

# HOME TRAINING – THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING ALONE & IT'S BENEFITS

By Dr Wolf Herbert.

*“Being able to train alone is a sign of maturity, of coming to terms with oneself.”*

*Stan Schmidt.*

Due to the Corona-pandemic we are supposed to stay at home and reduce our social contacts and keep a distance from others. Many Dojo are closed. Many Karateka are therefore confined to home-training. This calls for quite a change of training routines, but also offers numerous positive possibilities. I shall not comment on the plenty of instructional videos for home-training, which can be found on YouTube. I shall rather pen some reflections in regard to training for oneself.

To train alone is in many ways a reversal of the manner we usually learn(t) Karate. We get instructions from a Sensei, follow commands, imitate the more advanced students and teachers and hone our skills in regulated sparring sessions.

We are told how to stand, move, breathe, use our limbs and body centre. The Sensei corrects, exhorts, criticizes and praises us. We see ourselves mostly from the outside through the eyes of others. We attend training in order to meet our friends, to enjoy the companionship, or sometimes to please our peers, parents or the Sensei for showing up. We strive to obtain the next higher rank or to be successful in competitions. If that is so (and there is nothing wrong with it), one is, what is called “extrinsically” motivated. One is dependent on others, who pat one on the back and tell one how good one is or which level one has reached.

The teacher is the authority – and in a traditional Japanese context – the unquestioned authority. Independent thinking or analysis are not encouraged, nor is – *horribile dictu* – critical reflection.

Once you train alone, the authority is you! You are in total control of every move you make. Nobody tells you what to do, but you yourself. You need, what is called “intrinsic” motivation to train.

There are many legitimate reasons why one practices Karate. It is an art, a self-defence system, a health program, a sport, a way of self-cultivation, or character building, a mental and even spiritual exercise, and more. To be “intrinsically” motivated means to become inwardly clear about what drives you and why you do Karate. If this motivation is not strong enough, you will cease to train.

When you work out alone, there is no personal trainer standing at your side. He is inside you. This state is called autonomy.



*Author: Dr Wolf Herbert 5th Dan SKIF. Tekki (can be performed nicely on the spot without stepping, as I learnt from Naka-sensei!). A great way to practice alone: outdoor training.*

It might be what Stan Schmidt in the opposite quote meant with “maturity.” I maintain that training alone can be done at any stage of progress, even as a beginner, but more so and crucially as an advanced adept. Personally, I come from a family of musicians and played the violin for many years before I took up Karate. Regular daily practice as the key to progress was a “natural” notion for me. A certain time was set aside every day and – as kid often enough reluctantly – I practiced. And then I experienced how my fingers began to move more quickly and naturally, the tunes became a whole and the technical aspect became secondary over expression and interpretation. I hated to play mere études, but always had my showpieces, which I loved and played for the sheer beauty of them.

Today I do Karate and Kata for the same reason. It was the aesthetic aspect of the bodily cultivation in Karate which had attracted me to it in the first place. I could then easily transfer the experience of my musical training to Karate. It taught me discipline, patience and the virtue of

habitual drill. You will acquire that, when you train alone.

It does need a certain willpower to train by yourself. Once one resorts to it regularly, it can spill over into other activities of our daily lives: less procrastination, facing problems head on etc. Another faculty which has to be exerted and nurtured is introspection. It is not the eyes of the others which determine what and how we perform. It is our own eyes and attentiveness which is directed inwardly. It entails a heightened awareness. It sharpens the ability to listen to one’s body’s voice. One learns to scan one’s body and observe and direct the subtle synergetic interplay of all the parts of the body in movement. One can practice mindfully and practice mindfulness. It gives Karate a new dimension.

One can train completely independently. This is not promoted by the hierarchical structure of extant Karate organisations. They keep their members in dependance on the authority of the Sensei, on the handing out of ranks, titles and other outer trappings and telling you where you stand. Training alone allows one to take things

into one's own hands and to find one's very own way of how to integrate Karate into one's daily life. It is a liberation.

