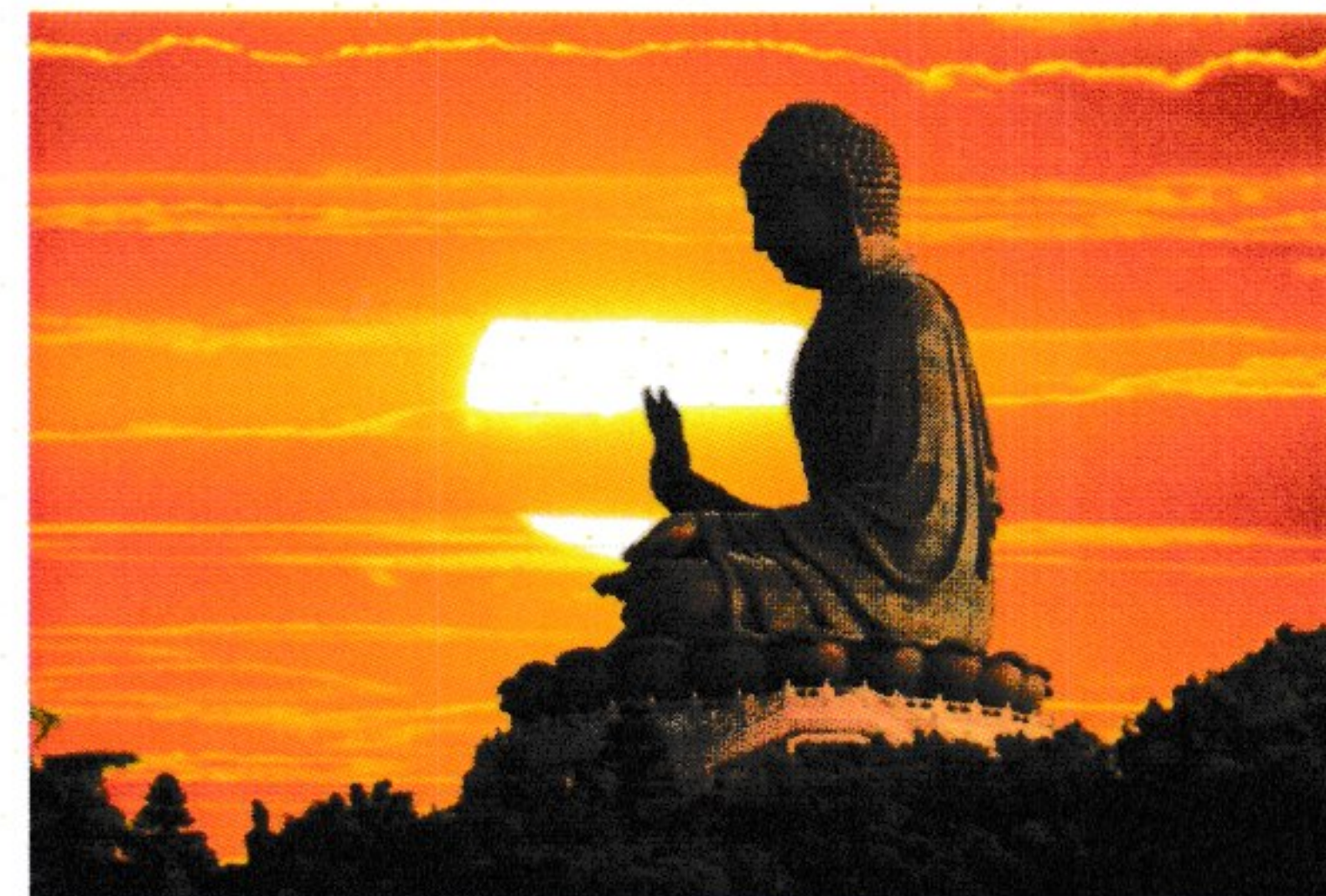
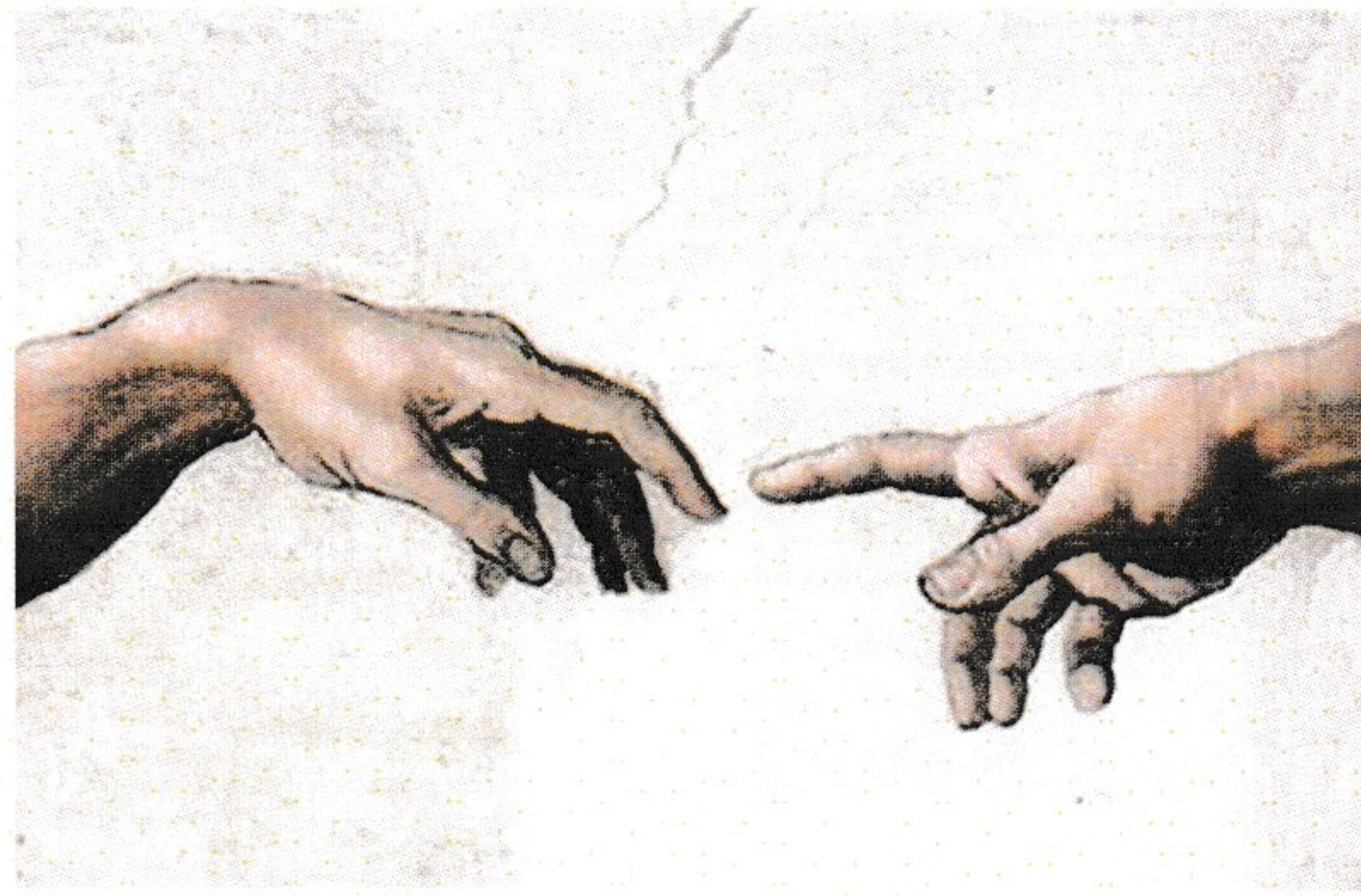




Okinawa, Religion, and Martial Arts

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In consideration for

Matsubyashi Shorin Ryu Shodan

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Okinawa

If an American has heard of Okinawa, it is usually due to the massive battle for the island during World War 2. The fight was unbelievably fierce and related in many ways to the Shinto religion and the claimed divinity of the Japanese emperor. Martial artists are more apt to have heard of Okinawa for another reason, as an amazing incubator of karate. Over 20 karate styles practiced throughout the world trace their origin to men from this island of less than 900 square miles, styles such as Isshin-ryu, Shotokan, Wado-ryu, Goju-ryu, and our own Matsubayashi-ryu.



Today, even those on the very fringe of the martial art community seem aware that karate has some kind of relationship with fighting and with various religious ideas. Actually, there has always been a connection between fighting and religion. If religion is defined as a collection of ideas about the purpose of humanity and the existence of the supernatural, that makes sense.

How should people treat each other?
What is the nature of reality?
What causes pain and sorrow and can it be stopped?
How do we know what we know?
What gives life meaning?
What happens after death?

