

AMERICAN KARATE: BUDO VS. ECLECTICISM

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There is a large movement to develop an eclectic Western style of karate. It is a commendable movement, and in general the intentions of these reformers are good. However, good intentions must be constructively directed and the proponents of such a movement should stop and reflect on how karate started, why it is practiced and what karate is.

Karate is an art, a martial art, and not a sport. It is part of what the Japanese call “budo,” the “way of the warrior.” It is practiced as a way of life and started in the crucible of Oriental culture.

Oriental culture emphasizes values different from the West. The Oriental ideal of men is of oneness, of being one with the family, one with the country. Participation with the whole is the natural Oriental culture pattern. In karate, or the cognate arts of judo, aikido, and kendo the repetitious training and emphasis on basics disappoint many Westerners who expect to flip an opponent with a simple twist of the wrist. They question the methods of training and keep searching from dojo to dojo for the magic formula that will make them supernormal. The Oriental accepts the premise that his teacher knows best.

Psychologists tell us our behaviour is produced by the way our body and mind interact and in the same manner our personalities are produced by the interaction of our culture and our psychological constitution. Fundamentally, the philosophical concept of Western culture has been that of postulation, whereas Oriental culture has been that of intuition.

The Oriental psyche looks for an esthetic contact with reality through intuition. To him eternal truth is behind reality. Man is part of the universe-the cosmic whole. The Western man takes a diametrically opposed position. He views the universe and all objects around him with an Aristotelian logic. It must make sense-two and two equals four. He wants to survey, subvert and control.

Since karate is a way of life, the screening process in the Orient is very stringent. This process of careful scrutiny and constant vigilance is continued until the student makes black belt-an achievement, to use the Churchillian phrase, of “blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

Where this screening process is lacking some practitioners slip in, acquire some technical skill and for commercial reasons try to develop their own eclectic style. In this particular case the cry for an eclectic style is based solely on the inadequacy of the principals involved and their overwhelming need to control people. They come into the martial arts with deep seated feelings of inferiority and not being able to stand the rigorous training involved in the martial arts cry with their own self-justification for something eclectic. The Oriental martial arts have much to offer the West and those in the West would be wise if they try to understand and learn, before they cry to high heaven.