ZEN NO-MIND IN KARATE-DO

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The relationship between Zen and Karate-do can be traced back to the relationship between Zen and the samurai. In that relationship, Zen greatly influenced the life of the samurai. ¹ In fact, D.T. Suzuki claims that it has "intimately related from the beginning of its history in the life of the samurai." ² Zen is a form of Buddhism. In whatever form, Buddhism is always a religion of compassion; "it has never been found engaged in warlike activities." Isn't it strange that Zen has been affiliated with the spirit of military activities? How then does Zen activate the fighting spirit of the Japanese warrior?

Zen did not actively promote violence among the samurais; rather, it passively sustained them morally and philosophically. It sustained them morally, "because Zen is a religion which teaches the learners not to look backward once the course is decided upon." A samurai, once he has decided to follow the course, never turns back, no matter what. A samurai once said that when one is challenged to a fight he must be willing to embrace and accept the possibility of death. Once, Matsumura Sensei, a karate master, was challenged to a match by another karate master, Uehara Sensei. In that match Matsumura showed the principle of fighting without fighting. He defeated Uehara Sensei, who surrendered without even being able to strike a single blow. Uehara asked why? Matsumura answered:

All along, your mind was filled with the thought of winning, while I was prepared to die.
That is the only important difference.³

Zen sustained them philosophically, because it treats life and death indifferently. It is said that once one is born he is said ready to die. Zen teaches non-attachment to things, called Zen No-Mind. Thus Zen offers the samurai the broad horizon of existence. In such
horizon he is totally free, neither hindrances nor obstacles, since he
does not have any attachment either to life or to death.
Coming empty handed, going empty-handed – that
is human.
When you are born where do you come from?
When you die, where do you go?
Life is like a floating cloud that appears.
Death is like a floating cloud that disappears.
The floating cloud itself originally does not exist.
Life and death, coming and going, are also like
that.
But there is one thing that always remains clear.
It is pure and clear, not depending on life and
death.⁴
Matsumura had Zen in his life. He was free; neither
hindrances nor obstacles would stop him from pursuing his goal. In
the same match he remarked philosophically:
In essence, a man is only a temporary aggregation
of the Five Principles and the Five Elements.
When his time is up, this form quickly
disintegrates, becoming again the elements of
earth, water, fire, wind and air. When one realizes
the evanescence of all things, it is easy to see that
there is no such entity as self, and consequently,
no such thing as other. Human beings, like grass
or trees, or all of nature, are only physical
aggregations of the spirit pervading the entire
universe. To the spirit of the universe, the
concepts of life and death are meaningless. When
one is free of attachment, there are no obstacles or
hindrances. There is no fear. That is all.⁵
The pursuit of Zen No Mind liberates oneself from the
bondage of ignorance to the freedom of seeing one’s being. Suzuki
describes Zen as “the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being
and it points the way from bondage to freedom.”⁶ This way of seeing
oneself is a seeing of reality just as it is; it is never with a dualistic and
discursive mind; this seeing has no grasping of thoughts or feelings.
This is called "no-mind," a state of consciousness wherein thoughts move without leaving any trace.

Zen No Mind is not only a way, an attitude; it is also a practice geared to reach awakening or self-realization. It appeals more to the heart, less to the mind. Because of this, Zen may be considered as a religion. As a religion, it transcends its own teachings and practices, but, at the same time, it is not apart from them.

The purpose of this paper is to present and describe the cardinal point of Zen teaching and non-teaching: the Zen No-Mind in the practice of karate-do. It aims to show the importance of harmony and integration of the mind and body in learning karate-do. To achieve self-realization, no-mind is indispensable. Without it there is no progress in the search for wholeness in karate-do. To achieve this purpose, this paper discusses the following attitudes and principles: 1) Non-Abiding in Ignorance; 2) The Immovable Wisdom; and 3) No-Mind.

The teaching of karate-do must be approached with right attitude. Shunryu considers the attitude as practice and both are expressions of one's nature. "Strictly speaking, for a human being, there is no other practice than this practice; there is no other way of life than this way of life."

This attitude in reality is one, holistic, total and undivided. But for purposes of discussion, this attitude will be broken into three.

Non-Abiding in Ignorance in Karate-do

Zen has two dominant characteristics. First, it is a complete acceptance of change; nothing remains the same, the wheel is always leading towards the only certainty—at some time or another, the human lifespan will come to an end. Man is a temporary being composed of elements. When he dies, his physical body returns to the elements. Consequently, to give too much importance on this fragile butterfly life is deemed futile. Second, it is understanding oneself, understanding the Mind. These two characteristics must be borne in mind in the study of it.

