

Philosophy and Spirituality in Karate

Frank Stone
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"Karate is the art of virtuous men."

-- Okinawan proverb

"To be sure, it is not the budo spirit to train for the purpose of striking others without good reason."

-- Choki Motobu

"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

-- Romans 12:18

Karate is typically defined in terms that emphasize the physical aspect of the activity, as in "karate is a Japanese art of self-defense employing hand strikes and kicks to disable or subdue an opponent." But even a casual reading of karate literature reveals a great appreciation for the mental and spiritual benefits of the study of karate. Although it is not typically emphasized in the general training of karate today, there is a great tradition of the understanding of the moral, ethical, and spiritual benefits of karate. This essay is an attempt to explore some of the major themes of philosophy and spirituality in the study of karate, especially as it was understood and taught by the original masters of Okinawan martial arts.

Although "philosophy" can be described in many terms, it can be most simply defined as a set of ideals, standards or beliefs used to describe behavior and thought. In this sense, almost any organized activity could be thought of as having an overriding philosophy. "Spirituality" is more specific, as it refers to those things that relate to or affect the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. This may be understood from a view of religious beliefs, or from non-religious approach, and the history of karate certainly has aspects of both.

We can think of religion as a specific set of organized beliefs and practices, usually shared by a community or group. Conversely, there is no single, widely agreed-upon definition of spirituality. Spirituality can be thought of as more of an individual practice having to do with developing a sense of peace and purpose. It also relates to the process of developing beliefs around the meaning of life and connection with others. In modern times the emphasis is on subjective experience and the deepest values and meanings by which people live, incorporating personal

growth or transformation, usually in a context separate from organized religious institutions.

Human conflict predates recorded history, and the primary driving force for the early development of martial arts was clearly the need for fighting skills. Although emphasis on personal spiritual growth is considered to be a later development, even early accounts of organized martial arts training may have had their origins in a religious setting, as in the legend of Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk who is credited with introducing Chan Buddhism to China in the fifth or sixth century, as well as the creation of Shaolin kung fu.

The early Okinawan karate masters were quite varied and individual, but many of the prominent historical figures in the development of karate were men of devout faith and great spirituality, as we can see today in their writings. While karate is not thought of as a principally religious activity, and some masters, as we will see, specifically emphasized the lack of any link with religion in their writings, it is clear that they were profoundly influenced by their beliefs. Ultimately, however, martial arts have no direct connection with any one faith, religion, or philosophy and can be practiced by people of all faiths.

While specific legends and traditions may vary slightly from place to place and island to island, the Ryukyuan religion is generally characterized by ancestor worship (more accurately termed "ancestor veneration") and the respecting of relationships between the living, the dead, and the gods and spirits of the natural world. Over time, Ryukyuan religious practice has been influenced by Chinese religions including Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as Japanese Shinto.

Buddhism was introduced from China into Japan in the 6th century and rapidly gained converts. In general, Buddhists follow concepts of self-meditation, simple living and physical discipline. Japanese Buddhists find no conflict in embracing Shinto principles along with Buddhism. The two religions often share common shrines or objects of worship. Although Buddhism had a smaller influence in Okinawa compared to the rest of Japan, Buddhist values can be seen in the Okinawan culture and the teachings of the early karate masters. For example, an important value in Buddhist ethics is non-harming or non-violence to all living creatures from the lowest insect to humans, which is associated with one of the primary precepts of karate, that of avoidance of conflict.

Zen Buddhism

Zen is a Japanese school of Mahayana Buddhism emphasizing the value of meditation and intuition. Zen Buddhism emphasizes rigorous self-restraint, meditation-practice, insight into the nature of mind and nature of things, and the personal expression of this insight in daily life, especially for the benefit of others. These concepts have clearly been expressed in the teachings of the early Okinawan karate masters, and continue to be carried forth today. Of course, these ideas are not exclusively limited to Buddhism.

The role of Zen in the martial arts is not easily defined, as Zen has no theory. It is described as an inner “knowing” for which there is no clearly stated set of beliefs. The Zen of martial arts places more emphasis on intuitive action, rather than the power of intellect.

Confucianism

Confucianism is not a religion; it is a system of thought and behavior that originated in ancient China. It has been described variously as tradition, a philosophy, a humanistic or rationalistic religion, a way of governing, or simply a way of life. The principle beliefs of Confucianism focus on the idea that human beings are fundamentally good, and teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavor, especially self-cultivation and self-creation.

