

THE TWENTY PRINCIPLES OF KARATE (SHOTO NIJUKUN) - Gichin Funakoshi

(comments by Enzo Cellini - September 26, 2020)

1. Do not forget that karate-do begins and ends with the salute (rei)

In karate-do respect, courtesy and kindness are essential. It is necessary to cultivate a sense of humble self-esteem that leads to respect oneself and others and excludes any form of conflict or attitude to subdue and dominate the opponent.

2. There is no first attack in karate

Karate is a self-defense method that involves the use of defense techniques. The attack techniques are essential to study and develop effective defense techniques.

3. Karate is on the side of justice

This principle indicates that the practitioner becomes the guardian of justice and peace. There is no justice if there is no peace and there is no peace if there is no justice. Unfortunately the sense of justice is often confused with the idea of imposing one's own vision of justice and this often generates the oppression of those whose ideas are different. In this way differences are not respected and there can be no peace and therefore no justice.

4. Know yourself first, then others

Knowing oneself means exploring within oneself to cultivate and establish inner peace and harmony. Only under these conditions it will be possible to know others. In karate we train to change our needs. "Take care of yourself, the rest will come by itself". (*Gichin Funakoshi*)

5. The spirit comes before the technique

Karate is a spiritual path that explores human aggression through personal self-defense techniques. It is a method to understand where aggression comes from and how to transform it into courtesy and kindness towards others. Egami sensei differentiated the training of the "renshu" body from the training of the "keiko" spirit. (*Shigeru Egami - The Heart of Karate-do - on page 23*)

6. Always be ready to open your mind (clear your mind)

Karate comes into being when the mind is empty, silent, calm and free from all thoughts, open to welcoming everything. In these conditions, the body, mind and spirit become one and will move together, making any action effective.

7. Inattention (laziness) causes misfortune

When the mind does not live in the present moment, it does not allow us to see the true reality: in these conditions we are fragile and easily induced to underestimate or overestimate situations and this generates discomfort and damage. Living the "here and now" is one of the indispensable conditions for practicing karate, as well as for living a healthy life.

8. Karate is experienced also outside the dojo

In karate, technique is the first vehicle of understanding, but it is a discipline that, passing through technique, transcends it, realizing itself in daily life through the relationship with others.

9. Karate is practiced throughout life

When, through years of practice, we shall understand the meaning of the twenty principles of karate-do and discover the profound meaning that Funakoshi sensei wanted to give to karate, we shall understand its benefits and never abandon it. Life becomes training and training is life.

10. Apply the spirit of karate to all things, there is its ineffable beauty

With this principle Funakoshi urges the practitioner to apply to all things in life that mental openness that karate cultivates and increases: an openness that welcomes and does not reject, which teaches how to move

with the things that happen and with the people you meet, without clashing and without the need to impose your will.

11. Karate is like hot water, it must be heated constantly or it cools down

The dojo is the research laboratory. The daily verification of what has been learned in the dojo is the practice that, through constant interaction with others and observation of one's behavior, keeps the discipline alive and illuminates the path day after day.

12. Don't think about winning, rather think about not losing

The goal of karate is not to win against the opponent by fighting, but to win together with the enemy without fighting. When we feel the need to fight, we have already lost.

13. Change according to your opponent

In karate it is necessary to cancel one's ego to become the opponent, put oneself in his shoes and thus be able to move with him. "Try to harmonize with your partner's inner movement. You will then begin to understand the very essence of Karate ". (Taken from "Bulletin du Murakami Kai" - 1988 - Interview with Tetsuji Murakami sensei)

14. The result of a fight depends on knowing how to master fullness and emptiness

In combat, where the aggressor moves against us, it is necessary to be able to grasp the gaps in the rhythm of his movements and fill them with our techniques. When an empty mind meets another empty mind, agreement is inevitable.

15. Consider the opponent's hands and feet as swords

Never underestimate the opponent.

16. When you step out of the front door of your house, you can be faced with a million enemies

Facing a million enemies is like facing only one. The only limit lies in our fears and our insecurities, which are our real greatest enemies.

