

An Introduction to Ming Zhen Shakya

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Some years ago, while researching a question I had about the newly introduced String Theory in physics, a series of internet links acted as natural connections to those authors and thinkers who had input into the sciences per my pursuit. Well, one link of interest would naturally link to another and finally I was mired in the overwhelming realm of science authors and critics. In the wee hours of the morning, one pithy comment in particular jumped out at me. The analysis related directly to my latest read -- Michio Kaku--and made a point comparison of another famous science writer and contributor,-- Issac Asimov---and it was nothing short of invigorating to read it. The brief yet astute observations and commentary that caught my eye was written by an American woman and Buddhist priest, one Ming Zhen Shakya--- who also happened to have the rarest of positions in Zen Buddhism and also a degree, as it happens, in physics.

Frankly, I wasn't really clear in my mind as to how to frame my questions. I am no stranger to jumbled ideas that go unconnected in my head. Yet, I was prompted by certain events and experiences to keep searching further in the hopes that I would trip upon one prompt or another that might, in turn, make a connection that I could grasp. Unusual events can compel us ---should compel us, I believe--- to make some scientific sense of the matter. Few sentences into this woman's comments online reflected a rare and erudite approach to connecting the dots that demonstrated an ability to reconcile so many disciplines that her works represented a stunning juxtaposition of thought that made sense to me. (No small feat, that !). Her work has never disappointed me since that time. The ordained Chinese Zen master has remained readable and clear as the proverbial bell--- even if I found myself on the re-read more than once. Moreover, these articles, as I later discovered, directly related to Karate-do in ways that I hadn't been able to previously collaborate or find appropriately scholarly, relevant or interesting.

Pre-dating Facebook, or any of the social networking that is par for the communication course today, I was a little wary at the time of writing to a stranger out of the blue. It wasn't my style and it was a bit risky given the reputation of anonymous behaviors on the internet. In any case, I had to say something to this person. And, that's what I did. Thanking her for turning on a light, I signed my name the old fashioned way. Because Ming Zhen Shakya is a teacher of the first order, she kindly and promptly answered my email and we have been communicating ever since.

More than intelligence, Ming Zhen Shakya has a perspective based upon being very well read, solid research as well as an inner understanding of human nature---all befitting her spiritual cultivation. It's obvious that she is a brilliant teacher and writer. For that reason, we of the USA NKF Board of Directors invited her to share her insight with Karate practitioners in the United States. As a guest speaker at the USA National Karate-do Federation, her speech was appropriate in a way that might have escaped some of the people that needed the advisements the most. Anyway, I was proud to introduce her. For those who grasped the crux of her message, they have been never been disappointed by continuing to follow her essays that are available online.

We will never be able to stop the nine headed Hydra that re-grows pompous officials. These are the officials of every ilk who view their positions as one of power and authority, rather than charged with the responsibility, to ensure safety and equanimity. Ok, it is an age old problem that requires some personal

as well as general oversight. The bottom line is that we who worked to make a change in the status quo many years ago wished to have our leaders at every level in the art/sport to begin the teaching of karate-ka more carefully, mindfully. Otherwise, no matter one's potential, we can't easily go back and say, "get some humility, will you?". Exactly what do Karate champions expect? What are the expectations of Referees once they achieve a level of expertise? What of the coach who has a few champions on the floor? Reverence? Veneration? Think again, please.

One Referee's take on their role might be to impatiently demand that a 8 year old little girl to urgently remove her ribbon that serves to tie her hair during a kata competition--- or (more likely) focus upon the latest Referee tie fashion. Another Referee's take on the rules is to ensure that his or her excellent skills prevent injury in a ring or maintain the integrity of the sport. One participant's take on community action is to sue the not for profit institution and to cause havoc within a volunteer work force as a way of pointing attention to themselves. Another participant's take on community action is to quietly endure the horrors of registering countless, needy applicants in the tournament or donating their medical expertise on behalf of the competitor's welfare for rigorous days at a time. Our first personality complains loudly to anyone who would listen, without thought and without basis, because real contribution and critical thinking simply eclipses them. Such types project wrong doing upon others because that is most certainly the way their brain operates. Real work is not what these people are about. On the other hand, we easily find ourselves indebted to the thousands of valued karate-ka who understand that the smallest job done well is critical to the overall success of any project. And, they do it graciously and proficiently year after year. This brand of karate-ka volunteer their time offering up their egos to be a working part of the greater good. We all know the long examples of the matter. Personally speaking, I have been side by side with fellow Hayashi-ha Shito-ryu and WKA colleagues who were international champions, and professional leaders, as we jointly cleaned the mats or the competition venue in lieu of the proper assistance. Karate-do means that we understand such roles as meaningful.

My personal challenge in Karate-do has been less a matter of imparting technical information and more a matter of dealing with the egos that tend to run rampant and unchecked. Is it impossible for some people to imagine bringing along their constructive suggestion along with the complaint? Is it not possible for some to seek a workable compromise than "win the day?". The incessant whining that goes on in most organizations finds me practicing karate-do in ways I never imagined.

