

Five-and-a-Half Years Along the Way

by Ryan Libel

An essay presented to Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura, Nidaime Akira Nakamura, Jun Shihan Nancy Lanoue, Kyoshi Sarah Ludden, and the worldwide Seido Karate and Thousand Waves communities

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Osu Kaicho, Osu Nidaime, Osu Jun Shihan Nancy, Osu Kyoshi Sarah! Thank you for the opportunity to present for the rank of kari-shodan in the World Seido Karate Organization.

Thousand Waves is such a special place. It is impossible for me to convey all that our school means to me. I humbly offer thanks to our entire community, but wish to make special mention of teachers who have offered so much of themselves over the course of my five and a half years of training:

To Jun Shihan Nancy and Kyoshi Sarah – the sacrifices you make to create a space where we are all welcome and where we can all come to strive with patience are not lost on me nor on anyone who trains at Thousand Waves. You are the best teachers I have ever had, and I value you both more than I could ever say.

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To my parents, who gave me my first love-filled community and who instilled in me the values of hard-work and compassion, two values without which a practice of karate is impossible.

And most of all,

To Michael Moss, my partner in everything this universe has to offer.

The supreme deity said, “Arjuna, in the centre of the heart of all beings their lord stands still, mechanically revolving all creatures through his magical power. Go with your whole being to him alone for refuge; through his grace you will reach supreme peace, eternal home.”

—from The Bhagavad Gita

Arjuna is a great warrior in the midst of a great internal crisis; his destiny is to lead the fight in his people’s epic existential struggle. But he desires none of it, believing, as many do, in the inherent vicious circle of violence. The supreme deity quoted above argues passionately with Arjuna, attempting to help the warrior realize that fighting his destiny is not the noble path; fulfilling one’s obligations to self, society, and god are the strongest components of right action in this world.

With Arjuna’s struggle as an ancient, mythical backdrop, in this essay I am going to discuss the broad topic of maturity on two main levels: the first deals with my physical practice of Seido Karate and some areas in which it has helped me grow; the second deals with the evolution of my worldview over the past five and a half years in much broader terms. In my discussion of the physical, I will encompass technique and partnerships, while in my discussion of my worldview I will primarily deal with violence and my shift away from binary thinking.

I. The Physical Practice

Anyone who shows up at Thousand Waves and participates in karate classes on a relatively regular basis for five and a half years, as I have, will make immense improvements in their physical well-being. They will also, inevitably, progress in the physical techniques of karate. The basic blocks are a great example; the two-arms-working-together concept comes over time; what begins as two independent movements with flailing limbs each unrelated to the other becomes, with practice, a powerful downward block. A dangling foot from a practitioner’s

first front-kick becomes a well-formed ball-of-foot weapon. These types of improvements are a natural outgrowth of time spent in the art. For me personally (though not for all), so is using that ball of foot weapon to break some boards. For me personally, there is nothing too special about this kind of improvement; it is a marker of maturity in the art, to be sure, but it is not anything extraordinary, it is just one marker on a path that some of us start walking down. Walk far enough and anyone can get there.

Techniques such as downward block and front kick practiced mechanically in the air are the building blocks, however, of parts of my art where, for me, maturation is more will-based than automatic. It was really in my first self-defense partner exercises at white belt that karate started revealing its potential to help me grow in ways beyond the physical.

I never used to enjoy working in groups much. I have always found myself to be reasonably competent and mostly capable of tackling tasks on my own; in fact I have often viewed others' participation as getting in the way of what I already know needs to be done. In the practice of karate, however, my "solo" type thinking has been revealed to be completely hollow. If I punch, what am I punching? If I block, what am I blocking? On the level I'm speaking of here, karate, when practiced as the fighting art that it is, encompasses a basic truth about our physical universe - action and reaction. Outside of basics practice in karate class, I have no need to block or to punch unless I have been attacked.