The answers may differ, but these questions help form the core of any religion or belief system, even atheism. The role of fighting is just one way the issues play out.

Does a trained fighter help preserve peace or make it more precarious?
Is there such a thing as a just war or battle?
Is evil a reality that should be physically fought against at times,
a necessary certainty, or just a different point of view?

Clearly, belief and action connect.

In America, people generally sally forth and decide what religion or belief system to embrace or discard. In fact, several of our original colonies were formed by Christians seeking free choice in how to worship. If we are not precisely a people who research carefully or a media who portray various religions accurately, we still surely are a nation who values freedom of individual choice, especially related to spirituality. Spiritual beliefs tend to be something we choose in both the inner and outer sense.

The Okinawan experience differs radically from ours. This tiny island lacks resources, but lies strategically between Japan and China. Merchants, missionaries and military forces all crave a strategic foothold here. A long history of being subjugated by other nations convinced the Okinawans that avoiding quarrels is necessary to their survival. They are less likely to sally forth and choose a belief system and more likely to politely cooperate as needed, especially in the outer sense.

Three of the major belief systems introduced in Okinawa were Buddhism, Christianity, and Shinto. Over time, these religions impacted those who fought and formed the art of karate. Because karate begins and ends in courtesy, it is worthwhile to understand the historical connection between religion and karate in Okinawa as well as the relationship between karate and religion today as practiced by the serious student.

Buddhism Enters Okinawa

Until the early 1400s, the outside influences in Okinawa were limited to an occasional shipwrecked sailor or priest, or an exiled Japanese noble or criminal. When a group of Buddhists came from Korea, their formal texts, rituals, and abstract ideas did not appeal much to the Okinawans. Some of the more educated in Shuri and Naha did participate (Kerr, 110) but most preferred expressing local religious customs related to Noro. (Kerr, 81) However, Buddhist rituals related to death were eventually adopted.

Soon after this, Okinawan sailors were trading extensively throughout the area, especially with China, often with a 1000% return. It was a time of great prosperity and complex civilization on the island. Japanese Buddhist and Shinto priests were inspired by this wealth to come seeking patrons for lavish temples and shrines. King Taikyu responded enthusiastically in the mid 1500s, sponsoring many Buddhist temples at amazing expense to the national treasury. (Kerr, 99) Buddhism still did not integrate with the common people, although the temples laid a foundation for the future.

Then Buddhism came again, with more influence. In Japan, the shogunate period was fading. The samurai were bored and becoming destructive, so Japanese leaders sent the Satsuma samurai off to Okinawa for something to do. (Kerr, 138) These warriors noted the fortune Okinawans made trading with China and were immediately inspired to take secret control of the island trade. Although most of the Satsuma samurai were Confucian, many practiced Zen Buddhism.

The root cause of samurai conversion to Zen probably dates back to the beginning of shogunate rule. Like most at the time, the shogunate considered the emperor to be divine. So they established supreme ruling power, but did not eliminate the royal dynasty. Instead the emperor was limited to a ceremonial court life of reign without rule. The new shogunate government was forging a culture of their own, separate from the royal court, just as a Chinese priest, Eisai, arrived. (Kasahar) "With his cultured and cosmopolitan background, Eisai laid the foundations of Zen as a favored religion of the emerging samurai class. The match was right; on the one hand the discipline of Zen, including the ability to endure pain and privation, went well with the warrior spirit; on the other, the austere but elegant arts of Zen suited the rising warriors' aspirations to refinement." (Ellwood, 133)



Chinese priest, Eisai

At first, those in the royal court of Okinawa politely accommodated these samurai who followed Zen. Gradual acceptance spread to some of high rank or education. However, in the mid 1600s, the religious situation changed from influence to domination. The Satsuma leader Shimazu forbid the expression of any local religions. For an extended time only Zen Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism were allowed to be openly practiced. (Kerr) These are esoteric or mysterious

systems that value special knowledge with abstract ideas and philosophic practices. Neither Zen nor Shingon appealed widely to the average Okinawan, though some did practice them (Kerr, 156), eventually to include Shoshin Nagamine, founder of the Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu karate style.

What is Buddhism?

Originally, Buddhism was known as “The Middle Way” of living between rigorous self denial and however you wanted to act. Siddhartha Guatama founded this now world-wide religion in India. Although accounts vary and were not put in writing until 400 years after his death, the general story is that Guatama lived a life of protected luxury, then saw an old man, a sick man, and finally a dead man. His initial response to pain and suffering was to retreat into the rigorous asceticism of self denial, which did not lead to peace. Then he turned to meditation and one day under a fig tree reached a state of enlightenment, experiencing nirvana.



The original and primary goal of Buddhism is to eliminate suffering through eliminating desire as expressed in the Four Noble Truths. Eliminating desire is achieved through following the Eightfold path. The Eightfold path includes many instructions common to all faith systems such as loving, not lying, stealing, or lusting. Somewhat unique are the requirements to renounce all desire and sorrow, to work in an occupation that harms no one, and to meditate on overcoming both pleasure and pain until a state of perfection and transcendent consciousness is reached.

Three key beliefs related to Buddhism are karma, samsara, and nirvana. Samsara is the belief in an indefinitely repeated cycle of birth, misery, death, and rebirth (reincarnation) caused by karma. Karma is the Hindu and Buddhist version of cause and effect, or the basis of justice. It is the belief that a person's actions determine their lot in the next life. Karma maintains that who people are and what happens to them is caused by their previous lives and also that their actions in this life determine what the next life will be like. If they suffer, it is because of past wrongs and desires. The better they follow the Eightfold path, the better the next life will be.

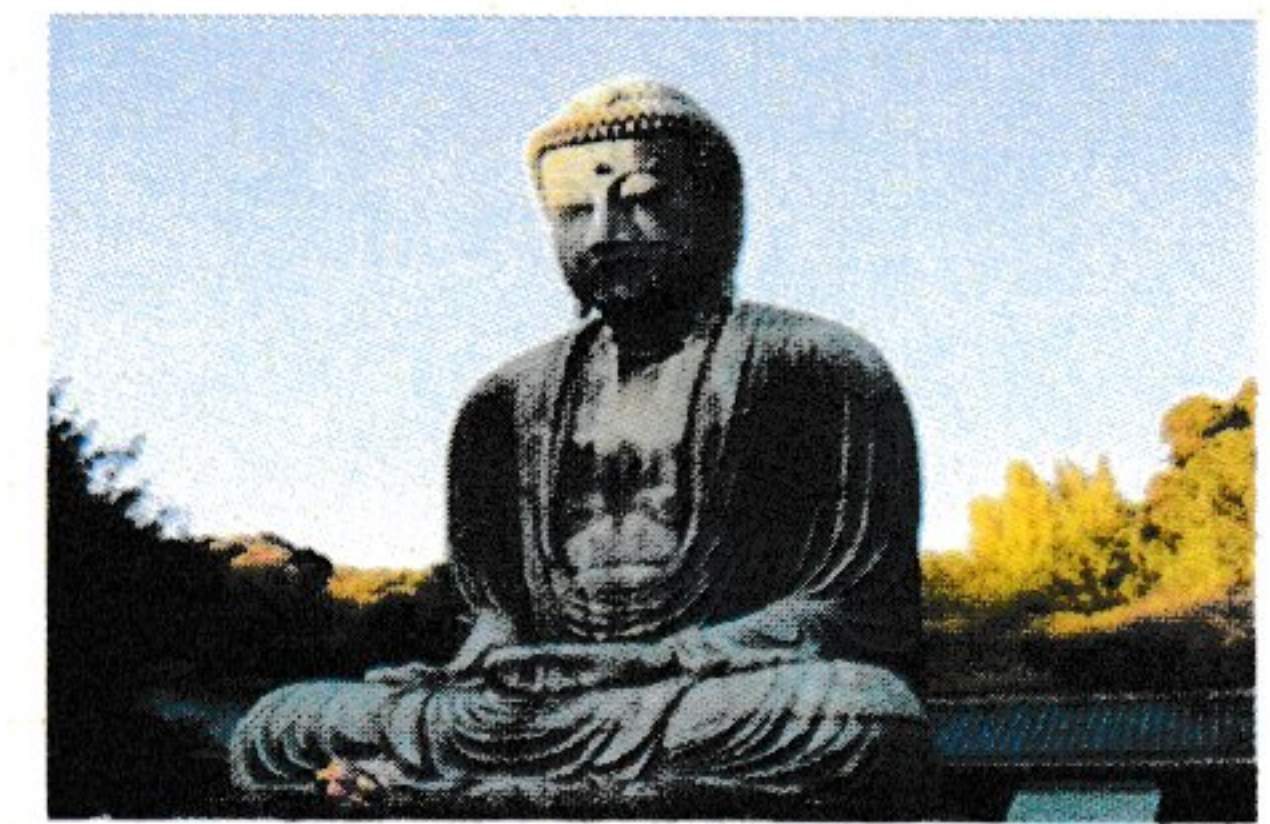
Buddha taught that the existence of self is an illusion and that we do not have an eternal substance or soul. This realization is part of the enlightenment in reaching the state of nirvanah. Nirvanah is believed to end samsara and karma. It is not considered a location or relationship, but a state of being or consciousness that literally means “the blowing out,” or extinguishing of sense of self into the great consciousness of the universe. (Hardy)

In original Buddhism, Buddha was not worshiped and did not give enlightenment. He showed a path and moved on to nirvana, which each person sought individually through their own efforts and thousands of reincarnations. However, now some worship Buddha as a savior figure or deity. Some emphasize chanting, others pray to Bodhivistas for help. Various sects such as Tendai, Nichiren, Zen, Shingon, Tibetan and Pure Land have formed in various countries, outlining different ways to reach enlightenment and to define nirvana. The primary goal of many

Buddhists today is still to end suffering, but with more emphasis on the other side of the coin, the achievement of peace and eternal bliss called nirvana.

