

Jukuren Karate: About Elderly Friendly Karate



Jukuren Karate, elderly friendly Karate, is not very prevalent yet. But demographic changes and the growing interest of elderly to learn and keep practicing Karate make it necessary to develop a Jukuren Karate that fits the needs of senior practitioners. Then especially Shotokan Karate focuses on athletic movements and military-like classes. But does this approach suit elderly? Do they maybe need a different training regime? How should this look like? An analysis and proposal by **Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Herbert**

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Jukuren Karate for elderly barely exists

Nowadays, many **Dojos** have kids classes or beginner courses for children. Hardly do I see “classes for the elderly” or “beginner courses for seniors” advertised on **Dojo** websites. This is remarkable. After all the overall population in industrial countries is over-aging and the age of Karate practitioners is also rising.

The reason for this is that Karate was introduced to the USA and Europe in the 1960’s and boomed with the Bruce Lee craze in the 1970’s. Therefore, many Karateka from this early period still train actively Karate, compete in Master classes, and teach in Dojos. They are well in their 60’s, 70’s or even 80’s. With 60 I consider myself part of this generation although still on the younger side.

Jukuren Karate: The Aim of this Article

But what about our training? Has it adjusted to our increasing age? Do we still practice the same routines in the same way as we did when we were in our 20’s? And how should a **Jukuren (熟練)** Karate for elderly Karateka look like? What must change in order to make it more suitable for seniors, so that they can still train despite their advanced age? I will propose some answers to these questions in this article.

As a caveat: I will generalize many of my observations (some laudable exceptions might exist) and mostly speak about Shotokan, since this is the style I practice and I am most familiar with. The setting to keep in mind are seniors (beginners and veterans alike) training together in a group. In fact, I teach an open lecture at my **university** called "Karate-dô for Health and Fitness" for more than eight years (see opener picture). The median age of the participants is around their mid-sixties. This course is my laboratory to reassess traditional concepts and develop Karate and Quigong (Taijiquan) exercises appropriate for people of an advanced age.

Why Jukuren Karate? Insights from Hirokazu Kanazawa

The late **Kanazawa Hirokazu**, an eminent teacher of Shotokan Karate, has in his autobiography and numerous interviews talked about how Karate training should change over ones lifetime. Let me pick out his statements made in an interview with Seamus O'Dowd in 2002:

"... everyone's personal training should change as they go from youth to being an adult and then again as they get older. It is natural for training to change.

If a person is always training the same way all their life, then this is not natural. For example, for people up to thirty or forty years, physical power is the main power, generated through the muscles, with the power of the internal organs and power of the spirit working in harmony to support the physical power.

After forty the muscles start to become weaker, but the internal organs remain strong, now these become the main source of power ... After sixty the internal organs also become weaker. The human body has limits, and it is natural to become weaker. Nobody can live for 150 or 200 years, so this is natural and should be accepted. But your spirit can always remain strong and even become stronger indefinitely, if people train correctly every day.

Therefore, after sixty, the power of the spirit is the main power in the body, with the power of physical muscle and internal organs used to assist and channel this power. Therefore, as we get older we must adapt our training to utilize the correct power sources in our bodies. Techniques must change and training methods must change."

Shotokan Karate Magazine 143/2020: 10

In another interview Kanazawa jokingly remarked:

"... I think training from baby to grave is something that I must do, but for other people it is as I have said before, one must train as one grows in different ways. If I did not do this then when I reached 70 or 80 years old Unsu and Enpi will be impossible. Maybe I could do some Shito-ryu or Goju-ryu kata, maybe, but I know I could do Tai-Chi until I die. Because it is more internal than physical. If I only did Shotokan, after 70 or 80 it would be 'Bye, bye.'"

Shotokan Karate Magazine 143/2020: 7

In his autobiography Kanazawa states:

“ Sure enough, when I reached my sixties I noticed that my physical condition had deteriorated and ki-ryoku had become the driving force for my karate. I let this development take its natural course and continued to develop it further. Muscular strength, and the strength of your innards certainly decrease with age, but mental and spiritual strength can be increased as you get older.”

