

Aren't we killing Traditional Karate?

Though not being the writing kind of type, I was forced to come up with this article to alarm the readers that we will lose Traditional karate within the next 10 years. The request came from Shaun, the editor of the Shotokanway, whom I met at a recent tournament in the UK.

Traveling around the world and attending numerous tournaments with my team, I started to notice a disturbing development in the recent tournaments. About 10 to 15 years ago, we all agreed on uniformity in our beloved Shotokan karate. The policy was to organize the competitions strictly based on JKA rules. Kata must be performed as shown in the Best Karate series of Nakayama sensei. We had agreed on this and no arguments and changes were allowed. However, during the past few years I began to see that, although the organizers claimed the tournaments were under strict JKA rules, a lot of non-standard movements were introduced in kata. I saw different performance by adding and modifying the techniques to make them look “nice“.

View from the fundamental concept of kata, which is a textbook, I do not agree with any modifications in kata especially to fit competitions. Lately I have seen many changes as they want to “look” better. Kata is the textbook, as I mentioned earlier and a series of fighting techniques. Those moves must have meanings (fighting), so they must and can not be changed because a new way looks better. When I have any questions in the moves, I go back to Best Karate and go by that text book. It is our Bible and you do not change a Bible.

Having said that, I also realize that many of the kata moves are purposely changed from the “real” bunkai movements. E.g. the first movement of Heian Nidan is left fist upper cut punch rather than jodan uchi uke. If you do not know the correct bunkai it is very possible to have different performance of any given movement even if you are seriously trying to stay with the original movement. This problem could show up with students who transferred from another dojo or organization.

Uniformity !!!!

Another E.g. is the very first move of Kanku dai. You bring the hands above the face line. After that, I accept both fast and slow hands break as you bring the hands down. Nakayama sensei said: “If you are a young practitioner it is ok to show the fast and strong break in order to show the power. On the other hand, an old practitioner would show the calm mind by breaking the hands slowly and smoothly.”

Actually this particular move is not a technique but rather a ritual move, so to me it does not matter how you move your hands.

I get more critical and less forgiving when it comes to a move that represents a technique.

The last tournament I attended with my team got us very frustrated. More or less out of disappointment of what we were looking at and the decisions I was forced to make as a referee.

It started as a light argument about a certain technique in Basai dai. I was not satisfied with the performance of the kata so I made a remark about it. At the end there was no punishment and I had to accept the change.

It is my strong believe that we, as traditional Shotokan karateka, must stick to the fundamentals, the Nakayama Bible or Best Karate series. In doing so we could avoid unnecessary arguments and misconducts. We could become the one and solid Shotokan group again without the splits, mishaps and fights. We certainly do not need the paper Tigers who are so called experts and Guru's. If we upheld the Bible, Best Karate, there is no cause to argue.

My good friend and Karate brother, who was present and had overheard the conversation, unfortunately did not agree. He pointed out that Yahara sensei and Abe sensei told him we, the Westerners, were taught Kata wrong. According to Yahara sensei the way they (Yahara and Abe) were taught by Nakayama sensei was very different from what the Best Karate series make us believe. In other words, we were taught wrong! Mind you this was the first time that I heard this.

Of course anything can be true. But, I wonder why Nakayama had to lie to us. I really want to know if he really lied to us. These questions cannot be answered anymore as Nakayama sensei passed away a long time ago. I want to ask if anyone can prove that Yahara sensei is telling us the truth now. I also wonder why he came up with that story so many years after Nakayama sensei passed away. Suppose we believe Nakayama sensei did lie or (just say) he taught us the wrong way. I challenge that no one can prove that Yahara sensei is not lying or teaching the wrong way too. I refuse to believe what Yahara said, but if his teacher (Nakayama sensei) had done this to protect himself or the Japanese way of karate or whatever the reasons, then Yahara himself could be doing the same to protect his own interests. If all these assumptions were true, then we must realize that our karate is in fact based on thin air. I do not want to believe that. Just think about all the writings, articles and books that we have published in the past. Do you want to admit that all of them were also based on thin air? I leave that open for discussion.

The main reason for writing this article is that I fear that we, traditional karatekas, are losing the battle and fast. We all claim the same: Yahara is right, Kanazawa is right, Nishiyama is right, Okazaki is right etc etc. To me we are all running around, following all these senseis and shihans without thinking. At some of the tournaments, I actually saw the rules were being bend or adjusted to accomodate other styles (WKF) and we let their competitors even win too. I can hear them laughing and we looked really bad. I also witnessed big mistakes were excused, because "they were taught that way in their own dojo". Can that reason be good enough to accept the mistakes ? We need to think this very hard.

Nowadays we see to many disorganizations and diversifications, because we accept them in order to look nice and good.

To save Shotokan karate, we must stop the current trend and start going back to the

basics, the Bible. We need to forget about the sports karate, the show and even our own ego. Otherwise, we are selling out our Tradition and Legacy. We have the Bible, all we have to do is to follow the rules again.

Another point to emphasize is that we have the knowledge. We have our own experts and instructors who are capable enough to continue the legacy. We no longer have to follow what the young generation Japanese masters claim or say. The time when we had to jump because Japanese masters said so is long gone. We need to be more confident. Our teachers were their teachers and our knowledge is equal to theirs. We must stop fighting their battles or we will downfall with them. It is time to engage in the real battle to keep our legacy. The Japanese organizations still want to dictate us but hopefully we are not stupid enough to obey the young senseis blindly. Our seniors, have seen it all and have worked and practiced with the great original masters. Now, why do we have to obey the young guns blindly? Do you not think it is ridiculous and humiliating?

In fact if we allow all those changes and follow the new Gurus with their self made changes, we are transforming our art to sports karate. Can you imagine that we are promoting sports karate without us realizing it? How stupid can we be if we are killing our Traditional karate and throwing away our legacy without knowing that we are doing it!

Some people may object by saying that I practice kata from Asai sensei as those katas do not belong to the Nakayama series. Their claim is half correct. Asai sensei saved my karate and I owe him for that. On the other hand Asai sensei's basics are rooted on Best Karate too.

If one has a favorite book and he reads it on a regular basis to remember the story, does this mean he is not allowed to read another book anymore? To value "my Karate" I need to look across much broader field sometimes. Building up appetite and go back home to eat, is one of my favorite expressions.

To all those who care, this article is a warning flag that we are killing our legacy and the art. Different teachers with their own opinions are no problem as long as we uphold and follow the original rules in our tournaments and events.

To those who are still asleep, I am hoping this is a wake up call. I ask you to come to your senses and let us unite Shotokan once again.

I am the first one to step up to keep the Nakayama Legacy as our foundation. Who will fight the battle with me?

**Jan Knobel
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