sparring) is the final application for the physical part of karate-do. Many karate schools have their students sparring right away and put more emphasis on it than kata. Sensei Keith Moore who has trained since 1970 began training in a school that put more emphasis on sparring than kata. Now in a school that is just the opposite, he believes there should be a 50/50 split of the two.

Sensei Carbonara who has trained for thirty-one years, began sparring immediately in his training (full contact). Over time, his views on kumite

flip-flopped. He sees sparring as having a winner and a loser, which he dislikes. Free sparring occurs very rarely in his dojo with emphasis on kata and yakusoku kumite.

Sensei Carbonara uses yakusoku kumite as a substitute for free sparring. "Yakusoku kumite is the major source of knowledge for a street fight situation," says Carbonara.

Master Takayoshi Nagamine said once "kumite is good, too, as long as it is well taught. The mental part is important. You have to be a good loser, then, no trouble." Master Nagamine was Sensei Rafferty's first sensei and he did not begin to kumite until a year had passed.

Sensei Frank Grant who is a student of Grand Master Shoshin Nagamine, does not allow any free sparring in his dojo. However, some students occasionally went to other dojos to spare. When Sensei Grant returned from six months of training in Okinawa with Grand Master Nagamine in 1967, he claims he was told no more free sparring and to this day there is still no free-sparring done at his dojo. There was one occasion though, in 1974 when some free sparring did occur in his dojo during a visit from Sensei Ota. It was allowed by Sensei Grant. In Grand Master's book on page 29, #3, there is a contradiction to Sensei Grant's claim on kumite. Sensei Grant is known to be a great kata man among his peers.



PHOTOS BY ED IKUTA



Frank Grant

Shotoku Omine

Because of the great varying of ideas on kumite, it seems to depend on the particular instructor's opinions. However, it's the chance to use what is learned from kata. I believe when the karate student performs and looks at kata as more of a fight and not just as a sequence of techniques, then his kumite will take a big step forward. As a Shodan I have just began to scratch that surface.

The Education of the Beginning Karate-Do Student

Senseis have so many things to instill in new students, which is the most important one? Discipline, dedication, and desire, the three D's as it's called by Sensei Rafferty, is one. Self confidence is a popular one. "Anyone can do it if they put their mind to it" says Sensei Renfro. Humility, also repetition and consistency are others.

All these are important to build a framework for students. This lets the students results surface on their own, says Sensei McCormick, "people don't get taught - they learn." After reading some of Funakoshi's book I believe his answer on what the most important thing to instill in a new student would be "karate ni sente nashi," which embodies the proper attitude for a karateka. This is because of the high rate of students influenced by the flashy violence of martial arts movies and also those who have been bullied and believe karate technique is the only way to solve their problems.

A Look at the Popularization of Karate-Do

Grand Master speaks of some of the down-sides of the popularization of karate-do in his book, "The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do. Early in the 20th Century instructors of many college clubs couldn't teach formal karate so they resorted to emphasis on free fighting as did some non-certified instructors in Japan who cashed in on the popular notion of the time that all Okinawans were karate-men.

As a consequence, Grand Master says, karate is beginning to lose its values as a martial art with the increase in worldwide popularity. In a formal karate dojo however, karate training can better the character of its participants and more. A good example of this is shown in a movie referred to me by one of my senior senseis called Samurai 1.2.3. It's about an actual samurai named Nusashi, who lived in the feudal times.

A great Okinawan karate man, Chotoku Omine had this to say in regards to the popularization of karate-do. "Can the young man who calls himself a sensei teach and hold students with only physical components of karate and no budo? Sensei Omine believes there are too many dojos springing up across the U.S. focusing on the flashy free-sparring techniques, which has a negative affect on karate-do. This leads us to some of the reasons for this problem here in the U.S.

Because of karate's rise in popularity there seems to be a lot of non-traditional schools across the country that teach karate but forget the "do"

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Memorial picture for the 85th year party of Grand Master Shoshin Nagamine and Master Takayoshi Nagamine. Kumite action. Photo was taken on 1 September 1991.



part of it. This is probably due to America's want it now attitude. They seem to push for popularity and the idea that winning is everything. This is bad for the students and bad for society in general.

It could be that these young black belts are in it only for the money, therefore taking a business like approach to running their dojos. "Only teaching technique without the bunkai or history along with it makes the training shallow," says Sensei Renfro who runs a school himself and is currently a Shodan. However, he's trained since 1978, obtaining a lot of wisdom in karate-do.

A comment was made that traditions are not for everybody, some people need different things. This is probably true, but the new student doesn't know the difference from one karate school to another. That student might leave thinking all karate is not for him and never get the chance to experience all the benefits true karate-do has to offer him.

The less traditional, more business like dojos will bring in more students, but through time the more traditional run dojos will retain more students. The student who craves knowledge of bettering his self will plateau and will eventually find his way to a dojo that offers more depth.

