



## **KARATE DO** **Its Essence, Mechanics & Implications**

### **Interview with** **Shifu, Hayashi Tomio**

#### **Would you introduce yourself?**

I am a career martial arts teacher. I have been training for 48 years and teaching as a full time professional for 44 years. I practice Karate Do. I hold an 8<sup>th</sup> dan in an offshoot of Okinawan Isshinryu called Isshin Kempo, and I am a Buddhist *Hoshi* (monk) in an esoteric sect called Chen Yen Shingon Mikkyo, Mi Ching.

#### **What is Karate Do?**

Karate *Do* is a way of seeing, a way of *being*, a way of acting, a way of carrying oneself, in essence, a Path, that extrapolates martial principles for living one's life intelligently, skillfully, with clarity and compassion. When we attach the 'Do' suffix to a karate discipline we broaden our training into an everyday Life Path, without the walls of a dojo and the limiting boundaries of the ego. *Any* endeavor viewed as or engaged consistently in this way defines a Do and encourages this type of endeavor.

Prior to the term Karate Do being coined in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we have many earlier and active Asian marital/spiritual disciplines in place with similar endpoints, though often with different routes.

Martial art is first and foremost a *physical* discipline but only in the early stages of training—generally the first ten years. When one enters a martial Do for the first time it can be said that they pass through a *gate*. This may be the initiate's first gate, first taste, or first glimpse of spiritual reality, but this fact is determined by one's Shifu.

#### **What do you mean by 'gate' and the statement 'that is**

### **determined by one's shifu'?**

The Chinese *Bagua* symbol will illustrate the use of my term *gate*. The trigrams forming the Ba Gau (I Ching circle) are sometimes referred to as the *Eight Gates* or the *Eight Entrances*. It is understood that a spiritual journey begins by entering through one of the eight doorways. That is, an awakening to one's spiritual nature occurs. When we speak of cultivating a spiritual life or practicing the Do of an art, we imply an *awareness* of an inner journey. Karate Do is not an unconscious or mindless trek into obscure or inert knowledge. We become aware at some point in time by way of 'entry' through some phenomenon; an activity, discipline, an inner or outer event, some kind of *doing*, that shifts our attention to our spiritual possibilities. Although the material and spiritual worlds are not separate or opposing realms, at first, and for some time, they are perceived as such.

To practice a spiritual discipline is not to reject one's material desires or goals but rather to loosen the over-firm grip the material world may have upon us. Modern American society too often presents the opposite objective. It encourages material desires and goals while stilling, even stifling, spiritual growth.

Now, when we come to the distinction between different types of teachers of the martial arts, there is something that must be clearly understood. A *sensei* is one who expertly teaches the material, or outer nature of karate, the art's *jitsu* or *waza*—its technical side. A *Shifu*, by contrast, teaches the spiritual or *inner* dimensions of an art. We have lost this teaching distinction in modern times.

This fact was pointed out to me by Shifu, Arakawa Tenshin, of the Tenshin Ryushin Ji, a traditionally trained Aikibudo master. In earlier Asian martial culture it was noted that a *sensei* instructed disciples in the art's technicalities as well as in the correct pacing of information. A *sensei*'s task is to construct a firm technical base and all the motivations necessary to move a student through various demanding levels of physical skill.

A *Shifu*, on the other hand, guides his disciples through an equally demanding 'inner' terrain. He introduces a different set of techniques and paces. *Sensei* and *Shifu*, in principle, are linked, complementary advocates of the specific training methodologies of both a material and spiritual discipline. They can also be one and the same person. In reality, the material and spiritual realms are deeply entwined. They can be unraveled, that is,

made to appear separate, in order to bring more energy and focus to a particular aspect of study. This is why, in the house of Karate Do, you will see physical training, discussion, and ritual, bundled together. Physical training defines the material realm. Discussion creates a bridge to the spiritual by offering distinction and definition. Ritual reveals and expresses the spiritual nature of karate Do practice. This is why sometimes one area of training will take the forefront, or is given extra focus because, as you bear down hard on one aspect of your training, breakthroughs are likely to occur, releasing additional energy, strengths and insights for continued advance.

