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Faceless Beauty:

Non-Japanese Practitioners of Japanese Traditional Arts

For three years I lived in the volcano-rimmed valley known as the Bonchi in Southern Japan. The small city of Miyakonojo sits in the Bonchi just at the base of Mt. Kirishima, the holy mountain where Jimmu, Japan's first Emperor, was born down from Heaven by the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. During my first few months at my new job teaching English at a local high school, I became involved with a karate dojo led by Master Jukoh Hirakawa, and started attending karate classes three nights a week. Soon this "extra-curricular" activity became the main focus of my time in Japan, karate lessons turning to lifestyle choices including Zazen meditation classes on the weekends. At the same time, my karate teacher, Hirakawa Sensei, became more than a teacher, but a life-long mentor.

I believe the reason I had such a deep and dramatic experience in Japan was because of my involvement in the traditional Japanese arts that led me to become a devoted student of Hirakawa Sensei. Through my exposure to the arts of karate, Zazen, shodo and haiku, I began to participate more and more in Japanese culture in what I can only describe as a "faceless" way. This faceless way is known in Japanese as *honne*, and can also be interpreted as an "inner" way.

When I arrived in Japan, I was told that, due to the intensive cultural and linguistic knowledge needed to become “like a Japanese,” it would be a nearly impossible task for a *gaikokujinka*, foreigner, such as myself, to understand and participate in Japanese traditional arts in a *honne* manner. While living in Japan, however, I did find one notable exception to this rather wide-spread belief. After having lived through it, I believe participating in a Japanese traditional art is one of the rare ways a level of faceless participation can be achieved. For example, watching a *Kagura* theatre show will give a non-Japanese only a *tatamae*, a surface or “face-filled” experience of Japanese culture. But dancing the *Kagura* will give her both a literal and figurative mask, behind which her true facelessness, the *honne*, can emerge. By participating in the art form, the participant metaphorically loses her individuality and becomes the form itself. This philosophy allows the Japanese and non-Japanese alike the potential to shed her “face” and take on the form of the art. This type of participation, in my experience, can be most profound.

One of the mantras of living and working in Japan is, “Every situation is different.” For me, getting to glimpse for myself this level of participation and facelessness took years. For some, it doesn’t happen. But I did meet others who, like me, dedicated themselves to studying Japanese traditional arts, and received from that study a new perspective of self and others. These moments of profound community are what I call moments of “faceless beauty,” where one’s personal beauty gives way to the beauty of form found in the art one is performing.

The first time I met my karate master, Hirakawa Sensei, was at a summer Fireworks Festival a few weeks after I arrived in Japan. His karate community had

gathered on the shores of the river near the karate dojo, the place where they practiced karate, to celebrate the festival. Hirakawa Sensei invited me to come to a karate class, and the person who had invited me to the festival told him I'd love to join. So, not long after, I arrived at the dojo for my first class. I didn't go to Japan with the intent of studying karate, and knew very little about martial arts at all when I arrived in Miyakonojo City.

Before my first karate practice started, the mood inside the dojo was similar to what I felt when I met the group at the fireworks festival. People were laughing, joking and telling stories. But as soon as Hirakawa Sensei signaled it was time to begin, everyone stopped talking and took their place in lines inside the dojo. The lines had an order to them. The highest ranks were in the front, leading from left to right facing the altar. So, the highest ranking person was in the front left corner and the lowest rank was in the back right corner. Everyone knew exactly where to go and what to do during the warm up exercises. I stood at the very back of the room and followed along, trying my best to keep up with the person in front on me. During my first practice, I had no idea that three years later, I would be in the front row, with the new people in the dojo following my movements. That first day as I tried my best to follow along, completely lost, I could not have imagined that my relationship with karate would become the life-long journey.

