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INTRODUCTION

Karate-Do

Karate-do, the way/art of empty hand fighting, spread outwards during the course of a single century from a small island in the Ryukyu archipelago to encompass the world. It is an art applauded and derided in just about equal measure.

Through shrewd marketing and transformation the art was made palatable by the Okinawan *sensei*, most notably Master Itosu and Master Funakoshi, to the population of Japan. The Japanese overcame the general xenophobia in the aftermath of World War II to make it palatable in turn to huge swathes of the population of the Western World.

Occupying Allied forces found diversions from the confines of their duties so far from home by embracing this small slice of eastern culture, which was of obvious interest to fighting men, giving them an outlet for their stress and aggression during a time of peace.

Then, during the sixties, organisations such as the Japan Karate Association developed a crop of élite *sensei* through their gruelling, now legendary, instructor's programme, and sent them out into the world to spread karate.

The rest, as they say, is history. During the sixties, seventies and eighties the art continued to grow and gain favour steadily throughout the West, which began to develop high quality sensei of its own, ensuring continued growth.

But then, an insidious downfall seemed to begin. Westerners were more interested in the marketability of the art than maintaining its

origin. In the West we are all about fast results. People jump from one crash diet to the next, hoping for the miracle rapid weight loss without the torture of exercise even though their subconscious correctly informs them each time that the diet offering the fast results will not deliver on its promise and, in some cases, will actually have an adverse effect on their health. The same became true of karate.

Black belts, once so coveted and worked for over so many years of diligent training, were offered in a fraction of the time. There was a time when the wearing of the black belt came with responsibility and due to the years of experience and hard training the wearer had undergone, that responsibility was more often than not fulfilled.

What many students in pursuit of this innocuous-looking length of black cotton failed to realise was that the obtaining of the *shodan* was actually the start of the serious training, not the climax, when all the subtleties that separated master from student could be studied. The problem was that many sensei who bestowed these black belts upon their hard-working students were not really equipped to deliver this next, higher level of training and a plateau was reached where the skills already acquired would be polished to the *nth* degree, but further development would be in short supply.

Please bear in mind that these statements speak of a general trend and that, just as there are rotten apples in every barrel, I am in no way implying that *all* western *sensei* were of this ilk.

Another problem occurred relating to the sporting aspect of the art. My intention is not to denigrate this exciting and valuable aspect of karate, and I have nothing but respect for the competitors. No, the problem lay in the perception of the techniques.

Formerly effective street techniques had to be outlawed for competition and less practical, but far more spectacular, techniques, began to emerge. All good *karateka* knew the distinction between sport karate and traditional karate and were well aware where the line was drawn between what worked in the tournament and what worked on the

street. (There was, in those days, a general lack of understanding of the subtleties of *kata* and an accordingly limited view of the possible applications of the techniques.)

The more spectacular techniques, which looked so good in the sporting arena, also translated well to celluloid, and former sporting champions found themselves embraced as movie stars. Thanks to seeing these films, ironically, *dojo* began to fill with children (and adults) who wanted to emulate their screen idols and thought that, because the technique worked outside for their heroes, it would also work for them. Sensei, quite naturally, taught these techniques, as that is what got the paying public through the door.

Some tried to translate their art to the streets and made it effective, while many more suffered the agony (quite literally) of defeat. The ones that were successful discovered that they could tweak the art to fit into the streets, possibly not realising that what they had been taught was already adapted from the original art and their ultimate destination was not too far from where karate originated. The journey they took made them into some of the best instructors that we have in the world today, but their arduous journey might well have been smoother (and less painful) if not for this blurring between the two aspects of the art.

Strangely, styles which were still based around Okinawa, such as Goju-Ryu, continued to train in the art as a form of combat plain and simple and, whilst their growth was not as rapid as the styles which were imported to Japan, their influence now reaches just as far.

Another hard blow came with the advent of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. The lure of different disciplines coming together in combat was just what martial artists the world over had been waiting for. The somewhat narrow-minded argument over which art is best had been discussed and debated for a long time.

(The short answer to this by the way, is that *no* art is better than any other. It is the students who are better or worse and, until they perfect cloning so that the same person can be trained in two different arts for

the same length of time and intensity, the above argument is moot).

