

INTERVIEW WITH THE 'SOUL POLISHER'

A Noted Teacher Talks About The Spiritual Nature and Transformative Process of the Martial Ways

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By D.J. DeMarco



Shifu Christopher J. Goedecke, has been a career martial arts teacher for nearly four decades. He is a passionate advocate for spiritual-based martial arts practices. His teaching, philosophy and unique ideas have been featured in leading martial arts magazines.

Goedecke is a Bodhisattva warrior monk in the Buddhist Chen Yen Shingon Mikkyo sect. His most recent work, *The Soul Polisher's Apprentice; A Martial Kumite About Personal Evolution*, explores the positive gains people can have through the martial experience.

In this interview conducted by Sensei Darren DeMarco, Goedecke shares his insights and philosophy into martial training, its spiritual nature and inner principles.

You've been called the *Soul Polisher* because some think your martial work goes well beyond the physical boundaries.

Durable peace and serenity are what spiritual-based martial arts have striven to accomplish for centuries. The word 'epigenesis' means an addition to that which was created. In the continual recycling of all particles and phases of life the memory of experience is advanced along with the deductions and adaptations gained from that experience. Though the original purpose for martial arts may have been to ensure basic survival its epigenesis brings us intelligent resolutions for our fundamental life struggles.

The public hears a lot about martial art's value for *physical* defense but little about its emotional or psychological benefits for one's *spiritual* defense. In my own search for answers, I discovered many tools within the martial arts that went far beyond the obvious kick/punch practicalities, to help me deal effectively with everyday conflicts, and reduce life's insidious frictions. I have concluded that to be successful in this undertaking, we need to explore not only the tangible, physical world but also our less tangible, spiritual, or interior world.

**You practice a form of Kempo.
How does Kempo differ from other martial arts?**

Roughly two thousand martial arts exist worldwide today. Though a dozen or so Asian disciplines have become popular in American culture, many more systems consist of esoteric or specialized studies of which the general public is mostly unaware. Kempo, an early Japanese word for Chinese martial arts, predates our modern karate and tae kwon do sys-

The term, Soul Polisher, comes from the classic epic Musashi, by Eiji Yoshikawa, about the famous medieval samurai who travels the Japanese countryside mastering the art of swordsmanship. In one instance, Musashi encounters an old sword polisher whose shop sign reads: 'Souls Polished.' Intrigued, Musashi finds that the sword polisher doesn't simply hone steel blades. On the contrary, since the sword is considered the soul of a samurai, "It's only natural that the craftsman who polishes the sword must also polish the swordsman's spirit."

tems. Kempo is deeply entwined with Buddhist thought and philosophy and because of this it presents a much fuller face of martial training by combining practical techniques alongside therapeutic and meditative practices. In this light, Kempo can be viewed as a yogic journey into the nature of 'self,' through the medium of conflicts that arise in our minds and bodies during training. By directing our attention to how we cope inwardly with physical conflict, Kempo training awakens the sensitivities to see and feel those unseen forces normally outside of our awareness, by which we are also influenced.

In China, Kempo was called *Chuan-Fa*, (Hand-Law). The figure meaning 'Law' according to the late Buddhist scholar Nagaboshi Tomio, when translated into Sanskrit is *Dharma*, the Buddha's teaching, the matrix of Enlightenment. In Sanskrit, the term Kempo reads similar to '*Hasta Dharma*' (Hand Law). He takes this name to refer especially to exercises taught by the Shaolin master, Bodhidharma, to help monks combat the harmful effects of prolonged meditation at the Shorin-Ji Temple.

Both Kempo and its modern offshoot, *karatedo*, embrace spiritual practices and thus preserves the tradition of directing its Five Pillars of training: *Kihon* (Basics), *Kata* (Form work), *Kokyū* (Breath work), *Ki* (Energy work) and *Kumite* (Sparring) toward personal growth.

What is the core doctrine behind your Kempo training?

We are striving for a reduction of life friction that leads to inner peace, a durable happiness, and authenticity. We don't take pleasure in the destruction of the fight, or joy in the combat. Our end game is to transcend arenas of conflict without distorting our nature. The formula: study life through a holistic discipline, train mindfully, assimilate the best of your discoveries, and repeat your successes. Of course, there will be obstacles, and hard practice will challenge your efforts and concentration, but the inner payoff is great.

What do spirituality and martial arts have in common?