After the warm up exercises, karate practice consisted of lessons given by Hirakawa Sensei in large or small groups. One Japanese word I heard at every karate practice that I really took to heart was *ganbaru*. *Ganbaru* has a variety of English translations, but the one I think of is "persevere." As I would practice, my fellow *karateka*, or karate practitioners, would say to me, "*Ganbatte, ne.*" I learned about *Ganbaru* most of all during my karate tests. During a test, everyone sits in a circle on the

dojo floor. My karate tests began when Hirakawa Sensei or one of the black belts he designated called out my name and I would stand up and walk to the middle of the circle. Then Hirakawa Sensei asked me to perform a certain kata, a choreographed series of movements. And I tried to stand up tall and straight. Then, I bowed and began my performance. I remained in the circle until Sensei asked me to sit down, signaling the end of the test. I had to remain focused and sincere no matter how long or short the test was, or how many times I made a mistake and he asked me to start over.

The aspect of karate tests that I didn't realize at first is that in order for Hirakawa Sensei to have asked me to take the test, I must have already passed it. In this sense, the test was not a true test of my skill at all; Hirakawa Sensei had already tested my skill in practice. Practice is the true and constant test. The “official” test, where I received my stripes and advanced in belt colors, was a test of my perseverance. Those tests were a measurement of one’s spirit of dedication to the art, to the dojo, and to Hirakawa Sensei.

Once I realized this important meaning of karate tests, then the tests were a very different experience for me. I realized that I needed to remember that everyone was watching and judging me during the test, but more than this, I had to forget that everyone is watching and judging. Because, as Hirakawa Sensei told me before a test I was particularly nervous about taking, “Those watching are only watching. And those judging are only judging. There is only one person in the middle. And that person is you. So persevere. Ganbaru.”

Karate is such a deep and complex art, and my experience with it has been similarly profound and complicated. But the essence of my experience in karate, I think, can be said to be as difficult and as easy as Hirakawa Sensei’s advice before my test. For

me, karate is a life-long journey filled with the paradox that there will always be a next test, yet each test will only be taken once it has been passed. As long as I continue to study the art of karate, I know that the more I learn, the more I have to learn.

While the technical skill and knowledge are extremely important in karate, the spirit of Goju-Ryu Karate is what I consider to be the center of my karate experience. This spirit has been translated into words in the Shorei-Kan Doujou Kun, the creed that members of the community vow to follow. This creed is professed at the end of each practice, first spoken by Hirakawa Sensei or a leader he designates, then repeated by the class. The *Doujou Kun* reads:



ShouRei-Kan Creed



shoureikandoujoukun

尚 礼 館 道 場 訓

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 一
Hitotsu
1. | 礼節を尊ぶべし
rei setsu wo toutobu-beshi
You should respect courtesy. |
| 二、
Hitotsu,
2. | 和の心を養うべし
wa no kokoro wo yashinau-beshi
You should cultivate a heart of harmony and peace. |
| 三、
Hitotsu,
3. | 忍耐することを学ぶべし
nin n tai suru koto wo manabu-beshi
You should learn patience. |
| 四、
Hitotsu,
4. | 精進に徹すべし
shoujin ni tessu-beshi
You should keep devoting yourself to your studies. |

- 五、 心と技の一致に努むべし
Hitotsu, kokoro to wazano icchi ni tsutomu-beshi
5. You should strive to maintain a balance between
your spirit and your technique.
- 六、 空手道の信条を暮らしに生かすべし
Hitotsu, karate dou no shinjou wo kurashi ni ikasu-beshi
6. You should strive to make the most effective use of
the Karate Dou's creed in your daily life.

During my time in Hirakawa Sensei's karate dojo, I meditated on the *Doujou Kun* daily. Even now that I live once again in the United States, so very far away from Hirakawa Sensei's Miyakonojo City karate dojo, I continue to strive to understand the meaning of this community creed, and to understand how I can incorporate the spirit of Shorei-Kan Karate into my daily life.