Zen is a practice to reach self-realization or satori. In the process of achieving such, there are several obstacles. But the most
dominant obstacle is the "Abiding in Ignorance." This is twofold: abiding in inherent ignorance and abiding in acquired ignorance.

Abiding in ignorance hinders man from understanding one of the most important Buddhist doctrines: the Patitva Samuppada or the Doctrine of Interdependent Origination. It deters one from knowing, understanding and realizing the interdependence of everything and consequently prevents him from understanding life's phenomena. 10

The term ignorance means the absence of enlightenment, which is to say that there is delusion. 11 When one is deluded, he thinks of something contrary to reality. Thus, abiding in ignorance is believing in something which is not real. This abiding is non-awareness of the true nature of things or of the real meaning of existence. 12

In abiding in ignorance, there is abiding place, place where the mind stops. In the practice of Buddhism, there are said to be fifty-two stages, and within these stages, the place where the mind stops at one thing is called the abiding place. It attaches to any object it encounters. This attaching signifies stopping, known as tomaru 13 and stopping means the mind is being detained by some matter, which may be any matter at all. 14

In karate-do, when one first notices the hand that is moving to strike him and his eyes follow its movement, his mind will stop and focus at the hand in just that position; his own movements will be undone; and he will be struck down by his opponent. This is what stopping means in karate-do.

A karate student must develop the non-abiding in ignorance attitude. What does this non-abiding mean? When confronted with the moving hand, his mind must not be detained by the movement. His mind must be like a clear pond; it reflects the environment without any judgment. Whether in normal or in combat times, the mind should not change the least bit—attentiveness should never relax and a position should not be taken recklessly. The mind should be candidly open and judge without bias. Care must be taken that the mind does not stop in one place but quietly absorbs all things. This is stated in Japanese:

Kokoro wa karada ni tsurezu
Karada wa kokoro ni tsurezu
(Mind and body: Neither should be led by the other)\textsuperscript{15}

With the \textit{non-abiding in ignorance}, although he sees the hand that moves to strike him, if his mind is not detained by it and he meets the rhythm of the advancing arm; if he does not think of striking his opponent and no thoughts or judgments remain; if the instant he sees the swinging arm his mind is not the least bit detained and he moves straight in and blocks it away from him; the arm that was going to knock him down will become his own; and, contrarily, will be the arm that will knock down his opponent.

In Zen this \textit{Non-Abiding in Ignorance} is called "Grabbing the spear and, contrariwise, piercing the man who had come to pierce you."\textsuperscript{16} In karate-do the spear is \textit{nukite}, a spear hand which is a weapon.\textsuperscript{17} The heart of this is: the hand of the opponent is blocked becomes the hand that knocks down. This is karate-do, "No-Hand." Miyamoto Musashi calls this hand as \textit{Muren musho no uchi} the hand that does not have ideas and thoughts.

Whether by the enemy's strike or one's own thrust, whether by the man or the hand, whether by a position or a rhythm, as long as the mind is diverted in any way, the actions will falter, and he will be struck down.

If one places himself before his opponent, his mind will be taken by that opponent. He should not place his mind within himself. Bracing the mind in the body is something done only at the inception of training, when one is a beginner.\textsuperscript{18}

The mind can be taken by the karate attack. If a man put his mind in the rhythm of the contest, his mind can be taken by that as well. If he places his mind in his own karate technique, his mind can be taken by his own technique. If his mind is stopping at any of these places, he becomes an empty shell. This is the same in Zen Buddhism. In Zen, we call this stopping of the mind \textit{delusion}, the affliction of abiding in ignorance.

\textit{a) Abiding in Inherent Ignorance}

The term \textit{ignorance}, as mentioned above, means the absence of enlightenment, the absence of insight into one's nature. This means further that \textit{ignorance} is lack of understanding the reality as such. In
Buddhism, this means delusion. Ignorance as delusion causes sufferings. Roshi Philip Kapleau contends that any one with an ignorant mind has a delusive mind. Any acts resulting from such mind produce painful results.¹⁹

Everything is causally interconnected. Man, however, does not readily understand this fact; hindrances prevent him from grasping reality as it is. When this happens he suffers or abides in ignorance. Alfredo Co identifies two obstacles from seeing this fact: one is inherent and the other is acquired. The inherent obstacle is built in the human nature. Within the human condition, man inherently grasps or clings to impermanent things. He futilely clings to life, thinking there is permanence. This clinging is based on the wrong point of view: ignorance.