Enter the attack. At first, I felt completely incompetent at sparring. I still feel that it is a weakness of my art, but it is also the area in which I have been able to observe the greatest maturation in my physical practice, at least since green belt. Though it is our first kata series that bears the name "Taikyoku" – which means "taking the wide view" - I believe sparring has been

the key to my development of a much greater sense of awareness of the world around me. Not long after becoming a green belt, I came to the dojo for a lunch-time class. There were only three of us who turned out for that class, and something I can no longer remember prevented us from having a senpai teacher that day. I was the middle student in seniority, and the other student was perhaps a brown belt while the third was a newer blue-belt. The brown belt ran our class, and we did quite a bit of sparring for some reason. What I do remember well about that day is what the blue belt said afterward, "You guys just move so fast." At the time I puffed up a bit, probably failing to recall in that moment of pride that I felt the exact same way when I first started watching my seniors spar.

My main point here is that in sparring, techniques first learned slowly, in the air, must and will mature. Mechanical repetition from basics practice enables us finally to deploy our basic strikes and blocks in novel combinations as we move free-form around another person. We must become faster too; there is really no choice about that! And most importantly, we are presented with live targets - a punch in the air is really meaningless; but landing one on a person reveals what we are really working toward in our practice. Karate cannot be practiced entirely by ourselves; we must have training partners if we are to improve.

Working with partners in sparring and other choreographed exercises has, for me, completely changed my view of working with others in contexts beyond the dojo as well. I have truly come to believe what I used to actually poke fun at in my head. The notion that we all have something to learn from everyone else in the world is probably taught from pre-school. I'm sure I'm not alone in my former lack of real belief in this idea. I now know it to be completely true. We all bring different strengths and weaknesses to our sparring, and no two rounds are alike. I have written before about my difficulties in sparring children, and over the past year I have come

a long way in my feelings on this subject. For those children who are not quite up to the level of sparring that many adults are, I try to view sparring them as an opportunity to learn how to teach. Teaching karate is not something I have a lot of experience with, so these rounds allow me to explore physical ways I can demonstrate or convey fighting concepts to my partner. Of course many children are excellent fighters and can give many adults a great fight. These kids teach me a lot about staying mobile. I too am challenged by my less-than-average stature, and by watching children successfully come in on me and score I learn more about effective strategy for small people (staying inside, deploying effective combinations). On the other hand, I am still occasionally frustrated by children and adult fighters who are fearful of making contact. Lately, I have been working on a similar teaching strategy with adults as I described with the kids. I might act, for example, as if their punch which really failed to land close at all didn't even happen. These are examples of successes. I still have a long way to go; one area of continuing frustration for me is when this same "teaching" strategy is turned back on me by my seniors. My frustration when these types of silent lessons are being taught to me comes up when I don't understand the message. I have actually stopped a couple of rounds to ask what my senpai would like to see me doing. Many times in sparring these days I am working with a discrete goal in my head, and often the feedback from a senpai is not relevant to my goal. I try to acknowledge their efforts at helping, but admit that sometimes I feel a bit short-changed.

The dynamism of sparring partnerships is just like any interaction we have in life; we will always be thrown together with people, some of whom we love engaging and others whom we would rather not. As an example, I have long been stymied by poor customer service experiences, unnecessarily allowing them to impact my happiness. I truly think it's been over a year since I've allowed that to happen. I'm working right now on resolving an insurance billing

dispute over routine blood work. I have made at least five phone calls to the blood work lab, and at least five to my insurance company. I have not once lost my cool on any of these calls. I truly believe that in the past this situation would have caused me a great deal of anger and frustration. I believe that my work with partnerships in the dojo has allowed me to see that most people try to do their best. Customer service representatives deal with many angry people, and they don't make a lot of money. These two facts have allowed me to better see their side of our encounter. In my job running a citizenship preparation program for immigrants, I come into contact with an astonishing variety of people from many different backgrounds. Communication is a constant struggle. My ideas about better learning how to teach through difficult encounters sparring children certainly apply in my vocational context too. Difficult interactions help us grow.