Pure Land

In Japan, the common man tended toward Pure Land Buddhism. The Pure Land is not heaven or nirvana, but once achieved in the cycle of reincarnation, is a place you can stay to pursue enlightenment without trouble or temptations. Warriors who died with honor or in battle were said to go straight there. Later, it was said to be achieved by chanting in faith the name of the bodhivista, Amida, who in grace and compassion would take you there. Pure Land was a simple faith that opened up Buddhism to the masses because it did not require reading texts or having philosophic discussions. “It sounds easy, but perhaps is not easy to put aside intellect, pride, and ego.” (Ellwood)

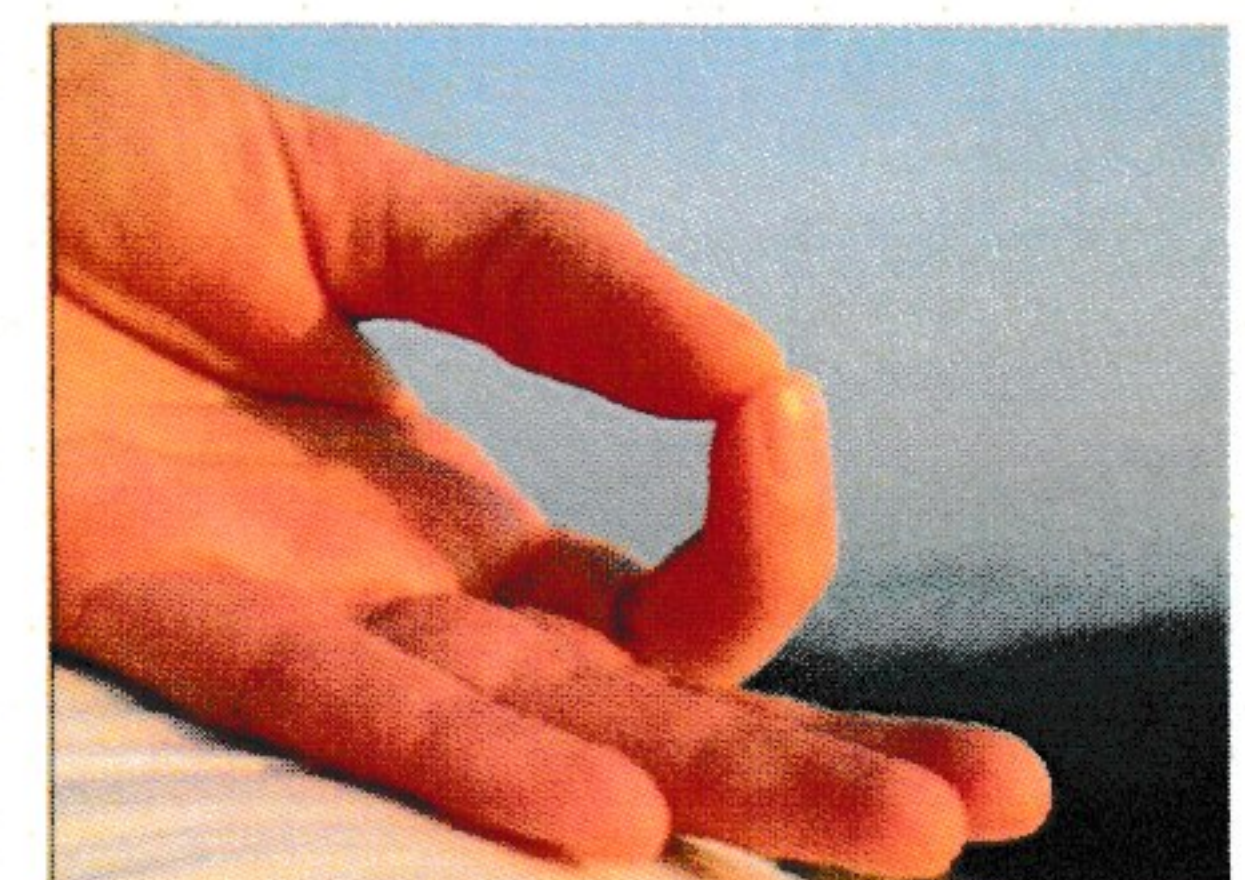


Statue of Amida

The Okinawan people under Shimazu’s thumb were known as kind, gentle, courteous and easy-going. Arguing the finer points of existential philosophy was not their idea of a good time, but common sense goodness was important to them. Shipwrecked Portuguese sailors said of them “They are very truthful men. They do not buy slaves, nor would they sell one of their own men for the whole world, and they would die over this.” (Kerr, 127) Of all forms of Buddhism, Pure Land seems to fit best with the Okinawan personality as a people. If Shimazu had not forbidden its practice, it might have spread widely.

Shingon

The Shingon sect is esoteric, or mysterious and special, not meant for the masses. The idea is to take a shortcut to enlightenment by uniting with a deity who helps you. (Hardy) Then you lose yourself through the consciousness of that divine personality, and can become a Buddha in this lifetime. Uniting with the deity is achieved with secret chants (mantras), hand gestures (mudras), and worship of symbols (mandalas). Although it was allowed by Shimazu during the Samutsura reign, most Okinawans did not embrace this belief system. (Kerr)



A Common Mudras

Zen

Zen Buddhism is also esoteric. It claims to be exclusive. (Hardy) Words and logic are viewed as interfering with true enlightenment; the highest truth is inexpressible. This form of Buddhism breaks from the idea of samsara, reincarnation, and karma. Instead, the focus is on the here and now. The belief is that everything you need is inside of you because you are already one with the universe. The goal is to experience or fully realize this through meditation, called seizan. Seizan in Zen is seated meditation that involves emptying your mind of words, logic, or preconceived ideas. The way to liberation is under an enlightened master. It has been compared to atheism or to Nietzsche’s philosophy which can be summarized as “God is dead. It’s all on you. Life is hard and then you die, but do your best anyway.”



Zen Master Meditating

There are two kinds of Zen. Rinzai is southern warrior Zen. Solving koans can jolt followers into sudden enlightenment, as can strikes during meditation. An example of a koan is, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” (Hardy) Meditating on a koan forces a monk to give up depending on logic so as to inspire a sudden intuitive enlightenment. Soto is northern farmer Zen which emphasizes gradual enlightenment through work and meditation.

