

IDENTITY IN KARATE

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If Gilbert and Sullivan were alive today, they could write a pretty little operetta about the activities of the karate movement in America, true to life and highly diverting. Looking at the ever burgeoning spate of dojos springing up all over the country, professing to teach karate, one should be thrilled at the thought that the Art of karate is here at last. A visit to one of the dojos will find a person dressed in karate-gi who will welcome you with open arms and looking you straight in the eye tell you that he will make you a karate master within a specified time. As a by-product to your mastership he will not neglect to tell you that you must pay a certain pecuniary sum as he must pay the rent and all that goes with it.

When your lessons begin you will start learning a set of stereotyped techniques that can be seen in many self defense books on the market and depending on the background of the teacher your lessons may go to ten or a hundred techniques according to the number of books he has read. If you are one of the fortunate few who has perused a few gyms here and there and have seen karate in action, you may ask the teacher for a few katas. He will then proceed to tell you that this is American karate and that he has cut off the superfluous junk associated with the Orient which he calls the classical deadwood and that what he is teaching is the new, the dynamic, the truly American – as American as apple pie.

After you have finished the course, if you remain long enough and pay enough, you will receive a card and a certificate stating in no uncertain terms that you are now a deadly weapon and a possessor of a black belt. If you happen to encounter a thug in an alley, you may show him your card and with justifiable pride expect him to run from terror having met a black belt, but do not be surprised if you wake up in a hospital sans wallet, sans false confidence, sans everything.

The foregoing account although tragic is not funny as it was true of the American scene some years back. Fortunately, true karate teachers during the past ten years or so have been coming to this country and have been spreading the Art of karate. Unfortunately, the quacks are still with us but in different form having gained a semblance of respectability by taking self defense courses or a facsimile of karate, or a year or so in kempo, or training in a karate dojo and then awarding themselves a high dan.

How can I avoid such teachers you may ask? How can I identify true karate? What criteria shall I use? True Okinawan or Japanese karate as taught today sprang from two fountainheads; namely, Itosu-Ha and Higashionna-Ha. All schools in Japan or Okinawa are teaching katas that find its prototype in the Itosu or Higashionna forms. Either a dojo has the katas: Naihanchi, Ping-An, Batsai, Kushanku and Seishan, or the katas: Sanchin Tensho, Saifa, Sanseiru and Sepai.

In other words there are two main-streams, but the katas are identifiable.

And with the katas you have identity for without identity you have no strength or purpose. The colored peoples of the world are seeking identity and that is how strong a spiritual force can be. And that is why it is the warp and woof of true karate. The fabric of karate cannot be woven without the katas.

If you want to learn true karate you must find the dojos that teach these forms as well as other advanced forms. However, these basic forms must exist. And it is the best criteria to judge as to who and where true karate is being taught.

What is easy is not worth having. And it is not easy to learn the katas. But once learned, how much it is worth having. A great Zen master, Takuan, once said, "An inch of time is worth a foot of jade." Your time spent in learning the katas is worth more than a mountain of jade.