However futile, the debate raged on. But what the general public failed to account for was that the martial artists, including *karateka*, who entered the tournaments were doing so utilising the *sporting* techniques. Not surprisingly, when they encountered fighters who did not keep their distance but closed in and dragged them to the ground, they found themselves swiftly despatched. This led to a general public opinion (a flawed opinion, in my view) that karate was not effective. Even now, when Lyoto Machida delivers a knee strike, they say he has borrowed it from Muay Thai when, in all honesty, he will see it as a *hiza-geri*.

Both he and Anderson Silva were lauded for the "front kicks" they employed to win fights. These were apparently passed on from the actor Steven Seagal, a man well versed in Japanese martial arts, who did not refine their teep but their *mae geri*.

Now we have 'mixed martial arts', a general term for a hybrid of different systems brought together so the fighter can cross disciplines and move easily from striking to grappling and standing to ground fighting. I greatly enjoy watching MMA and have followed the UFC since its inception. There are some truly great fighters out there, but I wonder how many of them, if they actually studied a traditional art as it was originally taught, would find that they do not need to cross disciplines at all and would actually find everything they need in

one place? After all, wrestling originally contained strikes, and the majority of striking arts originally contained grappling techniques.

The problem with traditional martial arts is that they were originally developed for fighting, not as a sport, but as a life or death struggle. With the advent of a more modern age (I refuse to use the term "more civilised", simply because we are not) the former battlefield arts were preserved by being formalised.

When karate, a civilian self-defence system for use against untrained attackers, came to Japan, it too was transformed from *jutsu* to do. The irony of it is that an argument could be put forth that, without

this transition, the art would not have spread as far across the world as it did.

Fortunately, a renaissance has been occurring over the past ten or twenty years whereby the art is being newly explored and the subtleties are being rediscovered. *Bunkai* and *oyo* are now becoming integral forms of training for many *karateka* and their healthy exchanges of ideas across different styles and disciplines have led to renewed interest in their traditional arts.

But what of the philosophy? If you read Master Funakoshi's biography, *Karate-Do My Way of Life* (see bibliography) you will find that he was held in high esteem by his neighbours and was called on for his wise counsel just as much as his prowess as a fighter, if not more. This is due to his pursuit of the art reaching far further than just techniques in the dojo and seeping into the way he lived his life.

This would have been by design, not accident. He saw his art as a way of life, something which transcends mere physical technique. How many of us today who practise the art of karate actually do so as a way of life? I have concerns that, whilst the necessary and much needed renaissance regarding the effectiveness of technique is taking place, the philosophy and more far-reaching aspects of karate may be neglected.

Chapter 5

A modern Interpretation of Karate ni sente nashi

One of the oldest pieces of legislation in our country (presuming you are reading this in the UK) is that of Common Law. If is from Common Law that we get the fundamental offences like homicide. Common Law also states that a private citizen has a right to defend himself/herself, his/her loved ones and his/her property. This is all good, but there is a grey area attached. The grey area is that the force used must be *reasonable*.

There are other Acts which govern the use of force by law enforcement personnel, such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984) and they too, mention "reasonable force".

So, what is "reasonable"? Unfortunately, that is usually decided by either a group of prosecutors and defenders, lay persons from a magistrates' bench, or a jury. It will be decided after you have been possibly arrested and interviewed, and you are now standing in the dock in your best suit trying to clarify, in a clinical artificial environment, the feelings and physical symptoms of terror you felt during that violent encounter that occurred at three in the morning in the driving rain on a darkened street six months ago.

The magistrates and the jury are not legal professionals. They are chosen from your peers but, even so, they have to draw their

conclusions from witness statements and CCTV footage because they were not there at the time of the incident in question. If any of them have been in your situation, they can probably empathise, but the majority of them will never have been involved in a violent situation and cannot possible know how it feels. (NB: even your Sensei may never have been in a live, violent situation.)

People are all different and the only person who can convey *your* feelings and reactions is you. If the jury find out you are well versed in "martial arts" I guarantee that there will be some amongst them who see those arts through a veil of deadly mystery and will judge you based on that.

This is all very gloomy and I am not saying that should you end up in court you will be damned. I am trying to convey certain realities that you may not have experienced.

Fortunately, some guidance does exist on what can be construed as "reasonable". Basically, it is whatever force is necessary to negate the threat, and no more. Anything above and beyond that is gratuitous violence and would be an aggravating factor in the eyes of the courts. This sounds straightforward enough, but even this can be incident specific.