Surely some Okinawans and others pursued and still pursue martial arts as a path to Zen enlightenment, but “Historically, most martial artists who have undertaken Zen have not done so with the intention of reaching enlightenment.” (Mann, 119) Instead, “They embraced it along the way – sending their sons to Zen monasteries for training – finding that zazen could “help steel a fighting man for battle.” (Ellwood, 143)

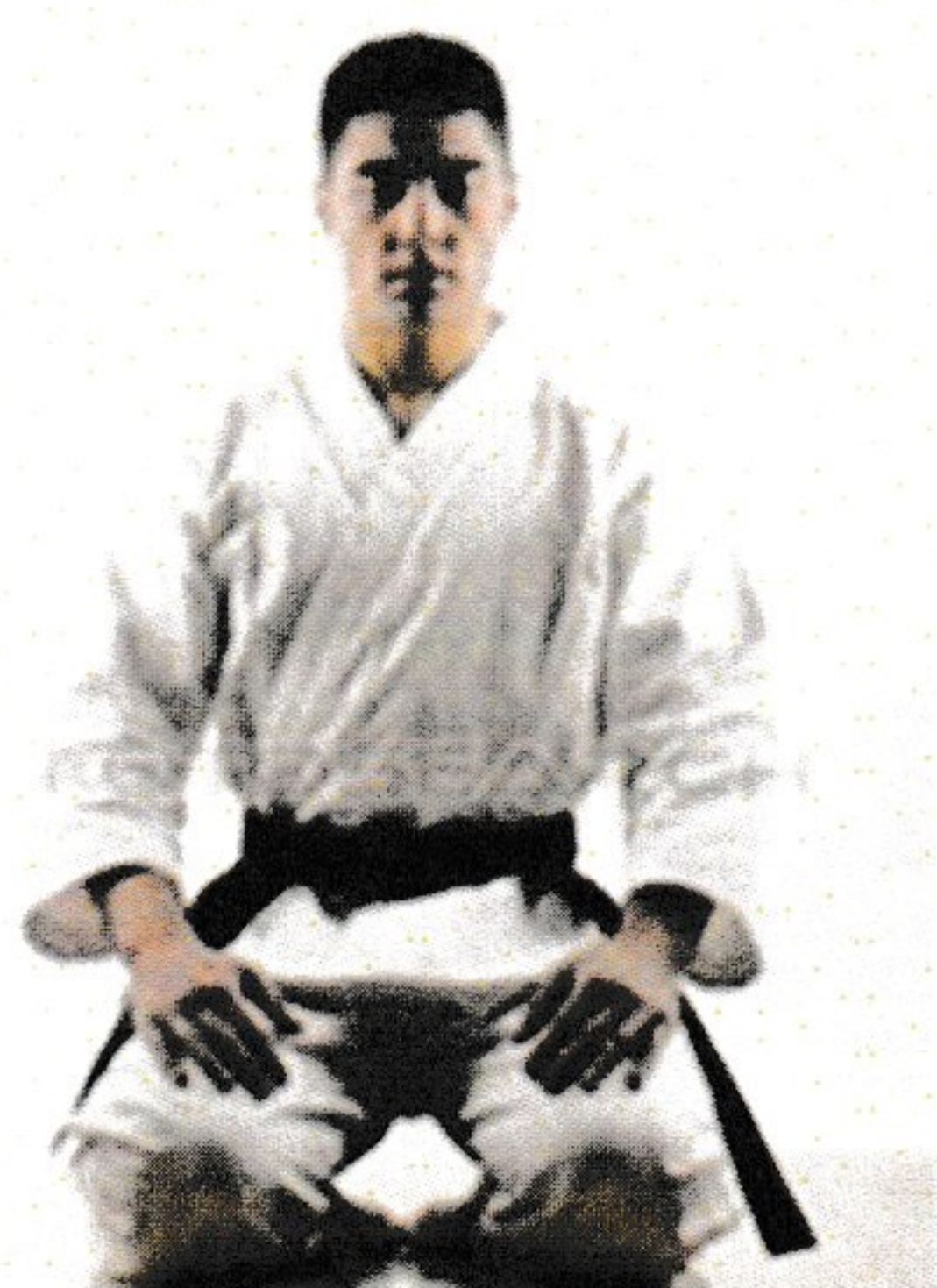
Benefits Borrowed from Buddhism

Buddhism has clearly contributed to the success and effectiveness of martial arts. In fact, many sources claim that martial art began in a Shaolin Buddhist monastery and was spread by priests. More recent contributions are the honored role of the teacher or master and meditation along with the techniques stemming from it.

Traditional and respected karate schools honor the role of the teacher beyond what is typical in the western world. For example, a college student might be asked, “What was your major?” But in karate the important question is always, “Who was your teacher?” and “Who was his teacher?” In Buddhism, “Documentation of transmission of the teachings from master to disciple was very important . . . a group that lacked a documented lineage of transmission from master to disciple was not a school or sect at all.” (Kasahara, 181)

This emphasis obviously influenced karate masters in Okinawa. Today, karateka rank is certified on paper with the teacher’s signature and personal stamp or chop. When visiting an excellent dojo, this proof of who your teacher was and what he recognizes about your ability carries more weight with the instructor than any colored belt indicating rank.

Another contribution from Buddhism is meditation and the skills and techniques associated with it. “The way to meditate is to breath in the nose and out the mouth and to think about breathing and nothing else.” (Mann) “Skill begins with breath control.” (Ellwood) Another Buddhist and Taoist idea is to think of spiritual energy as coming from the center of self. Samurai who practiced Zen adapted these spiritual ideas of breathing and center into useful physical techniques for fighting which are still effective in sparring now.



Seizan meditation has also impacted karate. Any great athlete takes time to clear their mind of distraction and to focus before training or performing. Traditional karate is one of the few disciplines to allocate group time for this, through the techniques of seizan and mukuso. Although the outward form and even the word seizan are borrowed from Buddhism, the intention in karate is generally to achieve what Buddhists would consider the mere side benefits of meditation, not enlightenment leading to nirvana, but “. . .to be fully present in the moment. . .not thinking of how others view me, or my last sparring match. I exist now. . .in one act concentration, attending to that which is truly at hand and not caught up in the irrelevant.”

(Mann) Skills stemming from seizan contribute to focused training, and also to the now awareness that helps fighters note and seize opportunities in sparring.



Buddhist Concerns

A traditional devoted Buddhist will struggle with the role of fighting and violence. Imagine what it was like for the man born into the samurai role to learn #5 on the Eightfold path “. . .not to have an occupation that harms.” The inner conflict was real.

The pure Buddhist views the world and the physical universe as something like a mind that has life force and purpose. Everything is this life force and this life force equals and is in everything.

The academic term is Pantheism. Naturally flowing from this is the idea that good and evil are just a human way of looking at things. A disease is bad because it kills a man, but medicine is bad because it kills disease. Yet we think of medicine as good and so somehow there must be a misunderstanding about disease. The distinction between good and evil gets fuzzy and fades away if the universe is all one unified life force.

True, this is not a problem for all of Buddhists. But for those who have subscribed to a complete system of traditional Buddhism, (the way we have subscribed to one system of karate as opposed to mixed martial arts or to another system) there is dissonance. Why train? How does a person decide when to fight and what to fight? How do you process the aftermath? If you believe in karma and in the samsara cycle of reincarnation, and are seeking nirvana, then these issues need to be thought through until a conviction about allowable action is reached.

The traditional Zen Buddhist faces a different dissonance. This system maintains “If you are a true Zen Buddhist you have no soul. So why fear death? What is lost?” (Mann) Fear can be paralyzing; lack of fear can be a major tactical advantage. However, sometimes a still, small voice says, “If I have no soul, then this body and this life are all I do have. Why fear death? What is lost? My very being and so everything.” It is not supposed to matter in Zen, but for some people, sometimes it still does. At a key moment, this doubt could be paralyzing or result in ferocity out of proportion to need. It could also become the root of performance anxiety in an effort to make this physical life count.