Hirokazu Kanazawa 2003: 293

Kiryoku is written 気力 in the original book (Kanazawa 2002: 344) and thus means the strength of the subtle energy *Ki*. I would figure that the gist of these statements is: training should be adapted to ones age and physical condition. Then it is “natural” and in accordance with ones stage in life. But do most of the older Karateka follow this advice?

DOJO FINDER

The Need for Jukuren Karate

I am quite sure that on an individual level Shotokan Karateka adapt their workout to their aging bodies and physical capabilities. However, when it comes to collective training it is different. If you attend international Shotokan Karate seminars with many participants, groups are frequently formed along grade or skill level (beginners, mid-level, advanced etc.).

Training, that addresses senior Karateka, rarely exists. **Kihon** lessons usually take place for all in the same way: from teenagers to **septuagenarians** – everybody performs the same techniques and is supposed to do this in the same way.



Prof. Dr. Wolf Herbert with his students from his “Karate-dô for Health and Fitness” course at the University of Tokushima, Center for Community Engagement and Lifelong Learning in 2018.

Teaching usually Focuses on Younger Karateka

The same goes for home training videos that circulate on the internet. They obviously address and focus rather on younger athletes than seniors. Some create the impression that the instructors want to show off their skills, like how fast they can perform difficult combinations or how high they can kick. Not only elderly, but also the average Karateka might struggle to follow these instructions. It illustrates that teaching in Shotokan focuses on young competitors rather than the casual and physically less able enthusiast.

To run through fancy combinations like Mawashi Geri Jodan, Ushiro Geri, Gyaku zuki dozens of times is not quite easy for the beyond-60’s. Indeed, it is “unnatural”, if not harmful.

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Karate for Elderly has to take Body Changes into Account

I am aware that there are some hard-boiled elderly Karateka around who desperately want to keep up with the sportsmen in their twenties or thirties. A few are physically still capable of doing so. I let them have their way.

But I would contend that the vast majority of older Karateka practice the art in order to maintain their health and agility. This implies that one is more likely to listen to the voice of ones body and to avoid unwholesome exercises. Joints become more fragile, particularly the knees, hips, elbows or shoulders. To feel slight pain in them is quite common among senior people. So are degenerative afflictions like gout, arthritis, osteoarthritis, cartilage atrophy or other wear and tear.

However, this should not preclude anyone to practice Karate Do. Everybody should be able to perform Karate with the very body one has and all the flaws coming with it. That is why we even have Karate for people with special needs. Thus, it would be desirable to develop a Karate that fits older people.

What has to change in Karate to become Jukuren Karate?

Such a Karate must change in two ways:

- in a physical/somatic way and
- a practical way.

I will start with the latter one: the practice of Karate. I want to characterize the necessary change with two words: de-militarization and individualization. To understand what that means we have to look at the history of Shotokan Karate that still coins the way we practice Karate in Dojos in a manner most Karateka are not fully aware of.

De-militarization of Karate

Shotokan has a background deeply entrenched in militarism. This has shaped our Karate and the way we train. For instance:

- standing in rows,
- militaristic drill,
- movements in unison obeying commands shouted by (usually) a man in front,
- who struts up and down like a general inspecting his army.

This had already begun in Okinawa in the first decade of the 20th century, when Karate was introduced as physical education into schools. In fact, it replaced “military gymnastics” (*heishiki taisô*) and **Itosu Ankô** (1831-1915), who was the driving force behind this, explicitly stressed the respective benefits in his **Ten Precepts**. In the second precept he recommends that children start with Karate (**Tôde**) while in elementary school, because “then they will be well suited for military service.”

In precept ten he reiterates that Karate should be taught in elementary schools, because “this will be a great benefit to our nation and our military.” Itosu wrote these principles 1908 in form of a letter addressing the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of War on the main island. Karate was, thus, annexed to a nationalistic and later imperialistic agenda.

When Karate became a real Military Exercise in Japan

Two assistant's of Itosu, **Yabu Kentsû** (1866-1937) and **Hanashiro Chômo** (1869-1945), were both military men. They joined the army in 1891 and were noticed for their exceptional physiques in the medical exams. It was ascribed to their Karate training. That was the reason why Karate caught the eye of the military for the first time.

