

October 2011 Newsletter
Goju-Ryu Karate-Do Kyokai

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Finding Budo Connections

by Gail Oblinger

The Seven Virtues of Bushido flashed into my mind as I was reading the letters to Ann Landers column in my local newspaper. I especially thought of Courage (Yuuki).

A letter from a woman who wrote about a drinking problem had appeared in a past column. Another woman, named Elaine had read the first letter and sent in her comment. Now a third woman was writing in to comment further. It goes like this...

"I read the letter from the Elaine from California who said she was inspired by another letter in your column about a woman who couldn't stay sober. She asked if she was too old to change, and her counselor replied, "Is your heart still beating?"

The third woman went on to say, "Her story hit me right in my middle." She said that she was 67, has had 3 back surgeries and will always have physical limitations. She also lives with chronic depression and is overweight. "It seems I have struggled with one or all of these conditions my whole life. "

She continued, "As I get older, I am more and more weary. I have a psychiatrist, a therapist, a good back doctor and the best primary care physician. And I have asked each of them whether there is any use in thinking I can improve my condition. They all give me positive answers, but Elaine's letter rang a new bell. Even when some parts are broken, there are parts that still work.

Here is one of my favorite quotes for lifting the spirits, from Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That is how the light gets in.

Doesn't that strike you as being a very true thought? I feel like it speaks to those of us who are attending karate classes, trying the best we can while experiencing physical limitations, and frustrated because we don't perform as well as we wish. In the dojo where I train, the ages of adult students ranges from 18 to 74, with an average in the mid-forties. On any class night there might be several persons with bad knees, a bad wrist, or other injuries and disabilities. They don't quit. They haven't given up. They are in class, participating.

"Some parts are broken, but there are parts that still work."
" Ring the bells that still can ring..."

That surely is courage in the budo way.

Kathy Reynolds

by Mark Cramer

Kathy Reynolds, just won the Bronze Medal in Kumite at the Pan American Jr. Championships. (She was the Gold Medalist at age 13.) Kathy is a student of Mike Jacobs in Genoa, Ohio and has trained in Shiteigata at the Bedford GKK.

Kathy has been a constant figure at the Bedford Qualifier to the USA-NKF National Championships Team Trials. Moreover, Kathy has conducted kumite seminars at the Bedford Dojo and has worked with our students to improve their kumite skills.

One of the things that impresses me the most about Kathy is that she is quite humble about her accomplishments. At our tournament, I have several times asked Kathy to do a demonstration match with a brown or green belt who had no one in her division to compete with. Kathy has always conducted herself with restraint and respect toward her opponent.

Matching a Pan American Champion with a dojo-level competitor could be disastrous for the unsuspecting green belt. However, Kathy has always made the demonstration match a good experience for the other competitor.

Kathy will also be competing in the World Karatedo Federation (WKF) World Junior and Cadet Championships. This event will be held in Melaka, Malaysia from October 13 – 16.

Mirror Mirror on the Wall

"If somebody thinks they're a hedgehog, presumably you just give 'em a mirror and a few pictures of hedgehogs and tell them to sort it out for themselves".....Douglas Adams

A few years back, I was watching the grandbaby stack wooden blocks. She would stack four high or so and they would fall down. It irritated her at first until she observed why they fall. If the blocks lean too far to one side, they fall. If they lean too far to one side but you compensate by leaning the next few towards the opposite side you can still add more before they fall. There are thousands of variations, all of which are discovered through trial and observation.

But here's the lesson: if you stack blocks and they do not fall, you learn nothing. If one stops and thinks about that statement, it contains the secret to skill development: it is mistakes and correction which build excellence. So, each time the blocks fell, a lesson was learned. Maybe I should say the lesson was placed before her. It was up to her to learn the solution through study, determination and practice.

Some say perfect practice makes perfect. Not so. Perfection is achieved when one runs through all the incorrect permutations until you finally find the groove.

Stand in front of a heavy bag for the first time and you will not hit well. But with many hours of practice you slowly learn the subtleties of how to hit hard. It cannot be taught - it is discovered. Much like the baby and the building blocks, each mistake teaches. And with each mistake, one learns how to make lightning fast corrections while the punch is in motion to avoid the previously learned mistakes. Let me rephrase; if one studies why the movement did not go as planned and tries again while deeply focusing to get it right, the previous mistakes are avoided.

This is what separates the great from the also ran - relentless correction and retrying.