The people of Okinawa embraced the philosophy of Confucius to the extent that it became part of the social fabric of the country. There is evidence that studying the moral teachings of Confucius was considered an essential aspect of learning karate. Sokon Matsumura, a pioneer of Okinawan karate, wrote that the study of karate is incomplete without the study of the moral elements of the teachings of Confucius. He stated, “Confucianist learning brings about sincerity, pureness of heart and a sense of propriety in all things.”

The philosophy of Confucius stresses the avoidance of all direct confrontations. Consequently, while Okinawan karate masters taught their students karate techniques, they also cultivated their student’s character, including the value of avoiding unnecessary conflict. In Confucian philosophy, if one possesses the

knowledge to use deadly force, then one should also possess the virtue of restraint and never use that force unless it is absolutely necessary.

In discussing the role of Confucianism in karate, Mark Cramer, in *The History of Karate and the Masters Who Made It*, writes: "Karate's attachment to a moral philosophy is the factor that elevates it to a unique position in the world of martial arts. The primary focus of many other marital arts is to achieve victory by use of physical force. However, from the earliest times, karate teachers have stressed that moral force supersedes physical force."

Writings of the Japanese Karate Masters

For several reasons, there are limited resources regarding writings of the very first practitioners of martial arts in general and karate in particular. Clearly, in some form, martial arts predate any historical record. We do have some record of the writings of some of the early Okinawan Karate masters. While these records mainly focus on technique, many also include spiritual and philosophical references.

Sokon Matsumura

Sokon Matsumura was one of the original karate masters of Okinawa. He lived from 1809 to 1899. Matsumura studied karate under the guidance of Sakugawa, who was said to have learned the art of To-te in China. It is reported that Matsumura was never defeated in a duel. Ultimately, all modern styles of karate that evolved from the Shuri-te lineage can be traced back to the teachings of Matsumura. In addition to karate, he was a practicing Buddhist and also studied Confucian classics and calligraphy.

He writes: "Finally, in the true martial arts, one does not relax spiritually but strives for higher accomplishments with ingenuity. This true martial arts prohibits violence, makes warriors courageous, supports the people, renders meritorious services, helps people to live in peace, harmonizes the masses, and allows assets to prosper. These are called the 'Seven Virtues of Martial Arts,' which were even praised by sages in literature."

It is interesting to note that these "Seven Virtues" that Matsumura defines actually originate in the writings of King Wu, founder of the Zhou Dynasty of Ancient China, who lived around 1000 years BC.

Anko Itosu

Anko Itosu lived from 1831 to 1915, and is considered by many to be the father of modern karate. He is credited with introducing karate to Okinawa's schools. In October 1908, Itosu wrote a letter, "Ten Precepts of Karate," to draw the attention of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of War in Japan. The first line of that letter states "Karate did not develop from Buddhism or Confucianism."

While acknowledging that karate is not exclusively linked to a specific religion, he does write of the spiritual aspect of karate, writing that karate "is a knowledge that has no beginning or end. It begins with intense physical exercises, then continues with the applications to combat and concludes in an inner spiritual path."

His first of those "Ten Precepts" also references an ethical ideal as he writes "Karate is not merely practiced for your own benefit; it can be used to protect one's family or master. It is not intended to be used against a single assailant but instead as a way of avoiding a fight should one be confronted by a villain or ruffian."

Choki Motobu

Choki Motobu was an Okinawan karate master who lived from 1870 to 1944. Although in many texts he is described as somewhat of a ruffian and street fighter, he ultimately developed his style as a balance between kata and kumite, and became a teacher of future masters, including Shoshin Nagamine.

Of Motobu, Nagamine writes: "Later in his life, Motobu put aside aggression and studied karate to seek its true spirit – conquest of self, and not others. We can learn much in his switch from an aggressively violent man who had become famous through his mastery of fighting skills to a seeker who concentrated on the kata to find the true essence of karate-do."

In his book *My Art and Skill of Karate*, Motobu writes: "Karate, being a quite valuable and universal martial art, is also a resource for mental training, that is, the cultivation of the mind. Those who practiced karate developed a strong unity of mind and body, became immovable, and never lost their composure. In these points the practice of karate coincides with that of zen."