Yabu Kentsû reached the rank of a lieutenant, although his lifelong nickname was *gunsô* (“sergeant”). He taught at Shuri's Prefectural Number One School and was known for his discipline and doing Karate “by the numbers” and with endless repetitions. This was in tune with every athletic training on the main island, which became heavily militarized in the 1930s and 1940s.

Hanashiro Chômo was the first to use the modern version of “Karate” (空手) in 1905, written with the Kanji for “empty” and “hand”. This publication was rife with military terms and Hanashiro taught Karate in elementary schools and with Yabu also at military schools.

On Honshû, the main island, it was Funakoshi Gichin, his son Yoshitaka, Egami Shigeru, Okuyama Tadao and others who taught Karate to special forces at the Nakano military school during WWII. The political climate of the 1930's, when Karate began to spread on the main island of Japan, was one of ultranationalism, xenophobia, Tennô-totalitarianism and mobilization for war.

The Okinawan and Chinese roots of Karate were eradicated and erased. Karate was streamlined along Kendô and Jûdô and transformed into a Japanese Budô and thus due to the zeitgeist militarized. It became infused with Bushidô-ideals, which were perverted for military goals and emperor-worshipping.

Elements of this fateful ideology were:

- unquestioned loyalty,
- absolute obedience,

- self-effacing service,
- exaltation of death and sacrifice,
- glorification of dying for the fatherland and the Tennô.

Benesch calls this kind of indoctrination the “imperial bushidô” (cf. Benesch 2006: 200-213).

To become a martial art that follows modern ethical standards all remnants of this ideology should be eliminated from Karate. However, it seems as if quite a bit of it lives on in an attenuated form. Westerners, who entertain fantasies about **Bushido** and want to emulate it, should be aware of this history. And it also has an influence on the possibility of an adequate Jukuren Karate.

De-militarization of the Dojo

De-militarization in the Dojo mostly pertains to the training in soldier-like fashion. Particularly elderly people do not have to be commanded around. With the high value put on fitness until the grave nowadays, elderly people are increasingly interested in beginning to learn a martial art. For the mature novices the techniques should be thoroughly explained. They can then be performed within the group. Thereafter, the practitioners should be able to experiment, explore the moves, repeat them according to their own taste and pace. This goes for **Kihon** combinations or **Kata** sequences, even for **Kumite** exercises. Once the practitioners are comfortable with the new techniques one can go back to training on command.

This alternation between group drill and free experimentation loosens up the atmosphere, brings a playful element into the Dojo, gives room for laughter about ones clumsiness and provides the chance to learn on ones own terms. Strict group drill always risks to leave some people out, who cannot follow the tempo or grasp the moves in a short time. This only leads to frustration.

Individualization of the Dojo

“Individualization” means to give the participants time and room to exercise and study by themselves. The instructor can take turn to watch them and give advice. A well balanced alternation between individual and collective training during one session is a good way to give elderly Karateka a chance to train in accordance with their capabilities and physical condition.

It also gives them space to recuperate and take a breath if needed. It takes older people longer to recover after intense physical activity and a good regime for rest is as important for them as adequate training as such. Karate training around twice a week will suffice. The other days they can do some walking, weight training, fascia loosening, yoga, tennis, gardening or the like or just rest.

Some older Karateka have issues with their circulatory or respiratory system or other ailments. You cannot put them through the same regime as the athletes in their twenties. We should give up the boot camp mentality of Shotokan. It is good to go to ones limits, but they should be determined by the practitioners themselves (particularly when they are older!) and not a commander in chief.

Seniors are more likely to introspectively scan their bodies and avoid discomfort. Physical exercise of any kind should be for their well-being and not bring them to the brink of a heart attack. They should be totally in charge of the tempo and the degree of exertion they want to undergo. Training should be highly individualized and fine-tuned to ones physique.

The Physical Part of Karate and what has to Change for Jukuren Karate

This brings us to the physical side of Jukuren Karate. That means in a nutshell:

- higher stances,
- lower kicks,
- less tension,
- more relaxation,
- moderation in effort and
- no acrobatic jumps.

In a way, this equals to going back to the roots.