The self-exploration connected with looking inwards while training solo, gives us the chance to scrutinize all our inner sensations. We can try to grasp the flow of Qi/Ki, the subtle, vital "energy", which permeates our body and the universe. The harmonization of the Ki-flux was a central goal of the way my most important teacher, Kanazawa Hirokazu, practiced and taught Karate. I deem it to be an integral and indispensable part of a holistic practice of any martial art. I would like to encourage every Karate-practitioner to explore and experiment with it.

A very basic combination like *tate shuto/gyaku zuki* (vertical sword-hand/reverse punch) can be practiced in a way to stimulate Ki-circulation. The physical execution is well known to every Karate enthusiast: we stand in *Zenkutsu-dachi* (forward stance) or in a slightly shortened version of it (*Han-Zenkutsu-dachi*), extend the *tate shuto* hand, turn our hips into *hanmi* (half-body) while bending the knee of the hind leg. We build up potential energy. The *gyaku-zuki* shoots out from the centre/core, the hind foot is pushed into the ground, the heel transfers the energy from the floor into the hips from where it travels into the torso/shoulder, arm and fist.

Our consciousness should encompass the lower part of the body, everything happens in and from the *tanden* (centre of the abdomen and Ki-repository). The

upper body follows. The spine should be straight, the tailbone slightly tucked in, the chin held back and the crown pushed up.

When we train on our own we can take the time to go through every part of our body and take turn in concentrating on specific areas like the floor connection via the legs or the inflection of the *tanden* when focusing or the correct clenching of the fist etc. For the mobilization of Ki, the coordination with breathing is imperative.

We move into *tate shuto* slowly and inhale. We stretch outwardly almost to the apex like when drawing a bow. Like in releasing the arrow we relax and let the fist shoot out and explosively exhale. At the end of the technique we tense our whole body for a split second and immediately relax again or implode. This is not a state of total limpness, then we would collapse. *Kime* (focus) alike is not a state of total stiffness, then we would freeze. It is a loosening and tightening.

There is hardness in the soft and softness in the hard. This is also symbolized in the Ying-Yang-emblem, where a black point is found in the white half and a white one in the black one. The opposite is always latently present. We start again with a slow inhalation and opening of the body into *tate shuto* and explode into the *gyaku zuki*. These motions follow the principle of *shinshuku* (expansion and contraction) and should feel like the body were a spring which is squeezed and released. At the moment of *kime*, momentary physical tautness, intention and breathing out culminate into one focal point. Body and