More often than not we do not have choices about entering into these encounters; we can only choose how to behave once we are involved in them. In the dojo, we must take all partners as they come via the rotation of the lines. In customer service experiences, there is no choosing the "next available" operator who will take my call. I certainly can't turn away difficult students from my state-funded citizenship program! Like Arjuna, we can choose to take part in our destiny, or ignore it and suffer the consequences (ignorance is the root of suffering in Arjuna's world, and many times the same is true of our world too). Too often still I have a negative view of some types of encounters that fall into the "would rather not" realm, but I also know that I have come a long way.

II. Worldview

My worldview is something I consider frequently. Someone said the unexamined life isn't worth living, and while I won't say that, for me I can't imagine not thinking the big

questions through every once in a while! On a foundational level, my worldview underwent a complete transformation when I broke from the religion of my youth in my late teens and became an agnostic for logical reasons, and an atheist for all practical purposes. The distance that change has put between me and my family has been significant. We have recovered in many respects, but there is still and there will always be a distance there caused by our radically different worldviews.

I find it heartening, however, that regardless of worldview, we can almost all come together on the golden rule, and it is my firm belief that most moral and ethical problems can be handled in view of the simple notion of treating others as we wish to be treated. This concept is likely dearly held in all world religions in one way or another. I will state firmly that I do not consider myself a Buddhist (nor do I consider Buddhism a religion per se), but as I've studied a fair amount about Buddhism over the course of my karate practice, I have begun to ground my ideas about the golden rule in the Buddhist notion that the self is not all-important. Buddhists generally consider the self to be an illusion, but I cannot go that far. In my world, the self is a series of neural activations in our heads, and as such it is a physical entity, a part of our bodies, made of stuff not unlike the earth, made of stuff not unlike the stars.

Buddhism strongly supports the idea of the interconnectedness of the entirety of the universe, and I too believe that from a logical standpoint universal interconnectedness is difficult to refute. I am no chaos mathematician, but I do know that our actions impact our world, and that the sun's rays and the Arctic winds do too.

Violence is something that also impacts our world. I am grateful that my parents instilled in me a strong aversion to violence. I was not given toy guns to play with much at all as a young

child. My two younger sisters and I were sheltered from much media violence into our early teens. Our household was completely free from abuse of any kind, and I know how lucky I am to be able to say that. It is a testament to the worldview of my parents. But one early point when I realized my anti-violence beliefs ran particularly deep was in the consideration of the death penalty. Though I was raised in a culture that strongly favored it (my social group as well as broader US culture), I realized at about age fifteen that it is a form of terrible violence. Many portions of my current worldview spun out of that early dissonance between what I thought was the belief system of most people I associated with at the time and this insistence that we need to kill those who have killed others. Somewhat quickly after my worldview began to crumble, my views on this subject led to my broader lack of acceptance of much dogma in any area of my life. It's not that I don't think we should have rules, but rules that hurt people should be carefully reconsidered. A rule that does not follow from the golden rule is one with which I am likely to take issue. I am a passionate advocate for the worldwide elimination of the death penalty. Imperfect judicial systems created by imperfect governments made up of imperfect people should never impose such a final penalty. It is a source of pain to me that so many people in my country disagree with me on this point.

Thousand Waves' practice of self-defense includes an "ethic of least harm," which I have found to be perfectly compatible with my worldview. If a dangerous situation presents itself, I am going to try to only do enough damage to stop the situation. This concrete statement of an ethical principle can be applied to society too. Once a dangerous person is in custody, there is nothing much they can do to anyone. I think it's easy to see that the ethic of least harm demonstrates that killing them is not going to really improve anyone else's life. Storytellers throughout time have shown us that vengeance is a vicious circle.

Arjuna is a great warrior. He is, however, convinced of the cycle of violence. His lot is to choose to fight and fulfill his destiny, or to sit on the sidelines and live an inconsequential life. I am a karate-ka. I too believe in the cycle of violence. I have, however, landed on a path on which one of my favorite things to do is to punch and kick people, and to have them punch and kick me back. What can I make of this seemingly irreconcilable contradiction?

