My Journey in Karate, the Sabaki Way

by Kancho Joko Ninomiya with Ed Zorensky

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I sensed the stranger before I had even heard his feet shuffling just outside the open door. He looked to be about 6 feet six inches tall, 240 pounds or so, built like a football linebacker. He was standing at the window, pretending to examine a poster, but I could feel his eyes measuring me in a way that made the hair stand p on the back of my neck. He strolled the length of the window and back again. Finally he stepped inside the door.

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"Can I help you?",

I asked. He didn't answer. He let his eyes gaze at the bulletin board. After a moment he strolled over to my desk.

"Are you the champion from Japan?", he asked.

A bus rolled by, its brakes hissing as it stopped in the next block. I looked him over without answering. He was dressed in jeans and a white tee shirt. He wore a brown, flat cap and carried a gym bag slung over one shoulder.

"Are you Joko Ninomiya?" he demanded "Yes", I said. "What can I do for you?"

His brown hair stuck out under the greasy cap. He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head back. "I've trained in three different styles," he said self-importantly. He had a cocky way of standing with his weight on one leg, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans.

"I'd like to spar with you."

There are so many parts of our Japanese tradition that Americans don't understand. They have seen movies and read the stories about fighters from one school coming to challenge the leader of another school. They see the outside of our tradition, the surface, but only those who have committed to the martial arts - those who have gone beyond black belts to the higher levels of understanding - know what the tradition means. It means you have chosen karate as your way, then you are ready to give up your life if you are challenged. It is a way of living on the end of existence, at death's door. It means submitting to the possibility of death and accepting it at any moment that it may appear.

I have never taken challenges lightly. I needed to make sure that this scruffy fellow standing in my dojo with an arrogant challenge burning in his eyes knew exactly the stakes at hand. I closed the roll book. I laid the pen on the desk.

"If you mean you want to practice, to just spar," I said, "no thanks."

"What do you mean, "no thanks?" I thought you were a champion," he said. "I want to fight you!"

"Are you challenging me? Because if you just want to practice, I'm not interested. But if you're challenging me, I'll fight you. You understand the difference?"

He weighed my words, and then nodded. "Yeah, let's fight."

"All right," I said.

I stepped out from behind the desk. I nodded to the dressing room at the back of the dojo. He started across the carpet. "Please leave your shoes at the door," I reminded him.

He grunted, kicked off his shoes, and started to the back of the dojo. My mind was focused on one thought only: I would have to knock down this cocky stranger and make him stay down. I remembered the lesson I had learned early on from Hideyuki Ashihara, my first and only karate teacher, and later on the kancho or leader of Ashihara Karate. When I was still in high school, a challenger showed up at the dojo in Yawatahama, and we fought. I handled him well, but when he finally gave up he was still on his feet. Kancho Ashihara shook his head and said, "Your heart is too nice. You must knock him down. Otherwise he will change his story and say it was a draw."

I did what I was told that day. And I have done so ever since. The importance of honor is a very difficult thing for most Westerners to understand. Honor has no weight, no size or color. Its value is gauged only by the heart and spirit. What Kancho had taught me that day in the dojo was the importance and seriousness of a challenge. I didn't know whether my opponent understood the seriousness of his challenge. If he did not, I was willing to teach him - with my life, if necessary.

I don't mean to sound melodramatic. I am simply talking about the way I live my life, a life that has been spent in karate-do (the "way" of karate). The Japanese word do means "way" or "path." In this sense, karate-do is more than physical conditioning or the mastery of a few self-defense techniques. It is a lifelong journey in pursuit of an art form and all the discipline, self-mastery, and understanding that any art requires. I started on this path when I was eleven years old, and I have pursued it from my homeland all the way to America. I have followed it through numerous fights and encounters on the street. It is a path that has taken me through six national tournaments and an All-Japan Championship title. I have no expectations that anyone else will live the same way I do, but I will not alter my own conduct to suit someone else's fancy. The desire of this total stranger to fight with me - only because I was a former karate champion - was a deadly serious matter to me.

