

SOME NOTES ON KARATE AND MEDITATION. By Dr Wolf Herbert.

"Without meditation there is no perfume to life, no beauty, no love."

Jiddu Krishnamurti

When we talk of meditation in Karate, the first thing that likely comes to mind is mokuso. Mokuso is generally translated as "silent contemplation or meditation" and is usually performed at the start and end of a training session. In Karate it is done in seiza, where one sits erect on the heels with one's legs folded under. The hands rest palms down on the thighs. The back is kept straight and extended with the nose positioned in line with the navel and the eyes half open. Breathing should be natural and done in an abdominal fashion by gently manipulating the diaphragm. The length of mokuso can vary from about one to a few minutes.

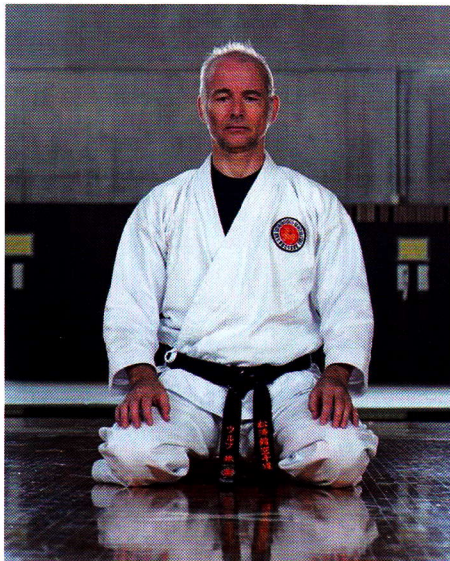
The eyes are half open or half closed (in Japanese it can mean both: hangan literally means "half eye") and the gaze should not be fixed but can be slightly blurry and is directed obliquely in front of the sitting person. Buddhist statues often show the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas with their eyelids in a lowered position and hangan is the preferred method when sitting in meditation Zen-style (zazen). It is said to prevent drowsiness and helps you to stay fully awake, since your brain receives a stimulus from the perception of dim light.

Mokuso as contemplation:

Mokuso does not necessarily preclude discursive thinking. Moku means "silence" and "so" is read in Japanese as "omou", which means "to think". Thus mokuso can also be interpreted as "quietly pondering over something." In this sense you can actively create an attitude of getting physically and mentally ready for training at its beginning. Whilst doing mokuso after training you can foster an attitude of thankfulness for having had the chance to refine your techniques and enhance your physical and spiritual well-being. Mokuso therefore is a sort of short rite de passage. Mokuso helps you to mentally switch from the outside world into the serene atmosphere of the Dojo and also serves as a threshold to step back into the ordinary everyday life.

Mokuso as meditation:

Mokuso as meditation in Zen-style can be described as awareness of oneself (one's Self), of one's consciousness and everything therein. Meditation does not mean to suppress thoughts or emotions. It means to observe them without judgement. Thoughts are not pursued, not pushed away, they can come and go. It is popularly compared to looking at clouds



Dr Wolf Herbert 5th Dan SKIF – Mokuso.

in the sky. You just watch them drift by without any kind of intervention. It is not a thoughtless state. One is just not affected by thoughts passing by. Pure observation brings about total awareness, a state of mind in which you are completely here and abide in the now. This is also the ideal state of mind in combat. It is the Zen-mind. There are many terms afloat in Budo-circles to characterize this state of mind. The most common ones are: mushin, fudoshin, heijoshin and zanshin. I shall look at the etymology of these notions, where they come from and what they mean by consulting the original texts. In fact they are just different descriptions of the same experience and insight.

Concentration and mindfulness:

Meditative practices can be broadly categorized into two forms: with object and without object. This corresponds to the above description of mokuso as contemplation and meditation in Zen-fashion. Daniel Goleman describes it in his book "The Meditative Mind" as follows: *"... there are two fundamental attentional strategies in meditation: concentration and mindfulness. ... Concentration leads the meditator to become one-pointed and finally merge his attention with its object. Mindfulness leads the meditator to witness the workings of his own mind, coming to perceive with detachment the finer segments of his stream of thought."* Meditation with an object means concentration on a single entity like the flame of a candle or the sound of one's breathing, visualizations (inner light, landscapes, buddhas ...), "holy" syllables (mantras) etc. Meditation without an object corresponds to a free floating all-encompassing attentiveness,

"mindfulness", mere "witnessing", pure consciousness, total awareness. Concentration is like a focussed laser beam, mindfulness like a floodlight illuminating everything indiscriminately. Both modes of meditation are relevant for Karate, however the latter is usually seen as the ideal state of mind in battle and I want to concentrate on it here (no pun intended).