Spirituality emerges from the pivotal insight that everything is interconnected. A powerful trinity of *awareness*, *attitude*, and *action* shapes our reality, and kempo develops all three. Unfortunately, even faithful practitioners often miss this fact, because mainstream martial arts are viewed primarily as self-defense arts or competitive sports, not as a process of personal evolution or self-mastery. Indeed, the martial community, itself, struggles to realize and to articulate kempo's value as a holistic, life-enhancing, day-to-day pursuit.

In kempo, one comes to understand that all life choices impact the larger world. For most, this will mean entering a previously un-navigated interior, an inner truth or reality.

To access this requires both a sound regimen, and a reliable guide. For centuries, the *Do* or 'Way' of Martial arts has provided us a vehicle, and its enlightened *sensei* (teacher), its guides. Spiritual-based martial arts attract positive energy and promote integration and insight.

How do you help students work within a spiritual context?

A shard of glass is smoothed in the ocean. Over time the sand's mild abrasion and the current's turbulence will soften its edges. In like fashion, students are similarly polished in a healthy, authenticating martial dojo. A calculated training turbulence yields a firm and balanced center. We are not removing the fight from the warrior. We are restoring higher life purpose. The glass is still glass. It can cut, if necessary.

For example, look at the kempo *kumite* or what in the West we call sparring or 'practice fighting': *Kumite* presents us with a unique opportunity to instantly un-mask the self. The *Kumite* uses one's own ego fear to overcome itself. Sparring should always be done in a compassionate manner. In the dojo, one should never allow personal anger or resentments to develop to the point that they actually affect his conduct toward others. Of course, this situation occurs, but within a spiritual orientation we want to observe our actions without being swept away in the heat of the moment. In this sense, *kumite* becomes an extension of the first 'Mindfulness of Body' meditation taught by the Buddha.

Modern Karate uses some strange terminology until you relate it to Buddhist doctrine. For example, the word used to describe sparring—*Kumite*—is composed of two characters meaning 'meeting' and 'hand.' It does not mean 'fighting' but rather to an act of *contact* between players. Similarly, the word used for block (*Uke*) means 'receiving.' It does not mean stopping, deterring, or even defending, but implies an act of receiving, a meeting in itself. These terms shed a much different light on sparring than as mere fighting technique. They suggest a deeper exchange is taking place.

Take another common term, *Kara Te* (*Empty Hand*). This word, innovated in the early 1900s, was also used in its Chinese form of pronunciation in the 1400s. *Kara* means not only 'empty' of weapons but also 'empty' of Intent. That is, *un-willed*. According to Nagaboshi Tomio, in the Heart Sutra (Hannya Shinkyō), *Kara* can mean *no ear, no touch* etc., in other words, *Void*, the traditional translation of the Sanskrit term *Sunyata*. In Sanskrit, 'Te' can also mean 'Wielder' or 'Holder.' Nagaboshi suggests we can translate Karate as *Sunyata-Pani*, '*He who wields the Voidness*' or '*He who grips the Sunyata*.' Training focus shifts when you consider Kempo in this manner.

These terms found within modern karate practices are not simply fighting names, but direct references to actual Dharma practices. However, not all Buddhist monks trained in Kempo/Karate and Karate is not the same as Buddhism

itself. It may not be much different but it isn't the same. Buddhist Kempo is a way of approaching reality, the reality of Self-Voidness. In some cases the actual Dharma was preserved because of the monks' skill as Kempo masters. Unfortunately, as time passed, many monks forgot or overlooked the nature of such training. Such definitions draw students' curiosities into a larger story of the nature and purpose of their martial training when it is presented in this fashion.

What about students who just want basic self-defense or sport training?

I apply my father's advice, "*Never force anything.*" There is a great deal of practical information available in all forms of martial arts training which I can equally enjoy with students. Although there is great value to be had through mindful, spiritual practice, if a student is uninterested, or resists the notion, he or she is not obligated. Natural life cycles continually take us around to the doorstep of our inner world as an unconditional offering. It's the student's choice to enter or not. I respect everyone's process.

How do you know when the martial process between you and a student is completed?

Martial evolution is a co-creative process. As a teacher I do not over-control a student's advance, nor does he or she over-control my instruction. A sculptor intuitively knows when his sculpture is complete. Think of the martial student as a living sculpture. Sometimes the student senses completion of a stage of his development first. Sometimes I do. There is also that rare occasion of a mutual climax when we simultaneously recognize the color of the moment has changed. When the energy of one process is discharged, a new one begins, and both student and teacher take a new position in the universal scheme. This is one of the reasons behind the change in colored belts in the martial arts. In a physical struggle, we say, "*When the hand (determination) is emptied, the fight is over.*" When you've got your groceries in hand you don't hang around the market place. It is time to head home.

