

Dancing
in the
Kara of
Te

空手道

KARA TE DO
Empty Hand Way

by Brenda Guiled

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Dancing in the Kara of Te

by
Brenda Guiled



Salt Spring Island, BC, Canada
www.bguiled.com

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Preface

This writing was done for my teacher, Tomoaki Koyabu *shihan* (teacher of teachers, or master), as part of my studies. He can see how well or poorly I've understood *kara-te* and teach it to my students. It is also for my students, whose *kara-te* understandings have begun with me. Some may find it useful to dig deeper and go further.

A century ago, little was written about *kara-te*. Now, there is perhaps too much. I hesitate to add to the deluge, particularly as a westerner who is less than 20 years into learning a very different culture and world view. With the best of guidance, however, I hope to have rediscovered and reworked enough information to justify a small offering.

Kara-te is a distinctly two-part word, thus I spell it with a hyphen. This also ensures its best pronunciation and distinguishes it from 'karate' as a competitive martial sport. In *kanji*, or Chinese characters, it is written:

空 手 道

<i>kara</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>do</i>
empty	hand	way

Kara-te studies focus, ostensibly, on the physical, or *te*, aspects of movement – breath, body positionings, transitions, self-defence applications, etc. To my surprise, about eight years into taking regular classes, I came upon a vast emptiness within, an endless place of loneliness and loss. Everyday life had its ups and downs, but my days continued in good health and routine. For reasons beyond explaining, I felt tossed about like a leaf in the stream, which at least had some grounding. Then it worsened, until I felt like a leaf in the wind, or a dust mote, or nothing and the wind was all.

This was not new to me, but this time, it was overwhelming and profound. Moreover, it was permanent, nothing that therapy,

pills, extrinsic repositionings, or time would ‘cure’. Knowing this emptied me more. To be free of it was impossible, so the answer had to be to find freedom *in* it, but how?

Kara-te seemed to be part of the emptying, if not causal. By taking the kara-te path, I had unknowingly welcomed it. Exploring the *te* of the art led to the *kara* of it. Then the art itself provided the means to come to terms with what it had opened up.

The clue was in *kata*, which are one-person, choreographed patterns of kara-te moves. When doing *kata*, however crudely, and while working out the core requirements of doing *kata* well, desolation vanished. While in fully-engaged motion, and even when practicing in mind (with breath correctly matching moves), all felt centred and playfully calm.

This is, perhaps, what kara-te adepts call Zen-in-motion. The better *kata* flowed and became dance-like, the stronger this mind/body/spirit centering and ease grew. Strangely, *kata*-dance seemed to require the vast inner void. And so, gradually, the core emptiness that was so devastating at first has become a joyful place of freedom and peaceful perspective.

The purpose of this writing is not to elaborate on these inner aspects, rather to present something of the dancing elements of kara-te through its history, basic movements, and requisites for learning. This contextual and process information may help others on their *te* and *kara* explorations.

This writing began as a “graduating essay” for Koyabu *shihan* (who prefers to be called Koyabu *sensei*, or just Sensei, i.e. Teacher). Through seven drafts, the dance focus emerged and sharpened. Despite considerable discouragement at times, I’ve persisted and completed it, if only to finish what I start.

This same perseverance has kept me studying kara-te since 1995. My first teachers were students of Koyabu *shihan*. He has, as a volunteer, trained hundreds of black belts in Okinawan *go-ju* (hard-soft) kara-te. He brought the art from Okinawa to Canada in 1972.

My first hint of the profound dance within kara-te came in late 1996. At a celebration at our *dojo* (training hall), I saw Sensei demonstrate a transfixing *kata*. Even the noisy children hushed as

he performed. His ego utterly vanished (unlike the other, very talented senior performers), and the *kata* became all, with its twisting, twining, beautifully strange movements. It flowed indivisibly, full of ease and contained, directed energies, with the finest of technique drawn in the air.

His dance gave me goosebumps and a keen wish know what he'd done. There was no direct way, however, to ask and receive. The answers were far more complicated and elusive than that. They required study, practice, and perseverance, without losing sight of that compelling moment and desire to understand.



A fellow student took photographs at the gathering, including one shot of Sensei's unusual *kata* (which he's never performed again, although the dance is in his every *kara-te* move). After earning my first-degree black belt in late 1997, I used the photo to paint this watercolour for Sensei, to say thank you.

At that time, he was transforming a nondescript corner of my family's front yard into an exquisite Japanese country-style garden.

He directed the work, while husband Don found the rocks and did the heavy lifting. The painting shows the construction at an early stage, with earth sculpted and rocks in place. A great deal more was yet to be done, to bring it together into almost-self-sustaining beauty in every season.

My *kara-te* was equally crude then, while Koyabu *sensei* knew exactly what to do next and next to satisfy every requisite of singular, classical creation. He created this landscaped gem exactly the same way he creates and dances *kata*.

Learning with Koyabu *sensei* has not been all an easy dance and garden-building, however. He's challenged me, sometimes profoundly. Kara-te understandings have been useful tools for facing and resolving these difficulties – a potent, everyday use of our training. At some junctures, I've needed to be the teacher, and like a true master, he's been open to learning – from any and all who'll give him the chance. The rough little garden of our relationship has grown into a settled, respectful, joyous place. The kara-te we share continues to inform our give-and-take, as it does in all life.

The kara-te way, Koyabu *sensei* says, is the way of all arts and is, ultimately, the “mother of education”. Its highest goal is *ikusei*, or “the education of the student's wish”, to help each fulfil their destiny, their best potential. *Shihan* (fifth-degree black belt and above) is the teacher who does this.

Sensei has, in a way as twisting, spiralling, and looping as his kara-te performance, “educated my wish” to understand the *kata*-dance he demonstrated years ago. I've finally made some sense of it and offer here some of those learnings.

Through the kara-te way, another of my wishes, held since age 10, has also been fulfilled. I then wondered what it took to be a good teacher, especially how to pass on ways to live well, happily, and sustainably. Over the years, I've gathered some credentials and experience, in the public school system, teaching environmental studies, earning a master's degree in education, raising children, and, of course, in everyday life. Through teaching traditional Okinawan kara-te for 15 years, I've gained new methods and means to apply and refine my educational interests.

This writing is a thank you to Koyabu *sensei*, my other kara-te teachers, and my students for their patience with my learnings and sharings. To them and all others, I say, “*O-ne-gai-shimas.*” Please teach me.