How do we rein in this ugly monster that, in an unguarded heartbeat, can undo so much good constructive action? How do we leaders in the Karate community communicate more effectively and impel practitioners to act more altruistically? How do we leave a legacy that has our spiritual and ethical footprints rather than our frustration end up as another useless short termed annoyance? In our good efforts, sometimes we just end up answering a cacophony of attention mongers who suck our energy and enjoyment from the project. How to avoid it? Of course, these questions alone beg the ultimate question: why is it that we see ourselves as the purveyor of the truth? Well, the USA NKF was founded by those who wanted to elevate our community standards---this is a fact. We just didn't cotton to the lack of democratic process--- and, that was at the least of the challenges. Education is part of that process and as karate-ka, it was a challenge that begged to be addressed. For that, you can only imagine the obstacles and pain involved with uprooting and starting an organization that would direct the sport and art anew. For that, you have to forget your immediate needs and be ready to put your ego aside. Or, you won't prevail. And for that goal, the WKA suffered and contributed mightily. Hanshi and others spent 15 years building a legacy for the United States at great personal expense.

Many of us have spent a lot of energy attempting to impart Karate-do to an awful lot of people. Some Senseis have had many thousands of students. And, as gratified as I am at having pursued this as more than a casual hobby, I continue to worry about the leadership in the art because so many of our higher ranks fall prey to self importance and self gratification. It's a killer of good intentions, good organizations and good institutions. And, this situation is hardly a reflection upon Karate alone. Rampant throughout many sports, political arenas, religious and non-profit institutions, self importance in the context of leadership may lead to the dilution, rather than the edification of, our better ideas.

As a new Federation became necessary, many of us realized that we, at the Washington Karate Association and those of us following the technical lead of Hayashi-ha Shito –ryu were a rare breed. Without the team work of our organization, the USA NKF would not have been founded and the inclusion of Karate been possible in the USOC or even the IOC. It is no mistake that we don't mind the challenges inherent in doing the right thing...or even the best thing. We spend, as individuals, a lot of time thinking and bringing our real life experiences and expertise to the Karate table. Karate, mind you, is not an end unto itself. The "do" signifies a choice in the matter, however, and it means that the self discipline we spend years developing should act as a platform of empowerment for better things. So, we at the WKA should never be hesitant to extend ourselves a bit. Reach out and learn more. Try something out of your comfort zone. Karate is not about medals or ranks or sport positions. Our medals or our positions do not enhance the world at large, in this person's opinion, unless it gives us a perspective of being a better team player, a better sibling or parent or spouse, for a few examples. Beyond all that nobleness, we have to be prepared for the short run "failures" that accompany bettering our environment. Be prepared to ignore credit, to squelch your ego, if you want to effect real change. I can't recount the times I have bit my tongue as I sat in the same room while another took credit for my project and work. Why did I do it in the first place? To better my community is the answer. If that were true and I obtained that goal, it is better to just keep quiet about the matter lest my ego take precedence over the achievement. It's a strain, I admit it. Stupidity and arrogance have no bounds so it is simply more satisfying to develop your sense of humor.

One of the reoccurring themes in the works that follow in "Zen and the Martial Arts" is the critical element of not being, in a word, delusional. Karate-ka need to have an understanding of Zen to best understand the history of martial arts and how we might choose to develop our skill into truly a 'weaponless weapon'. We must involve our minds in order to rein in the worst instincts. When I hear that someone is more or less infusing Budo ideals into their practice of Karate ("a real budo leader", I am oft told by one eager cult follower or another) , I am often disappointed by the lack of thinking that goes on.

So, we should try to direct and re-direct WKA students, who are already very academically oriented, to take the time to be better informed. We demand articulation, ask about grades in school and try to be advocates in every way but take the credit away from ourselves lest we become the object of undeserved veneration rather than the simple respect derived of experience and information. Let's be wary of charismatic leaders who lack substantive information or haven't a proven record of good works or sustained long relationships. We do not want to propagate cults under the guise of the ever elusive "martial arts" shingle on the door. We do want individual thinkers who collectively understand the value of team work, critical thinking and the importance of time honored ethics and moral character. As karate-ka, we know that we have to control our emotions for fear that they may manifest and hurt someone unduly. But, what about controlling our nature to exploit others? What about the ability to control that part of us that makes us more animal than human? To live small mindedly is to live

dangerously and dwelling in an insular world can easily present a danger to those who might follow our lead.

The Reverend Ming Zhen Shakya uses contemporary examples to put Zen and the Martial Arts in perspective. Some of her essays may not delve on martial arts per se, but the critical thinking certainly is important to the Socratic Method. I hope her observations and conclusions spark dialogue in each of you. Beyond practicing physically, we have loved to spar intellectually at our dojos and it's a tradition in the WKA that I would like to see continue.

Much like the book, *Hidden Leaves*, often considered the classic treatise for Bushido, Ming Zhen Shakya's contemporary approach with modern models, personalities and events of the day, will make sense to Karate-ka who like to reflect upon their world and talk about it with others. Her work simply will make you think and may oblige your offering up your own opinion in the dojo lobby. Finally, it is my hope that her essays may prompt us to reflect upon the reasons we find Karate-do worthwhile and make for a more informed community.

K.T.