Mushin:

Mushin is one of the terms that has made a career in Budo-circles. It comes from the Zen monk Takuan Soho (1573-1645) and his treatise "The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom", which he wrote for Yagyu Munenori, a renowned swordmaster. Although Takuan employs many other terms to circumscribe the ideal state of mind in a buddhist understanding, mushin has been picked out and iteratively ruminated upon.

Mushin describes an alert mind, unattached, not clinging to anything, not stopping anywhere, flowing like water from moment to moment. Takuan knows the traps: if you want to attain this state of mind by trying to get rid of everything in your mind, you again have something on your mind! It should come to you naturally.

Mushin is actually the abbreviation of mushin no shin or mushin no kokoro. Kokoro is the Japanese reading for the character shin in mushin, hence mushin no shin/kokoro means "the mind of no-mind". This "doubling" is of great significance in my eyes. I read it as an expression of being conscious of being conscious, which is described as metacognition or de-centerization. This is arguably a unique faculty of the human mind.

Sometimes mushin is said to correspond to what in psychology is known as "flow" or "being in the zone". The notion "flow" was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and designates the merging of action and awareness in sustained concentration on a certain task at hand. One is literally carried away, it is a state of absorption and self-forgetfulness. As the Karateka, Taijiquan practitioner and clinical psychologist Yukawa Shintaro points out in his book about "Karate, Taijiquan and Mindfulness" this is not "mindfulness". Mindfulness is characterized by metacognition, by being aware of awareness. The "flow" leads to optimal performance without being conscious of it.

There is another psychological category frequently (and just as falsely) assigned to mushin: subconsciousness. Mushin in this understanding meant that you act or react

subconsciously, therefore adequately, without delay or intellectual interference in a given situation. Hence there is no rational thinking. In man to man combat rational planning step by step no doubt would be by far too slow. What is subconscious is out of the range of rational apprehension, it is "below" (sub!) reason/consciousness. But in mushin you are not "below" rational thinking, but beyond! Reason is transcended, transparent, monitored, not blacked out. Acting out of mushin does not happen subconsciously, but hyper-consciously or super-consciously. It is a heightened state of consciousness, not a regressive one! This is a crucial difference! Kanazawa Hirokazu spoke of mushin in this very context of one being in a state of "total control".

Heijoshin:

Another term to describe the Zen-mind is heijoshin. It was the favoured concept of Yagyu Munenori (1571-1646), a famous swordsman, who was the addressee of Takuan's exposition on the immovable wisdom. In Zen-circles heijoshin is also read byodoshin and denotes a mind of ultimate naturalness, alacrity and openness. It goes back to an exchange between the monks Nansen (748-835) and Joshu (778-897). The former is asked, what the way (do) was. He answered: heijoshin kore do: the equanimous, spontaneous "everyday" mind is the way! Nansen adds that if you try to enact it rationally, it will elude you and likens it to a clear sky. Action occurs "naturally" unimpeded by thoughts concerning the past or the future.

The respective conversation is recorded in the Mumonkan ("The Gateless Gate"), a collection of koan. Koan can be a paradoxical anecdote or an illogical dialogue, used in Zen-Buddhism to blow away your analytical mind in order to give access to a "higher" (transrational) state of consciousness. Yagyu Munenori relates the story of Nansen and Joshu in his book on the "Art of War". In the comment he likens heijōshin to a mind as clear as a mirror which distinctly reflects everything as it is. He adds that this is the realm of mushin.

By the way, the metaphor of the mirror that reflects without distortion is also used by Funakoshi Gichin. Yagyu Munenori notes that heijoshin can also be called shizentai no kokoro. Yes, "the heart of the natural stance", the shizentai we assume in Karate before getting ready for action. The shizen in shizentai (tai = body, posture) means "spontaneity, nature, of-itself-so" and is an important concept in Daoism. You act "naturally" when there is no desire, no attachment, no self-centredness.

Thus this is the equivalent of muga (no self) or mushin in Zen. By the way, how to move and breathe most naturally in Karate was a lifelong pursuit of my mentor

Kanazawa Hirokazu and in my memory "natural" was one of his favourite words in his teachings!