When the Physical Education Dimension of Shotokan Karate developed

There is one more historical development Shotokan underwent, which we ought to scrutinize. If we look at the photos of **Funakoshi Gichin** in the 1920s, we can see that his stances were very high compared to the way they are done in modern Shotokan. The fact that most of his instruction was done at University clubs had an effect on the training and techniques.

His third son Yoshitaka aka "Waka-sensei" (the young teacher) took over most of the teaching in the 1930s. Students in Japan spend four years at University until graduation. During the war, the military drafted students even before they finished their studies. It is said that Yoshitaka was interested in a physical regime that would enable the students to become tough and strong as fast as possible. Deeper stances meant immediate strong muscle development. His favorite stance was the rooted, powerful low Fudô dachi.

The Issue of Deep Stances

How deep one stands, should depend on body type, flexibility, muscular strength and age of course and should be individually calibrated. Not everybody can stand as deep as **Frank Brennan** or Osaka Yoshiharu in their prime time. Even many youngsters, who copied them, looked awkward, because they did not have their stamina and elasticity. If one does not stand as deep as it became usual in Shotokan, this does not mean it is not Shotokan anymore!

Osaka sensei-Kata Sochin



Okazaki Teruyuki is quoted as follows:

“When Master Funakoshi taught us he never said copy his form. Because of his weight and body type he made it that way. He explained for instance, that there is no particular length or width for a stance, it depends on each individual’s body type.’ Obviously as far as Funakoshi was concerned stances could be high or low, according to the student’s physique.”

Shotokan Karate Magazine 1998:22

Many instructors will agree with this and recommend the same thing.

Sometimes this remains lip service. As far as I see, in Shotokan there is a strong adherence to textbooks and the standards set down in them. They almost have the status of dogmas and incontestable orthodoxy. In many textbooks stances are precisely delineated with ruler and compasses and weight distribution is specified in percentages. Usually you are corrected, if you do not fit into these templates.

Do not misunderstand me: age is by no means an excuse to get sloppy. The strengthening of the thighs and abdominal region is the goal of assuming (deep) Karate stances and is also good for the health of the elderly. But everybody should find his own depth and width of the stances the way one feels comfortable and maintain a good inner tension and muscular stimulation. As far as alignments of the knee to toes or tailbone and spine are concerned, they should be bio-mechanically absolutely correct and not compromised.

Funakoshi, Kanazawa, and the Deep Stances

The following anecdote by Kanazawa Hirokazu illustrates this notion. Because Funakoshi Gichin read his mind during some classes. In his autobiography Kanazawa Hirokazu reports:

“Even during training sessions, similar things happened. While we were practicing the kanku-dai kata, I copied his every move exactly the way he was doing it.”

'Kanazawa san, spread your legs out further and drop your hips down.'

'Hai!'