Brenda Guiled
Salt Spring Island
BC, Canada

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Introduction

By the 1970s and '80s, kara-te had become known world-wide as a martial, or war, 'art'. It was presented as tough-guy training for tournaments, and a hierarchical sport leading to a black-belt pinnacle.

In 1985, the original "Karate Kid" movie tempered this view slightly, through the old master, Mr. Miyagi.¹ Still, winning the competition at the end of the story was the big Hollywood point and payoff, with sequels showing more such confrontations and settlements.

None of this interested me. From first learning the word 'karate' (usually said "kratee"), I knew that if I ever took a class, it would be a one-off lark. I couldn't foresee myself, ever, signing up for longer-term study. It remains a surprise to me, therefore, that the art has come to permeate all that I do and am.

My own discovery began with taking my 13-year-old daughter to a traditional *go-ju* (hard-soft) kara-te *dojo* (school/training hall) to try one class. The chief instructor, a student of Koyabu *sensei*'s, convinced me to do the warm-ups and stretches, then coaxed me through the next parts of class, right to the end. Unexpectedly, I then signed both of us up for three months of classes, four hours per week. Daughter, then son and husband, gave it a good try, but I alone made it to black belt, then on from there.

My commitment for the first few years was tenuous, despite seldom missing a class. The fitness part was always good. Much of the training requires unusual postures, moves, and self-defence techniques, making them an interesting challenge to learn. Alas, some uneven teaching and ego politics in the organization were problematic, but still, glimmers of pure gold kept coming through. How to get from these glints to Sensei's amazing *kata*-dance was far from obvious, but I hung in.

¹Mr. Miyagi's kara-te and character were inspired by Seikichi Toguchi, my teacher's teacher, who served as senior consultant for the original movie. Chogun Miyagi was Toguchi's teacher. Hollywood tacked a tournament on at the end, counter to the kara-te way. Toguchi declined to help with the sequels.

From early on, it was clear that the physical aspects of the art were tools, but they were not kara-te entirely, or even kara-te in essence. What is the kara-te way, beyond fitness and self-defence training? What's the best way to learn the whole art? Why did it develop on the island of Okinawa?² What makes it unique? Many of the answers sought came through studies separate from class. Some of these learnings are offered here.



Okinawa lies ~1200 km/800 miles SW of Tokyo. It's at ~25° N latitude, similar to the northern Hawaiian islands.

The first section, “The Kara-Te Way Comes to Light”, traces westerners’ first recorded views of Okinawa from the 1600s to Captain Basil Hall’s most noteworthy visit in 1816, then through follow-up incursions. Koyabu *sensei* had read Hall’s journal years ago while studying karate history at an Okinawan university.

² Smile on the ‘I’ when you say “O kee na wa”, to pronounce it correctly. Natives call it Uchina. It’s the largest of the Ryukyu islands. The Okinawan prefecture of Japan includes the entire Ryukyu archipelago, which stretches 1100 kilometres (700 miles) between southern mainland Japan and Taiwan. See page 37 for a map of the island of Okinawa.

Thanks to Tony Wilson, his most senior student, who found a copy, which Sensei then passed on to me.

Koyabu *sensei* had underlined key sentences in several spots of Hall's account. He said that if I couldn't see their significance, then he couldn't help me discover them. He also said that only those who knew something of kara-te *and* something of Okinawan history would get it.

Reading this journal was a pleasure, making it easy to resist temptation and rush to find the marked spots. Captain Hall was a sensitive, sociable Scot who observed, discerned, and recorded well, despite his naive view. This reading was also happily reminiscent of my 12 years spent researching 18th-century explorers, culminating in a biography of Captain George Vancouver.³

Well before reaching Sensei's marked spots, connections were sizzling. On reaching his underlined sentences, fireworks went off! What a remarkable snapshot of the Okinawan way of interacting, at what seemed to be a halcyon time in the island's history. One man, in particular, Maehira Bôshô, leaps and dances off the pages. This section continues through the roots of the Okinawan kara-te way and summarizes its evolution into modern times.

The second section, "Inner Kara-te Dance", introduces an exercise routine built on Koyabu *sensei*'s exercises, with my own additions, interpretations, and sequencing. Its aim is to develop some of the moves, particularly the inner flow, that distinguishes kara-te from other movement arts. It's akin to Okinawan *kachashi* dancing, which students from the island know from childhood, before they begin kara-te training. It's suitable for all levels of fitness and ability, and it's fun, too – that's important.

In the third section, I offer some advice on learning the kara-te way, based on my experiences on a continuing journey. These are the notes of a perpetual beginner, hence not any final word, but some things to consider for personal development and, possibly, to find a little of the dance within.

³ *On Stormy Seas: The Triumphs and Torments of Captain George Vancouver* by Brenda Guild Gillespie, Horsdal & Schubart, 1992.

The Kara-te Way Comes to Light

*Kara-te is glimpsed like a vision
through a window
appearing and disappearing
behind a curtain swaying in the wind.*
Tomoaki Koyabu

Britain Discovers ...

The first English record of a visit to the island of Okinawa was by Captain William Adams, a naval captain turned merchant mariner. He called the island “Great Ryukyu”.⁴ He spent from December 1614 to May 1615 at Naha port.

Adams had been in Japan since 1600, setting up a trading factory – the first Briton on those shores. He kept a log-book of 79 leaves, recording his activities from 1614 - 1619. This included his junk, the *Sea Adventure*, being blown by a typhoon to Okinawa while heading to trade with Siam.

“We found marvellous great friendship,” he wrote of his Naha and Shuri hosts, which included the king. He noted polite Okinawan words and phrases in his book, so he could return their courtesy. After 30 days there, his hosts made plain he should go, but the months dragged on. Adams was too busy keeping his English and Japanese sailors from murdering each other – the Japanese ringleader eventually killed his arch-enemy – to write any details of Okinawan life, beyond their unfailing politeness, even as they resisted his company.

The British next became aware of Great Ryukyu through the publication of *Memoire sur les isles que les Chinois appellent isles de Lieou-Kieou*, Paris, 1758, by Father Antoine Gubil. It is his translation of Chinese scholar Hsu Poa-kuang’s account of his

⁴ Adams used various spellings: Leque, Leques, Luque, Lukess, lukes, and lukkeesse. Ryukyu has many spellings in European languages. China first referred to it as Liuqui (as translated to Roman characters) in the *Book of Sui*, 636 AD.