Shoshin Nagamine

Perhaps no other Okinawan karate master has written as much about the spiritual aspect of karate as Shoshin Nagamine. Nagamine lived from 1907 to 1997, and is the founder of Matsubayashi Shorin-ryu karate. In his book, *The Essence of Okinawan Karate-do*, he writes that karate “is a training of both mind and body, and leads one to a better understanding of both the self and the world.”

He goes on to state that the essence of karate is in “the process by which individuals make the utmost effort in an attempt to create limitless power by the utilization of true wisdom. The martial arts originated from the instinct of self-preservation, and ultimately aim at building a well-balanced person of sound mind and body through continuous practice. It is here that the spirit of karate-do lies.” In his book *Tales of Okinawa's Great Masters*, he expounds in greater detail, writing: “Void of its spiritual foundation, karate is reduced to common brutality. It is of the utmost importance that physical training be balanced by philosophical assimilation and methodical introspection as a single practice.”

Nagamine also writes frequently about this idea of mastery of self. “Karate,” he writes, is “self-training in perfection, a means whereby a man may obtain that expertise in which there is not the thickness of a hair between a man and his deed. It is a training in efficiency. It is a training in self-reliance. To pursue karate means to seek to master one's self. The true study of karate must transcend the mere physical – it must become a way of life.”

As other authors have done, both prior to and since Nagamine's writings, he makes a pointed distinction between karate as a physical pursuit (karate-jutsu, or the art of karate) and karate as a way of life (karate-do): “At this point it might be well to mention the differences between karate and karate-do. Karate refers to a martial art developed for the purpose of defending one's self from imminent and illegal violence with the use of the strictly-trained body as a weapon. Karate-do, however, means a way of life based on karate or karate life, in which one conquers himself and comes off a winner without any use of the art in a strict sense. In other words, its significance lies in fighting down the inner enemies, which are greater than the external enemies, by building up a sound body and mind through painstaking discipline of body and mind by means of karate practice. In short, it can be said that karate-do aims at building up the “whole man” by karate training lasting the remainder of one's life.”

Nagamine studied the Buddhist faith in his lifetime, and had a particular connection with the ideals of Zen Buddhism. In his later years, he regularly included meditation as a regular part of his karate classes. In a brief autobiography he wrote for the commemoration of his 85th birthday, he wrote "From time to time, I had vague feeling of anxiety in tackling with Karate and my way of living. Just then, I had a chance to read "Gorinsho" (Book of Five Rings) written by Miyamoto Musashi, in 1963, and was much moved. Already I had read through a book titled "Teshhukoji-no-shinmenboku" (Buddhist layman and master swordman, Teshhu's true self). The two were unrivaled swordmen in all ages, had common in intelligence, bravery and physical power, embraced the Buddhist faith so as to have an unbending spirit, practiced Zen meditation for art of war, and devoted whole heart to the spiritual problems. These pioneers of martial arts opened my eyes to re-orient my physically bent Karate to the togetherness of Fists and Zen. So I was resolved to adopt Zen meditation as part of Karate practice ever since. Under the conviction that togetherness of Zen and Karate is the one and only way to master the real way of Karate, and hoping that many a young Karate experts be nurtured, I am enjoying Karateman's life, with the spirit of wholeheartedness of health and longevity."

It is clear, however, that Nagamine did not view his inclusion of meditation during classes as a strictly Buddhist practice. Although a typical lesson started with 15 minutes of cross-legged meditation in front of the dojo shrine, Nagamine is quoted as saying that the shrine "is merely symbolic and may just as well be a Christian cross."

Gichin Funakoshi

Gichin Funakoshi is the founder of Shotokan karate-do, perhaps the most widely known style of karate, and is known as a "father of modern karate." He lived from 1868 to 1957, and published a number of books during his lifetime. He also emphasized the difference between karate as a purely physical activity versus a lifelong spiritual search. This is most notably observed in his autobiography, which he titled *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*.

Funakoshi writes that karate "is much more than simply a technique for gaining victory in combat. It is a way of cultivating the spirit." Similarly to the writings of Nagamine, Funakoshi also describes the study of karate as the pursuit of self-mastery and a continued striving for improvement. He quotes Lord Yagyu (a famed Japanese swordsman of the 15th century), who "said he did not know the way to defeat others, but he knew the way to gain victory over himself – it was to become

better today than yesterday, and better tomorrow than today – working in this manner day by day, all one's life."

