

**Christina Gutz**

## **Traditional Karate versus Sports Karate?**

„Martial art technique is like the cosmos, it is infinite. Know that there are no such things as limits.“

Hironori Otsuka<sup>1</sup>

### **A brief historical introduction**

Karate developed on the Ryukyu Islands, i.e. modern-day Okinawa, from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century for many hundreds of years as a fighting and self-defense system under Chinese influence. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, karate was introduced to the Japanese mainland. It was first demonstrated to the general public in June 1922 at an event organized by the Japanese culture ministry, the „Dai Ikkai-Taiiku Tenrankai“.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike koryu, the traditional Japanese martial arts which were developed before the 1868 Meiji Restoration, karate is part of Gendai Budo, the martial arts established in Japan after 1868. The purposes of Gendai Budo are, on the one hand, the development of one’s own personality and, on the other hand, self-defense. Wado ryu karate is an exception from this because Hironori Otsuka (1892 – 1982), who founded Wado ryu in 1934, incorporated his knowledge of the Japanese Shindo Yoshin ryu, a koryu style, into it.<sup>3</sup>

Anko Itosu (1832 – 1916) reformed Okinawa karate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by transforming the secret martial art into a system which could be taught at schools in the sense of Do with a view to improving body and mind. Hironori Otsuka developed the most recent karate jiyu kumite techniques from jujutsu randori and shiai and introduced free-fighting into karate with a set of rules. From the historical point of view free-fighting came from the sword via jujutsu and kendo to karate.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Karate has been spreading since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and has now diversified into various styles, such as Wado ryu, Shito ryu, Goju ryu, and Shotokan, and karate organizations, the biggest of which is the World Karate Federation (WKF).

### **Traditional karate versus sports karate?**

I would first like to note that karate in Germany is organized under the umbrella of Deutsche Karate Verband (German Karate Association). Sports and traditional karate are present and interlinked at both the

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1 Hironori Otsuka: Wado Ryu Karate. Hamilton, Ontario 1997, p. 4 (First published in the 44<sup>th</sup> year of the Showa era.)

2 Teruo Kono: Karate. Der Weg zum Schwarzgurt. Hamburg 1982, p. 11

3 Toby Threadgill illustrated this in Berlin in 2012 with a metaphor: “Otsuka took the core out and put the SYR core in it. ... He made it more Japanese”, Toby Threadgill. He transferred in this way koryu knowledge to Wado ryu. In: Christina Gutz, Berlin 2012 Pentecost Course: “Koryu lives a little bit in Wado. Shindo Yoshin Ryu and Wado are like cousins.” (Toby Threadgill)

4 “Wado is the root of all freestyle fighting and it came from the sword.” Toby Threadgill, In: Christina Gutz: Kumite and Randori: The Bridge between Kata Training and Free-fighting : Wado and TSYR Seminar with Toby Threadgill and Kaki Kawano (Japan) in Berlin on 21st and 22nd February, 2015

5 Gichin Funakoshi (船越 義珍) said, "There are no contests in karate." Egami Shigeru: The Heart of Karatedo 1976, p. 111. In: Pre-World War II Okinawa. Kumite was not part of karate training. Higaonna, Morio: Traditional Karatedo Vol. 4 Applications of the Kata 1990, p. 136

state and national levels. Kyu and dan grading curricula of the individual styles ensure common frameworks, expectations and comparability. Both traditional and sports karate are practiced at the state level. Which one depends on the clubs and their senseis' and instructors' preferences.

Sports karate appeals to children, youths and young adults. They enjoy training in a group, the exercise, and learning, and it ensures or even improves their health. Karateka are often introduced to competitions by their club instructors. Competition is about a contest of skills and becoming a champion. There are clear rules in competition karate, point systems, weight and age groups and a separation into sexes. Pre-conditions for competition are standards which lead to the harmonization of kata and kumite.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is also about public relations or an increase in karate's attractiveness in the general public, which is why, for instance, show effects are often incorporated into public competitions.

Traditional karate tends to appeal more to adults. As in sports karate, they enjoy training in a group, the exercise, and learning, and it ensures or even improves their health. But there are some differences:

Traditional karate places the focus on self-defense, Wado ryu on the notion of sente, attack. This may be explained by a look back into history or at the reality of fighting: On the battlefield, in close combat, everything was about winning or losing, living or dying. For this reason, there are no ineffective actions or unnecessary techniques in traditional karate. Every movement has its purpose, traditional karate is straightforward (kakugo) to ensure one's own survival.