How to Stick With It

A small percentage of people who begin training in karate-do actually stay with it and this is partly due to the rigorous workouts involved. There are

several ways to stay motivated when feeling too tired after attending to responsibilities at home and work. For some it is as easy as telling himself "every day is a new day" and just doing it. For others they use specific methods to pull themselves into the dojo like staying busy after work until you arrive at class so you don't have to rely on a second wind. Another might be to just throw your gi on and go very quickly and then usually you won't turn back.

Telling yourself you'll feel better once you're there is true and can be an affective way to get there as well. Some days however, take care of themselves like a stressful day at work might pull you in. Preventive measures taken to avoid feeling sluggish before class time is done by going to class consistently without excuses. "When I slack off I get less motivated," one sensei had to say. Eventually you should develop a discipline to the art as Sensei McCormick who trains six times a week as stated. "I cannot, not do it, it's as necessary to me as breathing."

As necessary as breathing brings up an important point. The desire to better ones karate-do is the foundation for consistent training, but evidently sometimes this needs a little push too.

Sometimes training gets cut off completely for some, not for lack of motivation, but because of major obstacles experienced in the karateka's life. It might be some deep personal reason having to do with a close

family member or other interests might gain a higher importance. One reason might even be because of too many personal obligations.

Apparently there is some kind of re-evaluation process that goes on with many students once they receive their Shodan.

No matter the cause of these breaks taken from karate-do, the “do” seems to always draw the student back in and sometimes there are regrets of ever stopping in the first place. To avoid getting burned out on the training one might beware of what’s considered to themselves as too much training.

Some karate-do students take a break and never come back. There is a definite higher percentage of students in karate-do who do not stay with it then there are who do. Unfortunately, these people are leaving the dojo knowing how to kick and punch and may use it in an improper way.

According to Grand Master Nagamine, it is the general tendency of beginners to be superficially attracted by karate-do technique, but the acquisition of technique alone harms not only the person, but society in general.

A lot of this attraction to the physical part of karate is due to false impressions of movies that disillusion the eager karateka. Many people walk in the dojo wanting only to fight or to have bragging rights. Sensei

Yasuharu Makishi currently a ninth Dan said he first sought karate-do for physical training and discipline. After 10-12 years of training however, his attitude changed. Karate-do became a spiritual challenge for him while the desire to only become strong diminished.

Grand Master Nagamine feels it takes a minimum of five years of training to feel the essence of karate-do. Realizing this themselves, many instructors have arranged the curriculum to lower the turn over rate. One way might be to switch the work-outs around to keep the interest level up. Another might be to raise the requirements of the training to have a better grade of students. This would set higher standards for the new students and keep any bad apples from having a negative affect on the other students.

No matter what the original reason of beginning was, if educated properly, an open-minded student will eventually find there is more to karate-do than fancy kicks and punches. The students and teachers must work together on keeping the students there in the beginning so the student is given the change to make karate-do and essential part of their life.

Attributes of Karate-Do

One of the many benefits of karate-do is a karateka's ability to rise to heroic proportion. This is an inadvertent attribute gained by hard working students. When Sensei Moore was attacked by two thieves while getting into his car one night, he successfully defended himself and had them

running scared. Modestly, he mentioned that it was like something took control of his body and did what had to be done instinctively. He thanks his training for that.

Master Takayoshi Nagamine says that deeper one gets into karate training one learns to use as little force as possible in order to defend oneself. You not only respect yourself but all living things. This is then the art of karate-do. This statement is exemplified in a situation Sensei Carbonara was in. A man had backed his car in to one of his student's cars. The man was very angry and came at this student with a sledge hammer. When Sensei Carbonara saw what was happening he bravely approached the man. In a polite tone of voice he asked what was wrong while cleverly moving closer and closer to the man, thus making swinging the sledge hammer impossible by jamming him up. At that point Sensei Carbonara said, "if you don't have a gun, then you should go home," and that was the end of it.

There are many similar stories of heroism in Gichin Funakoshi's book, "Karate-do My Way of Life". There is a lot of good knowledge to be gained from these stories. They show how a good karateka should behave in different situations. One story showed how diligent training of the body can also defeat the will of an attacker. An old Okinawan karate man was walking up a path one night as a young hoodlum snuck up on him. The young attacker punched him in his kidney from behind with all his might. And the old man grabbed his head without showing any pain of looking back

kept on walking. Once he neared some light, the old man finally looked back at his attacker still holding on to him and said, "you shouldn't pick on old men like me, it's not nice," and let the astonished and frightened hoodlum go.

The many attributes given to karate students seem to be endless. As they are applied more often in every day life karate-do becomes more of a way of life.

There are many questions still needing answers regarding karate-do.

Everyone in Matsubayashi Ryu should know who was responsible for bringing it to the U.S. That of course was Grand Master Nagamine when he sent Ansei Ueshiro, one of his students to pioneer Matsubayashi Ryu in the U.S. in the late 1950's. Although there was an American marine named Jimmy Wax who spread Matsubayashi Ryu throughout Ohio also in the late 1950's.

Humility, good character and respect was more than I expected to receive being such a low rank in Matsubayashi Ryu. I thank all of my senior senseis for all the input and help given to me to better understand karate-do.