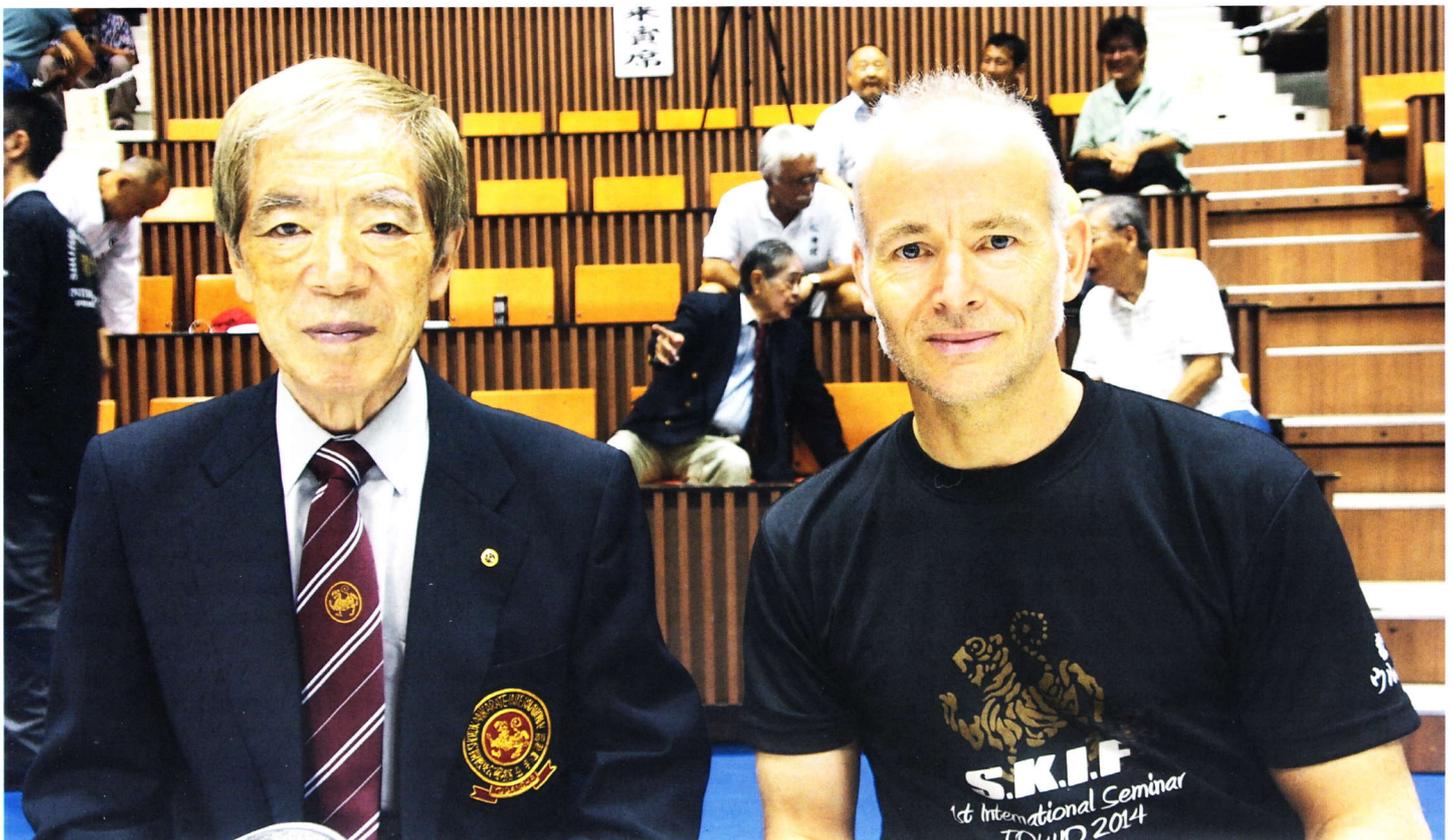
mind are in unity. Ki is ejected way beyond the fist and accumulated in the *tanden* again during the next inhalation. This forms a cyclical exercise of Ki circulation and can be reinforced with the imagery of inhaling good and fresh Ki and exhaling "bad" and spent Ki. This can be complemented by *Qigong*-exercises or *Taijiquan* where Ki-flow and breathing is accentuated by slow motion, calmness and inward orientation of the mind.

The many home-training-videos on YouTube can give us hints, such as how to optimally use limited space. If you follow them on time, you are given instructions and therefore you are still outwardly directed. You should take the hints and experiment with them on your own.

This article is not primarily about the technical side of training solo. Just one little suggestion: when you train at home, particularly if you live in a multistoried building with neighbours below, you ought to move quietly. This is an opportunity to develop an elegant *suri-ashi* ("shuffle") and smooth gliding footwork.

In *Kata*-competitions it has become common to stomp and make unnecessary sounds with the feet while stepping – is it supposed to impress the judges? Karate in Japan has been influenced by *Kendo* and other arts.

My Sensei in Vienna, Fujinaga Yasuyuki, always said we should watch how actors in the *No*-theatre move and move alike in Karate. Centre of gravity lowered and always in touch with the floor, gliding and flowing. "*Kami ichimai!*" he used to



Author, here with the late Master Hirokazu Kanazawa, Tokyo 2015.

say to me, since I understood Japanese. It meant to move lightly and silently with just enough space for "one sheet of paper" between your foot and the floor. If your moves are tanden-driven, it comes to you naturally.