Funakoshi also studied Zen and integrated it into his teachings of karate. In his book *The Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate*, he writes of "the necessity of developing the deeper reaches of the mind – of the self – that work to suppress and quiet the deluded mind. This "inner master of the mind" is often referred to as "immovable wisdom."

Traditional Concepts of Spirituality in Karate

Karate Ni Sente Nashi

It may seem odd at first glance to think that a discipline that originated in the teaching of fighting skills should stress avoidance of conflict, however, this idea is nearly universal in traditional karate instruction. This is demonstrated foremost in the saying "*Karate Ni Sente Nashi*" or "There is no first attack in karate." This quote from Gichin Funakoshi is probably the most famous maxim in karate.

Even Choki Motobu, one of the most prolific fighters in Okinawan karate, expressed this sentiment, writing the martial arts are "never practiced to beat up other people without reason. I think you already know that training the mind and body must be the primary purpose." Chojun Miyagi, another Okinawan karate master, writes: "the ultimate strategy is to win, not by battle but by virtue."

Funakoshi quotes his teacher Anko Asato: "Invincibility in battle does not make a man virtuous; a virtuous warrior is one who defeats his opponent without engaging in battle." Funakoshi defines *Karate Ni Sente Nashi* in these terms: "The man who acts first, even if he presents himself as a sage, behaves in a manner of one who is ignorant of human folly, is incapable of seeing with the eyes of the heart. Only those who follow the proper path at all times are able to gain a command of movement that transcends established methods, and grasp a true understanding of techniques."

American martial artist Ed Parker (1931-1990) probably describes this best: "The only reason men fight is because they are insecure; one man needs to prove that he is better or stronger than another. The man who is secure within himself has no need to prove anything with force, so he can walk away from a fight with dignity and pride. He is the true martial artist – a man so strong inside that he has no need

to demonstrate his power. The point of achieving proficiency in any martial art is to be able to walk away from a fight rather than to win it.”

Mastery of Self

The concept of mastery of self is pervasive in karate literature. John Teramoto, Shihan of Shotokan Karate of America, writes: “Technical skills and agility quickly pale in comparison to the importance of polishing heart, mind, and character – the very elements that define the quality of one’s life.”

It has been said that one begins training in martial arts for self-protection, but continues training for self-perfection. We have seen evidence of this conviction that “mastery of self” is at the heart of karate training in the writings of Nagamine and Funakoshi cited above, but there are many examples of this concept, both in traditional as well as more modern texts. In his book *Seishin Shyuyo, Mental Training in Traditional Martial Arts*, Jimmy Lockett lists these qualities that a long-time martial artist develops:

- Unshakable Calm
- Clarity of Thought
- Open Mind
- Uninhibited Spirit
- Compassionate Heart
- Balanced Lifestyle
- Indomitable Will

Nagamine further describes this idea in this way: “Amidst the noise and rapid changes of modern society, one can find in karate-do a peace of mind that will never be shaken. Through karate training one acquires stoicism and self-control, which will prepare him fully to meet life’s many responsibilities. Karate training takes devotees along the path of self-development. Every movement, every step in karate training requires one to make a total commitment of self. Complete and unswerving focus and power in karate practice help one to understand himself because he is required to fuse his entire being through physical motion. Because the self, in all its aspects and complexities, must be totally committed in karate training, the ability to commit the self will also carry over into all aspects of life.”

Certainly, many other pursuits in life, especially those that require intense training and focused efforts over the course of years, can instill important qualities and characteristics that extend to other aspects of one's life, but the physical and combative nature of karate provides unique perspective and opportunity. Others, however, suggest that it is not karate's origin as a martial art that makes it especially adept at teaching values, rather it is the ingrained, essential aspects of the Japanese and Okinawan culture in which karate evolved and that are now passed on to successive generations of karate students that make it so.

Dave Lowry, in his book *Traditions*, writes: "Developing a sense of empathy and respect for others and oneself, humility, self-control, and discipline; these are values held in esteem in Japanese culture. Of course, they are highly regarded in most cultures as well. But they are internalized and expressed in ways unique to the civilization of Japan. Those Japanese who take up an art like karate have had a perception of these values instilled in them as a natural process of acculturation. When they are taught by others who have had similar experiences, they have a good chance of passing along these values—or at least a respect and appreciation for them—to another generation of karateka when they reach the teaching level themselves. When karate is taught by these kinds of people and to people who have a cultural sensitivity to the values we're discussing, then those values are transmitted along with the punching and kicking and all the rest of the physical aspects of karate. Karate, under these circumstances, does provide an opportunity to produce better human beings."