Fudoshin:

The concept of fudoshin seemingly comes from Takuan's treatise on the "immovable wisdom" (fudochi). Fudo means "imperturbable, firm, unmoveable", however Takuan asserts this does not mean to be immobile like a stone or tree. Rather it means the mind can move freely in any direction, is unfettered and does



The Buddhist deity Fudo Myoo from the Kakurin Temple located in Shikoku, Japan.

not get stuck with anything. He deems a rigidly fixed mind to be "sick". It means the highest degree of motility with a center that remains immovable. There is no clinging, no discriminatory thinking, no cogitation. Takuan equals fudoshin with mushin munen (no-mind, no-thought) and sees Fudo Myoo as the personification of the immovable wisdom. Fudo myoo (sansk. Acala vidya-rajā) is a buddhist guardian figure, the frightful manifestation of the Buddha Mahavairocana. He displays an angry scowl and is the destroyer of evil and protector of the buddhist law. He holds a sword in his right hand to smite the wicked and a rope in his left to catch and bind them. Behind him rises an aureole of red flames. He became very popular in Japan in some so-called "esoteric" schools of Buddhism. Medieval warriors underwent tantric rituals to invoke his protective powers.

Zanshin:

The term zanshin has even made it into the vocabulary of Sports-Karate. For Issai Chozan (1659-1741), a samurai and author of popular stories, in his essay "The Demon's Sermon on the Martial Arts", zanshin "simply means that you are not

attached to your technique, the essence of your mind is undisturbed. ... even if you had smashed your opponent down to the furthest corners of hell, your self would not change a bit from the self you were before the smashing. Therefore you are free to move in all directions and without any hindrance."

Zanshin is not a Zen-buddhist term as such, but a Budo-born notion, notably in connection with sword fighting. Verbally it means "lingering mind" (zan = "stay, remain, be left over" and shin = "heart, mind, spirit"). The famous swordfighter Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) defines it in his "Thirty-five Instructions on Strategy" as "clearing the mind of the mind and leaving just an intention in the mind" after striking an enemy decisively. It means to remain alert and attentive after the completion of a technique or a Kata. You do not slacken off mentally after a strike, but stay watchful and ready for a potential next move. The term has been somewhat inflated in the sense of an overall attentiveness throughout a contest or an activity, from beginning to end. But in the strict sense it concerns the attitude (physical and psychological) after a technique has been delivered or a Kata has been completed. It is a state of total awareness, an intentional remaining in mushin, thus a hybrid state of concentration and mindfulness. If the meaning is stretched too far (i.e. permanence), it comes into contradiction with the temporal aspect ("remain, after") contained in its literal signification.

Zanshin in Kendo:

However, in Kendo zanshin is interpreted in one more, less known way (already indicated by Issai Chozan). This is a paraphrase of a passage from a book edited by the All Japan Kendo Federation: "When you strike, leave nothing in the heart/mind, i.e. you strike with all your might, nothing is held back, your Ki ("energy") is replete and you become able to naturally react to your opponent." Thus this refers to an "emptied" mind during the execution of a technique and beyond. It carries a kind of "inner-spatial" implication ("empty") rather than a time-related one and is of a more concentrative nature. This interpretation may go back to the famous swordsman Ito Ittosai (1560?-1653?), who wrote in one of his scrolls: "Zanshin (remaining heart) is not to leave any heart when the strike is made." Attack and leave nothing behind! At first glance it seems to contradict the first meaning of "leaving your heart", i.e. keeping up attention and vigilance after a strike. The state of mind you end up with though, is the same despite the divergent interpretations. The second meaning of zanshin seems not to be prevalent (or even relevant) in Karate-circles. I suggest that in Karate we stick to the sensu stricto of zanshin as an alert mind after a strike,

a bout or a Kata-performance. If the meaning is stretched to a mindfulness of long duration and throughout various activities it becomes interchangeable with mushin and the distinction with regard to its sequentiality and limited time frame in its first meaning is lost.

All above terms (mushin, heijoshin, fudoshin, zanshin) are not part and parcel of Karate since time immemorial. They have been "imported" into Karate from Zen-inspired swordsmanship. This happened in the process of its "Budo-ization" in the 1930s after Karate was introduced to the main island. Karate wanted to be accepted as a proper Japanese budo (martial way/art) and was therefore streamlined along Judo and Kendo. With the counter culture of the 1960s came a search for eastern wisdom and an interest in meditation. Taijiquan became popular even among the hippies and Jazz-musicians, so much, that it turns up in a scene in the cult flick "Easy Rider". With the contemporaneous Kung-fu-craze (David Carradine, Bruce Lee) martial arts became laden with mysticism and "spiritual" gibberish. In this atmosphere the Zen-label and its philosophy was readily adopted by many Karate-teachers. All this does not make it less valid, but we should beware of exotic mystifications.

