The Japanese refer to Mas Oyama’s kyokushin karate as kenka karate, meaning “brawling” or “brutal” karate.

But Oyama tells his students “Baka! Kenka karate ja-nai! Budo karate da!” which translates to “Fool! This is not brawling karate! It's budo karate!”

Why does the general public seem to misunderstand Oyama’s message? One look at a kyokushin karate tournament reveals the answer. Kyokushin karate fighters are among the fiercest in the world, and they will stop at nothing in their pursuit of victory. Kyokushin tournament sparring features full contact without protective padding. There are no weight classes; a fight ends only when one fighter proves beyond doubt his superiority, which almost always means his opponent is flat on the mat and may need to be carried away on a stretcher.

It does sound like a brawl, doesn’t it? So why does Oyama refer to it as “budo karate”?

Perhaps because kyokushin fighters personify the budo (warrior) concept better than any other karate stylists. Through his budo karate, Oyama is attempting to revive in the Japanese spirit the positive characteristics of bushido, the “way of the warrior,” which was so much a part of the culture of feudal Japan. In a modern world of peace and unification, many have forgotten this ancient code and see no need for the old warrior ethic. But in a time when it is no longer necessary to carry a sword for personal protection, the discipline of budo recreates in the hearts of its followers the do-or-die attitude of living life by the unspoken law of the sword. And that law is: Be prepared to make the greatest sacrifice (the sacrifice of one’s own life) in the execution of one’s endeavors, so that the resulting desire to overcome will be unequaled and the outcome will be the best possible.

This is not to say Oyama encourages his followers to take their own lives if their endeavors are unsuccessful, as was required of the warriors of Japan’s middle ages. Instead, he emphasizes a way of
thought that directly represents this ideal: The degree of personal sacrifice, in this case self-denial through self-discipline, is directly proportional to the degree of success in one's endeavors.

Not only has he adopted this, the strongest ideal of bushido, but Oyama has gone a step further by adopting the strongest attitude of another period in the development of Japan's martial spirit. In the Japanese middle ages, when several key military leaders became so powerful that they were able to unify the feuding states and maintain peace, the warrior class was no longer needed and military practices were for the first time practiced simply for the sake of the perfection of skill. Skills such as swordsmanship, archery and horsemanship, that before had been considered useful only for military purposes, began to be practiced solely for the sake of the practice. The term "martial art" was born, and martial "artists" realized that the search for mastery in these military arts led directly to character-building and wisdom. The martial arts became a means for finding personal improvement, fulfillment and emancipation from the everyday trials of life. Thus, not only does the follower of Oyama's teachings find strength from personal sacrifice, but also learns that great personal spiritual advancements can be gained as a result of this sacrifice.

The third, and possibly greatest, addition by Oyama in his synthesis of kyokushin karate is the concept of Zen. In a Zen state of mind, one thinks nothing. The mind is completely cleared of all intruding thoughts and emotions. The mind simply relaxes; it does not focus precisely on any particular detail. The mind focuses on nothing, yet perceives everything. Can this concept not be put to great use in karate?

While fighting, you stand facing your opponent. When the opponent attacks, you must quickly determine an attack is coming, what form it will take, where it is aimed, etc. All of this information must be relayed to the brain, where the decision is made about how to react. The brain must send a message to the body, telling it how to defend itself. This entire process takes only a fraction of a second, but what if the incoming attack is a fraction of a second faster?

If, on the other hand, you are in a Zen state while in combat, you perceive not
the individual attack, but the entire situation. Your mind and body act as one, bypassing the normal reaction time to automatically perform the necessary defense measure. The normal thought process in an attack is: perception, contemplation and, finally, reaction. With Zen, you can bypass the contemplation phase and react directly after perception. Oyama, having realized this, has gone so far as to say “Karate is Zen,” and thus, he makes Zen an integral part of his system.