Practitioners of sports karate will usually concentrate on basic techniques, combinations and kata. If they take part in competitions they will specifically prepare for these in their training. Techniques and their execution are practiced in such a manner that the karateka will be awarded points. Kenei Mabuni put it as follows:

"After the Japanese Karate Federation had been established, competition karate began to develop both at the national and international levels. This development was also being supported by the Japanese Society for Physical Education. The basis of competition karate, however, remained Budo ... When I go abroad I always explain that karate is Budo and not a mere competition sport, and that what is most important in Budo is of a spiritual nature. ... Karate there (in Japan, CG) is very competition-oriented. ... Therefore, training time is always used to prepare for some competition. Eventually, the same things are being repeated time and again, and there is no time to practice locks, throws, vital-point techniques or techniques with traditional Okinawa weapons such as the bo or sai. This means that there are fewer and fewer opportunities to even get an idea of these techniques."<sup>7</sup>

While sports karate will remain superficial (omote) traditional karate allows the karateka to become fully immersed in the dialogue with history because traditional karate preserves and maintains the ancient lore and skills of the individual styles. The pre-requisite for this is learning from an experienced and recognized sensei who has this knowledge and these skills and passes them on to his students. He can, by means of exercises and explanations (kuden), convey what is below the surface, what is inherent in kata and kumite

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<sup>6</sup> "Other, modern karate schools are descended from traditional karate. New schools based their techniques and stances on punches and kicks of the Japanese karate. Keeping the external resemblance, these schools introduced some basic changes. Changes in philosophy and moving the stress from the art of fight and self-defence to the point awarded sports competition consisting in punching and kicking, had biggest consequences. For example, it does not take an expert to notice that modern schools took from karate punching and kicking techniques only in the most general sense. In sports competition points are awarded on the basis of possibly the fastest and the most precise hitting the target with a fist or a foot." PZKT Traditional Karate Federation of Poland: Differences between traditional karate and modern schools. [http://www.karate.pl/differences\\_between\\_traditional\\_karate\\_and\\_modern\\_schools.php](http://www.karate.pl/differences_between_traditional_karate_and_modern_schools.php) (04.05.2015)

<sup>7</sup> Kenei Mabuni: Leere Hand. Vom Wesen des Budo-Karate. Edited by Carlos Molina. Chemnitz 2007, p. 70, 72

forms but which is not obvious (ura and henka). This may then be experienced by students at the rational and emotional levels if teaching and practice are closely intermeshed. This happens by virtue of a close, trustful relationship between the sensei and his students, as well as between the students themselves. It is about more than enjoying the common training: The point is to preserve and pass on the style's legacy, to develop one's own personality and mind.

As initially indicated, the development of one's personality is of paramount importance in Gendai Budo which includes karate. Etiquette plays a key role in this development of the personality. Etiquette is more than mere forms and rules, but it is the effort to overcome one's own ego, to internalize respect for others, to always be attentive and – this shows that Reigi in particular and Budo in general comprise more than the conduct in the dojo – it is about a flawless inner and outer attitude vis-à-vis oneself and the world. If traditional karate is practiced seriously, it requires patience, consistency, self-discipline, humbleness, moderation and, eventually, life-long dedication.

But Budo also provides the basis for sports and competition karate. Budo and Reigi may not be seen as mere form, instructors should be aware of being role models and make the form come alive and spread karate-do as Takashi Sasagawa writes "with a great deal of enthusiasm and knowledge of the philosophy (of Budo, CG)"<sup>8</sup>.

### **Not traditional karate versus sports karate, but traditional karate and sports karate**

In my opinion, traditional karate and sports karate are not mutually exclusive, but complementary: On the basis of the joint budo philosophy and principles sports karate may help to attract young talents and to promote them in the training sessions and competition. By virtue of the parallel existence of traditional and sports karate at the club, state and national levels the athlete may gradually become familiar with traditional karate and, eventually, fully adopt it. Traditional karate will continue to live, the historical legacy is being preserved. Senior karateka remain mentally and physically active and convey their knowledge and skills to younger ones. This active exchange between karateka, young and old persons, tradition and the modern era, between the sensei and his students will keep Budo alive and enrich our lives.

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<sup>8</sup> „In order to spread the wisdom of Karatedo widely as a means to rise healthy adults it is very important to have leading instructors who can display a strong enthusiasm and philosophy ...“, Takashi Sasagawa: Preface. In: Japan Karatedo Federation: Karatedo Kata Model for Teaching Shiteigata, Japan 2001, p. 2

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