Life-long Learning

As noted above, Nagamine makes a specific distinction between karate as a physical activity and karate as a way of life. This idea is frequently found in martial arts. The basic idea is that any art can be practiced focusing primarily on the physical techniques and skills, or practiced as a path of personal, inner growth. The concept of "karate-do," comes from the Chinese word *tao* (Japanese *dou*) and translates as a "path" or "road" to higher levels of mental and spiritual awareness and wisdom. This is achieved through commitment to the regular practice of a set of disciplines. The idea here is that this path is a lifestyle built on aiming for the highest levels of personal actualization.

Funakoshi expresses this same concept: "There is no single point that marks the completion of karate training; there is always a higher level. The true path of training is a boundless road with no end." He goes on to say "Karate practitioners

must constantly examine and chide themselves, never failing to be mindful and diligent, until they can penetrate the innermost levels of karate-do. This must be the attitude of all who aspire to the Way.”

Returning to the writing of Jimmy Lockett, he describes a Way or “Do” as “occupying the middle ground between religion on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. A religion is a specific unwavering doctrine that requires, first and foremost, the uncritical belief of its followers. A philosophy, by contrast, can be a purely abstract, intellectual activity. On a path, it doesn’t matter how deep your knowledge, or sincere your belief, unless you actively and consistently practice those beliefs. You must take action each day in accord with the principles of whichever path you have chosen to follow.”

The ideas of karate-jutsu versus karate-do, however, are not mutually exclusive. Dave Lowry, in *The Karate Way, Discovering the Spirit of Practice*, sums it up in this way: “The philosophical gives meaning to the physical in the karate dojo; the physical gives life and reality to the philosophical.”

Mushin (No Mind)

“Mushin” is the state of non (mu) mind (shin). It is a variously thought of as a mental state in which the mind is not fixed on anything in particular, or a state in which there is no thought at all. Also called “*Munen*” (non-thinking), or *Mushin no Shin* (mind of no-mind), it is described and practiced throughout both martial arts and Zen culture. Many martial arts have as part of their goal, the ability to enter into this mental state during the execution of their techniques and, ultimately, even in combat.