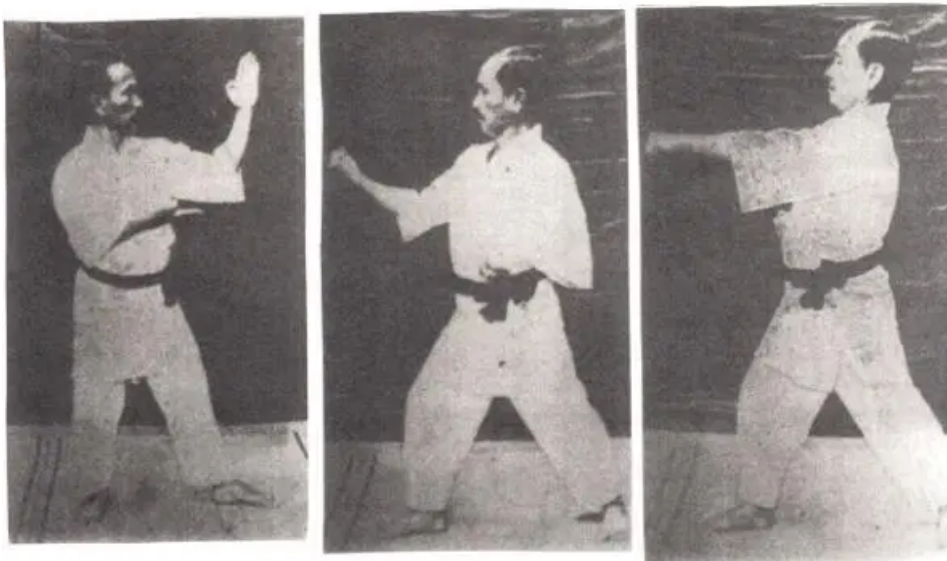
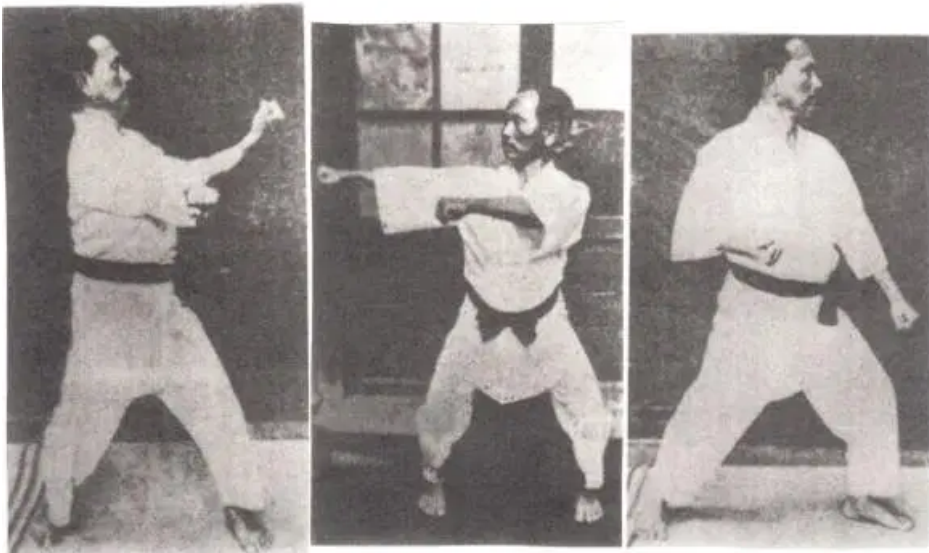
I dropped my hips down as I was told, but thought to myself 'I was doing it exactly how sensei was ...'

Then he got me again.

'Kanazawa-san, you're still young. You have to build up strength. Young people should do young people's training, and not copy old men.'

Kanazawa 2003: 87

What does this anecdote tell us? Adapt your stances (and Karate) to your age.



Many Okinawan styles have rather high stances in the first place and only low kicks. Hence, adjusting your stances is like going back to the roots. And indeed in Okinawa you can see many older Karateka, even octogenarians doing fine **Kata** performances. Their movements are relaxed, tension is low and there is no exaggerated **Kime**. The notion that Karate should be an endeavor for a whole lifetime comes from Okinawa and should apply to Shotokan as well.

Quality over Quantity! Physical Limitations and Jukuren Karate

With increasing age come physiological limitations. The heart muscle contractibility diminishes and maximum attainable heart rates decrease. Too much cardiac exertion should be avoided. In training this means lesser repetitions – quality over quantity! It is not natural, when people in their sixties, seventies run through the same program as young athletes in their twenties. The point of exhaustion is different and endless repetitions do more damage to an old body than bring benefit. Again: no boot camp for seniors.

Water Drinking during Training

Sweat cools the body, but even perspiration changes with senescence. Dehydration occurs quicker when one becomes older. Therefore, it is vital to replenish the body with fluids, minerals and electrolytes: before, during and after workout.

Japanese summers can be cruelly hot. Nowadays, it is common sense in sports and Budô-circles to rehydrate, i.e. drink something during breaks in the training. A generation ago, indeed, it was usually not allowed to drink something during workout in Japanese sports clubs (even in schools and at universities)! Even now, every summer, legions suffer heatstrokes in Japan, particularly children (doing sports like baseball in the open) and elderly, who have no air conditioning or due to insensitivity (which comes with age) do not notice that their bodies need liquids.

During heatwaves you are daily admonished in the prime news to drink water regularly, stay in shadowy places or inside and get your air conditioning working. Elderly Karateka should therefore frequently take a rest and consume some water or sports drinks.

The outdated Taboo in regard to rehydrating during Karate Classes

In this context I want to tell you an anecdote or cautionary tale which also tells something about the history of the transmission of Shotokan Karate to the West.