Asian martial arts inherently offer an instrument for individual practice: Kata. Before militaristic training in groups became the norm, it was mainly Kata which was recurrently practiced. Kata can be broken up into short sequences, which can be trained on the spot. With some smart stepping manoeuvres entire Kata can be performed in a confined space.

In the learning process the eye of the Sensei and feedback from outside are welcome and important in order not to fall into bad habits. Once the form is memorized and the techniques are programmed into your body, you can exercise on your own. The emphasis shifts from the outside shape to the inside feeling.

The Sensei can see if your body parts are aligned correctly and your movements are biomechanically precise. He can teach you the correct shapes. But what happens inside, the feeling of tension and relaxation, the connection to the floor and the contraction or expansion in the stances and during the carrying out of the techniques are things everybody has to work on by him/herself via self-observation.

Training on one's own gives the

space and time for exactly that. Through introversion Karate is "internalized", made into your own unique embodiment of the art. When training in the Dojo, attention is often directed to the outside. You have to follow orders, sometimes the rhythm of the commands does not correspond to your own tempo. Concentration is on learning something new, on conforming to the set patterns and expectations of the instructors. The inner work has to be done solo. Then you will own Karate.

Funakoshi Gichin himself noted in his 'The Master Text':

*"It is a unique feature of Karate that it can be practiced alone and at any time and in any place."*

He offers many practical suggestions concerning daily practice. He writes about Karate training as something that may extend over one's entire life and as an endeavour in continued self-improvement. He warns not to train excessively long and advises to rather practice for short periods, but frequently and on a daily basis. In order not to get weary of training, he recommends watching other Karate practitioners or exhibitions, discussing it, pondering on Karate again and again and even reading books on the subject!

Theoretical study, I would claim, should be part of training (on one's own). It helps progress and deepens the understanding of what we do. Of course, Karate has to be learnt from person to person, but

books are a good complementary tool to apprehend the biomechanics, the exact anatomical form of stances and techniques, the historical development of styles, the cultural background, philosophy etc. Nowadays with the Internet we have a myriad of possibilities to study: YouTube videos, podcasts, Facebook groups, blogs, printed martial arts magazines (like the excellent one you hold in your hands), books...

When I started Karate in the 1970s as a teenager in Austria there were only a few books on the market. I bought the works penned by Funakoshi, Nakayama and Nishiyama/Brown in England, where I spent my summers. Back home in my room they were a permanent reference. I pored over the descriptions and photos and compared my stances and arm positions in the mirror with them. I even had a sandbag in my room and trained regularly at home besides going to the Dojo. Training alone has always been part of my life. Instead of playing the fiddle I just began practicing punching and kicking.

In his autobiography Kanazawa Hirokazu reports that in addition to the gruelling three training sessions during the day, he used to practice alone around midnight in the Dojo of the Takushoku University. He wanted to catch up with other students, who had started with Karate at an earlier age than himself, and no doubt, he did! Stan Schmidt, who was at the time an accomplished Judo-practitioner, began his Karate studies with books and trained about five years on his own before he went to Japan in 1963 to receive instruction at the Honbu-Dojo of the JKA. Motobu Choki (1870-1944), a ferocious streetfighter and in a sense the father of practical Karate, is said to have secretly watched the Karate education of his older brother, who was first in line and thus exclusively chosen to learn the family's martial art. Choki picked up rudiments of the art and trained alone for years before learning directly from several renowned Okinawan masters.

A high-ranking Karate colleague with an air of pride once said to me over a beer: *"I have never trained outside the Dojo."* I was speechless. For me it was unimaginable. It may be okay, if you do Karate as a hobby. Today I would respond to him: *"To train alone is a sign of maturity!"* And only then the often heard and worn out phrase "Karate is my (way of) life" gains real meaning.