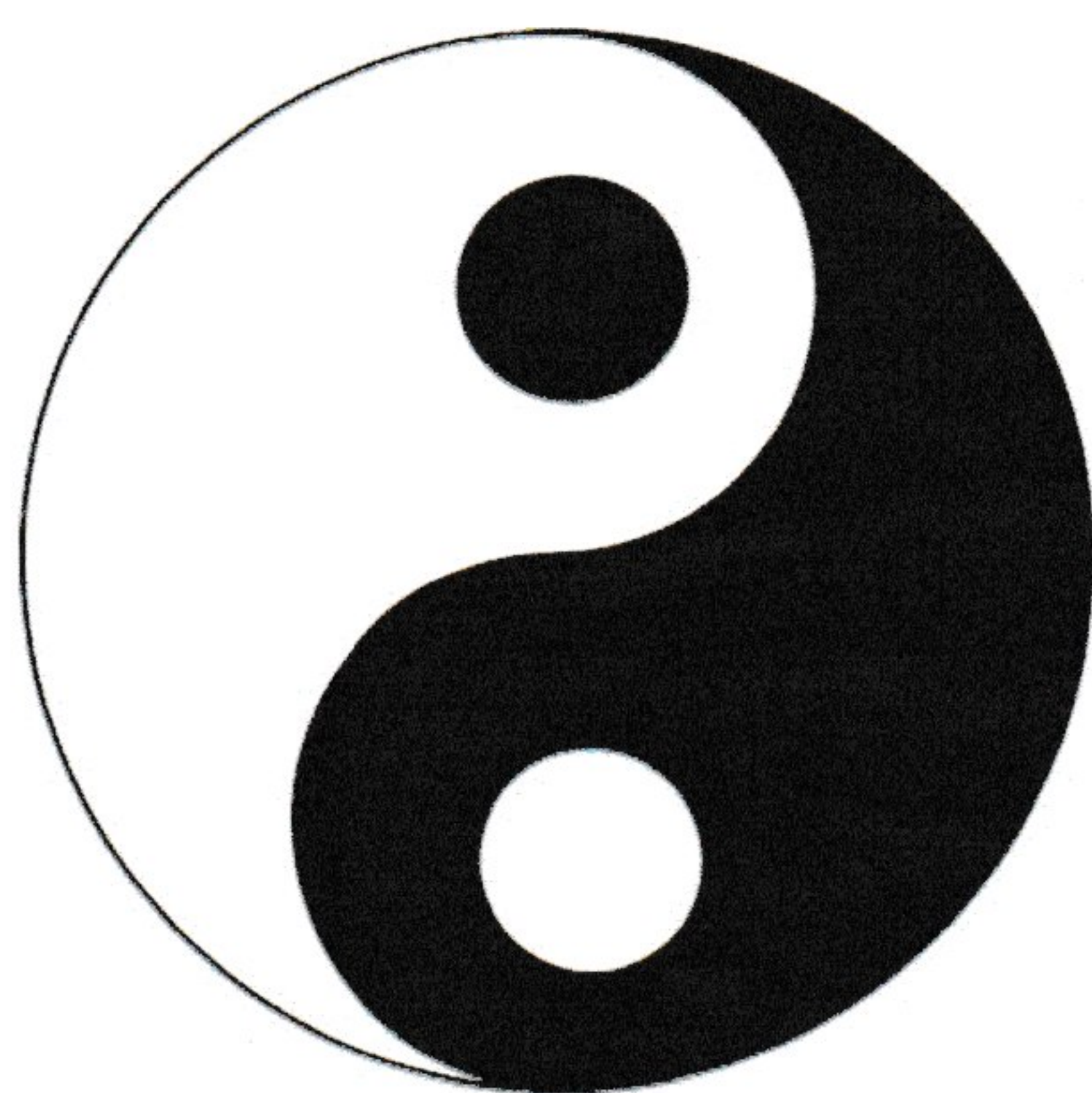
Mushin is described as being free from ego, anger, fear or expectation. In this mindset the practitioner allows any thoughts to pass like clouds in the sky, without following them. The unbound mind remains free to react at any time. Mushin is often expressed with the term “*mizu no kokoro*”, literally a mind, or heart of water. In other words, a mind that can flow freely, like water, can instantly adapt to the shape of whatever it encounters. Conversely, if the mind can remain calm and still like the surface of a lake, it becomes a mirror that accurately reflects the reality of things as they are, without the inaccuracies inherent in preconception or expectation.

The idea of this state of mind is typically linked to Zen practices, especially in the context of martial arts, but it is certainly not exclusive to either Zen or martial arts. The concept of being “in the zone” or in a “flow state” has been expressed in many activities from sports to music to arts and writing. In this state the activity takes the person’s undivided attention so the mind is totally absorbed in what he or she is doing. When in this state of flow, one’s entire being is immersed in the activity and everything seems to be working together in complete harmony.

Typically, this process is associated, especially in martial arts, with repetition of a practice. An example of mindlessness through repetition is when one learns something by practicing it so that it becomes like second nature. A person’s performance level is often at its peak, enabling one to achieve an optimum level of clarity and focus, without actively thinking about it. One is not judging every move or planning the next move. Rather they are just letting it unfold. Nagamine describes this state in decidedly spiritual terms: “The fusing of mind and body in karate is indescribably beautiful and spiritual. The flow of the mind, when totally absorbed during kata practice, brings a person into total contact with the essence and core of his being. One is both humbled and uplifted by this knowledge of self.”

Yin and Yang

In Ancient Chinese philosophy, yin and yang is a concept of dualism, describing how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they may give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. According to this philosophy, everything has both yin and yang aspects (for instance, shadow cannot exist without light). Either of the two major aspects may manifest more strongly in a particular object, depending on the criterion of the observation. The yin yang symbol shows a balance between two opposites with a portion of the opposite element in each section:



Yin is characterized as slow, soft, yielding, diffuse, and passive; and is associated with water, earth, and night. Yang, by contrast, is fast, hard, solid, focused, and active; and is associated with fire, sky, and day.