Do some students find spiritual training too ambiguous?

There is a general misconception about the martial arts that its spiritual component is a mysterious or mystical nature. In truth, I avoid obtuse, abstract or overly heady definitions for living a mindful and meaningful life. I, too, need practical tools, something I can see, touch and feel. I'd rather wash my hands with soap and hot water first than take a lecture on hygiene or a visualization of clean hands. As a martial artist I choose and teach action over rumination. Likewise, I want something practical to cleanse my inner world. Meditation allows me to quietly wash myself of unwanted frequencies,

negative thoughts, and to connect the loose ends of self. Afterwards, I feel lighter, clearer.

Our most personal journeying is not supposed to be understood by everyone. We share that part of the path only with our most intimate loved ones and fellow disciples, those who can really appreciate the nuances of our travels.

How Does Ki or Chi work factor into your kempo training?

Many of the great martial systems of the world complement their physical or biomechanical training with 'soft' principles. We use this term to describe working with the human *subtle energy body* or what the Japanese call Ki. Okinawan karate masters called their internal training principles *Kiko (Spirit Breath)*. *Kiko* refers to the dynamic synergy between mind, body, breath, and spirit moving in nature's vitalizing rhythm. From the practical standpoint, *Kiko* training adds instantaneous strength to any physical technique. From a spiritual standpoint, Ki is our direct interface with the vibratory world of energy, similar to the way breath is an interface between our physical and psychic world.

Have you seen much change in the martial arts since you began training in 1968?

Social focus continually alters the purpose, the value, the perceptions, the methods, and even the relationships we have toward martial arts. In some cases, we have greatly advanced our training concepts. In others, we have regressed. We have more sophisticated training devices today yet oddly, less sensitivity to our bodies. We possess a greater scientific understanding of the human body, but a diminished knowledge of its *spiritual anatomy*. Society has greater access to life-enhancing information but still chooses to self-indulge, selecting entertainment over evolution. For example, the broad media exposure to MMA (mixed martial arts) is changing the face of martial arts in the United States. It satisfies a great thirst for the martial arts but perhaps only for what the untrained viewers actually see—a sometimes bloody combat. More intrinsic values are masked behind MMA's sensationalism.

Although the basic truths about martial training have changed very little, modern culture constantly reassesses its merits and so reassembles its components from one decade to the next, highlighting now the ancient, traditional path or now the more popularized, eye-catching mixed martial arts.

What is your attitude about physical training?

Whatever activities we undertake, it is important to have a clear objective. We should not excessively stress our body's systems, or focus exclusively on one facet of life but rather

strive to integrate each and all of our biological functions. For example, we want the musculoskeletal system woven into the respiratory, and our breath connected to intention, and so on. Over-conditioning in any one area almost always depletes or diminishes another. This is why some people's martial skills, and their lives, never wholly improve. We must also ask some fundamental questions, "What does it mean to be human? How does martial practice help to elevate our humanness?" It would be self-limiting to spend all day in the dojo and let work and family relationships falter. This represents lopsided conditioning or one-dimensional training which can lead to one-dimensional viewpoints and perpetuate a self-restricting life cycle. Who cares how many front kicks you can do if your loved ones are starving for attention?

Kempo study is a three-dimensional undertaking. We have this amazing ability to elevate our lives through conscious practice. Our mind is very adaptable, but it needs freedom to see the whole range of experiences in front of it. Only then can we intelligently select and implement a balanced set of conditioning exercises.

Could you explain the spiritual concept of the *dojo*?

All the substrates of our personal reality: our social and economic systems, relationships, machines, martial disciplines, reflect the best and worst qualities of our personal makeup and desires. In this sense, life is like a mirror, and thus offers either muddy or crystal reflections. The right dojo, or training hall, will offer us a clear and candid image of our life process. When such a dojo allows us to clearly see the reflection of our inner world, it is considered a sacred or 'rite' place.

The word *dojo* translates as 'Way place.' The term implies a meditative sanctuary set aside from daily life to develop a conscious, spiritual life or 'Way' and then to weave that emergent inner world awareness into the everyday outer world.

When you take care of your business in the bathroom you move out into other rooms. You don't spend all day in the bathroom. In the same way, spiritual life is not supposed to be isolated from everyday life. We should take our dojo lessons out into the larger world to fully extend the dimension and meaning of our life.

