

## **Martial Arts**

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While I was going to the Tri-State Buddhist Temple in Denver Colorado I learned that one of my good teachers there, Shaku Kanya Okamoto, was a Black belt in the art of Judo. He assisted teaching at the Judo School when his schedule would permit. During this period, I started my study of Aikido under Manabu Honma Sensei from Akita, Japan.

It was only after a couple of years of dealing with lower back pain that I came to realize just how important the Martial Arts had been in my life.

When I returned to the world (a phrase we used to describe our homes in the United States) from Viet Nam in 1967 I was stationed down on the Gulf Coast of Florida at Hurlbut Field which was an auxiliary field of Egland AFB near the town of Ft. Walton Beach. Ft. Walton Beach was a town of about 22,000 folks and it was there that I first entered into the Martial Arts at a Karate school run by Sensei Todd Mason. Sensei called his system the “Kuro Neko” or “Black Cat” system. It consisted of both soft and hard techniques, the soft from Chinese tradition and the hard from the Japanese. Its emphasis was on self-defense.

My training in Kuro Neko Karate helped me to deal with being back in the world which for a long time, did not feel real. As I progressed through the ranks into the higher belt rankings, Sensei began teaching us about the devastating effects our techniques would have on the human body, thereby instilling in us, the responsibility of having become proficient in using the techniques we had been taught. We were not to use what we had learned unless it was absolutely and completely unavoidable.

This training kept me physically and mentally in pique condition. I rose to the belt before black, which in that system, was purple. This was in 1967 until I had to leave Florida. During my training there I remember something that Mason Sensei told us. That was, if in the future, we had an opportunity to learn the art of Aikido, we should do so, as he thought that Aikido was the most well rounded Martial Art. I never forgot that.

So, fast forward to 1979, after some years of not practicing any art and after the lower back trouble, I found Honma Sensei’s Aikido school, which he called

“Nippon Kan”. I reentered the Martial Arts remembering all I had benefitted from my previous study.

As Karate or “Empty Hand” became more and more popular in America a certain mystique developed about the “Black Belt”. You might remember how they were almost thought of as supermen. I always wondered about that.

So, when I achieved my “Shodan” or 1<sup>st</sup> degree of the black belt I went to see Shaku Okamoto to ask him what the significance of the “Black Belt”. Sensei very calmly looked at me and said, “The black belt is a sign that you have mastered the basics, now, you can start learning”.

I think Shaku’s description can apply to anything that we truly love to do as well as our study of Buddhism and Jodoshinshu Buddhism.

When Shakamuni Buddha was asked by a prominent scholar, “What is it that you teach?” The Master answered simply, “suffering and the alleviation of suffering.”

The basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are to be reflected on until we see their reality in each of ourselves. Only then can we begin to gain understanding of the Wisdom/Compassion that is extended to us as Shin Buddhists.

So if a dharma talk is about the present times or in ancient Japan or 2600 years ago, they all deal with the one constant in the human condition birth, sickness, old age and death and the alleviation of the sufferings which is inherent in them.

Namoamidabutsu