While some Japanese karate dojos are difficult for non-Japanese to join, Hirakawa Sensei is known for welcoming foreigners into his dojo. Over the years, I became good friends with several *gaikokujinka* who came from far and wide to practice in Hirakawa Sensei's Miyakonojo City karate dojo. Hirakawa Sensei has also established karate dojos around the world. During my first year in the karate dojo, a group of black belts from Hirakawa Sensei's dojo in Vancouver, Canada, came to Miyakonojo City to visit. The dojo in Canada belongs to Maurice Pagnucco Sensei, a long-time student of Hirakawa Sensei.

It was amazing to me how seamlessly the Canadian karate students transitioned into our practice in the Japanese dojo. They knew the specific warm-up exercises and executed the complex kata and bunkai, choreographed individual and paired fighting sequences, just as Hirakawa Sensei had taught. Talking with the Canadians over the next

few weeks we spent together, I learned that Hirakawa Sensei had visited their dojo in Canada, and that Maurice Sensei had been a student of Hirakawa Sensei for many years. Maurice Sensei is what is known as a *deshi* of Hirakawa Sensei, the most trusted type of student to a living Master karate teacher. Maurice Sensei strives to teach karate to his students in the same manner and with the same philosophy as Hirakawa Sensei taught him, in the tradition of the Okinawa Goju-Ryu Shorei-Kan style.

While Maurice Sensei and his Canadian students were visiting, Hirakawa Sensei took them to Okinawa for an intensive karate camp. I was able to accompany them and train with them on the beach. As a newcomer *gaikokujinka* to karate, I was so inspired by Maurice Sensei and the Canadian black belts, known as *Shodans*. Most of all, I was truly inspired by Chris Stewart-Candy, the only woman in the group. Since meeting Chris, she has continued to be a source of wisdom and support for me.

After the group from Vancouver left Miyakonojo City, I knew I had found a place for myself in Japan, and continued to practice in Hirakawa Sensei's karate dojo for the three years I was able to remain working in the Bonchi Valley. Once I started practicing karate on a more serious level, I found that I didn't only practice physically in the dojo, but also in my mind when I wasn't at the dojo. I discovered that certain music worked really well in helping me to remember the series of moves in my mind. I would listen to the music and close my eyes, envisioning my own body in my uniform moving through the steps of the karate kata. The best thing about this kind of practice was that after a few years of doing this, I began to lose my fear of entering this other world, the world in my mind. I started to experiment and try new things. I discovered that I could flip over in the

air, fly, and spin around in any direction. I discovered that gravity didn't apply, that my body could become fluid and move by will alone. This was a new perspective for me.

Physical practice at the dojo also gave me a new sense of self and other that I had not experienced in such a way previously. Being in a place where everyone was working toward these common goals created, for me, a place where I could fit in as long as I was also working toward those goals. The fact that I was a foreigner was no longer the most important part of my identity living in Japan. I felt I was a member of Hirakawa Sensei's karate dojo first, and a foreigner second. And when I was with my karate partner performing a bunkai, at least for those brief moments when the form of karate consumed us, we were one unit with two moving parts mirroring each other.

As I advanced in karate, I started to attend Sunday morning Zazen practice as well as the nighttime karate practices. My friend Corinne attended these Zazen practices as well, and they became a time of sharing for us. Corinne was primarily interested in Zazen, and joined the karate dojo as a result of wanting to study meditation when she came to live in Japan. After the traditional meditation led by Hirakawa Sensei, we would practice energy throwing as a group. This exercise involved standing in a circle and learning to feel the Chi'i energy of each person. We also practiced passing Chi'i energy between us, around the circle and across the circle. Hirakawa Sensei taught that Chi'i energy was the force behind the power of both Zazen and karate. Hirakawa Sensei explained that while Zazen is sitting meditation, karate is walking or moving meditation.