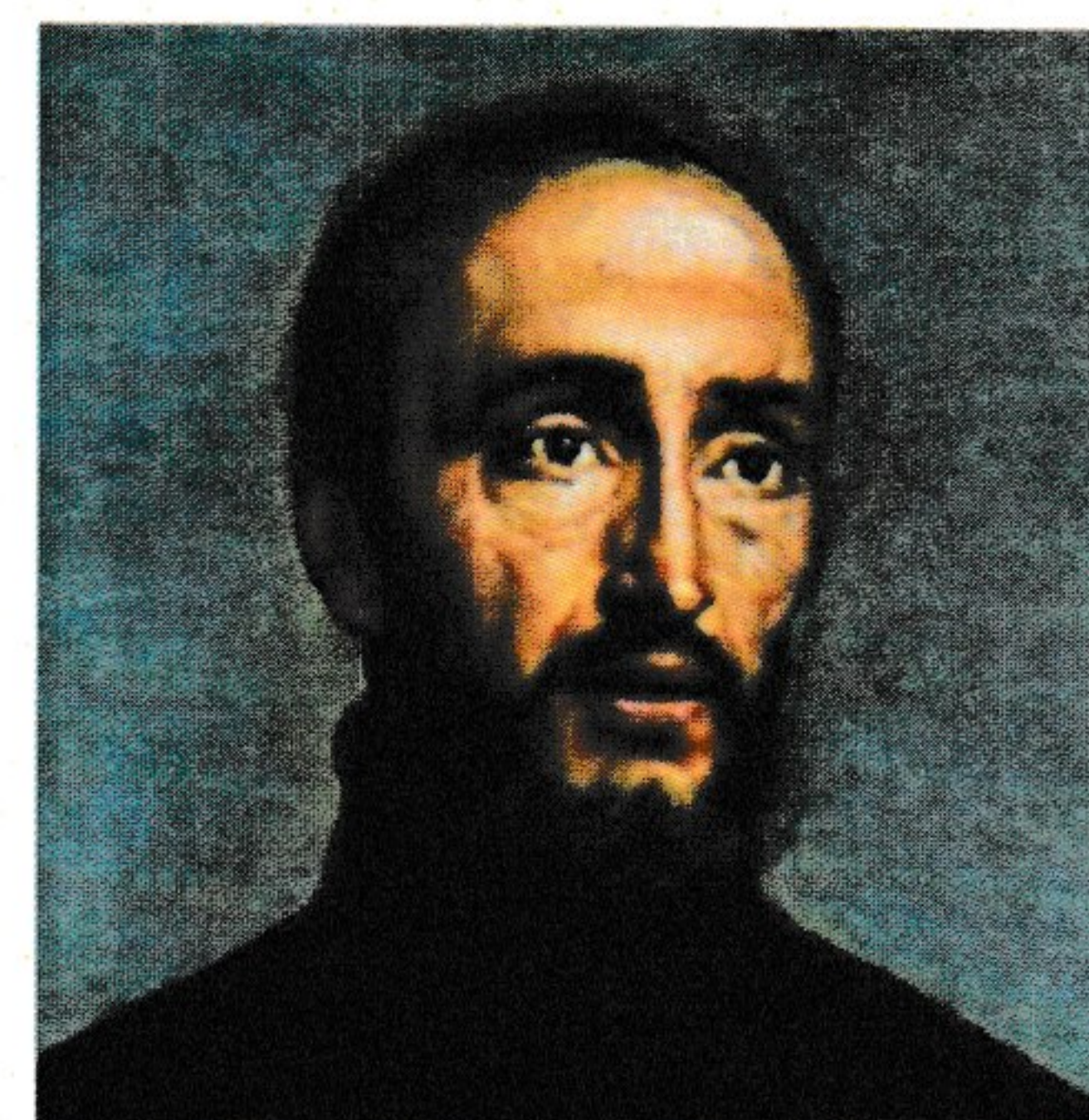
If you practice karate alongside a person who is grappling with these metaphysical questions, do not make simplistic assumptions. Do not dismiss their inner conflict or steamroll them with your solutions. Karate begins and ends in courtesy. There is much to honor from Buddhist contribution to martial arts, regardless of what a person agrees with, believes, or even understands. Start with honor. Of course various ideas might be submitted for consideration in a give and take friendship, if they are welcome. Courtesy requires us to truly respect the individual’s personal journey, their need to process ideas over time, and their inherent right to an inner choice of belief.

Christianity Comes to Okinawa

Both the shogunate government of Japan and samurai resolve play their part in Christianity’s extremely late appearance on the Okinawan island scene. When Jesuits arrived in Japan in the

mid 1500s, they focused first on the samurai class, believing that if they converted leaders, others would follow.

The Jesuit leader, Xavier, taught and brought fellow priests who were humble and modest, ready to endure hardship, with both a rich spiritual life and great knowledge. They loved the samurai, learned their language, and treated them as equals. Xavier focused on the greatest Christian commandments, loving God with all of self and loving others as much as self. He preached God as creator of all things, explained Christ's sufferings, and taught the 10 Commandments. (Kasahara, 423) These Jesuits greatly admired the samurai as "...being good, not malicious, able to honor nobles and pay them honor even if they weren't rich." (Ellwood)



Francis Xavier

The bond between these Jesuit priests and the samurai ran deep. Within 35 years 150,000 had become Christians. (Kasahara) Both the samurai and the priests were men who "lived by the demands of total loyalty and dedication to a cause greater than themselves, who admired simple living, self-sacrifice and a high sense of honor, who each fought to the death in his own way and by his own code." (Ellwood)



Then Hideyoshi began to martyr Christians. The Martyrs Monument still stands in Nagasaki in memory of the Christians he crucified in 1597. Persecution continued during the Tokugawa reign. In the 1630s many Christians were mutilated, burned at stake, water tortured, or crucified. However, once the samurai had accepted the faith, many "adhered to it with samurai resolve" and were steadfast to the end.

(Ellwood, Kasahara) Christianity could not enter

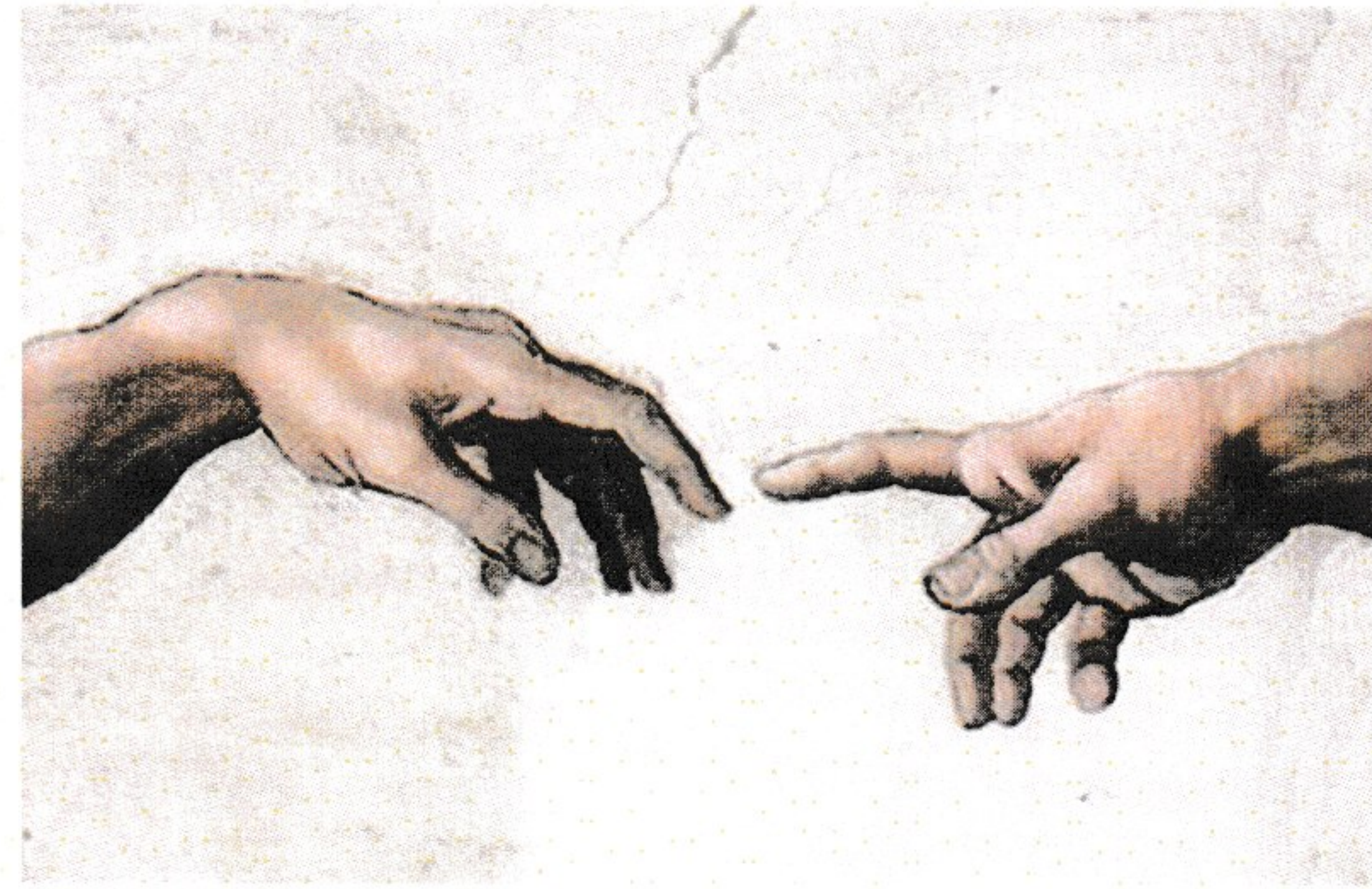
Okinawa through the samurai like Zen did, because the Christian samurai had been largely eliminated or forced underground.

The first record of extended Christian presence in Okinawa is not until the 1700s. In addition to a religious faith, Jesuits brought science, a corrected calendar, and a telescope. They also encouraged cutting back on lavish Buddhist funerals when resources were scarce. In the 1850s French priests came and started language schools, hoping to establish trade. About this time the infamous missionary Bettelheim also forced his way onto the island and turned out to be both unethical and ineffective at spreading Christianity. (Kerr)

The next wave of Christian influence came from Okinawans themselves. In the mid 1800s many went to Hawaii to find work and send money back home due to hard times on the island. They became Christians while there, returning to Okinawa in the 1890s. This led to 120 converts. Some of their faith contradicted both family traditions and the educational system. Overall they were looked down on as disruptive to community life and as poor. (Kerr) Now Christianity is more respected, but certainly not widespread on the island. Probably more consider themselves Christians than appear on church roles. Their role in helping the poor, the sick, the orphans, and women in need of education has been recognized and appreciated also in Japan. (Ellwood, 108)

What is Christianity?