I have started to realize that the answer lies in trying to eliminate binary ways of thinking. As a person who fancies himself governed by empiricism and logic, this is exceedingly difficult for me. Western ideals promote right/wrong, black/white, night/day, on/off, one/zero, male/female. Neural research by people like Eric Kandel, however, has long demonstrated that “all or nothing” is not really hard-wired into our brains. It’s also simply and famously demonstrably not true of that last binary; there are far more intersex people born naturally than most people care to think about. But we as humans do seem to have a penchant for categorization - we like people to check boxes for gender, race, marital status, etc. Clean lines make us happy. But what I’ve started to realize is that the lines are convenient, but they are not reality. Lines help give us ways to talk about the world, but they don’t line up with it entirely. They also divide. They also impose their will on others.

I’ve learned over time that the more we become familiar with one another, the more we realize that we have much in common. Most people share common, positive goals for themselves and their families. Trusting in the good intentions of most people allows us to find common ground. This is something that I’ve struggled with greatly. In a society which grants some people fully inclusive status and denies it to others, I seek to blame somebody. I want to point to a group and say, for example, “If it weren’t for them, I could be married.” I find it hard to know how to change a system if we can’t start by looking at who is to blame for the current

problem. But is that really helpful? I am working on moving away from a confrontational approach to my view of the problems of the world. I don't believe such approaches are very helpful, and they can even hurt others I care about. Changing my approach to the problems of the world has not been easy for me, and I fail time and time again. I still make broad statements that lack perspective, or I argue when listening would be the better choice. But I am improving incrementally with age, and I think that improvement indicates some degree of maturation.

Arjuna's dilemma has to do with his destiny - he was born to be a great warrior. One problem for me in attempting to analogize to my life from Arjuna's is that I don't really believe in destiny. I mostly think we are a product of our circumstances, of our biology, and perhaps of our personal proclivities. If someone wants to say that is destiny, then fine, but understand that I don't ascribe to it a conscious, external force acting on my life - the destiny of which I speak is simply the whirling of the universe. Destiny as most people use it implies some intentional, eternal significance that I simply can't ascribe to the little chunks of matter that we call Ryan Libel or Barack Obama or Joe the Plumber.

The Supreme Deity tells Arjuna "in the centre of the heart of all beings their lord stands still, mechanically revolving all creatures through his magical power." Now I'm going to go off the deep end for some people. Anyone who knows me well knows I'd be a liar if I didn't acknowledge that my karate is there, in my heart. Of course "Lord" is not the word I would choose, but I find it nearly impossible to articulate what I'm attempting to convey here, so why not. It does speak to that part of my path that I don't fully understand.

I have been thinking a good deal recently about my view that the practice of karate has some things built into it that are not fully visible to its practitioners. The stories that went into

the creation of our forms, the philosophical systems inherent in the foundations of many martial ways, they are subtly built into the practice of the art, and they effect change within those who practice it. This is feeling, this is ephemeral, this is not concrete, and this is nothing I can prove. For me, it's probably that space most people call faith.

I want also to make it clear that if I'm calling this thing that mechanically revolves me "lord," then it's a very multi-faceted lord. Part of it is my karate-do, part of it is my loving partnership with Michael. Part of it is my relationship with my friends and family, and part of it is my vocation. These things all come together to form my path. What is interesting is how "right" it seems to me that I have landed on my karate-do.

On one level, I feel like karate is something I have to do – I'm not sure of the degree to which choice enters into the picture! As a person who believes strongly in the interconnectedness of all the matter and forces in the universe, I have an aversion to ascribing choice to the actions of individuals anyway. I don't want to open that can of worms up too much, but for that reason I hope it's clear that I don't really take a lot of credit for being at this spot on my karate path. Most of those who have read this far will have heard from many people (including me) over the years the same story of walking through the doors of Thousand Waves and finding a home in our practice of Seido karate unlike any they could have imagined.

In reading over all I have written above, what stands out most about the way my karate-do has helped me mature is the degree to which it has increased my perspective. When I think about the rich heritage of Seido Karate and that of Thousand Waves, I am greatly humbled. In the locker-room the other day a newer white belt responded to another student's question by saying something like, "Ryan's been here forever!" I remember thinking to myself, "No, Kyoshi

Martha has been here forever, me, just a little over five years!” I know now that five and a half years is just a beginning.