Empty hands?
Karate and the Use of Weapons

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SANDAN THESIS
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“Karate-do is an empty handed art of self defence in which the arms and legs are systematically trained and an enemy attacking by surprise can be controlled by a demonstration of strength like that of using actual weapons.”

Nakayama 1987
Empty Hands?

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Introduction

When I was thinking about what subject to pick for this work I remembered that there are katas where there are moves which simulate using a weapon, for example, catching and striking with a bo in Jitte. I also thought about various open days where I had been involved in chair and knife defence, and where martial arts weapons such as the sai have been demonstrated.

What I could not escape was the fact that karate literally means ‘empty hand’, a distinction introduced by the founder of modern karate Sensei Gichin Funakoshi. This inquiry does not challenge that; it seeks to understand from a personal standpoint how weapons fighting systems relate to karate as an unarmed martial art.

I then read that our leading karate sensei Hirokazu Kanazawa is known to have had a keen interest in Okinawan weapons methods (known as kobudo). He states:

“……I believe that people should train in both kobudo and karate. Many weapons are part of the karate family. In the old days, people studied bo, sai, nunchaku, jo, kama, tonfa and other weapons as part of karate training. Now they are seen as separate, but it should not be like this. I think that karate-ka should be familiar with many weapons. I believe that this is part of karate.” (Shotokan Karate Magazine, 1988)

My jaw dropped.

It dropped a little further when it also became clear that Sensei Funakoshi also had an interest in weapons. This is evident from these images:

(Photos of Gichin Funakoshi with Bo and Sai)
Karate-Do and Okinawan Kobudo

Going back in time it is understood that Okinawa benefited uniquely from its location as a trading post between Japan and South East Asia whereby certain martial arts methods found their way to the islands merging with local fighting techniques.

It also seems that methods of empty hand fighting and adaptation of working/farming tools as weapons were refined under the various bans on weapons that existed in Okinawa at different times. The latter are collectively known as Okinawan Kobudo. Both these methods were conducted in secret to avoid the attention of the ruling forces and developed in parallel.

Other similarities include training in a dojo under a master or sensei, etiquette and respect, grading systems, training drills and so on. Each weapons system has techniques and katas that have a feel and form that reflect karate.

I also draw parallels with the fact that seemingly harmless objects – the hands and the feet for karate and everyday tools such as an oar or simple stick or staff for kobudo – are used as a defence system against ‘proper’ weapons such as the sword or spear.

In a karate article on this subject Sensei Tadashi Yamashita – an accomplished karate and kobudo master – says that "Okinawan karate and weapons are like brother and sister - they complement each other." (Stricker, 1998).

A Personal Note on Karate-Do

Notwithstanding the above Sensei Funakoshi was clear to define his chosen art as karate-do. This distinguished it from the former name which literally meant Chinese hands and alluded to Chinese boxing. The term he introduced literally meant ‘way of the empty hand’ and again separately defined it from other styles of “jutsu” or technique. Nakayama clarifies this meaning by stating,

“….to make any effective use of these techniques, the spiritual aspect of this art of self defence must be recognised and must play the predominant role.” (Nakayama 1987)

In other words karate-do is a “way” having a much deeper meaning than just training, style, gaining belts or even winning against an opponent. For me karate-do is a personal journey for each individual – each of us has our own battle to fight; we all face setbacks, obstacles and difficulties, but the defining quality of good karate-ka are about how they face those problems with a ‘karate mind’.
Weapons

1. The Bo

*History:* The bo derives from an everyday utility called a tenbin. This is a wooden support which is held across the shoulders and used to suspend items such as buckets of water, food or other packed items.

*Form and Methods of Use:* It is usually made of Oak and the standard length of 6 feet gives it its Japanese name of *rokushaku* bo. The most common bo type today is round with tapered ends. Its solid form and length made it extremely effective against swordsmen. The bo can be used jabbing at either end or striking in a swinging motion. It can also be used defensively parrying, blocking or trapping.
Of particular interest Sensei Kanazawa (opposite) produced two bo katas in the 1970s: Kanazawa No Bo Dai and Kanazawa No Bo Sho. Sensei Seamus O’Dowd is one of the leading western exponents of these katas and also has demonstrated the use of the bo in Jitte.

