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Karate-Do and Zen are one

Wado Workshop with Bob Nash (USA), 7th Dan JKF Wadokai, and Toby Threadgill (USA), Menkyo Kaiden, Takamura-Ha-Shindo Yoshin Ryu, in Berlin from 7th to 9th February 2009

Approximately 170 participants attended the two day workshop in Berlin. Attendees practicing under the supervision of Toby Threadgill and Bob Nash were from England, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Israel, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Madagascar and Hungary.

Toby Threadgill is representing and leading the Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu, one of only two legitimate branches of the Shindo Yoshin ryu jujutsu worldwide. Shindo Yoshin ryu was developed from Yoshin ryu, which was founded in the mid-16th century by Yoshitoki Akiyama. The tradition of Shindo Yoshin ryu jujutsu dates back to Matsuoka Katsunosuke (1836 – 1898) in the late Edo-period.

Bob Nash is the founder of Wado Guseikai USA, which is in the tradition of Hironori Otsuka (1892 – 1982) and is connected to Wadokai Japan (Japan Karate-Do Federation) and is under the leadership of Dr Hideho Takagi, 8th dan JKF Wadokai.

A special guest of the workshop was Carlos Molina, 7th Dan, General Secretary of Union Shito ryu Europe, was an uchi deshi of Kenei Mabuni Sensei.

Tanja Petrovic from Serbia, JKF Wadokai 4th Dan, a former WKF world champion and Wadokai World Champion and instructor in Karate, motivated the participants with her warm-up exercises and demonstrated her skill in Kumite.

As in previous years, the participants were divided into two groups after the warm-up phase: 3rd kyu and below; and black belts. The groups were taught under the alternating supervision of Bob Nash and Toby Threadgill. Both demonstrated in a compelling and brilliant manner the connection between Wado and Shindo Yoshin ryu. By practicing the technical principles in Kata, Kumite, Tanto Dori and Idori, the participants could experience the fundamental correlation between breath, technique, body and mind. In their lecture, Bob Nash and Toby Threadgill convincingly explained the total integration of breath, technique, body and mind – as a principle of oneness. Karate-Do and Zen are one.

Historical Background and Shinto

Historically, the line that divides Classical Japanese martial arts and Modern Japanese martial arts is 1868. 1868 was the end of the Tokugawa era in Japan and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. This was the time period that saw the samurai system replaced by the modern form of government modeled after Europe.

Shindo Yoshin ryu was founded during the end of the Tokugawa era and therefore is considered a classical Japanese martial art and is innately rooted in Shinto spirituality. Shinto, the native religion of Japan, is related to the worship of natural phenomena (a polytheistic, animistic religion) and ancestry. It is very diverse having no singular god as in western traditions of belief. This aspect of Shinto seems to be closely related to the topography of Japan with its formations of rugged mountains and valleys. Because of these natural boundaries, small villages remained relatively isolated resulting in numerous local manifestations of Shinto deities and rituals. In time Shinto became very syncretic, absorbing influences from esoteric Buddhism and Confucianism. Nowadays Shinto is practiced in a more orthodox manner in Japan. Shindo Yoshin ryu however is strongly influenced by the older and more syncretic forms of Shinto demonstrating many ideals related to esoteric Buddhism.

In the practice of Shindo Yoshin Ryu, a relaxed state of mind and body is paramount as mental and physical fear or anxiety causes muscular tension, preventing quick reactions in case of an attack. If one is mentally unfocused and physically unaware of the present situation; but more caught-up with the past and/or future events (of what has happened or what will happen) the resulting tension inhibits effective action and reaction. Therefore, a completely relaxed body-mind state, aided by the correct application of breathing techniques is core to the practice of Shindo Yoshin Ryu.

In Shindo Yoshin Ryu the correct use of breathing is taught and practiced in the form of eight kata, each utilizing a specific Shinto prayer. Breathing technique is considered key to proper movement coordination. This was demonstrated by Toby Threadgill who maintained a relaxed state of mind and body throughout the demonstration of the Shindo Yoshin ryu Nairiki no Gyo exercises. He explained that the breathing rhythm is taught, maintained and synchronized by the phrasing of these prayers. Toby's demonstration exemplified the principle that prayer, breath, technique and body becomes one entity in Shindo Yoshin ryu. Through this practice, ones awareness (Zanshin) is expanded inside oneself and towards the outer world simultaneously. Thus, the struggle for victory and successfully avoiding death is aided thru maintaining mental calmness and a detachment from fear.

Zen Buddhism

The actual fusion between Zen and Martial Arts took place in Japan after a period of war lasting more than 400 years. The Master Swordsman - Yagyu Munenori (1571 – 1646) asked the Master of Zen, Takuan Soho (1573 – 1645) to teach him Zen, thus enabling him to reach a higher level of consciousness". Thru this type of study, Karate-Do and Zen can become one.

Zen Breathing

The Zen approach has a direct positive influence and effect towards ones possibilities whilst fighting. Toby explained that Samurai frequently recited Buddhist verses during combat – no matter whether audible to others or quietly recited in their mind. This practice allowed them to channel their concentration towards their breathing and effectively established a more relaxed state of being, resulting in their combat becoming more highly functional. It is important to note that Samurai were not afraid of death as in their various belief systems, destiny and their final day of life was already determined.

As Bob explained, breath is the invisible foundation of visible movement. In Zen breathing, the lungs expand along the vertical and follow the dimensions of up and down (diaphragm breathing). You breath by pushing down on the diaphragm as opposed to breathing by expanding the lungs outwardly. During inhalation, there is downward pressure on the diaphragm. This pressure on the diaphragm stimulates the vagus nerve. This has the effect of stimulating some areas in the brain causing total bodily relaxation (this has been scientifically proven). Hence another kind of consciousness is reached in this way.

Practical Application of Zen in Karate-do

Bob Nash summarized the relevance of the above aspects for the workshop and Karate-Do. He demonstrated thru kumite that by exhaling in a controlled manner and stimulating the vagus nerve that he was able to move and react quicker. He also demonstrated that this method of breathing can help referees better see techniques that are exchanged by the competitors in a kumite match. Unity of coordination and breath contribute to being in the present moment, both in mind and body. Consequently, there is no fear, no tension and heightened visual acuity. Breathing, technique, body and mind become one or as they say in Japanese, 'Ki Ken Tai ichi' (Mind/sword/body is one).

Toby Threadgill and Bob Nash emphasized their focus for this workshop: participants should get an understanding of Shindo Yoshin Ryu as the foundation underlying Karate-Do as a form and technique of Wado. The aim was to demonstrate and practice some underlying principles in order to comprehend the integration between Zen and Karate-Do, and to develop an awareness that Zen-Buddhism and its techniques of mental focus are of great value to students of karate-do.

Toby Threadgill and Bob Nash will next be in Berlin from 27th to 28th February 2010.
We invite you all to participate in this forthcoming workshop.

Translation: Amaya Wang
Correction: Bob Nash, Toby Threadgill