The Martial Arts in the 21st Century
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Karate – The Art of Empty Self

“True karate strives internally to train the mind to develop a clearer conscience, enabling one to face the world truthfully.”
— Gichin Funakoshi, Father of modern-day Karate

What we generally understand as “karate” is mainly a Japanese form of martial art that, through the learning of self-defense techniques, claims to train its participants in character development. With continual training in physical forms, the student hypothetically becomes not only proficient in physical self-defense but also well versed in the character traits of respect, humility, and confidence — with particular emphasis on creating peaceful behavior.

But is this really true? Can continual training in physical skills alone bring about an understanding of what creates conflict or, perhaps better said, what prevents peace? It’s essential to know the answer to this question, because truly understanding what prevents peace and what creates conflict is the root of what “kara-te” means, and the key to success in character development.

The literal translation of the word “kara-te” is “emptyhands,” or “without the use of weapons.” Karate came about because people who were unarmed needed to find a way to develop their bodies into weapons to combat other people who did have arms. But the meaning of “karate” changed when Shotokan founder, Gichin Funakoshi, renamed it “empty-self.” It is not my purpose to promote Shotokan Karate or any particular style or type of martial art. My primary interest is to understand the fundamental intent of all martial arts and discover how it can unify the martial arts in helping its students understand and resolve conflict peacefully.

I have the greatest respect for Gichin Funakoshi. He was a schoolteacher and, in my view, he would be the first one to stand up and say that Karate education incorporates the mental and the physical, not just the physical alone.
Yet, a conditioned notion still exists in many martial arts schools that if we practice the physical over and over and over again, something magical will happen — we will reach some grand “enlightenment” that will allow us to transcend the problems of everyday living and become the “emptyself” that Funakoshi encouraged.

This notion of continuous, repetitive practice is based on the philosophical foundation of the Asian martial arts called Zen Buddhism (called Chan in China). The notion is also based on a particular form of Japanese Zen called Soto that emphasizes sitting in meditation as a path to enlightenment. The method, called “Zazen,” has the practitioner sit for hours at a time in special sessions, just watching his or her thoughts come and go in the brain.

This “sitting meditation” is vitally important in understanding oneself. The reason? Most thoughts that run through our brain are conditioned fragments — what can be called “flotsam and jetsam” or “mental rubbish.” These thoughts crowd our consciousness with random, confusing images. The key in Zazen is to be able to JUST WATCH these thoughts — not identify with them as “me” or “my thoughts.” In so doing the self or “me” empties itself of these unnecessary thoughts and, therefore, does not act on them.

This “inaction” is the highest form of accomplishment, because it allows us to not identify with these thoughts and, therefore, to not get caught up in them. The mind is freed from reactive conditioned thinking that so often causes us to become anxious or depressed. Freed from reacting to conditioned thoughts, we can develop a clearer conscience, which enables us to face the world directly, truthfully. This is the essence of karate as “empty self.”

Many martial arts practices have decided to include meditative sitting in their own practices, alongside physical self-defense skills. This is a good start. But the philosophical intent of this practice has not yet really carried over into western martial arts to create the whole martial art, as it was meant to be. We have been conditioned to focus on the physical.

The endless repetition of physical self-defense skills produces a conditioned fixed habit, a “conditioned reflex,” something Bruce Lee saw as a hindrance to a more spontaneous, natural way of self-defense. The first section of his book, The Tao of Jeet Kune Do, deals with this issue in some depth. The main point is that any repetitive, habitual practice of a physical self can lead to predictable, rote
behavior that is an ineffectual self-defense. More importantly, development of only the physical self prevents one from being inwardly free of conflict. Since the highest goal of all martial arts practices is to stop conflict before it begins, isn’t it time we all included mental self-defense in our practices?