Ignorance means the lack of right understanding of reality.²⁰ Out of this ignorance one divides the perceived world into individual and separate things; and thus, he confines the fluid forms of reality in fixed categories, which his ignorant mind has created. As long as this view prevails, he is bound to experience frustration after frustration and becomes trapped in his own ignorance. This causes him pain and suffering and obstructs his self-realization. Thus, ignorance is delusion.²¹

In the practice of karate-do, inherent ignorance occurs because one does not see the nature of his being. Oftentimes, man assumes to know himself. This is an illusion. Later on, this becomes a delusion since he acts according to the assumption that he knows himself when in reality he does not. This is very true for a beginner. Most often, a beginner who has just learned a few moves of karate has the tendency to boast his meager prowess. He thinks that he already knows karate. This is inherent ignorance. This is a stopping mind, and hence it affects his learning in karate-do. Eventually the beginner overcomes this ignorance as he realizes that he really does not know karate-do. When this ignorance persists, the practitioner gets disappointed because he is not learning the proper way of karate. This is similar to the first Noble Truth. When one is ignorant in karate-do, he gets suffering for lack of proper learning.

The solution to this is to adopt and follow the path of enlightenment which is natural and spontaneous. This is the attitude
of Non-Abiding in ignorance. In the teaching of karate, one must be natural and spontaneous. No hindrances should deter him. Thus any obstacles or hindrances must be discarded and the flow be followed. This attitude is one of the precepts of karate-do. If one were to learn karate, he must flow naturally and not be deterred by ignorance. He must have the beginner’s mind: no unwanted biases or preconceived notion, no ignorance inherent to his nature.

b) Abiding in Acquired Ignorance

The other obstacle is acquired ignorance. Co lists down education, culture and environment as belonging to acquired hindrance. Education, culture and environment drastically condition one’s perception of reality. In relation to this is the Abiding place, the place where the mind stops.

Education, as a hindrance, is an abiding because it is a form of “brainwashing,” which in some way or another prevents the person from perceiving things as they really are and stops him from seeing whether they are true or not. When one learns karate-do, he must rid all he has learned intellectually about karate. He must empty his mind so that he can learn new things. Like a full cup, the learned mind is full of its own opinions and speculations. It cannot be shown and taught Zen unless it is first empty.

Likewise, culture contributes to the acquired ignorance that hinders man from understanding the real essence of karate-do. For example, American culture and mind-set oftentimes offer wrong understanding of karate-do. Such culture orients him to look at karate-do as something esoteric, something supernatural. He thinks that once he learns karate-do, he becomes invincible, like superman. Also the way he relates and interacts with other people depends upon his cultural background. One acts in such a manner based on the cultural milieu that he has been brought up and accustomed. This is a cultural bias. The bias or cultural baggage blinds the person from perceiving and grasping the principle of no-mind. Some may claim to understand such principle. One student claimed it to be so simple:

How amazing! Never before has it occurred to me, shihan. This principle of No Mind, although so
profound and hard to see, yet appears to me to be so simple.\textsuperscript{25}

Culture and environment are instrumental to one’s ignorance. They hinder the individual from knowing, understanding and realizing this principle thoroughly.

In sum, \textit{abiding in ignorance} can hinder a person from achieving real knowledge of karate-do since it comes in terms of inherent hindrance and acquired hindrance. Both prevent the individual from looking into his true self as the goal of Zen and karate-do. He needs to have to get rid of these hindrances. He needs to examine himself and discover that he is abiding in ignorance. He has to see through the false image of himself as incomplete and ignorant; he has to wake up and aspire to become pure and whole. This requires the \textit{Immovable Wisdom}.

\textbf{The Immovable Wisdom}

The term \textit{immovable} means \textit{unmoving}. The word \textit{wisdom} means the wisdom of intelligence. Although wisdom is called immovable, this does not signify any insentient thing, like wood or stone. It moves as the mind is wont to move: forward or back, to the left, to the right, in the ten directions and to the eight points; and the mind that does not stop at all is called \textit{immovable wisdom}.

Takuan Soho, advising the Swordmaster, presents the figure of \textit{Fudō Myōō}. He grasps a sword in his right hand and holds a rope in his left hand.\textsuperscript{26} He bares his teeth and his eyes flash with anger. His form stands firmly, ready to defeat the evil spirits that would obstruct the Buddhist Law. This is not hidden in any country anywhere. His form is made in the shape of a protector of Buddhism, while his embodiment is that of immovable wisdom. This is what is shown to living things.

