



Article Title: The Art of KarateDo: What Karate means to me
(A commentary on 'The Budoka' by G. Seizan Breyette)
PART 1

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Abstract: "The Budoka" was written by Seizan (Gordi Breyette) Sensei, who is TOYAMA Seiko Sensei's direct student, and who was given TOYAMA Sensei's branch dojo to teach old style UechiRyu (UECHI Kanbun Sensei's style). The article reflects TOYAMA Sensei's attitude, which is natural and spontaneous to him, and is actually his lifestyle. When I met TOYAMA Sensei, I was from the first thrilled and astounded to come face-to-face with a real Budoka. It was the first time in my life to meet such a person.

INTRODUCTION

When I was involved in a different style of UechiRyu, I was not satisfied spiritually. My kata performance didn't feel right -- it felt uncomfortable and unnatural -- mechanical motion only, and empty of spirit. While I struggled to learn that style of modern UechiRyu, my previous instructor Breyette Sensei shared his struggling feelings about the training - almost the same feelings. After even so many years as he had in that style, it had become empty and meaningless, and he feared for the use and future of what must have been a much more meaningful karatedo once.

He had been quietly searching for historical answers and old philosophies, which he felt would hold the key to the missing spirituality he always thought should be found in UechiRyu, but his direct Seniors -- who were also my Seniors -- had no answers or insights to share.

Surely there had to be more than just punching and kicking, and sport karate technique! I asked him if there was any information source about our founder's style left in this modern karate world. In reply, he handed a book which briefly introduced all the great karate Masters living on Okinawa. As I read that book thoroughly, one of the greatest karate Master's life philosophy and biography inspired me immediately.

I realized that he (Toyama Sensei) was the last active instructor of UECHI Kanbun Sensei. I didn't want to miss this opportunity to meet him -- and he lived only a few minutes away, all this time! I just wanted to ask several questions from Breyette Sensei and myself regarding history, technique, and philosophy.

I was so excited; I telephoned TOYAMA Sensei that morning. He was interested in my request, and when he found that I was sincere to ask questions about the life and times of our Founder UECHI Kanbun Sensei, he too became excited for the opportunity to share his memories and precious history. He asked me to come and meet him and his family that very afternoon!

TOYAMA Sensei was very generous with his time and energy to answer all questions completely and without hesitation for us. Breyette Sensei had been asking those same questions for many years, and until then, nobody gave him any clear response. While TOYAMA Sensei was speaking to me, I saw his "Wauke" movement which he didn't intend to show me (he was describing the technique, and performed it almost unconsciously).

When I saw his "Wauke", I was so deeply and spiritually touched with the beauty of his movement -- the most deeply impressive feeling inside upon seeing a karate movement! I never felt this before in my life -- I felt strongly that this was the last true Master of the UechiRyu system for whom I had been searching. One single Wauke itself told me everything, beyond words. His simple, honest, and heartfelt speech toward me, and the beauty of his Wauke struck my heart. Before TOYAMA Sensei's training, I didn't experience any feeling of art form in the modern karate.

That was my big concern. The modern karate training was merely a set of mechanical movements and shallow understanding.

However, the old style of Kanbun Sensei is endless to learn, and takes the whole of our lives, and still there would be no end.

It is a great and positive challenge to learn more every day, because we study always more and new detail every time. Today is better than yesterday. No end. I am still working hard to perfect the "Sanchin Nuki", to get close to TOYAMA Sensei's performance standard. I understand now why Kanbun Sensei took three years to learn only "Sanchin" from SHUU Shiwa Sensei in China -- and why it normally took ten years!

While I am not a Master in any art form, I feel I can offer some slight qualifications to speak about the inner feeling of elation and spiritual uplifting that true art brings to the practitioner. I have been taking Koto (Japanese, Okinawan, and Chinese harp) lessons for 10 years so far, calligraphy since I was in 1st grade (35 years so far), Shamisen (Okinawan snakeskin-covered guitar) for several years, tea ceremony, Okinawan classic dance form, etc.

Those "DO" cultural lessons I learn are all very much similar to each other in their ways and disciplines, because these are art forms which teach us life philosophy. In this environment of art and spiritual development, only modern karate was totally different to me. That was why that sort of training could not last with me -- or Seizan Sensei -- any longer. It is sad that the majority of karate practitioners -- here on Okinawa as well as in foreign lands -- don't see the origin of karate art, and it is becoming more sports-oriented, with emphasis nowadays on such as competition events or sparring.

All the lessons in all the art forms I have been taking are one-on-one lessons. TOYAMA Sensei's lesson is same as those other art form lessons in which I feel very comfortable and peaceful. We don't "practice" in any of those art classes. We go to those Master's homes to study and to have corrections, and then practice at home to show our improvements every time we go. Not only to work hard physically and sweat a lot -- we do all the physically hard work at home so we don't waste the Master's time.

That is one aspect of the proper respectful attitude toward our Masters.
Those very special skills found in any of the art forms I take are very precise.

That's why it's a lifelong challenge and a true joy to see those Master's art forms in those very rare and precious classes. I don't want to miss any tiny detail in learning their skills. Being there with those Masters is serene and peaceful -- as it should be, nothing negative, always fulfilling, gaining positive sprits without forcing the training, everything flows naturally...

I hope the Okinawa KarateDo UechiRyu Zankai will preserve the old style UechiRyu, which is the closest style to Kanbun Sensei's through TOYAMA Sensei incredible memory, practice, and dedication. The precision of the art form will take a lifetime to achieve, and this is our great challenge.

No more mechanical motion, but beautiful and powerful movement with meaning and content! For example, you are never satisfied with even one stroke in calligraphy, or the quality of the sound of Koto or Shamisen playing - you have to feel the right sound by where you press your fingers, then the power and quality of the sound must be pure and exact.

So it is with our karate We are never satisfied with our kata, we just feel the performance is just OK for today's level, next time will be a little better than before so long as we keep up dedicated practice at home, otherwise we just stay the same, or get worse. In order to get better everyday improvement, we have to practice more and more every time.

"Flexibility" is one of the most important practices for any art form - and not only these forms, but also for our lives, mentally and physically.

Lessons can take place anywhere you are, and can be found in anything you do -- e.g. how you sit, walk, stand, your posture, how you speak, how you interpret words, how you deal with people. I feel this approach to training -- on all levels, in every facet of our daily lives - develops better personality, better life, better anything. No arguments, no negative feelings, no attacking people even though verbally, always self-development.

You don't want to hurt other people's feelings, you just want to share good and beneficial things with people, and enjoy a peaceful relationship. In that manner, we don't have any "wars" in any situations.

Peaceful life filled with strength, compassion, meaningful expression, and confidence --that is the most beautiful art, and the purpose of any art.

Karate is art, and much the same as music, painting, calligraphy - for example, to play a beautiful piece of Mozart with the violin takes forever and there is no end to the practice -- so it is with kata in Karate.