It happened just a few years ago in Europe. I was in my mid fifties and came as a guest into a dojo in Vienna. Although, I was the oldest and highest in rank, as a guest I just partook in the training like everybody else. It lasted a good two hours and was led by a guy in his early thirties.

Shortly before a line up to do some Tsuki in the group at the end of the session, I dared to reach for my bottle in my bag and gulp down a few swigs of water. I was immediately approached by the trainer and heavily reprimanded. It is forbidden to drink anything during training, he shouted, and I would give a bad example to the younger students by doing so. I was quite put off and inquired why this should be so.

The answer was, that this was the stipulation of the Japanese Sensei “So and so”, who sadly passed away a few years ago. It was an order of his, there was no drinking in the dojo, basta!

Well, this is pure old school! I attended a JKA-dojō back in the days, where the same rule was observed. You were supposed to nurture perseverance, patience, endurance, self control, *gaman* in Japanese – a highly valued virtue. But times have changed. Even in Japan. Not so in Austria. Why? Be sure that after the training I started quite a diatribe and lambasted the young guy for his “fascistoid, toxic loyalty, blind obedience, cowardice and inability to criticize the Sensei!”

Misunderstood “loyalty”

The ultimate point of the story is that this young man was a doctor, a medical doctor. I told him that he of all people should know that I as an older practitioner was more prone to dehydration and not getting replenished with liquid was harmful to my salubrity. As a physician it would actually have been his duty to inform Mr. Sensei that his directive and this ascetic practice were hazardous nonsense and detrimental to the health and also diminishing the performance and ability of his pupils!

What showed here, is a pathology in Shotokan which was rampant in its early days in Europe: the deification of the Japanese Sensei, total subservience, a wrongly understood “loyalty”. Nobody ever dared to criticize the (Japanese) Sensei. Sometimes this was encouraged by the very Sensei under the (misguided) guise of “Bushido”. Rigid hierarchies and authoritarian attitudes are out of place when teaching the elderly. They deserve respect for their life experience and unique personality. Instructor and student should meet on the same level. Even more so, when the teacher happens to be (much) younger.

Jukuren Karate: The “Why” of your Training Counts!

Seniors have no time to do meaningless things. As the violinist Isaac Stern said about his art: “to play good music is not about how to play, but why you play!” And every single note counts. Thus, you exercise fully concentrated, purposefully, mindfully.

Once you know the how and shift your attention to the “why” training acquires a different quality. You scan your body, ask why you stand this way and not otherwise, feel what it does to your body and if it enhances your well-being. You make every technique your very own and become aware of its characteristics. This “why” does not necessarily look for an intellectual answer. It rather denotes an attitude of inner awareness, heightened body-consciousness, introspection, and mindfulness.

Kata in Jukuren Karate

Kata can be trained in slow motion or in Shotokai-style in a continuous flow without **Kime**. This also serves to realize one of the objectives Kata were invented for in the first place: the regulation and harmonization of the Ki-flow. According to the understanding in Chinese traditional medicine this leads to health and inner peace.

The incorporation of softer martial ways like Qigong and Taijiquan is also highly recommended and improves coordination and balance. The older you get, the more Karate should be “internalized”. You pay attention to the inner energy flow. It is **Ki** or Kiryoku – as Kanazawa Soke put it -, that directs your Karate. Health in the Chinese understanding means that Ki can flow freely and without blockages or occlusions. Latter occurrences lead to sickness and indisposition.

Jukuren Karate should focus on Energy flow

Acupuncture, moxibustion, massages, gymnastics and meditation (visualization) were developed in ancient times to guarantee an unimpeded Ki-flow. **The martial arts were practiced in this context.** Good martial art practice is said to open the energy channels, eliminate blockages and harmonize the flow of Ki. Ki is virtually sent through the whole body from head to toe, thus one feels refreshed after a good Karate training session, even if one is physically exhausted. Ki flows best, when the body is totally relaxed. Therefore meditation also leads to health and well-being.