Seeing this form, the ordinary man becomes afraid and has no thoughts of becoming an enemy of Buddhism. The man who is close to enlightenment understands that it manifests immovable wisdom and clears away all delusion. For the man who can make his immovable wisdom apparent and who is able to physically practice this mental dharma as well as \textit{Fudō Myōō}, the evil spirits will no longer proliferate. This is the purpose of Fudō Myōō’s news. \textit{Fudō Myōō} is
one’s unmoving mind and an unvacillating body (“Unvacillating”
means not being detained by anything). 27

Glancing at something and not stopping, the mind is called
immovable. When the mind stops at something as it fills the heart with
various judgments, there are various movements within it. When its
movements cease, the stopping mind moves, but it does not move at
all.

Let me illustrate this in karate. If ten men come at you with
their karate strikes and you parry each strike without stopping the
mind at each action, you will not lack a proper action for every one
of the ten. Here, although the mind acts ten times against ten men as
long as it does not halt at even one of them and you react to one
after another, proper action is aplenty. But if the mind stops before
one of these men as you parry his strike, the right action will have
slipped away when the next man comes. 28

Again, Takuan Soho exhorts the Swordmaster to focus on the
unmovable mind. He does this when he describes Kwannon Bosatsu.
Considering that the Thousand-Armed Kwannon
Bosatsu 29 has one thousand arms on its one body,
if the mind stops at the one holding the bow, the
other ninety-nine hundred will be useless. Unless
the mind is not detained at one place, then all the
arms are useful. 30

To what purpose would having a thousand arms attached one
body? The figure of the Kwannon shows that if one lets go of its
immovable wisdom, even if a body has a thousand arms, each would
be useless. 31 Suzuki in his article “Zen and Swordsmanship” notes
that when one realizes the Prajna Immovable, even as many as one
thousand arms on one body may each and all be useful in one way or
another. 32

To illustrate this farther: when you face a single tree and you
look at one of the green leaves, you will not see all the others. When
the eyes are not set on one leaf, and you face the tree with nothing at
all in mind, any leaf is visible to the eyes without limit. But if a single
leaf holds the eyes, the mind “stops.” This “stopping” effectively bars
you from seeing all the rest. It will be as if the remaining leaves were
not there.
Zen No-Mind

The Zen No-Mind is the same as the Non-Abiding in Ignorance, the same as the Unmovable Wisdom. This No-Mind is actually the Beginner’s Mind, the Novice Mind. This mind is empty, ready to accept new things without prejudice and hindrance. This is clearly illustrated in a story about Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912).

One day, Nan-in received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea to his visitor. He poured his cup full, and kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself.

“It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “You are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

The Zen No-Mind is empty; it is empty from any cares, opinions, and speculations. It is free from the habits of the experts. It is ready to accept, doubt, and open to all the possibilities. The mind can see things as they are and can intuit, step by step or in a flash, into the original nature of everything. This is the mind every study of Zen must possess and develop. Without it the attainment of enlightenment is almost impossible.

D.T. Suzuki considers Zen as the intuitive looking into one’s nature, his inner self. He describes the essence of Zen as “the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being and it points the way from bondage to freedom.” But one cannot see into the nature of his own being, if he is not liberated from all the yokes and the mundane cares of the world. Thus one must empty or liberate himself from all such cares and return to his latent self: the novice’s mind, the Zen No-Mind. In this sense, when one practices, he must free himself from all opinions, biases, cares, and greed which hamper the releasing of the mysterious power that is within himself.

Every human being has this mysterious power within himself that must be put into proper operation. Because man becomes
ignorant about such power, he becomes blind to what his very nature is. He starts to struggle because he is blind to the fact.

With the No-Mind attitude, the Zen practitioner frees himself and allows him to devote fully to all the creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in his heart. The attitude of No-Mind would uncover and drive the cloud that blinds man from seeing into the very nature of his own being.

All preconceived ideas, all biases, all speculations, and opinions, all logic must be discarded by the No-Mind. These ideas, biases, speculations and opinions oftentimes lead people into considering the practice of Zen as something difficult. Why? There is a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to assume the lotus position during meditation—this position can be learned through constant practice; it is not difficult because it is hard to attain the enlightenment; rather, it is difficult because man is so engrossed in his ideas of what is, of how to meditate. He must discard all such ideas...Otherwise he will be stuck to the discursive understanding of meditation and will never attain enlightenment. This is the nature of Zen and No-Mind. When one begins to study and practice Zen he must remember Nan-in’s teaching: “How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

It is necessary that he achieves this No-Mind. He must first empty and quiet his mind, so that he can understand mystically this subtle attitude of the Zen Mind. He must empty his mind so that he can get rid of all preoccupations and excitations of mundane things; so doing, he makes his mind open to all eventualities. If he does not empty and quiet his mind, his mind becomes rough and rugged. Yuan-hsien expresses this mind in this way:

If the mind is not emptied, it is like a pitcher full of donkey milk – How can you also fill it with lion’s milk. If the mind is not quiet, it is like a lamp in the wind, or like turbulent water – how can it reflect myriad forms?

