

KARATE NI SENTE NASHI

空手に先手なし

THERE IS NO FIRST ATTACK IN KARATE

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Kenwa Mabuni Executing the opening Block of a Kata

Every traditional Okinawan and Japanese kata begins with a block symbolizing the principle of *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate. This principle is the logical outgrowth of the Confucian belief that virtuous men avoid all direct conflict. Additionally, this concept was included in the *Twenty Precepts* of Mr. Gichin Funakoshi.ⁱ However, one might ask what this really means. Does it prohibit one from engaging in any type of attack unless one's life is endangered? Does it require one to wait to be attacked before one can respond? Does it allow a karate-ka to respond to an imminent threat prior to an actual physical assault, or does it mean something entirely different? In order to get a better understanding of this important precept, it would behoove us to research what some of the

great masters of karatedo have said on the subject.

CHOJUN MIYAGI

In January of 1936 Mr. Chojun Miyagi bemoaned that the moral precept *karate ni sente nashi* had too often been ignored, and that the physical side of karate had too often been emphasized: “Although such maxims such as ‘karate ni sente nashi’ (in karate there is no first attack) existed, in reality this type of spiritual focus was paid little if any attention – the focus was on the physical. However, the methods and purpose of karate instruction have changed so that...the main objective today is the development of spiritual discipline, [and] I hope that the pursuit in this direction will continue.”ⁱⁱ

Whereas Mr. Miyagi neglected to explain precisely what *karate ni sente nashi* meant to him, he told us that he agrees with this moral concept and that he was pleased to see that it was being emphasized to a greater extent among karate teachers and practitioners. Moreover, it is implicit in Mr. Miyagi remarks that he placed karate's moral values above karate's physical attributes.

Mr. Eiichi Miyazato, who studied directly under Mr. Miyagi, explained his concept of *karate ni sente nashi*: “From time to time Rei [respect] is lost, mistakes are made, and lifetime regrets are often the result... Ancient Budo teaches that the fighting techniques are techniques used to escape... The wisest thing to do in a confrontational situation is to run away.”ⁱⁱⁱ As we can see, Mr. Miyazato

goes beyond the concept *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate, and tells his students to avoid confrontations altogether. It is possible that Mr. Miyagi’s beliefs about *karate ni sente nashi* were similar to the beliefs of his direct student, Eiichi Miyazato.

Mr. Seiichi Fujiwara, president of Seiwa Kai International and one of the best known Goju Ryu instructors in the world today, touched upon this concept in a 2002 interview: “When Karate skill is used thoughtlessly it involves danger. Gojuryu is based on the concept that ‘you do not strike a person and you do not get struck by a person’. This is the spirit of our style’s foundation.”^{iv} Thus Fujiwara Shihan explains what *karate ni sente nashi* means for him and for others who study Goju Ryu. We should not attack others, and we should not allow ourselves to be attacked by others.

GICHIN FUNAKOSHI

Mr. Gichin Funakoshi, who was a Confucian scholar, was quite specific in his concept of *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate. Mr. Funakoshi always maintained that karate-do was to be used only as a last resort, and only in defense of human life. Mr. Funakoshi explained that “[I] performed a rite and pledged myself never to make use of my trained body for any illicit purpose.”^v

An incident occurred after the second world conflict when Mr. Funakoshi was about eighty years old that would test his pledge to himself and to his concept of *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate. He had attended a poetry-reading party out of town and was returning to Tokyo late in the evening. In one hand he carried an umbrella to shield himself from the rain, and in the other hand he carried a satchel containing some books.^{vi} Out of the shadows, “a black-clad figure sprang suddenly out from behind a telephone pole.”^{vii}

The assailant demanded “Untie your *furoshiki* [satchel] and let’s see what’s in it.”^{viii} Mr. Funakoshi resisted the thief’s demand and responded: “There is nothing in it of the slightest value.”^{ix} At this point, the thief grabbed Mr. Funakoshi’s umbrella and swung it at his head. Mr. Funakoshi ducked under the strike and grabbed the man by his testicles. The thief loudly cried out; a police officer quickly appeared; and Mr. Funakoshi released his assailant into the custody of the police officer.^x

However, Mr. Funakoshi relates how he felt guilty over the incident. “I had done what I constantly tell my students not to do: I took the offensive. I did not feel very proud of myself.”^{xi} Mr. Funakoshi believed that he could have avoided the physical conflict altogether, and walked away while surrendering “nothing of the slightest value.” Instead, he chose a course which led to a conflict and which violated his concept of *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate.