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How does this relate to kara-te? The welcoming, polite nature of islanders, combined with firm, respectful limits on familiarity has, for me, kara-te written all over it. *Kara* means “open” or “empty”; *te* means “hand”. The *kara* has multiple meanings. One interpretation is that those who practice the art aim to live with hands and arms open to life, with its endless possibilities and nuances, while also seeking ways to diminish, avoid, deflect, and block trouble when it arises. It’s an ideal, and the embodiment of a philosophy. It’s the way of individual life, and it can be the way of a community and a nation. However imperfectly Okinawans live it and foreigners’ understand it, the spirit of kara-te comes through in most accounts of this place, from earliest to present day.

Meet Maehira

In February of 1816, two British Royal Navy ships, the *Alceste* and *Lyra*, left England to take Lord William Amherst to China, to become Britain’s second ambassador to this important trading partner. They arrived in August, leaving the Lord to his fate: he refused to *kowtow*, or bow and prostrate himself, before the emperor, and was bidden to go home at once. Captain Murray Maxwell, knight of the realm, and his second-in-command, Captain Basil Hall, set off to chart the Korean coast and Ryukyu islands.⁶ They sailed from China before the dismissal, so knew nothing of it until they returned from their reconnaissance.

Captain Hall was a keen recorder of sights seen on these shores. He was a kindly, well-educated Scotsman with a gift for describing the people he met. He didn’t take to the Koreans, because they didn’t in the least take to their surprise visitors.

Maxwell and Hall turned their ships to Great Loo-choo Island, which they reached by mid-September, 1816. They were eager to find the same welcoming, polished people that Broughton did. They weren’t disappointed, from arrival to departure 42 days later. This was the longest visit by British men since 1614.

⁶ *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea [sic] and the Loo-choo Islands by Captain Basil Hall, 1818.*

Throngs of men and boys, on shore and in boats that seated about ten, came out to see the strange ships anchoring in Naha harbour.



Hall's chart of Okinawa,
Naha port on the SW side

From Hall's journal, one Okinawan man, in particular, leaps off the pages. All the British sailors, from most junior to senior, came to be equally taken with him. Hall called him "Mádera *Cosyang*", which is how he heard his family name, Maehira, and his Chinese name, Ka Sei Ei.⁷ I write his name Maehira, while Hall refers to him as Mádera. The ship's surgeon, John M'Leod,⁸ wrote his name different ways, most often "Maddra".

⁷ He was Maehira Bôshô. Maehira is his family name, Bôshô his personal one. See pp. 29-30 for biographical information.

⁸ *Narrative of a Voyage in His Majesty's Ship Alceste to the Yellow Sea, Along the Coast of Corea, and Through it Numerous Hitherto Undiscovered Islands, to the Island of Lewchew, with an Account of Its Shipwreck in the Straits of Gaspar.* By John M'Leod, Surgeon of the Alceste, 1817.

From the first day of the visit, Maehira came aboard the ships with many others. This plainly dressed, unobtrusive man was yet to catch the eye of Captains Maxwell or Hall. They spoke only to those wearing the finest clothes, with the most attendants. They could not speak directly, rather through a rough Chinese fellow they called John, brought on the voyage to act as an interpreter. They quickly found several Okinawan officials who read and spoke Chinese.

The British explorers made clear that they wanted two things during their visit: to meet the “Great Man” of the place and to set up a shore camp, with permission to come and go as they pleased.

Their persistent request, “Take me to your leader”, got many different answers from the Okinawan “chiefs”. We have no Great Man, they said. Or he’s in his castle over there, or up island, or a thousand miles away, no, ten-thousand miles, but he’s coming soon. And yes, his permission was required for the officers to even stretch their legs ashore, let alone make an encampment. No one else could grant this.

Every chief was unfailingly courteous and firm in explaining the impossibility of the visitors’ requests. In the meantime, they sent abundant water, wood, and food to the ships, while refusing all offers of official payment. They took only personal gifts of little value such as tobacco, individual wine glasses, and ornamental objects. The British soon learned to offer more valuable small gifts on necklaces, though they weren’t ornaments, because that’s the only way their hosts would accept them. This made little sense to the British, but they had no knowledge of Okinawa’s place in the Asian world.

Every Okinawan man and boy, whether in silks or humble cottons, was kind, polite, helpful, and scrupulously honest. Not an item was stolen from the visitors during the entire stay. All of them had seemingly endless ability to comply while resisting, all with great courtesy – a finely honed skill that kept both parties at a win-win draw with each other.

Early on, the captains invited the chiefs to meals and wine. A few days later, the chiefs took the ships’ senior officers ashore,

under strict escort. A week later, under the same vigilant guard, they took a larger party of officers and midshipmen to a Buddhist temple on shore, where they provided an Okinawan feast.

The “Bodzes”, or Buddhist priests, who tended the modest temple were clearly of little importance the Okinawans. Being feted there wasn’t likely to lead to the king, whoever he might be.

Luckily, Hall and his fellow officers remained respectful of their hosts and didn’t press any further than courtesy allowed – though press they did, without cease. It was in this push and resist that Maehira made himself known, by his quick wit, physical adeptness, and increasing usefulness.

By early October, Okinawan officials gave the ships permission to land their stores and sick men in a shore camp set up within the temple grounds. Officers and recovering sailors were allowed to stretch their legs on escorted walks up the nearby hill, which overlooked Naha harbour in one direction and great Shuri castle, nearly hidden by forest, in the other.

On October 8th, 1816, Captain Hall wrote:⁹

Two of the natives have been studying English with great assiduity, and with considerable success. One is called Mádera, the other Anya.¹⁰ They carry note books in imitation of Mr. Clifford¹¹ in which they record in their own characters every word they learn. They are both keen fellows, and are always amongst the strangers. From the respect occasionally paid to them, it is suspected that their rank is higher than they give out, and that their object in pretending to be people of

⁹ All spellings are as written in the original journals.

¹⁰ Others who became favourites were (all Hall’s spellings) Anya, Jeeroo, Ookooma, Shayoon, Issacha, Sandoo, Jeema, Yackabee Oomeejeero, and Issacha Hackeeboocoo (the fat chief). Anya was Aniya Seiho. He and Maehira became accomplished translators of English. In 1811, Japan had started a program of translating western texts, hence Okinawan scholars were likely part of this initiative.

¹¹ A Royal Navy officer on half pay, hence not in active service, and an amateur linguist who recorded the Okinawan language in notebooks.

ordinary rank, is to obtain a more free intercourse with all classes on board the ships.