Traditional, classical Christianity is based on the idea of a God who is creator, sovereign, and savior. Like Buddhism, there is the idea of a massive life force, like a mind, striving with purpose. But the Christian believes this being is not the same thing as the universe. Instead it is more like a being who invented and made the universe, and so is separate from it, much like an artist is separate from his or her canvas. The author and lay theologian, Lewis, describes this personal God as considered



“definitely good. . .a God who takes sides, who loves love and hates hatred, who wants us to behave in one way and not in another.” The fancy term for this idea is monotheism. Jews and Muslims also live in this camp.

It makes sense that a creator God would also be sovereign, which means having power. A sovereign gets to make the rules and require obedience, to call the shots. If there is such a God, a relationship would need to be respected on his terms, not ours. An imperfect but perhaps helpful analogy is the relationship of obedience and respect between a karateka and his or her sensei. This concept feels un-American, but logically speaking, a buffet god based on our input, opinions, and choices would be our creation. A claim of Christianity is that the real situation is reversed, that we are in the role of created under sovereign rule and would be wise to bend the knee.

Delegated free will is a large and complicated element of Christianity, related both to sin and to salvation. Things have obviously gone wrong in this world God created and rules over. True badness is not considered to be misunderstood, necessary, or equal in power to goodness, but something to be fought valiantly against.

Still, if God is all good, all powerful and created all things, why are people allowed to do wrong? Why does badness even exist? Lewis suggests considering anyone in an authority position. A situation can be in line with their will in one way and yet not in another. For example, a mother could say, “I’m not going to make you clean your room. You need to practice making yourself do it.” The task might go undone and a messy room may result. This is against her will, but it was her will which has allowed it to happen. Christians maintain that God has set this type of situation up on a major scale, at great cost to the world and at great risk to Himself, and God says this is worth it. Unless a thing is free to be bad, it is also not truly free to be good in a way that God values. (Lewis)

One of God’s main purposes for humans is to enjoy them and for them to enjoy him forever. Christianity presents the obstacle to this as humanity’s sin. This does not mean people are always as bad as they can possibly be. “Sinful nature” means people will not be consistently morally tidy inside themselves; they will treat others poorly at times on purpose, and they will disagree with the sovereign God’s instructions and head off in their own directions. Some will fall more and some will fall less but all will fall far short of God’s perfect design and desire.

So the sovereign creator also became a savior, Jesus Christ. As both fully God and fully human, his sinless life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection have somehow made a way for people who deserve punishment and separation to be in relationship with God. The Christian's part is to believe this, and to accept forgiveness as an undeserved and essential gift, purchased and offered by Christ.

Unique to classical, orthodox Christianity is the salvation requirement of faith in a historical event and a personal being rather than in an above average moral performance. The claim is that when a person surrenders and believes, part of God comes to live in the new Christian and to help him or her be more fully and truly the unique individual God created. This new relationship between the creator and the created grows forever in a straight line past physical death. Communion and baptism are symbols of this. Although many who claim to be Christians today are known mostly for standing strongly against things, a Christian is supposed to prefer introducing others into a marvelous, never-ending relationship with a creator, sovereign, savior God.



Christian Contribution

Research does not support any Christian contribution to the original formation of karate. Their current contribution in the West is a high degree of participation, probably attracted by the discipline and community of karate, as well as by the important Christian character traits it encourages and contributes to. As time goes on, history may show that Christians played a significant role in preserving and continuing karate into the 21st century as a discipline, art, and sport.

Christian Concerns

Christians are generally untroubled by the concept of fighting. When a Christian is concerned about practicing karate, it is probably related to seizan. The root of this is a sincere desire to be loyal to his or her God by not practicing or appearing to practice another religion. If you believe a separate and personal God has come to live in you, at your request and at great sacrifice to Himself, it makes sense you would not want to empty your mind to become an enlightened part of a universal being that is not your understanding of God.

It also makes sense that physical form might communicate content in the form of a symbol. The seizan position is associated with other belief systems. When people see it, they sometimes make assumptions about the beliefs of others or are influenced themselves. A common concern of Christians is their influence on others, which flows from their doctrine that life is only lived on earth once, but goes on forever after that either with or apart from God.

A Christian may practice seizan with a clear conscience for several reasons. Some view it as merely a sign of respect or an outward cultural tradition. This is similar to a non-Christian friend who bows her head for a dinner prayer not because she personally wants to thank Christ, but to show respect for her host's belief or practice. Others consider seizan an inner choice, a time to set aside distractions, to pray, or to practice focusing on right now in an athletic sense, regardless

of how others around them use the time. They would maintain that their God sees the intent of the heart.

On the other hand, a Christian may maintain a clear conscience by not practicing seizan. For example, someone who bows down in seizan in our dojo may choose not to in another setting, where bowing would be understood by those around as endorsing and practicing Zen or ancestor worship. This is similar to a friend who does not bow for a Christian prayer at a funeral because he is not a Christian and feels it would be dishonest. Not participating in seizan might not be a judgement on others or disrespect, but instead an attempt to follow the two greatest Christian commandments as understood by an individual: loving God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving her neighbor as much as herself.

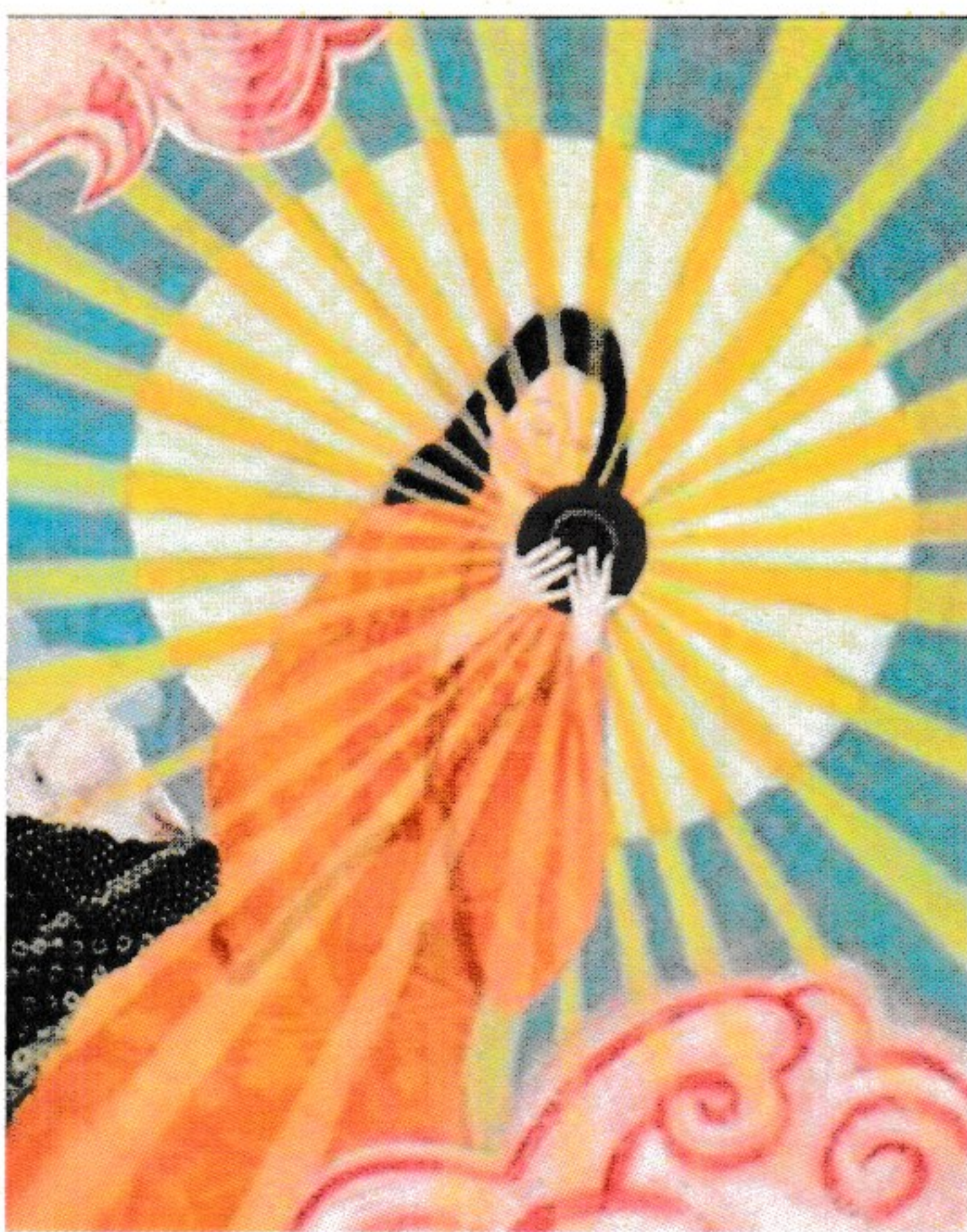
How can this situation be treated with courtesy? Courtesy considers intentions. In this case courtesy would excuse a person who conscientiously objects from participating in seizan. However, if the practice of seizan at a dojo is truly a Buddhist religious requirement of the leader that will not be excused, then courtesy again considers intention. The Christian should not violate his or her conscience, but respect that leader's intention and not participate at that dojo.