This is also very true of karate-do. Whenever an enthusiast would join Japan Karate Association, he/she is always asked if he/she has ever studied any form of martial arts previously. He is thus asked, because the instructor would find it very difficult to teach
a student, who has all kinds of preconceived ideas about karate-do. A student who has studied *kung-fu* or *tai-chi* would find it hard to learn karate. Even a student who has studied a particular of karate, say, *Shito Ryu*, would find it hard to study other styles. To successfully learn karate the student needs to adapt the Zen No-Mind, the novice’s mind, the beginner’s mind attitude and must unlearn what he has learned before. He must “first empty his cup.” He must empty his previously learned techniques to learn new techniques. Then he must try to master the new technique he is learning. Always must he obey without hesitation the instructions of his teacher.

Gichin Funakoshi considers the mind necessary in karate as the Zen No Mind. This is the stage of the novice. He describes this stage as a process of “no-mind to mind to no-mind.” Thus from being a novice, one gradually accumulates experience and reaches a superior level. He then returns to the stage of the novice. In karate, the novice knows neither how to make a stance, how to make a fist. His mind does not stop in his body. If he is attacked, he replies, but he has no strategy. Then, as the body learns more techniques and postures, their uses and stratagems of a battle, the mind is captivated by various things. His mind is detained by all such techniques and postures all those stratagems. Thus, when he tries to strike, he vacillates and becomes restricted. However, as months and years of training pile up, techniques and posture come to be applied without conscious effort. This is the stage of the novice mind, the stage of non-mind. With detachment, with freedom from obstacles, appropriate movement.

Consequently, be it in Zen or in Karate-do the attitude of No-Mind is very essential. The goal of Zen or karate practice is always to develop and keep such attitude. To improve in any field, it is very necessary to keep the mind pure and the practice pure in its fundamental sense. All self-centered thoughts must be purged from the mind. When one has no thought of achievement, no thought of self, he is a true beginner, a true novice; thus he is said to have the No-Mind. His mind must be boundless in order to be true to himself and see the very nature of his own being. This allows him also to learn karate-do. Funakoshi expresses this very clearly:
Just as it is the clear mirror that reflects without distortion, or the quiet valley that echoes a sound, so must one who would study karate-do purge himself of selfish and evil thoughts, for only with a clear mind and conscience can he understand that which he receives.\(^{37}\)

To recapitulate: in learning Zen and karate-do, the attitudes of the Non-Abiding in Ignorance, Unmovable Wisdom, and Zen No-Mind are essential. When one practices karate-do he must possess these. Although I have presented three attitudes, in reality they are one and the same. In fact the two are integrated in the Zen No-Mind.

It must be borne in mind that no matter how much time the student devotes to practice, no matter how many months and years pass, if he practices with the abiding in ignorance, then he never develops or reaches his realization. If he practices with the movable wisdom, then he can never reach his perfection of character and illumination. If practices with discursive mind, then he only moves his arms and legs and nothing more. He should rather be studying the art of dancing or ballet. Without the Zen No Mind, he will never come to know the true meaning of karate-do.\(^{38}\)

ENDNOTES

1 Samurai is a Japanese warrior, who was trained to use swords and knives for warlike activities. Basically, a samurai is a warrior devoted to protect and support his lord, daimyo.
7 These rituals and devotions are unique in the sense that they do not follow any definite patterns and dogmatic teachings. They do not involve philosophical


13 *Tomaru* is a Japanese word that means “attaching” “clinging” “fastening” or as a noun “disturbance.”


17 *Nukite* is one of the weaponless weapons of karate-do.


19 Ibid., 80.

20 Ibid., 51-52.


23 Co, *Compassionate Buddha*, 51.


25 Ibid., 50


28 Ibid.

29 *Kannon*, a bodhisattva, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. (Sanskrit, *Avalokiteswara*) Originally depicted as male, in one of the three common forms of representation she has a thousand eyes and a thousand hands. Cf. Takuan, *Unfettered Mind*, 93.


31 Ibid., 22.


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