17. The guard is for beginners, the natural position is for experienced practitioners.

Karate is the constant search for the naturalness of movements. ".... Zenkutsu is for beginners, shizentai is for experts." (Shigeru Egami)

18. Kata must be performed correctly; combat is something else

Kata represent the technical and spiritual baggage of karate and are the very substance of the discipline. "Karate should be practiced with kata as the main method and kumite as the support method." (Gichin Funakoshi - Karate-do Kyohan - pag. 211)

19. Do not forget where to use or not use force, relax or contract the body,

Apply slowness or speed, in any technique. For each technique you need to know how to apply the right force and the right speed. Nothing more and nothing less. Underestimating or overestimating situations leads to defeat

20. Be constantly aware and always creative

This principle encourages the practitioner to be constantly aware of his/her behavior and strive to reach the highest point of the discipline through creativity, essential for karate as for any other form of art. Karate-do is the way of karate which leads from a conflictual world to a world of harmony. ..."The rhythm of the movement of the body is music and the lines drawn in space are a painting. It is art and its canvas is the universe" (Shigeru Egami)

Funakoshi sensei, after his experience of Zen practice in the Engaku-ji monastery in Kamakura, in 1929 coined the new name for his method, from "Chinese hand" (tode) to "empty hand": karate-do. In 1938 his 20 Principles of Karatedo were published for the first time.

Through the 20 principles he describes the evolution of karate towards karate-do, a path that leads from a world of conflict to a world of harmony. Karate (jutsu) is a fighting method in which the techniques aim to defend oneself by dominating and subduing the opponent, imposing one's will.

Karate-do, on the other hand, is a method for overcoming combat, it is a spiritual path where aggression is processed, transformed and sublimated towards respect, courtesy and kindness. The technique is not applied "against", but "together" in a soft and heavy way in the relentless search for an agreement through the harmony of movements, guided by a calm and decisive state of mind.

Karate-do is also a method of overcoming one's limitations, one's insecurities, and the feeling of inadequacy and inability. It is a method of becoming physically stronger and increasing one's self-esteem.

It is evident that karate (jutsu) and karate-do are two very different methods to interact with reality and with others, the objectives are diametrically opposed. It is important for the practitioner to know this difference.

In karate, victory is achieved by fighting and prevailing over the other. In this case, whoever is more technically prepared, physically stronger and more aggressive wins. In karate-do you win when no one loses and when you become able to move together with the aggressor, anticipating his intentions and his will to attack (*sen sen no sen*).

The difference between karate and karate-do lies in the way of dealing with life and its difficulties. In the first method the idea is: if you want to win you have to fight (even with yourself). In the second: you will begin to win when the need to fight has turned into a need to find an agreement (first of all with yourself).

"Dominate / subdue" is one thing, "manage / rule" is another. If we need to dominate the aggressor, we are in fact expressing our discomfort, caused by our inner conflicts and we do it at the expense of the aggressor.

If our mind is calm, we have no need to dominate and subdue, because it becomes enough to "manage" the aggressor and be able to move at the right moment to cancel the effects of his action and dissolve the tension. The state of mind that leads us to confrontation is our real enemy and this is the condition that determines our defeats.

The 20 principles express the dream of Funakoshi sensei "shoto" in a clear and concise form. He intended to disseminate a method that, through the learning of defense techniques, could help the human being to improve his relationship with himself and to live harmoniously with others, with nature and with the universe.

The karate of Funakoshi sensei has its roots in the teachings of Bodhidharma, a Zen Buddhist monk who lived between the 5th and 6th centuries AD, who considered the mind and body to be inseparable and who first introduced, in the spiritual path for his disciples, body training and some defense techniques. He believed that body training was a necessary support for the path of purification of the spirit and fulfillment of the soul. (*Gichin Funakoshi - Karate-do Kyohan - The Master Text - pag. 7*)

The reason why Bodhidharma, a religious person opposed to any form of violence, chose the techniques of self-defense, is that the study of these inevitably turns the spotlight on human aggression, considered by Buddhism one of the great evils to be cured.