Shinto with Noro and Buddhism

The oldest known religious practice in Okinawa is Noro. Families worshiped 3 sacred stones in their fireplace hearth, led by the oldest woman in the home. Whichever woman had the oldest fire in the community was the high priestess, with great political power as a shamanistic spiritual advisor. (Kerr, 27) The people also worshiped natural forces and had sacred groves. (Kerr, 33)

Shinto does the same, so when it was introduced to the island in the early 1400s, Okinawans

intertwined the two religions, borrowing and adapting Japanese Shinto legends and deities to explain, name, and give background to their practices. An important Shinto legend is that of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, who is claimed to have given birth to Japan's first emperor.



Amaterasu

In the 1700s, Shinto festivals focused around rice planting. The celebrations were to entertain and please kami in hopes of a good crop. This involved dances, singing girls, prostitutes, temple visits, and games to please good kami, along with special rituals and ceremonies to ward off bad kami. (Kerr) In fact, Sumo wrestling began as a way to entertain kami. The topknot was to cushion the head during a fall. (Hartz) Ancestors were also worshiped during the festivals.

In Japan, Shinto surged as Zen fell out of favor when the samurai/shogunate period ended. The masses returned to the simple faith of worshiping local kami and Amaterasu, the sun goddess, whose creation of Japan proved its unique and divine role in the world. The emperor began to be worshiped at shrines as the most important kami. (Ellwood, 153) Japanese Buddhists integrated with Shinto's popularity by declaring that Buddha and kami were the same thing. (Hardy)

Worshiping kami was the same as worshiping Buddha and vice versa.

Okinawa was annexed to Japan when the king was forced to abdicate in the late 1800s. Now the Japanese government began aggressively promoting Shintoism as a form of nationalism on the island. Gradually Noro shrines were absorbed into Japanese nationalist Shinto by declaring all local field, forest, and sea divinities to be defending the empire. Compulsory worship of the emperor was required of all school children. In 1909 Japan hoped and hinted Okinawans would donate toward more shrines dedicated to worshiping the emperor, but they did not. (Kerr) Mandatory shrine worship did not end until after World War 2.

By the 1930s, Japanese military leaders quoted emperor Tenno, claiming imperial rule should be extended to the whole world. The emperor was considered the only rightful ruler of the earth because his power came from Amaterasu, the sun goddess. Soldiers were told that death in battle would ensure they became kami. (Hartz) This mindset inspired the kamikaze pilots, and hari-kari suicide gestures of extraordinary sacrifice during World War 2. The Okinawans were willing to do their duty, but the government's spiritual emphasis connected with extreme nationalism was unpopular with them. (Kerr, 461) Promised a divine Shinto victory during the war, no provision was made for protection of the Okinawan civilians, 12% of whom died during the 80 day long battle for Okinawa that began in April of 1945. (Kerr)

Although no one could claim that nature has been kind to this island, many Okinawans still worship nature today. Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity have been introduced to Okinawa and practiced throughout the centuries, but Noro expressions of fire worship, ancestor worship, and the shamanistic role of women have intertwined with Shinto and are also still practiced, as they have been for over 800 years. (Okinawan Prefect U.S., Army)

What is Shinto?

The word "Shinto" literally means "the way of the kami." Shinto didn't have a name at first; it just was. The name was chosen when Buddhism arrived, to differentiate it. (Hartz) No one remembers how it started. It has no holy book or written code, no central leader, no regular services. There is no vast overarching power.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims with their separate God are monotheists. Hindus, Taoists and Buddhists have plural deities, but the emphasis is that they are expressions of a universal oneness, and so they are pantheists. Shinto has no sense of one powerful will, but of many individual divine or supernatural beings and wills. It is polytheist. In fact, Shinto is the only polytheistic religion still practiced in an advanced nation today. (Ellwood)

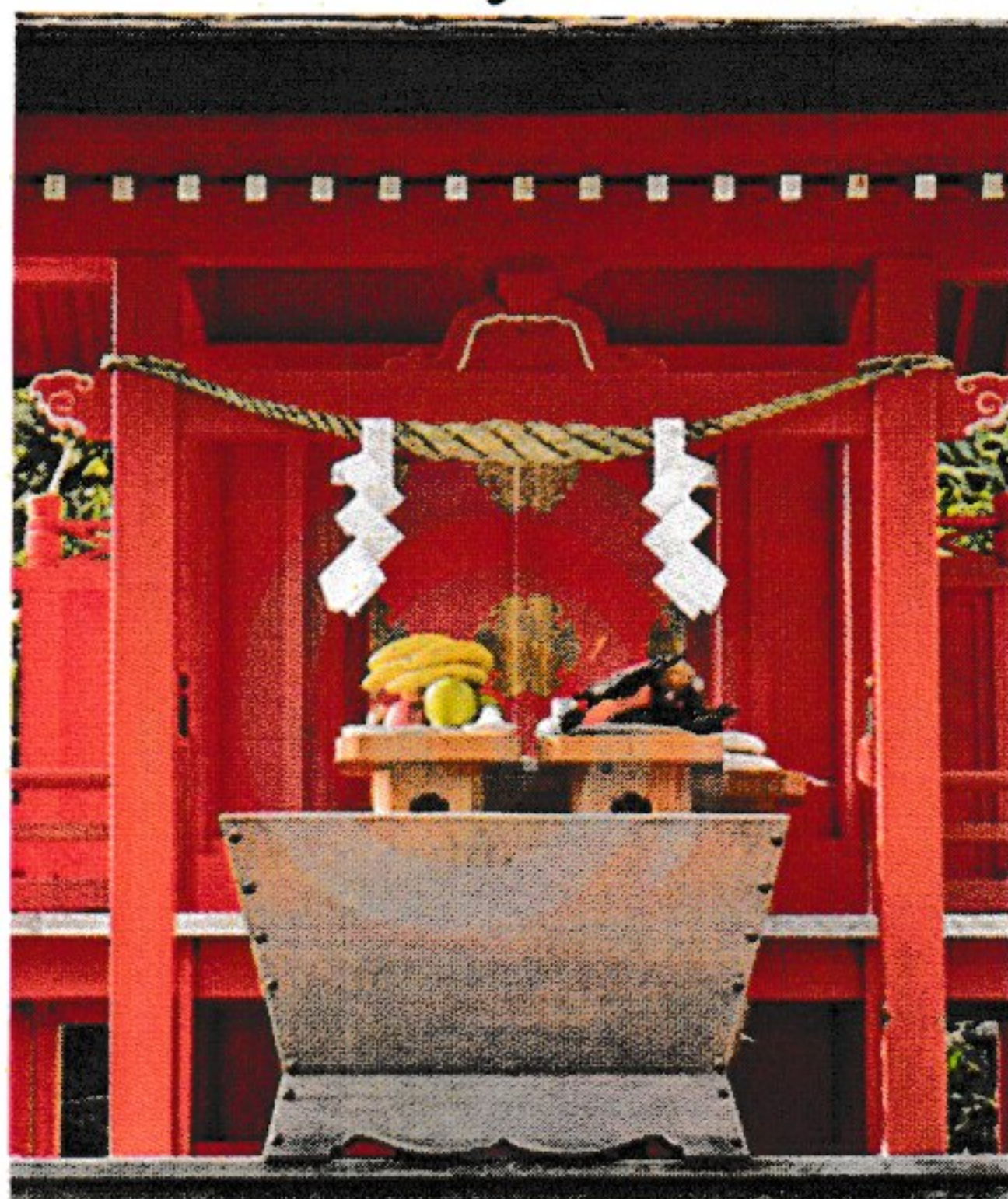
Shinto is basically made up of traditions and kami worship. What are kami? They are considered deity or spirits found in elements of nature, animals, creative forces, or in the spirits of people with extraordinary qualities (alive or deceased.) Anything that fills a person with wonder and awe can be kami: a beautiful waterfall, an amazing person, a terrible storm. The kami are not



Miyajima, the Great Torii

necessarily good. Like the mythical Greek gods, they can be capricious, or given to sudden changes of temper. This is not considered evil or sinful, but misguided. (Hartz)

Kami are worshiped through thank offerings, which are considered gifts not sacrifices; they are offered daily or kami feel neglected and unhappy. Gratitude, sincerity, cooperation and harmony are stressed. (Hartz) Dedicated Shinto follow the will of local kami to avoid displeasure and also to secure blessings. Sometimes this involves ordeals. A shaman channels revelations of kami, and is usually a woman. In Shinto, death is the end of existence for people. Only kami passage to a better place. The idea that a person can become kami is the basis of ancestor worship.