Mádera, by his liveliness and his propriety of manners, has made himself a great favourite; he adopts our customs with a sort of intuitive readiness, sits down to table, uses a knife and fork, converses, and walks with us, in short, does everything that we do, quite as a matter of course, without any apparent effort or study. He is further recommended to us by the free way in which he communicates every thing relating to his country; so that as he advances in English, and we in Loo-choo, he may be the means of giving us much information.



Naha, from Hall's journal

The *Lyra*, under Captain Hall's command, circled Okinawa, visited a number of villages, and charted the island's shores. When Hall returned one week later, in mid-October, 1816, he wrote:

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country. When it was proposed to him, he paused for some minutes, and then, shaking his head, said, "I go Injeree,—father, mother, child, wife, house, all cry! not go; no, no, all cry!"

On the 19th of October, Captain Hall wrote about a dinner with Okinawan chiefs aboard ship, after which the guests danced. Maehira was the most impressive, by far.

A dinner was given to-day by Captain Maxwell to the chiefs Ookooma, Shayoon, Issacha, Sandoo, Jeema, and Issacha Hackeeboocoo; Jeeroo was also invited to it, but did not attend; being the junior, he had probably been left in charge of the beach and store-rooms. Mádera also made one of the party, though not originally included in the invitation. As he had never laid any claim to an equality in rank with the chiefs, it had not been thought to invite him along with them: but Mádera, who probably knew that he would be very welcome, put himself in Captain Maxwell's way just before dinner, and was prevailed upon, after a little persuasion, to remain.

Dinner was served at five o'clock in as sumptuous a style as possible.

... Mádera has dined often on board the ship, and is quite perfect in our customs. On this occasion he took great charge of the chiefs at his end of the table, speaking sometimes in one language and sometimes in the other. Observing Jeema eating ham without mustard, he called to Captain Maxwell's servant, and pointing to Teema, said, "Tom, take mustard to him." ...

After sitting about an hour and a half after dinner, and drinking with tolerable spirit, they rose to depart; but this they were not allowed to do, and they were informed that it was the English custom to sit a much longer time. They represented that the sun had set, and they would never be able to find their way on shore, but

would all be drowned in attempting it. This alarming difficulty was easily overruled by a promise of the barge, and they sat down again. While the discussion was going on between Captain Maxwell and his guests, Mádera kept his seat, and looked about him in his keen observant way, to discover, if he could, what was likely to be the issue of this adventure. Having observed that in general we were anxious to keep our company at table as long as we could, he naturally enough thought that we would not let this opportunity pass of entertaining the chiefs according to our fashion. He appeared to have settled his question with himself just as the chiefs resumed their seats, for rising half off his chair, and with a mixture of archness and simplicity, as if he had made an amusing discovery, cried out in English, "When all drunk then go ashore!" Though Mádera, as will be seen, was not quite right in his guess, there was enough of truth in his remark to raise a hearty laugh among those who understood him; and as he joined in this laugh at his own joke, it was some time before he could explain what he had said to the chiefs, who, being in a merry humour themselves, took it in perfect good part, though their mirth was evidently dashed by a little apprehension of the fate which Mádera had anticipated for them.

Everyone then drank to the health of the King of England, King of Loo-choo, Capt. Maxwell, then all visiting chiefs. Mae-hira translated for them.

They lighted their pipes, laughed, joked, and seemed so happy, that it was agreed on all hands, that conviviality is no where better understood than at Loo-choo. After a time, at our request, they played some games, of which we had heard them speak. The object of these games was drinking; a cup of wine being the invariable forfeit. [The Okinawan men drank from their own tiny cups] ...

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When visiting Okinawa, I was lucky enough to see the roots of dance in kara-te, and of kara-te in dance. Like Captain Basil Hall, I had no idea what I'd seen, although it was highly memorable. George Iwama and his three young sons took me to watch one of the kara-te classes. The training seemed overly militaristic (the head instructor was eventually expelled from kara-te). Luckily, the assistant instructor, Simisu-san,⁴⁵ was an Okinawan dancer turned kara-te *ka* of exceptional abilities. She had great dignity and a ready smile – very Okinawan.

After class, she taught Okinawan dance for half an hour. She was a vision of grace, control, and power, her hands and arms waving and twining, emphasizing the rhythm of the music with precise little stoppings. Fifteen years of study later, the connections between Simisu-san's folk dance, Koyabu *sensei*'s *kata*-dance, and the kara-te way started to come clear.

Sensei has a particular interest in this. Twice, he took me to see Okinawan dance performances, by the islands' best dancers. There are bits of self-defence moves in the livelier dances, and the small steps in slower dances are similar to *sanchin* walking.

A signature of kara-te movements, as well as Okinawan dance, is the waving, turning, twisting that Maehira demonstrated. In Ryukyuan dance, this is seen in a free-form dance that all people do called *kachashi* (*kacha ashi*: "to mix" or "stir" in the Okinawan tongue). Kara-te *ka* Charles C. Goodin⁴⁶ writes that:

At the end of Okinawan parties and events, they often do a dance called *kachashi*. This is very free and

⁴⁵ Mrs. Smith, an Okinawan woman who'd taken her American husband's name. She had danced all her life, I'm sure, but she began her kara-te studies at age 47. She was 63 when I met her, with long, flowing grey hair. Sami Iwama, then six years old, said quietly to me, through two missing front teeth, "Thee's a with, you know." She's a witch! I took this in the best way, for she was a powerful woman, a dream of a dancer, and who knows? (I haven't been able to trace her) perhaps a *kami-sama* or *nuru* priestess.

⁴⁶ karate instructor, researcher, writer, and head of the Hawaii Karate Museum. This piece, called "*Kachashi – Koshi* Dance" is from his "Karate Thoughts Blog", <http://karatejutsu.blogspot.com/search?q=kachashi>.

spirited dance. [Examples can be found on YouTube.]

We sort of do a similar dance to teach *koshi*

Soon the students can wave their hands in all positions while moving their *koshi* from side to side (in a sort of rotary way).

... we teach them to be able to throw karate techniques from the rhythm of the *kachashi*-like movement. ... Essentially, all movements are either like a backhand or a forehand, and either directional movement is easily accessible from within the “dance”.

More advanced students can “walk” while dancing – and throw techniques while moving. Even more advanced students can learn to internalize the rhythms.

... I know that *koshi* exercises can look a lot like some movements of Okinawan dances. Whether this is a coincidence or not, I cannot say.

Kachashi dance is a combination of arm and hand twists and waves, with larger body turns, while the feet pick up and down in various ways. It’s difficult to master, but whatever one’s ability, it’s done with unself-conscious ease and joy.