I selected a gi (training uniform) from the pile next to my desk and changed, unaware that I was standing so close to the front window - I was fully concentrated on the challenge ahead of me. The stranger came out in his gi and warmed up. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him throw a few kicks and punches from a very wide stance. I finished tying my belt and stretched. The stranger continued to warm up in his sideways stance, his feet still spread wide, his weight well back It was an impressive stance to watch - low and powerful, but not very mobile or quick. It was a style popularized in America by the television show Kung Fu. It was a showy, impractical style that belonged on television, but not in the dojo or out on the street.

I watched without expression, mentally calculating my strategy. With his weight back and his front foot extended, his front leg would be very vulnerable to a sweep or low kick. Using a sweep, I could hook his lead leg with my ankle and pull the supporting leg out from beneath him, forcing him to lose balance. The other choice was to attack the front leg with a low roundhouse kick. The impact would divert his attention to the lower part of his body and I would follow up with an attack to the face using a high roundhouse kick. When you first attack low, your opponent's hands drop, leaving his head open to attack. It took but a second to decide just what I would do, and yet that second of understanding would have been impossible without the hours and years of constant training of both mind and body.

I stood and walked into the middle of the floor. I stood in the ready stance and bowed briefly to my opponent.

"Ready?"

"Okay," he said.

He dropped into his low, wide stance and moved his hands in small circles in front of his face. He looked comical pawing the air like a dog paddling in a pond. The faint sound of the lights humming, the traffic in the street - it all went away, and I settled into my own fighting stance. It was like entering into another world, always familiar and yet strangely quiet - a world of intense concentration and alertness where I felt neither pain nor fear, a world to which street noises, the shouts of one's friends, or the cheering of a crowd came distantly as if through a thick glass. One never knew what would happen in that world where life occurred in the absolute present. One thing was certain, however: whatever occurred would happen in perfect solitude that was at once the loneliest, most profound, and most glorious of moments life could offer.

I settled onto the balls of my feet and focused entirely on my opponent's eyes. I allowed my field of vision to expand so that peripherally I could see his arms and legs. The large hands pawed the air in precious circles. He moved slowly back and forth. I timed his movement watching his cold blue eyes. He blinked and I kiai-ed from the bottom of my belly. The room shook as I attacked instantly.

I leaped forward, pivoting on my left foot as I drove a low roundhouse kick to the middle of his front thigh. He staggered as my shin drove deep into his muscle. The leg had no place to go, and the muscle absorbed the full impact. Immediately

I followed with a second roundhouse kick, this time to the outside of the thigh just above the knee. I kiai-ed again as a third kick caught him square on the jaw with a loud crack. He started falling like a big tree, his eyes wide with disbelief. He landed on his back and stayed there, clutching his leg, groaning. It was over.

The challenge that afternoon in Denver was not the greatest I have ever faced, but I still had to meet it as if it were. It was a challenge that might have ended quite differently, but you can never calculate that ahead of time. You simply confront the challenge head on as if it were your final match. You entrust yourself to your training and spirit and technique. You entrust yourself to the years of preparation, and if that preparation has been done with full attention and love and dedication, you find yourself floating in that momentary solitude. You find that time slows down and you see your opponent's attack before he even cocks his hip or raises his knee. You anticipate his every movement. You penetrate his mind. You own the moment.

In karate, these moments stretch through a lifetime. They reach deep down into the body. They reshape the mind and spirit. These moments can occur in the dojo, in the stadium, or on a lonely hillside, working out, pushing yourself a little further than you thought you could go. Over the years these moments change you a little at a time. They make you a little faster, a little stronger. They build the mind and enlarge the spirit in ways that allow you to take on greater and greater challenges.

Karate is not just winning, but learning and understanding. It is a journey with many beginnings. Thinking only of who is strongest and attempting to prove it in tournaments, sparring, or encounters in the street is the wrong attitude. More important than winning is being able to use karate to look into one's life. This is the real meaning of karate. It is a journey of self-discovery that leads out of the dojo and touches on every facet of life. Whether you have trained for ten years or have never set foot on a dojo floor, the lessons of karate are the lessons of life itself: meeting challenge, focusing the mind, shaping the will, staying open to the forces of nature and blending them to the spirit within. Karate is just another path leading to that internal garden we all carry with us, every moment of every day. It is a way of discovering the best part of ourselves - our own unique spirit. That is what karate teaches and this is what this story is about: one man's journey in karate.

Let us begin.

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