Kami offering at Japanese shrine

Shinto traditions include: offerings related to the moon and seasons; rituals like passing through the evergreen ring at the New Year for purification; and festivals. Another tradition is pilgrimage to shrines, where the divine embodiment of kami spirits reside. A torii gateway marks the entrance to a shrine and symbolizes the separation of our world from the kami spirit world. Shinto festivals tend to be more like Mardi Gras, a cultural celebration rather than a pure one. (Ellwood) Perhaps they originated from the kami- pleasing rice planting festivals in the 1700s.

Like Christianity in America, many in Japan participate in Shinto traditions as part of being courteous and being in community, rather than as an expression of belief. (Ellwood, 57) Today there is still no central leader or organization for Shinto. However, fantasy acting, anime, and Nintendo effectively mainstream the ideas of shamanism, kami, capriciousness, and ordeals throughout the youth culture. (Ellwood) It is not surprising that Shinto is beginning to spread in the world. (Hartz)



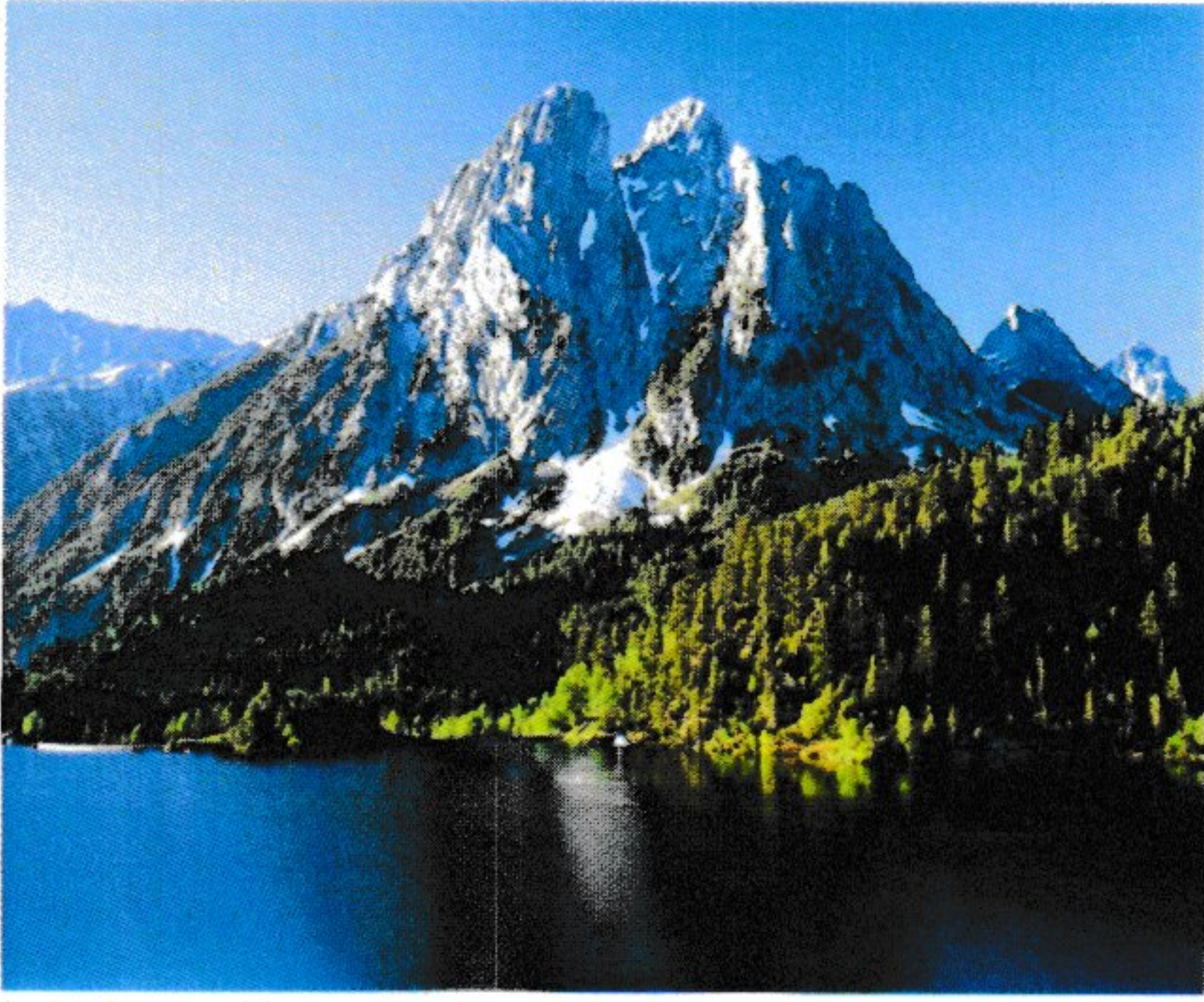
A shaman type from Anime

Shinto's Role

In traditional martial arts, Shinto probably influenced several practices. One is related to the sense of dojo practice space as set apart in a special way. Another is the honor of enduring an ordeal, such as rigorous training or fighting. Also, although it is doubtful that many people actually worship Shoshin Nagamine (or the founders of other karate styles), great emphasis is placed on honoring and respecting his memory. This is shown by the presence and placement of pictures and also by bowing. It was probably adapted from ancestor worship practices.

Shinto Unconcern?

With no leaders or written texts to provide a rule to measure against, a concern might be that a sincere practitioner of Shinto be manipulated into harming others or self for the sake of pleasing kami or becoming kami. This is a decidedly Western world view. Manipulation and capriciousness are expected in Shinto. They are something to adapt to and accommodate or appease, not to resist or stand against. It's part of the belief system. A devoted Shinto person probably would not have concerns related to martial arts. However, if Shinto continues to spread, perhaps some issue will become more obvious in the future.



Conclusion

Maybe you have heard the claim that all religions are the same, expressed in the analogy that there are many ways to get to the top, but in the end it's all the same mountain. In one way that is certainly true. Each belief system answers the same questions: How should people treat each other? What is the nature of reality? What causes pain and sorrow and can it be stopped? How do we know what we know? What gives life meaning? What happens after death? The most overlap

between religions occurs in how people should treat each other.

However, in another way the mountain analogy misleads, minimizing the difference between actual answers. Is God a separate being, one with the universe, nonexistent, or in multiple forms? Does death go in a circle back to life, bring self to a definite end, or just mark a point on a straight line into eternity? Do you get to the mountain top by self actualization or does God come down the mountain to get you? The reason courtesy is needed is not because we all believe the same thing, with nothing to disagree about. Courtesy is needed precisely because the differences are substantial.

The history of religion in Okinawa surfaces a significant theme about honoring the inner choice of the individual. That doesn't mean agreeing with others choices, it means acknowledging their right to make choices. Shimazu in Buddhism, Bettelheim in Christianity, and the Japanese government in nationalist Shinto all attempted to steamroll the Okinawans into external compliance with their beliefs. When they did, it didn't stick. Individuals choose beliefs in the inner sense, regardless of externally compliant behavior. On the flip side, another subtle theme is that external accommodation without inner conviction doesn't improve situations as much as people hope, as demonstrated by the mistreatment of Okinawans through the ages.

Examining the belief systems and histories of Buddhism, Christianity, and Shinto on the island of Okinawa helps us understand context, identify important ideas, and honor contributions to martial arts. It also exposes possible concerns and different motivations for training and fighting. Most importantly, it helps us see why courtesy is required and how it might be expressed between karateka who hold different beliefs or are forming new beliefs.

Today, karate continues to spread and grow. As Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine says, "Karate, like all things classical, has the potential to meet the demands of various ages and to produce something new out of itself without rejecting those basic elements upon which it was founded." (Nagamine, 30) One of the basic elements is this: Karate begins and ends with courtesy.



Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine,
founder of Matsubyashi Shorin Ryu

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