In Chinese martial arts there are meditations done in a standing position (called ritsuzen 立禅, the character 立 means "to stand"; 禅 = Zen). Sitting meditation (zazen 坐禅, 坐 denoting "to sit") has the same effect. Sitting with legs crossed and upright, the arms and hands forming a circle, the spine straight, the crown pushed up and chin slightly tucked in is a compact way to sit completely relaxed. Combined with natural gentle breathing and a calm mind the Ki finds its perfect equilibrium.

Taikiken Ritsuzen early morning training



Ritsuzen can be a vital part of Jukuren Karate.

Benefits of Jukuren Karate and How to Achieve them

The benefits of Karate for seniors are undisputed and manifold, just to name a few:

- higher energy level,
- bodily and mental agility,
- flexibility,
- increase in bone density,
- decrease in muscle loss,
- weight control,
- good coordination and sense of balance (prevention of falling!),
- better overall health,
- disease prevention etc.

How to Conduct Jukuren Karate Classes?

In order to earn these rewards of Karate training for the elderly, let me sum up. Here are the desiderata for a meaningful training and learning process for seniors:

- less military drill, more individual practice,
- less power/muscular strength, more relaxation,
- less repetitions, more awareness/mindfulness,
- higher stances, lower kicks, no acrobatics,
- alternation in tempo, slow motion, fluid movements, no unnecessary tension,
- breathing exercises, soft style martial arts practices (e.g. Qigong, Taijiquan),
- less cardio, more rest,
- lots of stretching, fascia release work,
- meditation, and
- fostering of body consciousness.

Spirit First, Sport Second

To engage in Karate training in old age can help to grow spiritually. Frantzis argues, for instance:

“Many Eastern physical exercise systems have at their core a spiritual tradition. ... In both, yoga and qigong, physically-based internal exercises are preparatory phases of their respective spiritual paths. However both can be practiced with only the goals of enhancing health, reducing stress and quieting the mind.”

Frantzis 2006: 66

With the transplantation of these Eastern disciplines to the West, their spiritual roots have been clipped. Yoga is practiced as gymnastics for health, so is Tai chi or Karate. There is nothing wrong with this. It seems that the more popular these practices become, the more competitive and acrobatic they get. In Yoga ever more complicated contortions are added to the basic simple postures (asanas). Taijiquan has become an acrobatic performance or show in Wushu competitions. Even the way Kata are executed in Karate championships has become more and more theatrical and athletic. The reduction to sports is literally visible.

If one is not spiritually inclined, one can leave this aspect out and still benefit from the many good effects of the purely physical exercises. These however have to be adapted to age and ability. The focus may change from body to mind/soul. The older martial artist will likely put more emphasis on the spiritual core of his discipline. It will then unfold its full potential and richness.

To age means to have to let go

To age means to have to let go. There is much half-baked parlance about (Zen)Buddhism in martial art circles. Let me put it into a nutshell. The revolutionary message of the Buddha was: there is no permanent self, no soul (sanskrit. *an-âtman*, Jap. *Muga* 無我). This was blasphemy for the Hindus, but only consequent thinking in Buddhist terms: should there be an eternal soul, one would cling to it and this would hinder liberation.

Nothing is permanent (Jap. *Mujô* 無常). So, do not attach yourself to anything. Your personality (ego), your thoughts and memories, your emotions – it is all fleeting and evanescent. To cling to them means suffering. Let go and you will be free. To die means to have to let go of everything. To age should teach us to let go step by step. Strength, speed, flexibility are inexorably on the wane with age. We have to let go e. g. of our high kicks and jumps.

And do not tell me there was no ego involved while demonstrating them to our students or in a competition in our younger years. It may be a painful process, but an inevitable one, if we want to age with dignity. To let go of the ego – this is a true Buddhist attitude. And then Karate will emanate a different quality independent of technical aptitude.

It will really be: spirit comes first, technique second (技術より心術 *gijutsu yori shinjutsu*: one of the instructions in Funakoshi Gichin's 20 precepts).

Time is crucial for Jukuren Karate

One more consideration: time. The older you get, the more precious it is. And this connects to Buddhist concepts as well: every training, every movement, every breath could be your last. Therefore you give it your full attention in the here and now. You do it mindfully, as it is now fashionably called. Training becomes a blessing and fills you with thankfulness. This gives rise to compassion – another Buddhist virtue which should always be coupled with detachment.