Okinawans, I’m told, are quick to their feet to perform for each other and dance together. George Iwama said that, at parties, people sing, dance, do *kata*, and more. He added that children’s rough *kata* are cheered, while masters who are too stiff and serious are teased.

Susan Sered explains, in her book about the priestesses of Okinawa,⁴⁷ that:

... gifted dancers, singers, and drummers are the pride of the community. ... Henza [a small island connected by a causeway to the east side of Okinawa Island] villagers love to perform from a young age, children are encouraged to get up in front of audiences

⁴⁷ *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa* by Susan Sered, Oxford University Press, 1999.

and sing and dance. ... it is never a problem to find enough people to perform; rather, the problem is tactfully limiting the number of performances. Stage fright seems to be unknown in Henza: Children, old people, men, and women all perform at wedding, celebrations, and village events.

Yasashii [which includes *akarui* and *ohraka* in Sered's book] means not pushing oneself forward; it does not mean either shyness or utter conformity. ... Villagers recognize that individuals have different abilities, and those abilities are respected and honoured as long as they are expressed in an easygoing manner."

... in the performances at celebrations, the children are socialized into becoming part of the village community. They are taught how to be good performers and how to be a good audience. They are taught to be relaxed in front of a group, and they are taught to be patient and tolerant. In other words, they are taught the essentials of being yasashii."

A rare piece about kara-te and Okinawan dance that's available in English is "Sometimes I play karate like Okinawan dance *Hamachidori* [headband]: Karate and Okinawan dance is the same" by Kiyohiko Higa, teacher of Naha Technical High School.⁴⁸

Talking of the relation between karate and Okinawan dance, it reminds me of an interesting story which I heard from my father, Seitoku Higa.

A long time ago, there was a karateka whose name was Machaa Buntoku or Kinjo Matsu in Itoman village, Okinawa. He was born in 1867. People said that he had been practicing karate in Fuzhou city, Fujian province, China and mastered the fighting arts in depth.

⁴⁸ Okinawan magazine *Aoi Umi [Blue Sea]*, February, 1978, No. 70, p. 118; translation, <http://sanjinsoo.angelfire.com> © Sanjinsoo@hotmail.com.

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Inner Kara-te Dance

Introduction

Types of Training

Self-defence training tends to fall into one of two camps. Many martial sports take what bodies do naturally and polish up these abilities. Practitioners work to become stronger, faster, and more efficient at instinctive moves and responses.

Bushi Toguchi explains: “I believe the techniques used in sport karate are not very different from the movements of everyday life. Many of the punches and kicks used in karate *jiyu kumite* (free sparring) are easily copied by children who have never studied the discipline.”

In the other sort of training, Toguchi says, “Instead of using only your own speed and force, you are required to also utilize your opponent’s power and speed. In doing so, however, you need to move in particular ways that are rarely found in everyday life.

In the *koryu* [classical] *kata* of *go-ju*, there are many strange movements to which our bodies are not accustomed.”⁵⁸

Unusual turnings and twistings of the body and limbs, new ways to shift weight and step, and the use of opposing forces within the body all work together. They enhance grace, ease, and flow as well. It’s quite a challenge and quite a dance!

Approaches to Learning Kara-te Dance

This section offers a simple, basic means by which to begin to learn the inner dance of *kara-te*. It’s *kachashi* dance, essentially, with some additional elements. Advanced training in traditional *kara-te* takes the inner dance much further.

This routine evolved from watching *Koyabu sensei*’s warm-ups and *kata*, viewing Okinawan dance, reading many books and other sources, taking part in and viewing many self-defence arts

⁵⁸ *Okinawan Goju-Ryu II: Advanced Techniques of Shorei-Kan Karate* by Seikichi Toguchi, Ohara Publications, CA, 2001, p.44.

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Please note that I offer no kara-te self-defence moves and techniques here. They must be learned from a teacher who has trained with a master of a comprehensive system.

Children & Teens

I teach parts of the inner kara-te dance to children, but not the entire routine. They have no experience with *kachashi* dancing, as Okinawan children do, so such movements are strange, showy, and largely irrelevant.

I find it better to show young students their *kata* with exaggerated connectivity and flow, as if done under water, which they imitate. This gives them some notion of what mastery looks and feels like, in slow motion at least. Teens and adults benefit, as well, from copying *kata* done this way.

Teenagers particularly like the dance applications of this routine, done to music. I teach them very carefully, keeping to the mechanics. Power is generated through the hips, making movements that can be mistaken as sexual. These motions must not be exaggerated or misused in this way – ever, not even in spoof or jest. Doing so is as off-track as using kara-te for aggressive, win-lose purposes.

Warmups & Stretches

Before beginning the inner kara-te dance routine, spend 10 - 20 minutes doing traditional kara-te warm-ups and stretches. It's beyond the scope and purpose of this book to give more than a summary of what these are.

Start from the extremities, i.e. fingers, toes, and neck. Work from the hands through wrists and elbows to the shoulders, and from the feet through ankles and knees to the hips. Stretch and turn the neck muscles - carefully. The inner dance will then work from the hips and shoulders back out to the limbered outer joints.

As you work from small to large muscles, be sure to twin moves with breath, exhaling when force and tension are engaged.

For particular warm-ups and stretches, modern masters of *go-ju* kara-te offer the *Daruma Taiso*, a unique system of ancient exercises said to have originated with Bodhidharma, originator of Shaolin self-defence practices. Many *dojos* do some of these exercises without knowing the full range, origins, or name of them. To learn the *Daruma Taiso* entirely and well, best to find a teacher with comprehensive, classical kara-te training.

Getting Started

For the inner kara-te dance routine, you'll need enough floor space to take one long step. More room is nice, but not necessary.

When first learning the routine, give yourself at least 40 minutes to complete it. As it becomes familiar, allow 20 - 30 minutes.

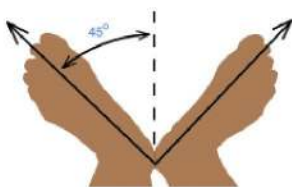
Because it's easy on the body, you can do pieces of it any time of day, without stretches and warm-ups, as you're able – with good breath, always. Such practice won't get into the integration and flow of it, but will improve the tone of the body parts exercised and the form of the movements. As separate bits of the routine improve, the whole pulls together more easily.

As you come to know and embody it, simply thinking of it, with an in-breath, will set it in motion, from the inside out. With this should come “the ability to smile at any occasion”.