After energy throwing, we'd gather for breakfast with Hirakawa Sensei, his wife Michiko San, and the other students at Zazen. The food at Zazen breakfast was always the same: hot rice with sesame seeds and salt, pickled cucumbers and *umeboshi*, sour

plums. Michiko San would make green tea for us to drink at breakfast. She would mix the thick tea in circles using the traditional tea brush until it frothed up. The tea ceremony was also an important part of the Zazen experience because the tea maker moves Chi'i through her body into the tea and we drink it into our body.

Hirakawa Sensei would encourage the practice of Zazen to those who took karate classes because one practice mirrored the other. He also encouraged us to practice other forms of Japanese traditional arts. Corinne practiced *shodo*, Japanese calligraphy. Calligraphy also uses Chi'i energy, and it is connected to karate in that the movement of the body in karate is like the movement a calligraphy master gives to her calligraphy brush.

I started writing haiku at the karate dojo, especially after morning Zazen practice. My first poetry book, [Water and Stone: A Story in Poetry from Japan](#), had recently been published with Japanese translations by Niizaki Mitsue, and I wanted to write my next collection all in bilingual haiku. Many of these haiku came to me during my meditation sessions, with subjects ranging from tea ceremony to karate to calligraphy. Through this type of practice, I was able to better understand the close relationship between different forms of Japanese traditional arts.

I had been living in Miyakonojo City for three years when my work contract expired, and I had to return to the United States. After being so immersed in my Japanese artistic community, returning to the United States was a shock. I felt ripped away from the daily interaction I had with my friends at the karate dojo, my participation in traditional Japanese arts, especially karate, and the leadership of Hirakawa Sensei and his wife, Michiko San. For a while after leaving Japan, I felt quite empty inside, except for a

distinct feeling of *natsukashii*. *Natsukashii* is a feeling of nostalgia for times gone by, which wells up inside us, and we are filled with emotion. More than a sentiment, *natsukashii* floods the body and if we close our eyes, we can transport back to a certain time, a moment of feeling in the past.

It took many months before I was able to see that my transition back to life in the United States was the continuation of my journey with Japan, not the end of it. And, I realized that I had to let go of the past in order to form a new vision of the role karate and traditional Japanese arts could play in my life. A few years after I returned from Japan to the United States, I took the first step on this new journey by traveling to Vancouver, Canada, to visit Chris Stewart-Candy and attend a training practice at Maurice Sensei's karate dojo. I had not seen Chris or Maurice Sensei since our time together in Japan, years before. I was nervous if I would still fit into the karate community, and if the karate community would accept me back after such a long absence.

My friend Corinne was also joining us for karate practice in Vancouver. The last time I saw Corinne was on my final day in Japan, when she and Hirakawa Sensei took me to the airport to fly back to the United States, three years earlier. Corinne had continued living in Miyakonojo City, but had only recently returned to her hometown in Ottawa, Canada. As soon as I met up with Chris and Corinne in Vancouver, my fears disappeared and I felt an immediate connection. We spent the drive out to Maurice Sensei's karate dojo reminiscing about our time together in Japan, and caught up on each other's busy lives.

When Chris, Corinne and I arrived at Maurice Sensei's karate dojo outside Vancouver, he greeted us at the door and welcomed us in. What struck me the most when

I walked into Maurice Sensei's dojo was that the room was nearly an exact replica of Hirakawa Sensei's dojo in Japan. It had the same photos, similar placement of objects, and was made of similar materials. Most importantly, it had the feeling of the karate dojo I had spent so much time in while living in Japan.

There were five students in the class that night, and as we warmed up, I realized the moves were the same as I had learned in Japan. As we practiced, the focus and intent felt the same, and the *kata* and *bunkai* were executed the same way. During the six hours of practice to follow over the next two days, I saw in Maurice Sensei so much of his teacher and my teacher, Hirakawa Sensei. Maurice Sensei's way of teaching was so similar to Hirakawa Sensei that I felt Hirakawa Sensei could have been in the room.