What we can Learn from Buddhism for Jukuren Karate

To make it clear: I am not a Buddhist, but I want to show that if the influence of (Zen)Buddhism on martial arts is to be taken seriously, it implies more than just an unfettered, clear, “empty” mind (no-mind, *Mushin* 無心) or “lingering mind” (sustained attentiveness *Zanshin* 残心) to enable you to succeed in combat. These concepts have unfortunately been ideologically misinterpreted in order to legitimate killing enemies in a non-attached state of mind.

In the conclusion of his book, in which he exposed and analyzed the role of Zen-Buddhists during the second world war in Japan, the ordained Zen-monk Brian Victoria writes:

“Experienced Zen practitioners know that the ‘no-mind’ of Zen does in fact exist. ... But they also know, or at least ought to know, that these things, in their original Buddhist formulation, had absolutely nothing to do with bringing harm to others. On the contrary, authentic Buddhist awakening is characterized by a combination of wisdom and compassion – identifying oneself with others and seeking to eliminate suffering in all its forms.”

Victoria 2006: 230-1

In China, meditation (be it Daoist or Buddhist) usually is an integral part of martial arts training. The *Mokusô* (黙想) at the beginning and the end of a Karate training session is a remnant of this practice. With the “internalization” of Karate the mental and spiritual aspect becomes more central. The focus can even completely shift to introspection.

Grandmaster **Wan Lai Sheng** said, for instance: “People who are too old and weak to practice Gongfu (or Karate for that matter, W.H.) can meditate in order to preserve health.” (Kozma 2013: 57)

In the Chinese martial arts it is the “internal” ones (like Taijiquan) which “are unique in that they seamlessly fuse exercise and meditation.” (Frantzis 2012: 5) Exercises can be found on a continuum from “meditation in motion” to

“meditation in stillness”. With ageing comes a continuous reduction in the range of movements you are able to execute. In the martial ways you may give up the hard styles in favor of soft, internal practices. If these become too cumbersome, you may change to “immobile” or on the spot practices like Qigong, breathing exercises, meditation and self-inquiry.

The ultimate martial art might be the motionless one: to just sit, get absorbed and dissolved into pure consciousness, being, bliss. One may get a momentary taste of infinite emptiness (sansk. *śūnyatā*; jap. **Kū** 空), nondual suchness, the ground of all being and form, a timeless, formless eternal presence, the absolute reality. These are just helpless attempts to describe the indescribable. This insight is the apex of Buddhist wisdom.

Conclusion: Jukuren Karate as Kara Te

Let us be clear that Funakoshi Gichin had this meaning in mind, when he sought to change the character for “Kara” from 唐 (“China”) to 空 (“empty”). The decision was also politically motivated, since in the 1930s anything considered to be Chinese was not welcome to say the least. Funakoshi however explicitly referred to the most famous line in the **Heart sutra** 色即是空、空即是色 (*shiki soku ze kū, kū soku ze shiki*, form is emptiness, emptiness is form) on choosing the character 空. Could Karate-dō 空手道 in the deepest sense be the way (道) via the body (pars pro toto: 手) to the selfless Self, the incommensurable and inexpressible Absolute (空)?

For Funakoshi Gichin Karate was a way to stay healthy, an art for self-defence and a “method to cultivate the spirit” (精神修養法 *seishin shūyōhō*, see: Funakoshi 1922/2006: 5).

In Jukuren Karate we, therefore, should not strive mainly for physical prowess. The integration of the body and the mind, the original aim of (Shotokan) Karate, should stand at the center of our efforts. Then, elderly Karateka will benefit much better from Karate training. And it will also have a huge effect on your Dojo. Because a Dojo is a community that should comprise all generations and bring together the wisdom of the old and the energy of the young to be vital.

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Author

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Herbert holds the chair of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Tokushima, Japan. He obtained a degree in Japanese Studies and Religious Science. In 1975, he began to train Karate and can look back on a successful career as athlete and instructor. His last major victory was the 1st place in Kata at the 39th SKIF All Japan Karate-dô Championship Masters II (50-59yrs) in 2019. His Karate has been coined by Hirokazu Kanazawa, who also promoted him to 5th Dan in 2016. Beside Karate he also practices Taijiquan.

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