I have spent the last year correcting my right side kick. My left kick was fine, but I never mastered the kick with my right leg. I blamed my spine problems for the difference in technique. While that was a factor, I simply had to re-teach myself to over compensate and adjust my alignment to make up for structural flaws. Just like the baby blocks, a little tweak here and there made the kick look right. And when you have done something cockeyed for over forty years, it takes a lot of reprogramming to undo the motor skills.

When most martial artists are videotaped, they don't like how their technique looks when they watch the playback. Self-perception is usually quite different from what their performance actually looks like. I sometimes look at karateka and think "has this person ever looked at his performance in a mirror?"

Albrecht Pfluger of the Japan Karate Association used to assign "homework" for his students. They were to spend a few minutes everyday working on a single technique while viewing themselves in front of a mirror. Mr. Pfluger would demonstrate the technique in detail as the students observed so the motion would hopefully be etched into their memory. From there, the student would self-correct any mistakes on his or her own.

I priced large mirrors a few years back and the cost was very high. However, I got around that by ordering mirrored closet sliding doors. The two doors were made for an eight foot wide opening which meant each door was around four feet by six and a half feet. By turning them sideways and adjusting the hanging height, I ended up with thirteen linear feet of mirror set at just the right height so I can see myself head to toe. Two hundred and thirty dollars sure beats two thousand. The mirrors have some sort of rubber backing glued on them which I suppose is to prevent shattering into a thousand pieces. Since I have a young granddaughter, safety was a huge concern when it came to the mirrors.

Dance studios have at least one mirrored wall. There is a reason for this. The mirrors provide intense visual feedback as the dancers practice. Students can see when mistakes are made and correct them in an instant. Since traditional karate places such emphasis on how each movement looks, mirrors are a superb training aid for any level student.

I am not a proprioceptive learner. That is, you cannot move my foot or arm to correct any technique flaws I have. The corrections never quite make it to my brain. My head hasn't a clue where my body position is. I am a visual learner. What I see is burned into my head like a photograph. I can then take that photograph and mimic the movement as I watch myself perform. I will learn more from five minutes of observation than I will from five hours of being physically manipulated. It is a simple process for me - you demonstrate, I watch and memorize and then I observe myself practice until I match the movement. With my somewhat stunted proprioceptors it may take a thousand repetitions until I get it right, but that is how I learn. It probably explains why I can find a single sentence from a thousand books when I research an article - I can sort of "see" where it is located.

Few things are worse than practicing a movement wrong. It not only wastes time, it will have to be corrected and re-learned at some future time. If one doesn't know where the mistakes are, one cannot correct the flaws. And once the flaws are recognized, painstaking practice until the task is mastered is necessary.

It doesn't matter whether it is the execution of a side kick or the balancing of baby blocks.

The Character of Goju-Ryu **Kata Implications for Experienced Practitioners** by Rich Stamper

Chapter 11: **Traditional Karate-Do**

What does the word "tradition" mean? We all are sure we know what it means and yet this seems to stir up controversy. So here's more stirring:

I suggest that "Traditional Karate-Do" means teaching the way we were taught and the way our instructors were taught and so on. I suspect this is perhaps the least controversial definition, but what does that definition really mean and what are its consequences?

When I say teaching the way we were taught and the way our instructors were taught, what comes to mind? A bunch of techniques? A methodology? Both? Is this something we even give much thought to? I suspect that most of us just do it because "that's the way it's done". So here are some thoughts:

First, let's consider teaching methodology. By this I mean the class format, the demeanor of the instructor, the relationship of the instructor with the students, the relationship of the students with the instructor, and the relationship of the students with one another.

For this discussion, let's accept that the tradition of teaching the way we were taught and the way our instructors were taught goes back to where? Some say back hundreds of years ago to some guy in China or India or Okinawa or wherever. Nope. Not the case. Now, martial methods go back there somewhere, but not the way it's "Traditionally" taught. Neither the current teaching methodology nor the widely existing protocol goes way back there.

It is well established that karate was made available to the general public in the early 1930's. Prior to that time it was closely held and only taught to a select few. When karate was first made widely available, it was in grade schools, and was structured for large groups. The format was designed to provide character development, self discipline, improved attention span, physical fitness and self-confidence and that format continues today. The promotion of these attributes was necessary to convince the school administrators to accept karate practice for their students. When it was introduced, the format, content, protocol, focus, and intent were designed for school kids. It specifically was not designed to be something that would hurt people. That is so important that I need to repeat it. The version of karate made available to the world in the early 1930's was formatted specifically to be for character development and conscientiously designed not to hurt people. This is in vivid contrast to the "Classical" version whose primary purpose was to disenable an opponent.