In martial arts, this distinction between hard and soft, active and passive, can be applied to the dynamics of some techniques. The most classic example would be the way to deal with an attack. If direct blows (yang) are defended with hard blocks (also yang), the result will typically be injury. If we face the blows with “yin” blocks, softer, that deflect the blow instead of hitting it directly, we will be making better use of our energies. The concept of “*taisabaki*,” or defensive body movement, for example, could be thought of as a “yin” response to the “yang” of an attack.

There is often found in martial arts the idea of finding balance between hard and soft forces, or more specifically between tension and relaxation. Relaxation and tension are said to follow the natural course of yin and yang: tense at the moment of striking, just at the moment when it is going to hit, and relax immediately after the blow, always alternating, seeking a harmonious balance. The essence of all this is the search for balance and naturalness, so that we can get the most out of our energy to be effective in the technique when we practice martial arts.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote: “Softness triumphs over hardness, feebleness over strength. What is more malleable is always superior over that which is immovable. A tree that is unbending is easily broken. The hard and the strong will fall. The soft and weak will overcome.”

Funakoshi, again, takes a more pragmatic approach to this concept. He relates that his teacher, Anko Asato, advocated an understanding of the laws of yin and yang, invoking the old saying “Battle lies between *ki* (気) and *sei* (正)¹; without converting *ki* into *sei*, and *sei* into *ki*, there would be no way to achieve victory. It is a given that karate, as well, adheres to the fundamental principle of martial arts in that attacks quickly become blocks and blocks are transformed into attacks.”

Ki/Chi

The concept of “Ki” (Japanese) or “Chi” (Chinese) has been described as an “essential psychobiological force”, which may be cultivated by and utilized in the

¹ *ki* (気), here, refers to spiritual energy, while *sei* (正) refers to yang, or positive energy.

practice of the martial arts. Although typically associated with Chinese martial arts, there are some aspects of this concept that apply to karate as well.

The word chi in Chinese can mean different things. In the direct translation, it can mean "air" or "breathing." However, when it is taken further, it can mean "energy," "temper," "tension" or "endurance."

Most often described as a bioelectric life force or psychophysical energy, ki is also commonly referred to as vital breath, subtle energy, and directed intention. Ki is thought to circulate through all living things, and even though it is often a vague concept, many traditional martial arts prescribe methods of cultivating and directing this subtle energy for higher-level students. The benefits are said to include longevity, good health, power to heal injuries, and power to injure opponents and to break objects.

According to traditional Sino-Japanese medical theory, ki not only permeates the universe, it also flows through the human body along paths or meridians. It is claimed that the flow of ki can be regulated through acupuncture, massage, or mental intent. Indeed, some researchers suggest that ki is both emotional and physiological. This has been hotly debated in martial arts; from people denying ki exists altogether to those that try to make ki into some magical power.

Critics of the ki concept suggest that ki is not a separate force but is simply the correct utilization of breath, mental focus, body weight, timing, and physics. By synchronization of these factors one can achieve a synergistic effect without recourse to such mystical concepts as ki. By this definition, "ki", being our energy, health, and vitality does exist.

The Okinawan masters quoted previously have, notably, very little to say on this topic. Nagamine discusses the effort to create "limitless power," but does not make claim to supernatural force. Funakoshi addresses this concept more directly. While making light of some of the outlandish claims of skill and strength professed by some practitioners of karate, he goes on to say: "Any man will be able, after sufficient practice, to accomplish remarkable feats of strength, but he may go only so far and no farther. There is limit to human physical strength that no one can exceed."

The most practical way of considering this topic is to describe ki as simply the most efficient way of moving or performing a technique that uses the least number of muscles, tendons, or ligaments needed. Using the least effort to get the most force.

Isshin (Focused Mind)

Isshin means “one mind.” It is a state of total focus on one thought or act. It is the ability to commit totally to the moment without the slightest hesitation and with no other restricting thought. Isshin is considered a very powerful tool in the execution of martial arts techniques. Generally, it is considered to be a state one attains only momentarily. However, in that brief moment of total commitment, one can often achieve levels of power, of effectiveness, far beyond one’s normal capabilities.

Martial arts isn’t just an intense physical activity, it is also an exercise of the mind, sharpening focus and improving concentration. One of the many benefits of training martial arts is enhanced mental clarity. Shoshin Nagamine writes “We must sweep from our minds all egocentric and preoccupying thought during practice, concentrating on all the movements with maximum vigor. When this is done, karate ultimately produces in the individual a vital concentration of energy that expands to heroic proportions in times of crisis.”