At one point, we did call Japan on Skype and were able to have a video conference with Hirakawa Sensei, Michiko San, and my karate partner, Tomoko, from the dojo in Miyakonojo City. So, in a way, we were all together in the same room. It was so heartfelt for me to again be an active part of this international karate community. This extended practice in Vancouver was an extremely important one for me because during the time I spent at Maurice Sensei's dojo, I came to better understand more of what true devotion to karate means to me.

After our two days of practices, I was able to interview Chris and Corinne about what karate means to them. I was interested to know more about how they came to practice karate, what they thought of Hirakawa Sensei, and how they felt about our international karate community, considering they had also practiced in both the Japanese and Vancouver dojos.

Chris Stewart-Candy joined Maurice Sensei's dojo in 1998. At the time, she was already a *Shodan*, a black belt, with ten years of experience in Shorei-Kan Karate, but was looking into joining a different karate community. She happened to be sitting on a park bench with her husband when he pointed out that he saw a karate class in the community center gym. When Chris looked inside, she saw the Shorei-Kan logo hanging in front of the class. She said of the chance encounter, "I was completely mystified; I thought I'd trained in every Shorei-Kan dojo in the lower mainland yet I'd never heard of this one. I went inside and Maurice introduced himself to me. He invited me to train at his dojo and I have ever since."

The reason Chris has stayed so long in this karate dojo is because of her teacher, Maurice Pagnucco. "Maurice is not just a Sensei to his students, but a friend," Chris said of her teacher. "He is not arrogant or self serving. Maurice is a dedicated karate practitioner and a good-hearted human being." Chris said that she appreciates Maurice Sensei's patience and thoroughness as a teacher, "He offers great instruction and encouragement, and keeps an optimistic, respectful atmosphere in his dojo."

Although Chris has been involved in karate since the late 1980's, the first time she was able to visit Japan was in the Spring of 2002, when I first met her at Hirakawa Sensei's dojo. Chris went to Japan for the purpose of training with Hirakawa Sensei, and ate and slept in the karate dojo, which is on the top floor of Hirakawa Sensei's house. Of her karate experience in Japan, Chris said, "It was great; a real sense of being at the nerve center of Shorei-Kan. It almost felt like a pilgrimage."

At the heart of her experience in Japan was her time training with Hirakawa Sensei. When asked what she thinks of him, Chris said, "Hirakawa Sensei is essentially a

karate genius. But the cool thing about him is that he possesses no ego. He's very humble, kind and is a dedicated teacher. He possesses a true karate heart."

When we talked about Hirakawa Sensei, I found that Chris and I had very similar feelings about our time spent learning from him. Chris said of her experience in Hirakawa Sensei's Japanese dojo, "It was amazing. All of us learned so much. Sometimes the language barrier posed some communication glitches but we always worked them out. Hirakawa Sensei is a brilliant karate practitioner, plain and simple. His understanding of karate is at a level that few of us will ever come close to. Having him teach us was an honor. He packed so much knowledge into our heads. He was always pushing us – sometimes almost like a drill sergeant. It was exhausting at times, but we were rewarded with new skills and improved technique."

Since I found the two dojos to be incredibly similar, I wanted to know more about what Chris thought of the actual practices held in Japan, as compared to her Canadian dojo practices. "Structurally, classes were similar, but Hirakawa Sensei's classes did have their own unique flavor. Having classes run late into the night was different. Also, many classes were followed by a long social tea drinking session that would also go quite late. But the conversations were so interesting and mentally stimulating that the time would fly by."

Chris told me that she practices karate for "self improvement on many levels," including self defense, physical and mental strengthening, self discipline, improvement of coordination, balance of spirituality and logic, improvement in the ability to work with others, and improvement of adaptability, confidence and creativity. When asked if she

will continue karate in the future, Chris said, “Karate will always be a part of my life. I may periodically need to take breaks from it but will always return.”