Spiritual awareness is complementary to material life in the same way that the inside lining of a coat adds more warmth or substance to the outer layer. Spiritual life is referred to as *inner* because it is less visible. For some, though, spiritual life is an unconscious life, where *inner* can imply 'hidden'--which can also mean 'lost.'

The coat analogy describes the polarity between *egocentric* and *egoless*, distinguishing two perspectives on life. The dojo's importance is not so much in its physical make up of *tatami*, wood, or padded flooring, but rather, as a place in the mind where we come to recognize our role as 'life student' or *DoKa*. The outside decor reflects the inner sanctuary. So

the inner and outer dojo becomes a place for the ritual unfolding of the spiritual or sacred. Who we are unequivocally spills outside of us and shapes our environment.

The 'Way place' is also where we come to study our way, our path, as it relates to our unrealized potential. Kempo practice summons the Grand Perspective. Practicing the Way leads to great inner rewards and a deeper sense of community and purpose.

I was denied access to many powers in my youth because the gates to those powers were shut. I had little awareness of my own subterranean currents until I began the discipline of Kempo.

Personal growth has its own special timing and rhythm likened to our seasonal cycles. You cannot have summer without going through spring. In the dojo we get to look candidly at our personal life cycles in the hopes of attuning to them.

We reduce the interfering distractions of work and social obligations by asking them to politely remain outside. We slough them off with a bow. Everyone thinks of the dojo bow as a greeting, a salutation, but the *rei* is also a letting go, a saying good-bye to prior obligations and old patterns, even if only for an hour or so during training. Everyone has a dojo. It's just that some people have locked its value out of their everyday mind.

Many societies choose to carve out a place for personal spiritual growth to balance the material side of life. Any place that supports communing with your deeper nature: a church, a garden, a time alone in your chair at your desk, or the dojo environment, places you on the Way.

Some suggest that spirituality or real growth in martial arts often begins *after* the black belt.

The Japanese made an important distinction between two skill groups; belt holders below the Shodan grade, the first black belt ranking, and those holding rank above it. This grading system is referred to as the *kyudansha/yudansha* ranking system, formalized in Japan in the 1880's. *Sho dan* translates as 'conception,' 'new beginning' or 'first step.' You may ask, "Why should there be the recognition of a *new* beginning at this juncture?" I cannot answer for other teachers, but I can give you an analogy that may help explain the general distinctions between the dan (black belt) grades.

For infants, life *outside* of the womb is a radically different growth stage from life *inside* the womb. In either case, a developing being experiences 'existence'. Newborn babies could be called *shodans* because of their autonomy that occurs at birth. The baby is still very much dependent upon its caregivers but its umbilicus has been cut. No one is going to reattach it. The newborn gains a newfound freedom along with its *severance*. The infant cannot return to the womb. This is true of the martial shodan. At shodan, the teacher ritually cuts the student's umbilicus, metaphorically speaking, after literally pulling that student for years through the

conceptual birth canal of understanding about his or her art. Martial rebirth also has its gestation period. Just as the infant will go on a decades' long destiny, passing through various rites of passage like puberty, driving, dating, voting, military service, college, career, marriage, children, home ownership, so the awakened student will discover similar rites of passage and milestones of martial experience. Dan grades mark these passings. Each headmaster determines where to place these markers and what experiences and skills his student must have in order to meet them. Then he waits, witnesses, and affirms their crossing.

Of course, there is much subjectivity in the ranking structure of most martial systems so it is difficult to give a precise meaning that would define each organization's standards. There is also a presupposition that teachers possess a student body mature or skilled enough to assume these high ranks. It takes years to cultivate a skilled senior line.

The author, Patrick McCarthy, discusses the issue of rank in his book **Ancient Okinawan Martial Arts:**

"The ranking system was, and still is within the Butokukai, the evolution of an individual's progress toward the attainment of human perfection through the practice of fighting traditions. This evolution is not based solely upon physical prowess, but rather encompasses the individual's overall physical, moral and spiritual development: budo's goal of cultivating our world within in an effort to enhance the world without. Hence, promotions were, and still are, awarded based on this standard."

When it comes to personal evolution where one places the markers for ranking is secondary to the fact that a distance is covered.

What do you consider unique about your student body?