For instance, if a man attacks you with a baseball bat and you use a walking stick to defend yourself, as long as you stop when the threat is negated, that force can be construed as reasonable. If a man attacks you with his bare hands and you use the same walking stick in the same manner, you would say that that was excessive.

But what if you were a seventy-six year-old woman? Or the man is twice your size? Or he is simply the first person to get to you out of a gang of six who all intend doing you harm? The definition of reasonable force is not as cut and dried as legislation would have us believe. Every situation is different and, if the courts are doing their jobs correctly, all factors should be taken into account before it is decided whether the force used is reasonable.

So what can you do? First of all, there is nothing glamorous

about violence, no matter what films would have you believe. If you have any sense at all (and any grasp of the philosophical side of karate) you will avoid violence like the plague. If a violent encounter is unavoidable, stop when the threat is negated.

Should the police become involved, whether you are giving a witness statement or are being interviewed under caution, make sure you go on record explaining exactly how you felt when the incident occurred. There is no room for bravado and ego; if you felt fear, tell them. If there were other factors conditioning your actions, such as the feeling that if he got past you, your family was in danger, mention it. Stressful situations, such as being placed under arrest or being interviewed under caution, can cause time to seemingly fly by and, before you know it, your opportunity to relate your experience of the incident will have passed, so try and keep your wits about you.

You need to hope for the best but plan for the worst. If you are going to find yourself in a court, you need to help the people judging your guilt to understand why you did what you did, to put them, figuratively speaking, in your shoes.

Do not forget though: your comments about the fear you felt and why you did what you did will only be effective if they are true. There will be people other than you speaking to the police and in the courts.

So, when we talk about reasonable force, does that mean we have to wait until we are physically attacked before we can act? The short answer is: No. The law allows what is called a "pre-emptive strike" if you have a *reasonable and honest belief* that you are in danger. What is construed as *reasonable and honest belief* is down to you to prove in the aftermath of the encounter, but would depend on lots of factors which would probably be unique to that situation.

Understanding body language and the imminent physical signs on a human body which imply an intention to fight and that violence is imminent can greatly assist in this.

Although this is not true in every encounter, usually, when the fight ritual begins, your opponent will try to make himself seem larger. He will push out his chest and spread his arms. His face will redden, and he may shout. This is designed to make you back down as soon as the situation begins and to "scare" you away.

As I said, every situation is unique and if, for whatever reason, you decide to stay, you will be witness to the next step in the ritual. This is when the body prepares itself for actual conflict. Your opponent's limbs will come back in closer to the body, his face will pale as his speeding heart spreads blood to his organs to cope with the chemical reactions as his body prepares for fight or flight. His chin will instinctively drop and, in complete contrast to the first part of the ritual, he will make himself appear smaller in an instinctive effort to present a smaller target. He may look away from your eyes to a potential target area and his fists may clench.

These symptoms, or variations of them, may or may not appear, but knowing them when they *do* appear can give you that reasonable and honest belief that you are going to be attacked.

It is also surprisingly common for people to make some comment, such as "I'm going to fucking smack you" before attacking. I am at a loss as to why you would advertise your intentions in this manner, but it does occur. If there are any psychology buffs out there who can tell me, I would be most grateful.

So, interesting and necessary as learning all this is, how does it fit in with our continuing quest to make our karate more pragmatic whilst adhering to the original philosophical concepts?

There is a concept in karate known as *karate ni sente nashi,* roughly translated as "there is no first attack in karate". This tends to imply that a *karateka* must wait for their opponent to make the first move before going into action. In traditional karate, this "first attack" has, in my opinion, been somewhat misconstrued.

Taking the concept of *karate ni sente nashi* into our modern scenario, you may think that a pre-emptive strike goes against this

concept. I don't think it does. What needs to be established is: *At what point does an attack begin?* This concept has always been taken as though the first attack is a physical one, such as a grab or a strike, but it does not have to be. As soon as you have that reasonable and honest belief, the *second* that feeling of being under immediate threat kicks in, the attack has begun. It may be subtle, such as an invasion of your personal space, the clenching of a fist or a comment, but it is the point where you can put your hand on your heart and say that what you did was justified.

Karate ni sente nashi, therefore, merely means that the *karateka* should never seek out physical confrontation, should never be the protagonist. But should imminent violence become a reality, it must be identified and negated as quickly as possible. This opens the door for the pre-emptive strike to enter your arsenal without veering from the *do*.