"A true karate-man is one with the God like capacity to think and feel for others irrespective of their rank or position. One who possesses ideals so lofty, a mind so delicate, that it lifts him above all things ignoble and base, yet strengthens his hands to raise those who have fallen - no matter how low. The ultimate aim of karate, therefore, lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants."

Heard that before? Notice it has nothing to do with being effective in combat. Notice that it specifically says the aim is to not include victory or defeat - the very necessary consequence of combat.

Again, it is well established that karate was made available to the world in general in the early 1930's and that it was presented in a form designed to promote character development. Period. And that version is what we have today - sort of.

When karate was taught in the grade schools the instruction had a very formal, structured format. This was because karate, like any other contact sport, must be taught with the requirement of controlling the actions and behavior of the participants. A very formal teaching method was called for and strict discipline was implemented to keep things under control with a large group. This fit well with the military mind set and karate was attractive to various members of the armed services. Our soldiers stationed in the Orient after WW II were trained the prevailing version of karate. When our military personnel returned home, they brought and shared what they learned. Those pioneers had learned in a military setting, had a militaristic mind set, and they were taught the version of karate fit for public consumption. That established the format and teaching protocol of the Traditional Karate-Do that we consider to be our heritage.

So, what we have is a program designed to promote character development in large groups that is taught in a militaristic manner. It accomplishes the goals it purports to, but it is not taught the way it was originally. And that's okay.

Now, let's look at content - what is being currently taught rather than how it's taught. Again, for this discussion, let's accept that the content of what we're taught goes back to where? Back hundreds of years ago to some guy in China or India or Okinawa or wherever? Nope. Not the case. Martial methods go back there somewhere, but again, not the content as it's currently "Traditionally" taught. Neither the popular, limited selection of basics nor the practice methodology go way back there.

A typical karate class will emphasize physical fitness through a set of special conditioning exercises, certain basic techniques, some work with partners, kata and sparring. We teach good form first, strength second and then speed.

What constitutes good form? It is some prescribed movement that must be duplicated precisely. The emphasis is on the performance. The goal is to duplicate some standard. That is the art. And we are consistent in directing our students toward developing good duplication of the current version of what's considered to be good form.

What constitutes strength? There are prescribed requirements for determining strength in karate. These often revolve around locking the stance, locking the technique, using proper form on delivery and focus. An experienced practitioner has the prescribed requirements so thoroughly ingrained that simple observation is all that's necessary to determine the degree of strength exhibited by a student.

What constitutes speed? I suggest that any movement practiced for a long period of time will become natural and move faster. At some point, it will move about as fast as an individual is capable of considering that person's physiology.

So what we do is to take a limited number of techniques selected specifically not to hurt the original school age participants and train to do them with improved form, power and speed. Kind of like becoming an expert with a BB gun. This is analogous to the creation of judo from jujitsu or kendo from iaido.

I personally find this rather disappointing. No one ever really told me that what I was investing all this blood, sweat and tears in was actually the original, ancient stuff. I just assumed it was - or wanted to believe it was. I was told it was traditional and it was. It still is. I just didn't understand that Traditional didn't mean Classical, even though I read all the books and they are very, very clear. The old stuff was secret and not shared, and the current stuff was designed for character development and is shared. I misinterpreted that to mean that I was learning the old stuff but with a moral/ethical cant. Not so. Hard to accept, but the facts are very clear.

The good news is that we have a tradition that goes back close to eighty years and it has served many, many people very well.

All this must be kept in mind when trying to understand the Classical kata that predated Traditional Karate-Do and its creation of the Gekki Sai kata.

Did You Know?

By Rich Stamper

Did you know that we have a Member's Marketplace? This will appear in our Newsletter as needed. Have anything to sell? Old punching bag, magazines, training equipment, etc.? Looking for something to buy? Submit your notice to the Newsletter



Thanks for the Memories 1976



Last month's picture of a kid's class from 1976 showed a tall young man standing in the back row. Who would have guessed he would eventually become the CEO of our organization?

Yes, that is Mr. Ed Myers.

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