There is a term in the Okinawan language used to describe this thought. It is “*chinkuchi*.” Chinkuchi refers to the instantaneous tightening of the joints to focus a technique. It describes the execution of a technique where the focus of the entire body is concentrated on the point of contact. Chinkuchi is the way a movement should be applied when the intent is to utilize maximum power. It refers to an explosive focusing of kime, utilizing as much force as possible in as short a time as possible with that coordinated motion, peaking during the impact phase.

Interestingly, noted French boxer Georges Carpentier (1894-1975) describes this concept precisely: “It seemed to me that the real secret lay in the delivery itself far more than the strength behind it, and I therefore aimed to make my punches the culmination of a perfectly coordinated action of the whole body, beginning with the legs.”

One example of this concept is the “kiai” used in the performance of certain martial arts techniques and katas. This term can be translated as “spirit convergence” or “energy concentration,” and takes advantage of breath and sound to focus the

body's power. Nagamine states that with the kiai, "one is using the utmost life force."

The Dojo

It might seem strange to consider the dojo in terms of spirituality, but it is clear that many karate masters and practitioners consider the dojo in spiritual terms. Even the word *dojo* has Buddhist origins. The main worship hall of a Buddhist temple is referred to as a dojo, and it is written with the same characters, meaning "a place to follow the Way."

Nagamine describes the dojo as "the place where courage is fostered and superior human nature is bred through the ecstasy of sweating in hard work. It is the sacred place where the human spirit is polished."

In his book *Zen in the Martial Arts*, Joe Hyams describes the dojo in similarly reverential terms: "A dojo is a miniature cosmos where we make contact with ourselves – our fears, anxieties, reactions, and habits. It is an arena of confined conflict where we confront an opponent who is not an opponent but rather a partner engaged in helping us understand ourselves more fully. It is a place where we can learn a great deal in a short time about who we are and how we react in the world. The conflicts that take place inside the dojo help us handle conflicts that take place outside. The total concentration and discipline required to study martial arts carries over to daily life. The activity in the dojo calls on us to constantly attempt new things, so it is also a source of learning – in Zen terminology, a source of self-enlightenment."

Lawrence Vellucci, in his book *Nintai: Philosophical Lessons in Okinawan Karate* describes this idea from a different point of view. "The reason there are mirrors in the dojo," he writes, "is to allow the student to always face his greatest opponent; himself."

Conclusion

It could be argued that many of the concepts discussed above could apply to any discipline that requires dedicated practice and focus, such as sports, music, and other arts. Martial arts, however, are unique in that they carry the prospect of real human conflict and violence. In this regard, ethical considerations become more

critical. While karate was not born from any one religion or faith, it is clear that the early masters of karate were deeply influenced by the religious ideals and moral values of their time. These values remain prevalent in the teachings that continue to be passed on in dojos today.

Ultimately, it is not possible to fully define or separate the concepts of philosophy or spirituality in the history or evolution of the practice of karate, any more than we can precisely identify or characterize it in the instruction of karate today. Daniel Bolelli, in *On the Warrior's Path*, gives an interesting perspective: "Many martial artists are superficially infatuated with the halo surrounding their arts, while just as many martial artists label anything having to do with spirituality as mere superstition. Both factions make a huge mistake. They look at spirituality as something strange, esoteric, removed from daily life. They look at it as if it were some faraway dimension wrapped in clouds of mystery and incense, something with no connection to the most mundane aspects of life. Forgetting that true spirituality is not ascetic nor against life, both its friends and foes call "spiritual" what is remote and beyond the material world. But spirituality is just the opposite. It is the quintessence of life. It is a way of waking up, of walking, of smiling, of dancing."

We will leave the final word on this subject to Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine:

"There can be no question that the martial arts first ascended from man's instinct to defend himself. However, the body of moral philosophy established to govern the behavior of those who master the secrets of martial arts elevated the discipline from a form of common brutality to a sophisticated vehicle through which to enhance the living of life itself. The annals of history are filled with the testimony of those who pursued spiritual guidance through the physical and philosophical teachings of the martial arts, leaving us with an invaluable message "there can be no end to training in the martial arts."

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