We are a healthy, functioning and nurturing family, which is becoming more of a rarity today. Through collective study, we've reached a level of enlightenment about our individual and group dynamics. Our organization functions like the Buddhist *sangha* or virtuous community, even though we have a variety of members with diverse lay and religious beliefs. Egos are certainly present, but they rarely command center stage. We are also different from many sport clubs, which choose to bond in a feeling of competitive superiority. We are not trying to 'win a game' against others or outsiders. We are simply raising the bar of our own evolution. Kempo study is ultimately a personal undertaking. We accept others into our arena to nudge us along, to provide support, and to offer clear mirroring and encouragement.

What keeps you going as a full time professional teacher of nearly forty years?

I have not yet exhausted my curiosity about the martial arts. The more I peer into my discipline, the more compelled I am

to look deeper. My wonder for this art and its nourishment to me is still bountiful. I feel alive when I am around others questing for growth. The dojo is always charged with questions and curiosities. Those seeking harmony have caught me in their flow. The whole experience reminds me of that deep anticipation of readying oneself to listen to a symphony. As the orchestra slowly draws into accord, it carries its audience down a river of harmonious sounds. Martial art plays that symphony for me.

So it's not where I am headed but where I am that keeps me going! Metaphorically, when one is on the right train (train of thought) then it does not matter where the train goes. The mystery of the journey makes our lives just as rewarding as its known parts. To strive for authenticity, to engage in meaningful action, and to pass along valuable tools to the younger generation define the right train for me.

Do you still find value in punching and kicking?

I use the physical realm as an integral component for study and self-activation. So, although we each may kick and punch for many different reasons; to win a trophy, to maintain health, to repel invaders, or to study the larger physical universe through its parallel in the physical body, all or any of these actions, can move us up the evolutionary ladder. In kempo, we kick and punch as steppingstones to higher functioning.

When it comes to advancing ourselves we could all use a mentor, a parent, coach, teacher, literature, time alone, anything that can lead us through the rough or unknown parts of our physic terrain. We need a path through the forest of Life's uncertainty and doubt if we are to ascend up the mountain of truth. We need clear purpose to make our peak life experiences more than just momentary highs. We need our bodies to be healthy, alert, and energetic because our body is our primary vehicle in this life.

Could you comment on the *practice* of everyday living?


Many people practice to become skilled at martial arts but rarely extend the concept of *practice* to become skilled at everyday living? The *practice* of everyday living instills extraordinary qualities into ordinary moments. Our main tool of practice is mindful attention to our behaviors to locate our 'ground zero' for doing things. Mindfulness practice makes one feel more alive, more connected to one's actions, and more responsible for the actions one chooses. For example, most teenagers view house chores as an imposition on their time. So they shun these natural responsibilities. But cleaning up after one's self is a byproduct of living. Taking care of such basic responsibilities as washing dishes, taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, ironing clothes, organizing thoughts and objectives give our life balance. It adds greater meaning to those freedoms we are able to enjoy. Suppose

no one washed your dishes, no one sewed your clothes, no one changed the oil in your car or you never organized your thoughts. How long would it take before your life clogged with the disorganized, dirty, confused and spent casings of your actions? Life would become foul and come to a halt until you cleaned up. True practice, whether in the Dojo or in Life, is essentially the act of cleaning up.

Are there any restrictions on who can learn the spiritual side of martial arts art?

Anyone can cultivate inner wisdom through martial practices but there first must be some attraction that leads them into this particular room of change. Not everyone at the carnival wants to enter the Fun House. This is also true of the world's disciplines. Not everyone wants to enter yoga, martial arts, biofeedback, homeopathy, or other meditative or alternative disciplines. The Ferris wheel attracts some, the Fun House others. If you have heart trouble, you might wish to avoid skeletons popping out of the dark. Some disciplines challenge your physical limitations, others your intellectual or spiritual limitations. Some marital disciplines are very

rugged. But there's enough martial diversity to stimulate many temperaments, body types, and philosophical bents. In American culture we are mostly restricted by our own distractions. This can make us our own worse enemy and place an interesting spin on the concept of 'self' protection. What is this thing called 'self'? Why do we need to protect it? Who or what is the real enemy?

In my kempo study, I have found answers to these questions in mindful practices: awareness of my own sensations and emotions, observation of others' responses to my actions during training, and by directing my thoughts and monitoring my feelings toward resolving or removing myself from unnecessary conflict. We offer a relationship that nourishes hearts, awakens bodies and stimulates minds. Here one can find an authentic path without the need for games or ego dominance. Our path brings value and meaning into students' lives. It uplifts people in ways that are both visible and practicable. I would not want to let this feeling, or these results go, if I could grasp them. And as a teacher, if one is going to polish the living blade, i.e. the body, it makes sense to polish the character housed within. 



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