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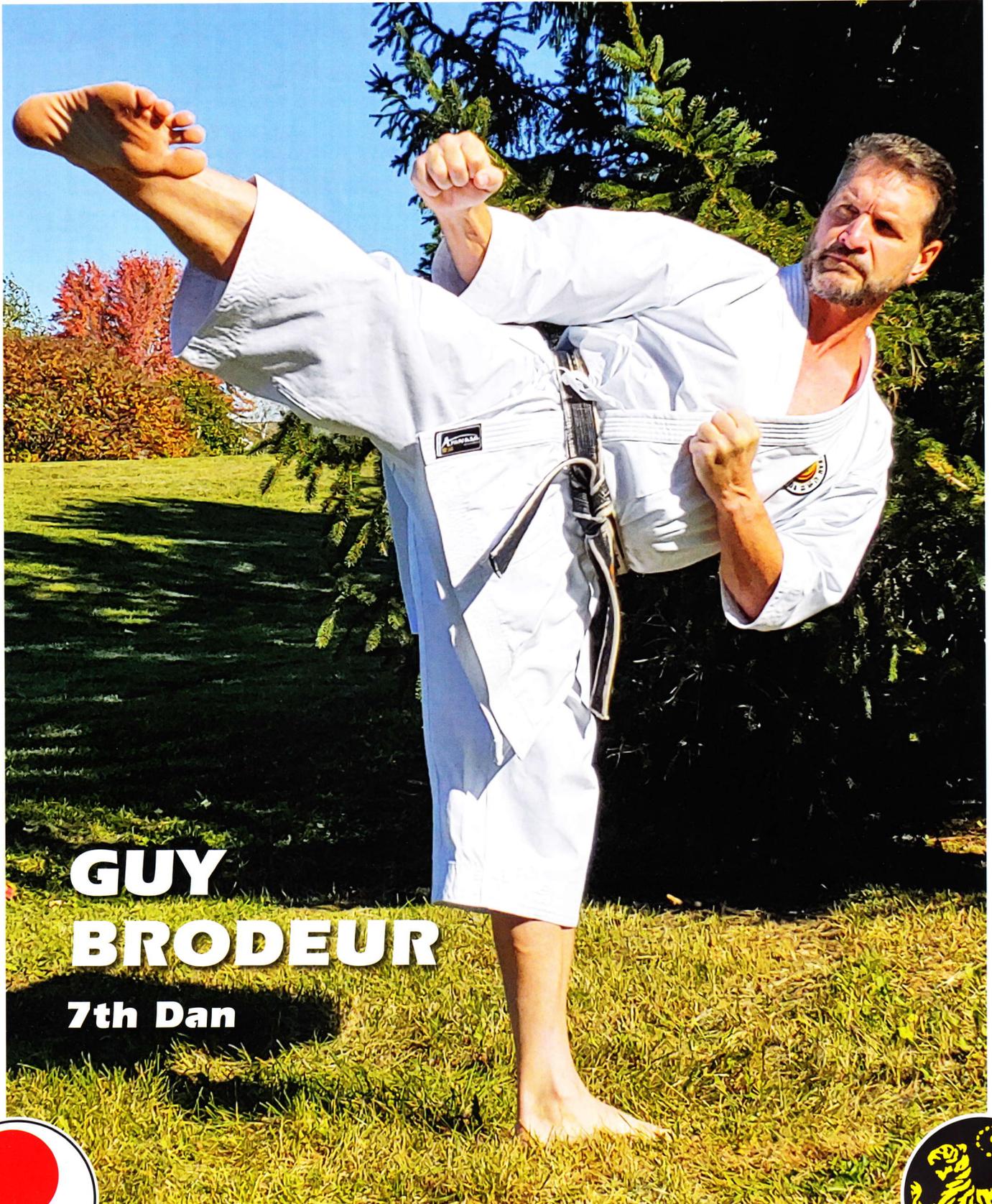


Author, Dr Wolf Herbert practising Taijiquan at the beach in Tokushima, Japan.

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