Like Chris, I want always for karate to be a part of my life. Being able to again be part of the karate community I was so connected to in Japan meant a lot to me. It was even more special because my dear friend Corinne Baumgarten was able to come to Vancouver from Ottawa to be a part of the karate practice as well. Corinne first went to live and work in Japan in 2003 and stayed until 2007. One of the things Corinne was planning to do while in Japan was study Zazen meditation. We met when the International Center of Miyakonojo City gave her my name as a contact for Zazen meditation classes at Hirakawa Sensei’s karate dojo. I met Corinne and took her with me to karate class, but after watching for a lesson, she wasn’t really interested in joining the karate dojo.

However, after the lesson, Corinne was able to speak with Hirakawa Sensei through a translator about her desire to study Zazen meditation. Hirakawa Sensei invited her to come and meditate on Sunday mornings with him. “Hirakawa Sensei also explained to me the origins of karate and how it was spread by the monks who needed to be able to protect themselves while spreading the Buddhist message,” Corinne said of that first meeting with Hirakawa Sensei. “And he explained that while Zazen is sitting meditation, karate is moving meditation. So, after talking with him, I was convinced and joined the karate dojo.”

For Corinne, her first experience with karate practice was difficult because she had no idea what she was doing and didn't understand what was going on. Of her first practice, Corinne said, “Hirakawa Sensei's wife, Michiko San, was teaching me on my

first lesson and she kept telling me over and over, ‘Chigau,’ meaning I was doing it wrong. So, that combined with the stress of my work and lonely life brought me to tears and I couldn't help breaking down right there in class. I was just going to go home but [Michiko San] insisted I go downstairs into their home. She talked to me in broken English about her life, gave me tea and tried to make me feel better. In the end I did feel better and went back to karate practice.”

Over the years, Corinne became close with the Hirakawas and members of the karate dojo. “They became like a sort of family to me. It was a great way to get to know people and develop a community,” she said.

What attracted Corinne to karate most was the *Zazen* aspect, along with the physical aspect. “I like the grace involved. I like to watch how my body slowly learns these moves that look so difficult at first,” Corinne said of karate. “And I liked how students taught other students and everyone was very community-minded. I liked the time after the lesson when it was snack/social time. And the extension of the community into *onsen* [hot spring] social expeditions and parties. It was a link to other people in the community to make friends.”

Corinne also felt a deep respect for Hirakawa Sensei. “He's an amazing man and teacher who has dedicated his life to karate, this original Okinawan form,” Corinne said of her teacher. “So many people have learned and been inspired by [Hirakawa Sensei]. He wants to bring the true spirit of karate to the world.”

Practicing alongside Corinne in Maurice Sensei's Vancouver dojo was an amazing experience for me because I could tell we both felt definite similarities to our practices with Hirakawa Sensei in Japan. Of the Vancouver karate practice, Corinne said,

“The similar thing was the sense of community and students all helping each other to perfect their skills. The difference was that [the Vancouver practice] was in English and the exercises were individually done, whereas in Japan we sometimes helped each other.”

Corinne and I both feel that if we lived in the Vancouver area, we’d be overjoyed to join Maurice Sensei’s dojo. But since we live far from a Hirakawa dojo, we are left to practice on our own, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Asked if she’d join a different karate dojo in her hometown, Corinne said, “There aren’t any dojos with the same mentality that Hirakawa Sensei has, or any that I know of, so it just wouldn’t be the same. I’m not sure that I’d like it without that same mentality of Zazen and community.”

I feel similar to Corinne, and am still looking for a local karate or Zazen community to join with a similar atmosphere to Hirakawa Sensei’s dojo. It can be a challenge to practice a community activity in isolation. But what helps is knowing the community still exists for us, both in Miyakonojo City, Japan, and Vancouver, Canada, where we are welcome. My hope is that I will continue to belong to the Goju-Ryu Shorei-Kan community, and that my journey with the Japanese traditions of karate, Zazen, shodo, and haiku will be a life-long practice of evolving beauty.

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