Posture and Breath

We begin every time with posture and breath. Good posture enables good breath.

Every stance and movement is coordinated with breath. Do yogic breathing – i.e. inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Count “one” for the sharper in-breath, then two, three, or four times that long for the out-breath.



Make a ‘corner’ with your feet. Feel your heels touching each other. Learn to fall into this every time, accurately and without looking.

Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.



Hold your fingers straight and together, with the thumb tucked against the big knuckle joint of the index finger. This is knife-hand.

Pull yourself into *kiotsuke* (“kee-oat-su-kay”) position, shown right. It means “attention”. It’s good for aligning the body and mind. I return to it during transitions in this routine.

Hold your arms close to the body, as shown. Pull your head up as tall as it will go, as if you’re being held up by a string from the crown.

Pull your shoulders down as far as they’ll go – not back, but down. This engages the latissimus muscles, or lat’s, on either side of your shoulder blades. This area between your shoulder blades – the back side of the heart *chakra* – is difficult to exercise. When it goes soft, the back slumps, the shoulders tighten, and breathing collapses.

Push out your floating ribs at the bottom of your rib cage. This pulls down the diaphragm, the sheet of muscle that separates your chest from your abdomen. You’ll automatically take in a deep breath.

Tighten the tummy, and tuck the pelvis under. The back-side feels like it’s sitting on a narrow ledge. Soften your knees, and keep your heels light on the floor. About 70 per cent of your weight should be on the balls of the feet.



The pelvic tilt and pulling breath in from the lower torso are vital. The *koshi* muscles must be used to pull in breath. Place your hands as shown. Inhale and exhale so that you can feel the muscles in this area subtly rocking open and close.

With all of these alignments and forces engaged, take several deep breaths.

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Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.

Vertical Plane: Up-and-Down



Alternate shoulders, pushing one up while pulling the other one down. Push downward with the hand on the down side. Repeat, with good breath. Change the speed, as it suits you.

Vertical Plane: Circles

Next, similar to what you did with your hips, use your shoulder to 'draw' a clockwise (from your view) circle in the air, in the vertical plane, then reverse direction. Repeat with the other shoulder.



Vertical Plane: Figure 8s



Now slide a circle through the heart area and move into the opposite rotation circle with the other shoulder. Your hips will sway a little as your shoulders work from side to side; this is unavoidable.

Vertical Plane: Wave

Raise your arms, and turn the vertical-plane 8s into "the wave". You've really got the hang of these shoulder 8s when you can do it.



the vertical wave

Horizontal Plane: Back-and-Forth

Move your shoulders back and forth on the horizontal plane. Do it first keeping your arms from swinging (not shown), then let them go limp and track forward and back with the shoulders.



Horizontal Plane: Circles

Next, use your shoulder to ‘draw’ a clockwise (from your view) circle in the air. In the horizontal plane, then reverse direction. Repeat with the other shoulder.



Horizontal Plane: Figure 8s

Connect one circle to the next, through the heart area, to describe figure 8s on a horizontal plane.

Try to keep the lead shoulder from lifting. The hips will twist a little with you, but hold them pinned as best you can.



Horizontal Plane: Wave

Now, raise your arms and try “the wave” in the horizontal plane.



the horizontal wave

Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.

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Mobius: 3-Dimensional Loops

Roll the figure 8s into three dimensions, while hips stay pinned. Notice how the elbows follow to make their own smaller mobius gyrations, while hands track bigger or smaller depending on the bend of the elbow.



Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.

Upper Body Mobius, Connected

Focus on sending a spiral of motion from shoulders to elbows, then down to hands, while maintaining the lateral mobius loops.

This is “the wave” in fully connected mobius loops. Again, no illustration can show the full wringing, twisting motions of this exercise.



Mobius Full-Body Advancements

Start with the hips, doing mobius loops. Lift the heels to make quite large loops. The hips then drive the shoulders into their mobius pattern, with the arms and hands following.

Lift your arms to shoulder height, making mobius tracks. Raise them higher, well above your head. One arm can be up, one down, then gradually switch, continuing the mobius motions.



Turn the body to one side, then return to centre. Turn farther, to the back, with the gyrations never ceasing. Keep the balls of the feet in the same spot. No stepping yet.

Whether the loops are big or small, or the energy is explosive or soft, we're still just doing a fitness exercise, because other forces are not yet connecting it into an integrated whole.

Now, we want to link all of the gyres, as shown. This is the complete inner dance. It isn't possible to show it accurately in illustration. It's complicated and can take years to learn to embody it fully, at will, without effort or thought.



Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.

Please note: Once you get the basics of the above routine, make up your own hip and shoulders combinations.

For example, using vertical motions only, pull one hip up, and push the shoulder on that side down, while the other hip pushes down and shoulder goes up. Then try lifting the same-side hip and shoulder together, while the other side drops. Find a way to alternate smoothly between these two modes.

You can play with all sorts of hip and shoulder combinations in vertical and horizontal planes, as well as circles, figure 8s, and mobius loops. Use your arms and hands to reach in all directions, to creatively 'write' or 'draw' in the space around you.

Such parts and pieces aren't the integrated, connected inner kara-te dance, but they're good exercises and a great way to explore how your body is put together and works. They also give a taste of how kara-te moves use parts and pieces of the loops and spirals of the dance, held together by a continuous inner stream of motion, as the following simplification explains.

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Adding Twist-Hands

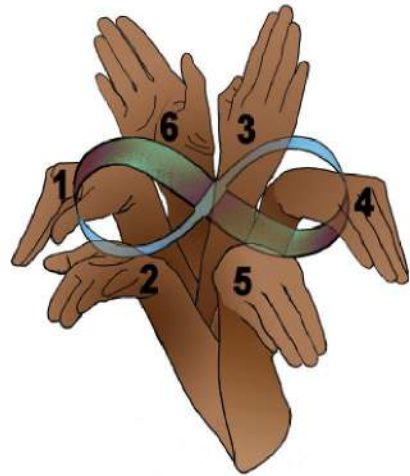
In 1816, Captain Basil Hall noted that a key element of the dance performed for him by Okinawan friends was “twisting the hands about ... while the movements both of the body and hands were regular and of a waving description.” *Koneri-te*, or twist-hands, continues to be a distinguishing feature of Okinawan dance and of kara-te.

We’ve done various ways of waving the arms; now we add *koneri-te*, using the *kachashi*-dance pattern of twist. Within in it, and the other two patterns of wrist-twisting used in Okinawan dance⁶⁰, are various kara-te applications.