I'd also like to point out that an unraveling may occur for negative reasons, where one experiences a de-grading or reversal of growth. This condition does not generally occur in the authenticating dojo. The 'unraveling' I am referring to is a conscientious action by a Shifu to add further distinctions to the various training realms. For example, on the practical side, when a student is taught a simple wrist escape, the method is presented in a rather broad way. It is devoid of nuances. But when the student's mind appears ready, the technique's previously hidden intricacies are revealed. From the spiritual side, a similar unfolding might follow in parallel fashion. For example, a Shifu might point out a hidden resentment that one fellow disciple has for another while doing wrist escapes, causing both men to behave off base. The Shifu might bring this inner discord to the forefront and defuse the hostility calling it for what it is. Perhaps, the fact that one man is going through a divorce and taking out his frustration on his fellow disciple alleviates the problem. I don't want to imply that the psychological side of training is the sole representative of the spiritual nature of the martial arts, but the organization of one's mind does give a good indication of where one is at spiritually. Your mind and body are always equally engaged in an authentic martial Do.

I might also add that any physical or mental discipline can be spiritualized or de-spiritualized. This latter condition describes most of mainstream American Martial arts today. Much of the inner richness in the martial disciplines of earlier Asian cultures has been stripped away from modern systems. The inner assets were not carried forward. This has been the fateful and current karma of the martial arts at the moment, and it appears to have created some confusion amongst those intuitively seeking more depth to their arts. For such people cannot find appropriate guides. This reality has also completely separated others from the knowledge that such an art even exists. But this is not something to lament. This is simply a dormant winter cycle for

the spiritual nature of the arts. Martial history has its seasons. The current cycle will turn again in the future, sooner rather than later. And you will always find, even in the coldest of environments, small martial houses emitting a great deal of warmth somewhere on your horizon. But you may just have to search a little harder to find such a dojo.

So Karate, without its *Do* counterpart, is only the skin or outer shell of an otherwise authentic, spiritual martial vehicle. Karate *jitsu* or karate *technique* represents the material side of training while Karate Do represents the art's spiritual dimensions.

**Isn't the distinction between the *jitsu* and the *Do* often metaphorically described as the *Hard* and the *Soft* of martial arts?**

The distinction between *hard* and *soft* varies from one martial discipline to another. So it is not confined to a specific interpretation or level of a material or spiritual reality, though it does embrace this particular understanding. Hard and Soft can also imply Closed and Open, Yang and Yin, Transmitting and Receiving, filling or emptying etc. The reason we have this metaphor, and why it is so appropriate, is because it can be used in an open-ended manner to explain interdependent training levels in how we execute technique, how we think or philosophize about our martial arts, and how we comport ourselves daily. For example, when a new student practices a kata he or she will often ask, "*What is the purpose for a set of moves being performed in such a manner?*" The answer is that the 'purpose' is often never singular. Most traditional movement sets are multi-dimensional and if spiritual-based, transcendental. First, one must meet the challenge of organizing the body to move intensely, precisely, and with commitment. That is, one must upgrade one's own bodily organization, not worry about what it's going to be doing at future training stages. When the correct measure of skill is demonstrated in the first level, the next layer is added. Until the first level of organization is achieved, which varies from person to person, the next must wait in the queue. In this process patience is cultivated in the student.

**What is your understanding of Esoteric versus Exoteric Buddhism and how it weaves into your art?**

At first glance, we see Buddhism's central focus as a method to reduce suffering in this world, both our own and others. To understand suffering, according to the Buddha, we need to understand the nature of the mind and the nature of the world our mind exists within. It is here that we often find

that we are the generators of much of our own pain and suffering. So the Buddha devised 'skillful means' to quell these imbalances and to see the true face of our mind as the source of the conflicts surrounding us.

In a like fashion, when we take a quick glance at karate training we see a similar goal. We want to reduce fear, pain and injury to ourselves from any physical abuse or assault. Karate or Kempo training can protect us and provides all the necessary skills to do so.