Whereas some of us will perceive the elderly Mr. Funakoshi as being fully justified in defending himself and his property against a much younger would-be robber, he did not believe that his actions were justified at all. In his moral paradigm, he had been willing to risk the life of another human over “nothing of the slightest value” and that was something that he had pledged himself never to do. Certainly, Mr. Funakoshi embodied tremendous humility in his concept of *karate ni sente nashi*. However, there are other karate masters who do not believe that one has to go to such extremes to exemplify the principle of *karate ni sente nashi* – there is no first attack in karate.

KENWA MABUNI

Mr. Kenwa Mabuni trained with both Mr. Kanryo Higaonna and Mr. *Ankoh* Itosu, the teachers of both Mr. Miyagi and Mr. Funakoshi. He contends that there are two types of misunderstandings regarding the concept of *there is no first attack in karate*. The first misconception is held by those who minimize *karate ni sente nashi* and contend that “the opportunity for victory is seized by getting a jump on your enemy... Those who make such statements do not understand that the true spirit of Japanese budo means not to be bellicose.”^{xii} The second type of misconception comes from those who “do not see *karate ni sente nashi* as an attitude, but rather as a literal, behavioral rule to be followed rigidly... When absolutely necessary, when one is facing battle, it is an accepted truth of strategy that one should try to take *sensen no sen* [preemptive initiative] and forestall the enemy’s actions.”^{xiii}

From Mr. Kenwa Mabuni’s statements, one can reason that he believes that Mr. Funakoshi has taken the concept of *there is no first attack in karate* too rigidly and too literally. Mr. Mabuni reminds us that the essential meaning of budo is to stop conflict and to maintain peace. Consequently “when one is faced with someone who disrupts the peace or who will do one harm ...it only stands to reason that one should get the jump on the enemy and preempt his use of violence.”^{xiv} For Mr. Kenwa Mabuni, this is the true meaning of *there is no first attack in karate*.

KARATE NI SENTENASHI

All of the great masters of karate-do agree that the belligerent use of force is morally wrong and goes against the moral concept of *karate ni sente nashi*. Some of these masters believe that it is a literal rule and that initiating an attack violates the spirit and letter of *there is no first attack in karate*. However others masters believe that *karate ni sente nashi* means that when one’s safety or the public order is threatened, one may use preemptive force to prevent harm and maintain the peace. Whichever philosophical stance the great karate masters have taken on the precept of *karate ni sente nashi* it has been a moral stance based on slightly different but principled reasoning.

ⁱ Cook, Harry: *Cook, Harry: Shotokan Karate*, page 325

ⁱⁱ Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: pages 85-86

ⁱⁱⁱ Miyazato Eiichi: *Okinawan Den Goju Ryu Karate-do*: page 29

^{iv} Nitiniti Omagari [Akita Newspaper]: “*Karatedo (Gojuryu) the highest rank 8th Dan Fujiwara San of Omagari City*”: October 31st, Thursday 2002

^v Cook, Harry: *Shotokan Karate*: page 47

^{vi} Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: pages 110 - 111

^{vii} Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: page 111

^{viii} Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: page 112

^{ix} Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: page 112

^x Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: page 112

^{xi} Funakoshi, Gichin: *Karate-do My Way of Life*: page 112

^{xii} Tankosich, Mark *Classical Fighting Arts*; Issue 5: page 44

^{xiii} Tankosich, Mark *Classical Fighting Arts*; Issue 5: page 44

^{xiv} Tankosich, Mark *Classical Fighting Arts*; Issue 5: page 44