Hold one elbow near your waist. Keep your other arms and hand still. This illustration is of a right hand from an onlookers’ view.

With minimal arm movement:

1. twist the wrist to make it turn outward into a goosehead – i.e. thumb against fingers;
2. twist it so the palm is then facing up, the back of the hand down;
3. lift the hand to direct the palm toward your face;
4. twist the wrist to make an inward-turning goosehead;
5. continue circling it down, then;
6. raise it so the palm is facing away from you;
7. and continue making loops in this mobius pattern.



Repeat this with your other hand, then do both, with hands rotating in the same directions. When you’ve got both hands flowing, keep them going while you use your hips through shoulders to drive your arms in large mobius waves. Add some steps, and you’re *kachashi* dancing.

Remember to coordinate every stance and movement with breath.

⁶⁰ *Ryukyuan Dance*, see footnote 53.

Adding Clenches & Releases

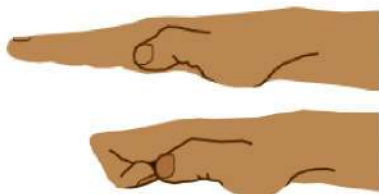
As before, return to *kiotsuke* and coordinated breath. Feel all the opposing forces of good posture working for you.

Pull both heels into *heiko* stance, then bounce and ‘walk’ on the spot a bit to feel the floor.

Basic Full-Body Clench (*Kimae*) Exercise

Keep your feet shoulder-width apart. Raise your arms straight out in front of you, level with your shoulders.

Pull your fingers and thumb together into knife-hands. To do this, breathe in through your nose, then, as you exhale, roll your fingers and your thumb into knuckle-hand.



Continue, pulling your shoulders down as far as they’ll go. Breathe out completely, until you have no breath left. Repeat this several times.

Now, grab the floor with your toes as you curl your fingers and thumbs in. Pull your shoulders down, and breathe out completely. Notice how your tummy tightens automatically as you do this, and your pelvis tilts under. Soften your knees to help exaggerate this.

Let go completely when you’re done. Let it all drain out of you, as if every tightening and tension hadn’t happened.

Repeat several times, keeping your technique while clenching every part of you as tightly as you can as you push to the end of your breath. This is tiring – very. Giving your all this way is called *kimae*, which means “generosity”.

Inner Kara-te Dance with *Kimae*

Go back to *kiotsuke* with good posture and breath. Swing into *heiko* stance. Bounce and feel the floor a bit.

From the hips, get the mobius dance going, then focus on the lines of opposing forces between the arms and hands.

With one arm moving forward, as shown (note: I haven’t shown the mobius loops and opposing forces, to keep the

pages skipped

All One

Understanding, piece by piece, what's in the dance and application elements is relatively straightforward. Being able to do it is a matter of much practice. Little by little, it will come together, and you'll be able to engage the whole routine. Luckily, it's easy on the body and brings a sense of accomplishment and capability each step of the way.

To end the routine, bring the feet back to shoulder-width apart, keep the heels lightly touching the floor. Go back to all flow, no power – i.e. no *kimae*-release pulses. Keep the energy you used to do the routine with the largest of arm movements and body twists, but pull it in, to concentrate it in smaller and smaller movements, until you're scarcely moving. Every joint will still be full of little mobius gyres, and the body will still be tensioned, integrated, and flowing within.

Mastery of the inner kara-te dance is being able to do the opposite, to go from an everyday, relaxed posture to crackling with energy gyres while apparently not moving at all. The applications, or any part and piece of them, may then come out, as required for efficient, effective action.

Learning the Kara-te Way

Priorities

The first priority of kara-te is to serve justice – to do oneself justice, as well as our relationships, our community, the world beyond, and the art itself.

Kara-te teaches reactions to aggression, while seeking never to make the first strike. We only throw punches and kicks in class, in carefully prescribed ways, to learn how to deal with them. Kara-te looks for win-win solutions, not only in immediate circumstances but in the bigger picture. Balance and harmony do not necessarily mean across-the-board fairness and equality, rather a consideration of all interests, so everyone has what they need to live and thrive.

To do oneself justice requires commitment to polishing up physically, since the basis of a good life is good health. This is achieved through a tuned-up, aware, capable body, integrated with mind and spirit. There is no arrival, of course. To be successful, one learns to make a priority of this pursuit, so that kara-te study and progress become part of the fabric of all that one is and does.

It is a pursuit in everyday reality, not just in intention and sporadic attention to it. Regular practice and persistence are necessary to learning the kara-te way.

There is nothing rote about any of our physical training. However many classes we attend or repetitions we do of an exercise, every moment, breath, and move is new and done with total presence. It is the only way we can learn to react ever more appropriately to what's really happening.

“Practice with shoshin.”

[the beginner's heart]

Seikichi Toguchi

Beginners to kara-te training will become aware of various bodily asymmetries, some benign, some potentially painful, some hurting from the start. A worthwhile goal is to get back to more youthful, pain-free symmetry. We become lopsided over months and years, so it's reasonable to take as long as needed to get back to more balanced form.

Make of a priority of doing what you can, day by day, to find new limits of capability. Nudge those limits, don't push them. Better to keep steadily improving than to under- or over-do it, hence drop out from too many lulls or from aggressive injuries.

Coming to know, respect, and work well within one's own abilities can provide useful guidelines for the larger priorities of kara-te. A physically disciplined, balanced, harmonious person will react more justly, in general, to all manner of situations than those not exercising these attributes.

Politeness, Politesse

The kara-te way is the polite way, in every circumstance. Okinawa is famous for its politeness, as a cultural tenet that has impressed visitors and invaders alike over the centuries.

Okinawans have had to show politesse, as well. It means "a clean and polished state", the same as politeness, but it connotes the smooth, savvy working of situations to particular advantage. This can have positive and negative spins, depending on who benefits. Okinawa would not have survived as a distinct culture between battling empires without great politesse.

I see politeness as knowing when and how to make a move and a strong point, and more importantly, knowing when and how to let go. I see politesse as a broader concern for outcomes. When best applied, everyone wins.

Kara-te training is full of moves to answer physical aggression, using dodges, blocks, and control moves, as well as strikes as a last resort. The goal is to limit and contain dangerous, uncivil situations, to restore harmony.

Great effort is required to seize up into particular stances and execute strong, precise leg and arm movements. Because

they're so energy-intensive, kara-te students assume that these are the most important part of training. They advance by showing ever-greater speed and good form, which fortifies this understanding.