Buddhism and Martial arts thus share a very common goal – *to reduce or stop the suffering that arises from conflicts*. Whereas Buddhism addresses the root cause of suffering in the mind, martial art begins to address its gross manifestations of people actually experiencing physical hostility. Thus the two disciplines have a strong connection to one another. They form a bridge, an inner thoroughfare, where the mind can learn from the body's wisdom and the body can benefit by anchoring to mental concepts that keep us mindful of those events and behaviors that might lead to our distress or imbalance. We see the most successful welding of Buddhism and the martial in the *chuan fa* or Kempo arts of China. These inner influences reached into Okinawan martial culture. We can see elements of their fusion in the kata syllabi of Isshin Kempo.

Mainstream martial arts offer us good *physical* training along with common sense tactical strategies and motivations. But this is often its sole or primary emphasis. There are some valuable goals here, but they can too easily be superficialized; heightened physical skills, trophies, and ego gratifications do not always alleviate our inner imbalances. These goals have their place and value, but they represent only *half* the quest of living a full life. The other half of the journey—spiritual life—is missing in this practice. The nature of reality and the intricacies of the mind are not really discussed or easily grasped. So this still remains a murky, ambiguous topic in most dojos. Today, many people just want a good workout. They either convince themselves they don't have the time for any other aspects of their art or they don't want to open up closets with skeletons inside and have to deal with them. It's too scary.

Esoteric Buddhism is an altogether different breed of study. In the esoteric lineages, we use mental strategies and tactics not commonly known to the average person outside of the sect. Meditation practice, though used by both Esoteric and Exoteric Buddhism, is one method the Western world found

original back in the 60's, even though it has been practiced for centuries in Asia. Shifu Nagaboshi Tomio has described the Esoteric Buddhist practices as “mystical”. I think this term, though true, is slightly off-putting for mainstream Western students because it holds some connotations to magic and even trickery today, although that is the wrong way to look at it. But then again, a lot of things are being looked at askew in the world today. Perhaps, we could say that Esoteric Buddhist practices avail themselves of the transcendental, but even this word can hint of a mysterious realm to a layman unfamiliar with spiritual language. It's sad that there are those who jump to quash or denigrate others merely because they may use secretive methods or vocabulary to describe uncommon practices that offer true value. So, let's simply say that esoteric martial Buddhism advances its disciples by way of uncommon, little known, or unknown methodologies.

**Can you describe these ‘uncommon’ practices of Esoteric Buddhism as they relate to martial arts?**

I mentioned previously that the material world is woven deeply into the spiritual. Likewise, in my personal practices, Esoteric Buddhism is woven deeply into my Karate Do or Kempo, and it can be so for others as well.

The intersection between the two disciplines takes place within karate's patterned Forms or Kata. It is here that we see the “mystical synthesis” of Buddhist aims within martial training. Meditation is brought into the physical movement patterns giving kata practice *spiritual traction*. A kata then becomes a spiritual vehicle, an authentic or *full* practice, when its goals are aimed to quell “inner rebellion” along with any outer discord.

The influence of Esoteric Buddhism in Karate Do doesn't stop here. It also presents the kata practitioner with a whole new and unique set of inner tools by way of specific breathing patterns, visualizations, and deep understanding of the body's electrical nature, the mind's elusive and sometimes illusory qualities, and Karate's microcosmic parallels to the larger world surrounding us. It also helps us to understand how body and mind can be more fully activated through specific physical posturings and motions. All of this knowledge is directed to facilitate a balanced merger between our material and spiritual natures. *Absolute balance* represents a state of ‘no conflict.’ It is this mutual goal that both the martial arts and Buddhism has striven, and still strives for, and thus, for this reason, these two disciplines have historically shared their knowledge contents with one another.

Chen Yen Shingon Mikkyo, Mi Ching Esoteric Buddhism offers advanced karate practitioners its guarded, mystical, and hidden mechanisms from centuries of cataloging, to create broader dimensions for both martial and ordinary life expression. It gives us concrete steps to widen ourselves beyond the goal of mere physical self-protection to a meaningful embrace of minimizing or ending conflict altogether on all levels of our existence.