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Universal Connection

When people think of Zen Buddhism, it may commonly be associated with Buddha, meditation, and other spiritual practices. If one were to categorize Karate, they may think of things such as fighting or breaking bricks. It may seem that these two practices exist in completely opposite worlds; Zen favoring the spiritual potential of people while Karate focusing on physicality. However Zen and Karate have very much in common, so much that the two coexist. Not only do they share a common history but also similar beliefs.

In trying to find how Karate and Zen are connected, I used interviews and observation. I had a total of three informants; a reverend of a Zen temple, and a Karate practitioner.

The practice of Zen originated from a long line of buddhist variations, which in all sprung out of Hinduism. It all started with a buddhist monk named Bodhidharma who introduced Buddhism from India to China. His teachings grew in popularity and became a very influential force in Chinese culture. This was also around the same time when Bodhidharma engaged in his infamous nine years of uninterrupted meditation.

Although Buddhism had become very big in China, it would not be until six generations after Bodhidharma's time when Buddhism was introduced to Japan. It was in the year 1191 when a Japanese monk named Eisai returned from China after years of learning Buddhism. However, his return from China marked the beginning of his own version of buddhism, which came to be known as Zen (literally meaning peace, meditation). Zen gained its unique approach to Buddhism by focusing on meditation as the way to reach enlightenment. Other exclusive characteristics include the belief of Buddha as not a god, and Koans (riddles), which are used to determine if one has reached enlightenment.

The philosophy and beliefs of Zen Buddhism is a very important part to understanding its relationship with Karate. In search of this, I visited a Zen temple called Soto Mission of Hawaii Shoboji. There I was able to speak with Reverend Kochiro who has practiced Zen all over Asia.

"What is Zen? What is the universe?," Kochiro said with a chuckle. "Zen is abstract but also concrete." Kochiro then went on to explain that the goal of Zen is to achieve enlightenment, which he described in many ways as peace of mind, connection with oneself and nature, and a state of advanced thinking. In this sense, enlightenment is finding and

connecting with your "true self" which is hidden by the material world we live in. The material world is what causes us to lose sight of who we really are, and so to regain this sight, we must detach ourselves from the material world and connect with ourselves. This connection with ourselves also means an awareness of our connection with nature (nature meaning all forms of life ie: plants, animals), as it is thought that nature and us are one in the same. The realization of our union with nature also gives us a sense of equality with nature. With equality we gain an appreciation for nature, thus achieving a state of happiness and content with what we have (because nature is seen as everything around us, happiness with nature means happiness with everything). This state of awareness and peace is the "Buddha nature" which is present in everybody and is what Zen practitioners strive for.

If the material world is what prevents us from enlightenment then how do we escape the material world? Reverend Kochiro describes this process as a way of refinement and purification. He says that we must "take away all the unnecessary things in life," meaning our desires. It is believed that desire is the cause of suffering, so as long as people have desires, they will always be suffering. However Kochiro also said that there are also good desires (ie: helping people) and that we will always have desires, even if one has attained enlightenment. So then it is not a matter of having desires but rather if the desire is under control (Kochiro then gave an example of some people who must always use things like hair gel or cologne before going out). To get these desires under control, Zen monks use activities such as chanting, contemplation, and meditation. Chanting serves as a way of promoting unity and harmony. Because chanting is done in unison, then a sense of togetherness must be present. Chanting cannot be done properly if there are feelings of disturbances or independence. Contemplation and meditation is done as a means of freeing one of all thoughts and distractions. It is in this method that one ceases all thoughts but yet achieves a heightened awareness and concentration. This is referred to as mushin, or mindless mind. The mind is empty of thoughts yet at its peak of performance. Action and thought become instinct. The mind no longer thinks but acts. This is a characteristic of enlightenment.

In all, chanting, contemplation, and meditation are ways to detach ourselves from the world of desires and distractions we live in. By breaking away from this world, we allow ourselves to connect with ourselves and transcend into a state of higher awareness and focus. This is the state of enlightenment and is the goal of Zen Buddhism.

Having an understanding of Zen Buddhism, I decided to learn about Karate and its relation with Zen. For this, I interviewed Rita who is a 4th Dan (4th degree black belt) in Karate.

There is said to be three different approaches to Karate. One approach is the Karate of a fighting dog; one who is concerned with the fighting and violent aspect of Karate. The second approach is Karate of a lion; one who is full of

fighting spirit but not as aggressive as the previous approach. The third approach is Karate of the tiger; one who is reserved and can win without fighting. Out of these three, the third approach or Karate of the tiger, is the one that harbors the Zen aspect the most. Rita first off explains that Zen relates to Karate by how she tries to connect her mind, body, and spirit. This connection of the body is normally done during a kata (a number of bodily movements and positioning done in sequence). In order to connect your mind, body, and spirit, "focus, intention, and concentration" is required. First one must have concentration. This means that if one were to do a kata, the concentration of the person is in the present moment (which would be the Kata), not in the past, not on what's for dinner, not on how others think his/her kata looks. Having intention means that you strive to perform the kata well. If one had doubt then the kata will not be performed well. Focus is the direction and guide of intention. The will of trying to perform well is directed towards the kata. If the connection is made, then the mind reaches a state of mindless mind, and the body reaches a state of effortless effort. This means that the kata will be performed effortlessly and instinctively without distraction from the mind or doubt in the body. Thus the kata is performed superbly.

Rita also believes that a kata is an expression of one's personality. If one has a big ego, then the kata will be performed in very loud and dramatic movements. If the person were shy, then the movements of the kata will be done with doubt and inconfidence. "Every kata will be different" said Rita. "The moves are the same but each person will express them differently." If a kata is an extension of one's personality, then changes in the kata will result in changes to the personality. A kata that was once done with inconfidence but with practice, turned into a confident kata, should also give the person more confidence in his/her life. However this extension of personality is not only confined to kata. Rita explains this with the example "If I were sparring and found an opening in my opponent, that could be the same as finding an opening in life." It is in this belief that one can improve his/her life through his/her improvement in Karate.

The connecting of the mind, body and spirit is the first relationship with Zen. This is done in both cultural. The only difference is that the energy is directed towards a different direction; for Zen monks so that they may detach themselves from the material world and gain a higher awareness, and for Karate practitioners, to perfect and further themselves in the art. Katas and meditation are also similar. Though they are done differently, both are done to achieve the same state of consciousness, the mindless mind. The methods of Karate and Zen Buddhism may be different but they both share common beliefs and goals.

Although there is a clear connection between Karate and Zen, Karate is not the only art related with Zen. Many other Japanese arts including calligraphy, archery, or tea ceremony have heavy Zen influences. This may suggest how easily

Zen can be adapted and integrated with so many other practices and arts. Perhaps Zen is more than a way of life, maybe even a way of the universe.