These clenched states are frozen moments, of body and mind. Politeness does not flow easily from people who tend to go from seized-up state to seized-up state, however proficiently they do it. There are few applications in the real world where tightening up fast and hitting brilliantly hard – metaphorically speaking – will solve problems and serve friends, community, and the greater good.

In *go-ju* kara-te, we soften as much as possible between bursts, for efficiency's sake, but the *ju* of kara-te goes much deeper. Its aim is to return, in an instant, to a relaxed, easy state. It's not an active letting go, but a complete release, which is also liberty, freedom.

The entire art and Zen of kara-te – the ultimate polish and politesse – is in this. It is the *kara* of *te*, the empty and open of the released state, the ultimate freedom from within.

This where kara-te really shines, by teaching our bodies to get out of and beyond tightenings and tensions with speed and grace. How? Through *kata*.

When I realized this, I took a new look at the first *kata* we learn in *go-ju* kara-te, and I counted eight major freeze-up moments in it. The opening sequence of moves flows nicely, then “errkk,” you lock up in a block, from which you next make a 45-degree turn into another block. You push through these, then “errkk!” again, you're in a bigger lock-up, in horse-stance, with a 180-degree turn to make this time – a major transition. And so it goes, to the end.

The most advanced *kata* in *go-ju* kara-te is *Suparempai*,⁶¹ which is called “108 hands”. The 108 has many meanings, but the *kata* has about that many locked-up poses to release. All of the

⁶¹ *Suparempai* is the ultimate *kata* for practicing deep inner kara-te technique. The full intent and complete, correct performance of it is elusive, even for the most comprehending, skilled practitioners.

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Teachers use *Sanchin* to measure their students' overall progress in power development, integration, and release. Those who perform well on all other subjects can struggle mightily with *Sanchin*, or not struggle adequately, which is also a problem.

Websites abound about *Sanchin*: its history, explanations, discussions, animations, and videos. You can try to learn it on your own, but it must be done with a teacher, for many reasons.

Kara-te self-defence works against all manner of incoming aggressive forces. Too many people mistakenly think that kara-te practitioners must use force over force to win – answering in kind, only cleverer, stronger, and faster. Too many times, people respond to those who study kara-te by saying, “Oooh, we’d better watch out around you, you could be dangerous.” Aiy!

Responding in kind is not the kara-te way, not at all what one trains to do. When inescapably confronted, the goal is to control situations with sufficient grace and power to quickly return to harmonious relations without injuries or vendettas. In deadly circumstances, harming others must be the very last resort. This justice should then be mercifully fast and final.

In this sense, kara-te is a shadow art. Its power is reactive. It aims to develop quick counter-responses with just the right touch – i.e. physically powerful moves as required, but not any more than required. Force does not answer force. Power seeks to make good use of power, first by doing so within oneself, then, by extension, doing so with others.

Developing personal power feels good in itself. Showing well-honed, well-applied flashes of it, in all that one does, is compelling. To use it to good ends, including to justly settle contentions, is a great gift and responsibility.

Very few programs of study focus on developing personal power and its wise expressions. This is a major reason to recommend learning the kara-te way.

Personality

When I presented to Koyabu *sensei* my outline for this section, the final section was about power. No, no, no, he said

instantly. The final ‘p’ is Personality. Character. All these other things simply serve the development and polishing up of good character, by which we are known and leave our mark.

Personality is why Maehira, in Captain Hall’s 1816 account, catches our eye and imagination. He quickly emerges as a marvellous character, exemplifying the Okinawan way, which is the karate way. He’s a man we would all want to know. He would make a spectacular storybook and movie hero.

We are born with personality, that’s a given, and it’s very malleable indeed. It comes out and gets shaped through life: in some ways we stay a little wild, unschooled, and highly individual; in others we’re nurtured and contained, trained, and learn to fit into expected norms. In total, we’re each a unique package of usual and unusual talents.

Every person has a few great gifts, no two people alike. By working from the best, most positive of these gifts, we develop healthy, strong personalities.

Good teachers regularly point out what each student does well, for a couple of reasons. First, the student can work to apply their best understandings and abilities to the things that they don’t do as well. We become our own teachers in this way, and we can improve considerably by this method.

Second, we learn from watching and appreciating what each classmate does best. Each of us is particularly good at some moves, weaker in others. We do well to learn to spot and copy others’ best actions, until they become our own. Dramatic advancements take place this way, and individual “flavours”, as Koyabu *sensei* puts it, really start to come through.

“Very tasty!” he says, when students do *kata* and two-person subjects with good flowing technique through which their strengths – i.e. power of character – comes through. They possess the space they’re moving in, and they dance within it – beautiful to watch, delicious to learn to do.

To promote learning from each other in class, we say, “*Onegaishimas*” (o-nay-guy-shi-mas), or “Please teach me.” Students say it to each other, whatever their level, and teachers

say it to their students. It means several things: teach me what you've learned; teach me as we learn together; teach me how to learn; teach me how to teach.

The great masters still say "*Onegaishimas*", they more than anyone. They're master learners, without end. This is the key and cornerstone to their exceptional personalities. They approach all with the beginner's heart, ever curious and keen for the give and take of teaching one another.

Personality comes out through our physical beings, hence kara-te teaching begins from that core. A healthy, tuned, empowered body that relates nicely to others provides a good basis for all learning. In this, the kara-te way truly is "the mother of education". With it, we can make the most and best of what's at hand, so everyone benefits from our individual and shared efforts.

This is a simple and perhaps impossible ideal, but it can be lived. It's a path and a process, if not an achievable end. Okinawan people have given us the kara-te way. We can take it and, by staying true to it, make it our own.

* * *

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Brenda Guiled (rhymes with 'wild') grew up in Jasper National Park, Alberta. She finished high school in Kamloops, British Columbia, then completed a B.Sc. in honours Zoology at UBC.

Brenda worked in environmental education for a decade, including completing an M.Sc. in Education. She has published nature and curriculum materials, a biography of Captain George Vancouver, editorial page commentary for many years, fiction, and more. She does graphic arts, with a speciality in technical illustrations of fishes and shellfishes, often credited as B. Guild Gillespie.

Brenda has lived in Greece, Norway, and Nova Scotia. She and husband reside on Salt Spring Island. They have two grown children.

From 1995-2001, she was a student, then instructor, with the Lower Mainland Okinawa Goju-Ryu Shorei-Kan Karate Association. She started the associated Salt Spring Island Shorei-Kan Karate School in 2001. Her kara-te teaching and studies continue.