2. The Sai

History: The sai while normally associated with the island Okinawa, is thought to be of Chinese origin. It is believed to have evolved from a pitch fork for carrying bales of hay. There are variations of this weapon that seem to have been used much like a police truncheon. Indeed, it was used as such in the 17th Century Okinawa.

Form and Methods of Use: It is usually metal in construction. Its points are dulled and can be used for prodding. It was used to stab, block, trap and punch. Practitioners often carried a sai in each hand, and a "spare" at the belt. The weapon could also be thrown. The shorter side prongs made it effective for catching and trapping long reach weapons such as the sword and bo. The sai tends to be used in pairs which means that practitioners must be effective in its use for both left and right hands.

3. Kama (Sickle)

History: The kama is a harvesting tool used for cutting and collecting grass and rice. Being a bladed instrument it is not difficult to imagine this being a quite deadly weapon.
Form and Methods of Use: Like the sai, the kama is most often used in pairs cutting from side to side, from underneath, or from above. Its handle is most often made of wood which makes it a much lighter weapon than a sai. In close range fighting, the sickle could be used to trap an opponent's weapon, or for striking. Techniques include circular movements which involve blocking and countering.

4. **Tonfa (Side Handle Baton)**

History: Originally a bean or rice grinder, the tonfa's circular movements as a farm implement evolved into its rotating strikes as a weapon.

Form and Methods of Use: The side of the tonfa was used for blocking, and the ends for direct punches. The tonfa was developed as a weapon by the Okinawans, specifically for use in conjunction with karate. Two tonfas were often used simultaneously, and were very efficient against armed assailants.

The tonfa while an ancient weapon, as a baton, has been the popular weapon of choice for many modern law enforcement for many years due to its versatility.
The Karate Kata

Weapons Bunkai

I believe that almost any kata could be adapted to have a weapons bunkai. For example with the kata Gankaku this includes a combined side block followed by a grasping block which could be conceived as dealing with a knife attack.

It also has moves which would be very effective for use with a bo or sai – particularly the various manji uke techniques which would involve very effective blocking, sweeping and striking with the said weapons – see below:

Kata Examples

Below are some visual examples of moves and the kata they are most closely related to.

1. The bo utilising one of the key moves in Meikyo
2. Here is a tonfa, kama and sai in some the characteristic moves of Sochin
3. The following picture shows the signature move of *Kanku Sho* with the sai

4. Here *Heian Yondan* and *Kanku Dai* moves also with tonfa

5. *Bassai Dai* with Kama
Modern Day Weapons

I was tempted when writing this to talk about pepper spray, guns, tasers – the sorts of things a modern law enforcement, security or military personnel might use. But perhaps with inspiration from Okinawan kobudo (and little tongue in cheek) I thought about what everyday things might be used as a weapon. As karateka we use our hands and feet – but how about our imagination. What might that lead to? Here are some things that might be used as weapons

- Aerosol spray: Into an opponents eyes/face to confuse and disorientate.

- Desk top tools: Tape dispenser, stapler – could be thrown to stop an attacker or reach an attacker at distance.

- A newspaper: A tightly rolled newspaper: this can be used to parry a knife attack. Striking to the side of the head or ears can be very effective.

- A jacket: Can be used to defend against a knife attack concealing your true position and hooking the knife.

- A bottle of water. Can be thrown as would be heavy if full or even sprayed to disorientate an opponent.

I look at this as thinking with a ‘karate mind’. By applying your self defence knowledge imaginatively and creatively - who knows? It could get you out of a tight spot one day or just keep you amused in thought as you pass the time.
Conclusion

In a way I have set myself up to face the following criticism:

*Why discuss weapons when karate is an unarmed martial art?*

In true karate style I have defended my position with examples from masters past and present; drawing parallels with karate and kobudo; and a discussion of weapons bunkai with karate kata.

For me the circle is completed by the suggestion that karate-do and kobudo (although distinct disciplines) can be seen as a defensive state of mind where, by using your imagination, everyday items can become weapons – whether this is just your hands or feet or an item you might use in your daily life.

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