With the training in defense techniques we gradually become aware of our aggression, we observe it and process it, transforming it through a process of awareness of our body, which can be a good friend for us because it does not think! The mind, with its thoughts confuses us, but the body is simple and we can learn to take note of its state at any time.

During training while applying a technique, we can immediately observe the effect it causes on the other, for example pain and a natural reaction of stiffening and opposition if the force we apply is excessive. We can then try to decrease the force or speed, applying only what is necessary and sufficient (see principle 19) and thus see that the reaction of the other changes. This makes us reflect and makes us understand that our actions generate the reactions of others and consequently we can obtain different reactions towards us from others by modifying ourselves, our needs and our actions.

If we applied this awareness in everyday life, for example when someone approaches us aggressively, we might notice that our instinctive reaction is defensive and often results in an aggressive reaction on our part as well. However, when we become aware of this process, we immediately recognize the "trap" into which we have fallen and are induced to modify that negative feeling of discomfort by now sadly known. For example, we

can try to focus on breathing and relax ourselves: in this way our condition has already changed and those in front of us no longer perceive it as a threat.

Through awareness we are able to recognize the tension that arises within us and we can try to "let it go", dissolving it. The reduction of our tension will also positively affect others, induced to relax, thus defusing the spiral of aggression. This path of awareness leads us towards an intimate balance and allows us to glimpse a better parallel world, which we did not suspect existed; and if we continue to explore it, we find that many tensions within us and around us vanish and that we can give ourselves and the world a little more peace.

Human aggression

Some believe that aggression in humans is innate, others instead that it depends on environmental and relational factors. Innate aggression is also present in the animal kingdom, it is a benign aggression because it is at the service of the survival of the individual and the conservation of the species, and ceases when the danger is lacking.

The aggression that arises instead from the conflictual relationship that the human being has with himself, and consequently with his fellow men, is specific to man and is absent in the animal world. The conflictual relationship with oneself is caused by a mind that does not know how to live in the present, but that obsessively chases thoughts about the past or the future; this condition creates stress in man, states of internal discomfort that are often expressed externally towards others through aggression.

My experience of 70 years of life and 50 years of karate-do practice has taught me that, regardless of what our aggression is due to, it is appropriate to address the issue to improve our relationship with the environment and to avoid unavoidable damage to ourselves and to others, thus contributing to improving relations between individuals and reducing social tensions.

The practice of Egami Karate-do, assisted by a Zen meditation path, has allowed me to understand that the best way to face an extreme danger is to transform one's aggression into a state of calm and lucidity, where the mind remains unperturbed and able to guide the body with minimal and essential movements, performed at the right moment, at the right pace and with the right force, dosing it in quantity and speed.

Some believe that it is possible to control aggression by orienting it positively. Personally I think that trying to control one's aggression is like wanting to "cage the beast", obtaining exactly the opposite result. Trying to control one's aggression without first changing one's needs leads to an apparent calm and a gradual increase in aggression itself and an inexorable self-damaging process.

Aggression, on the other hand, must be treated and we can do it through meditation, which involves a process of inner awareness in search of an intimate balance to transform one's needs. It is a change that, through the conscious observation of one's inner conflicts and reactions, allows us to analyze our tensions and our behaviors and leads us to improve what we don't like about ourselves, what causes us discomfort and tensions. It is a path that helps us to find an agreement with ourselves and to accept ourselves to become authentic, genuine and finally natural in behavior and free from frustrations.

The practitioner of Egami Karate-do gradually becomes aware of his own aggression and begins to experience it as a trap from which it is necessary to free oneself if one wants to make one's techniques and in general one's actions effective. It is through years of physical training and sitting meditation (zazen) and meditation in movement (dozen) that it will be possible to escape the spiral of aggression, which confuses our senses and leads us towards fights without winners and sure defeats.

Shigeru Egami sensei indicated the path towards Heiho (the method of peace and inner agreement) to overcome one's weaknesses and process one's aggression, transforming and sublimating it into courtesy and kindness.