Wisdom and compassion:

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) or "lingering mind" (sustained attentiveness, zanshin) 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. "Emptiness" (sansk. sunyata, sinojpn. Ku, jpn. reading: kara) is a concept used in Buddhism to describe the ultimate reality. The "kara" in Karate is written with this character and Funakoshi Gichin had the buddhist metaphysical meaning in mind when he changed the writing of "Kara" from the character for "Tang-dynasty = China" to "empty" (which was first suggested in 1905 by Hanashiro Chomo). In the introduction to his "Master Text" Funakoshi in this context quotes one of the most famous buddhist maxims from the "Heart Sutra": "Form is empty, emptiness is form" (jpn. Shiki zoku ze ku, ku zoku ze shiki).

Takuan accordingly elaborates that everything is "empty", the enemy, oneself, the hand, the sword, they are all "empty", therefore you can "cut" (= kill) with an "empty" heart! Miyamoto Musashi also describes the optimal mental condition for striking an opponent by rendering the heart/mind into a state of "emptiness" = (ku).

The ordained Zen-monk Brian Victoria accuses Takuan of violating one of the most important buddhist precepts, i.e. not



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to kill living beings! In the conclusion of his disturbing book "Zen at War", in which he exposed and analyzed the role of Zen-Buddhists during the second world war in Japan, 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.*" Wisdom without compassion is coldness, compassion without wisdom is mere sentimentality.

Meditation = no Ego:

One more caveat: you do not meditate in order to achieve something or to perform better. Meditation has its own intrinsic value and should not be instrumentalized. "Zen for managers" and all the other abominations of this ilk, i.e. sit in meditation to become a better manipulator, only leads to an inflation and boosting of the ego – the exact opposite of what Zen stands for. You do not meditate to become a better fighter! You meditate in order to unfold your whole potential as a human being.

There exist other notions besides mushin in Budo and Zen, e.g. munen muso (no thought, no conceptions; a term preferred by Miyamoto Musashi),

muga (no ego), muge jizai (no obstacles, free), muyoku (no desires) mushotoku (no attachments). They all indicate the absence of something (mu = nothing) in your consciousness, often called "emptiness". This does not mean a blank or void, on the contrary, it is the fullness of awareness, mindfulness. It is the end of time, pure presence. Consciousness of consciousness, from moment to moment. Total choiceless awareness, detachment. The chatter and clutter in your mind is far, far away and does not disturb or distract you. The ego fades out in the light of attentiveness. There is no center. No "watcher", just the act of watching, pure witnessing. Therefore you cling to nothing, there is no attachment, as the buddhists reiterate. Thus your mind is free, liberated, natural, as the daoists like to name it, spontaneous. This is the Zen-mind.

You should meditate for the sheer beauty of it. It is a basic human faculty, which should be nurtured like an art. Meditation is nothing extraordinary, it is only the gurus and recipe-sellers, who claim it to be something mysterious or difficult. We naturally fall into meditative moods when we watch a sunset or a butterfly, listen to a birdsong, drink tea or train oi-zuki for that matter. If we are inwardly tranquil and just witness what happens in our consciousness – this is meditation. It is simple and does not need any effort. It refreshes our mind and sharpens our actions. No lofty talk of enlightenment or the like is needed whatsoever. You do not have to sit for hours in order to meditate. Meditative spells of a few minutes during the day will do. They can happen while sitting, standing or walking, even while working! No incense or contorted legs for sitting in a lotus position are necessary. Just be here and now for a little while. Exactly this is actually advised by the sharp-witted Issai Chozan, who also showers some acerbic critique on Zen-monks in his "Demon's Sermon". He explains it with the backdrop of the regulation of the flow of the inner, vital energy (Ki). Rectify the posture, relax, breathe naturally, let the mind calm down and Ki will flow freely and fully! It is actually what we do when we go into shizentai – if we pay attention to it (= yoi!). It can be a form of a brief standing meditation. Meditation is a natural gift or a gift of human nature and part of the art of living. Karate can offer a way to realize it as such. Just never train without doing a bit of mokuuso!

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