

KARATE NI SENTE NASHI

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Philosophy Essay
Yondan Exam
August 15, 2011

Funakoshi Sensei left Shotokan with twenty precepts or concepts of training. The second of these concepts is: “*Karate Ni Sente Nashi*” or, loosely translated, “There is no first attack in karate”¹

This precept seems to be simple, and yet has hidden depths of meaning. On the surface, it is easy to dismiss this precept with the observation that karate is the empty-hand art of self-defense. Certainly, karate does not teach a person to attack another, but only to defend oneself from attack, and then only if there is no other way to avoid conflict or prevent injury or death. A karateka may be able to anticipate an attack and counter before the attack can be launched. Yet this concept may be difficult to explain should the martial artist be brought to court to answer for their actions.

An article written in 1922 in Tokyo quoted Funakoshi Sensei as saying: “Essentially, the principle purpose of karate is defense. The initial move has long been strictly prohibited, and it is said there is no initial move in karate. This martial art is to cultivate a modest mind, which must not be uselessly carried away by the martial spirit. Moreover, it requires no weapon. So, I think it is most suitable as a civilized self-defense art.”²

It is evident that this “initial move” is what Funakoshi referred to in the second precept. Every initial move in every kata is said to be defensive in nature in tribute to the idea that a karateka does not seek violence and does not attack. However, the art of karate is an active art and does encompass strategy because the opponent might not oblige the karateka by not attacking.

There are three basic strategies of conflict in karate. The first is referred to as *sen* which translates as “seizing the initiative” or attacking. The second strategy is *sen no sen*, which loosely translates as “waiting for the opponent to attack and countering.” The final strategy is *go no sen*, which translates as “countering the opponent’s initiative before it physically occurs”³ This final strategy relates directly to the hidden meaning of the second precept.

Go no sen strategy means attacking the opponent in the short space of time between the opponent’s decision to attack and the actual, physical, attack.⁴ If the karateka can “see” the attack coming, and act to prevent it from occurring, this is the ultimate type of self-defense. This is the art of fighting without fighting, as the karateka can escape if he knows an attack is imminent.

However, the karateka cannot fix their mind on the “attack” or fix their mind on the “response to attack”. Paranoia causes tension, which prevents quick response to an attack.⁵ Therefore, the karateka must not think of the attack, or the form of the attack, or of a response to an attack, as this attitude will stop the mind and the body from responding quickly. Such thoughts would be, “Will the attack be to the face, the body, or the groin?”

Will it be a punch, a kick, or a downward strike? Will I be walking, standing, sitting, or lying down? Will I be attacked from the front, the side, the rear?" Any of these thoughts will cause the opposite of relaxation in the body and in the mind.

The body must respond easily and without restriction to an attack. Therefore, the mind must be calm and not tense with thoughts about attacks. Bruce Lee addressed this concept during a conversation with Joe Hyams.

"If it was a real fight, I'm certain I would hurt my assailant badly, perhaps kill him. If that happened, and I was forced to stand trial, I would plead that I had no responsibility for my action. I had responded to his attack without conscious awareness. 'It' killed him, not me.. 'It' is when you act with unconscious awareness, you just act. 'It' is the state of mind the Japanese refer to as *mushin* , which literally means "no mind".⁶

Another anecdote by Randall Hassell illustrates this concept further. During his karate training, an incident occurred that involved "first attack" One of his fellow students, a Mr. Smith, was cornered by an aggressive person on the street who demanded his wallet. Mr. Smith refused, and the attacker swung a club at him. The student responded by defending himself against the assailant. However, the head instructor was not impressed with the student's action.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! No, no, no. This is a terrible example of self-defense. Smith-san not understand anything! Let bad guy hit him like makiwara."⁷

Another fellow student of Mr. Hassell's , Mr. Jones, had a different experience. He, too, was threatened on the street. He attempted to calm down his antagonist but. "Sure enough, just as my friend spoke to us, the troublemaker took a step toward him (Mr.

Jones) with his right hand raised. .. Jones spun around with blinding speed, uttered a fierce kiai, and planted the hardest reverse punch imaginable in the loudmouth's face."⁸

The instructor's reaction to this incident was very different. "Jones-san ok. He not start fight. He tried to avoid, had no choice. Must fight. Did good job."⁹ The difference between the events is that the first student should have perceived that the first attack was the demand for the wallet. He should not have waited for the actual, physical attack before acting. The second student perceived that the first attack was imminent when his attacker stepped towards him, hand raised. He did not wait for the actual attack to occur before striking to prevent the attack.

Therefore, there is no "first attack" in karate. The karateka should neither think of attack or of the fear of attack. According to the law, self-defense is permitted only when a person is apprehensive about being attacked and the apprehension is reasonable.¹⁰ A martial artist might have trouble convincing a jury that he "sensed" his opponent was about to attack, and struck first to prevent the attack. To a layperson, it would appear that the martial artist has started the conflict because he struck first. The courts do seem to recognize this factor:

"If the defendant reasonably knows that he or she is about to be attacked, he may resort to self-defense before being actually struck."¹¹

The problem is convincing a jury of non-martial artists that the karateka was reasonably apprehensive about being attacked and was convinced that an attack was about to happen. Some instructors train their students to explain to a jury or a police officer what movements of the attacker would lead them to think an attack was imminent and to

respond by attacking before the attack could be physically launched.¹² Learning to explain this aspect to a layperson may keep the karateka out of jail or the hospital.

In conclusion, the precept of no first attack in karate is deceptively simple. A karateka should train so that any attack can be detected before it is launched and therefore avoided. However, if the karateka needs to counter this attack before it can be physically generated, the martial artist should be prepared to explain to laypersons what actions by the attacker prompted this counter in self-defense.

ENDNOTES

1. Randall Hassell, *Shotokan Karate: Its History & Evolution* [Los Angeles: Empire Books, 2007], 164.

2. *Ibid.*, 36.

3. Randall Hassell, *The Karate Experience: A Way of Life* [Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1980], 34-35.

4. *Ibid.*, 34.

5. *Ibid.*, 35

6. Joe Hyams, *Zen in the Martial Arts* [New York: Bantam Books, 1979], 81-83.

7. Randall Hassell, *The Karate Spirit* [St. Louis: Focus Publications, 1989], 121.

8. Ibid., 122.

9. Ibid., 124.

10. Carl Brown, *The Law and Martial Arts* [Santa Clarita: Ohara Publications, Inc., 1998], 67.

11. Ibid., 95.

12. Dan Jones, *Karate: The Isshinryu Way* [Knoxville: Dan W. Jones, 2002], 47, 55.

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1. Brown, Carl. *The Law and Martial Arts*. Santa Clarita: Ohara Publications, Inc., 1998.

2. Hassell, Randall. *The Karate Experience: A Way of Life*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1980.

3. Hassell, Randall. *The Karate Spirit*. St. Louis: Focus Publications, 1989.

4. Hassell, Randall. *Shotokan Karate: Its History & Evolution*. Los Angeles: Empire Books, 2007.

5. Hyams, Joe. *Zen in the Martial Arts*. New York: Bantam Books, 1979.

6. Jones, Dan. *Karate: The Isshinryu Way*. Knoxville: Dan W. Jones, 2002.

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