Thus, Oyama has not only integrated Zen with bushido and the “martial art” ideal of self-perfection from skill perfection, but he has also added perhaps the most important qualities of all into his kyuokushin system: courtesy, respect, wisdom and humility. These concepts are needed to discipline the fighter, for a fighter who does not know how to control his strength, or does not know when it is appropriate to use his skill, is nothing more than a brute. According to Oyama, “Karate begins with courtesy and ends with courtesy.”

Kyokushin Training

Now that you are familiar with the important philosophical ideals of Oyama’s system, you might be wondering about the physical training in kyokushin karate.

Kyokushin kihon (basic exercises) are practiced at the beginning of every class. These basic techniques include: punching techniques using both seiken (forearm) and uraken (back fist); shuto (knife-hand) strikes; blocking techniques; and kicks.

Mas Oyama practices meditation and breath control under an icy waterfall. Oyama spent two years in isolation in the mountains, training for eight hours a day.

All of the basic striking and blocking techniques (of which there are 16) are practiced from a sanchin stance, and each maneuver is generally repeated 30 times in rapid succession. A kiai (spirit yell) accompanies each technique. The 10 kicking techniques are performed either from zenkutsu-dachi (forward-leaning stance) or from a normal standing position. According to Oyama, “The practice of a technique only begins after 1,000 repetitions, and only reaches maturity after 10,000 repetitions.”

While practicing basic kicking techniques, the kyokushin stylist always holds his belt just above his hips with both hands to limit his upper-body motion, thus forcing his waist and legs to do all of the work. Subsequently, when the kick is performed in a real situation, using the upper body, it will be much faster.

The basic kata (solo training sequences) of kyokushin are the three t'aiyoku forms. The intermediate kata are the five pinan sequences, and the advanced forms include tensho, kanku, seipai and seiunchin.

At the conclusion of every kyokushin
Kyokushin karate sparring competition is conducted without protective padding and is perhaps the most brutal tournament fighting in the world.

class, students recite the dojo kun (school oath).

In addition to kihon, kata and dojo kun practice, kyokushin students can expect instruction in ido-gekko (transfer training) and kumite (sparring). During ido-gekko practice, the kihon movements are repeated in a variety of stances and combinations while moving forward across the length of the dojo (training hall). This is the longest portion of class as each technique is repeated literally hundreds of times. Kumite usually comes at the end of class and, just as in kyokushin tournament competition, protec-

Today in Japan, Mas Oyama heads the International Karate Organization, Kyokushin, one of the largest karate federations in the world.

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tive gear is not worn and blows are delivered with full contact. Surprisingly, however, serious injuries seldom occur, although bruises are inescapable.

The Heart of Oyama’s Kyokushin
Three basic concepts are at the heart of Oyama’s system: chikara-no-kyujakku (timing in the use of strength or focus); iki-no-chosetsu (control and timing of breathing); and waza-no-kankyū (the tempo of the technique). A common misconception among martial artists is that power comes from strength. Those who believe this tend to focus the energy in their muscles at a constant rate throughout each movement. This method is not only counterproductive because it wastes energy, but it also lessens the power of the technique. As any physicist will tell you, power (impact force) comes from acceleration (rate of change in speed); force is a result of mass and acceleration. It is therefore necessary to relax the muscles used when performing a technique to generate the highest possible speed. Then, just before impact, it is necessary to focus your energy (tense your muscles) to provide the mass behind the force. Relax first, focus second.

According to Oyama, the control and timing of one’s breathing is the third tool necessary to attain optimum efficiency in the performance of a technique. When exhaling, your diaphragm tenses, causing the muscles to relax, thus reducing muscle opposition and accelerating your techniques. Therefore, you must exhale forcefully while performing a technique, but an instant before impact, cut short your breathing. By doing so, the diaphragm again relaxes and the muscles have a tendency to tighten, which adds force to the technique.

Oyama claims that an understanding of the control and timing of your breathing, combined with an understanding of focus and speed, are the keys to performing karate techniques in the best possible manner. "I can defeat anybody whose breathing I can hear from 10 feet away," Oyama has said.

The Oyama Legend
Oyama was born in Korea and immigrated to Japan as a youngster named Baedel Choi. Little did the people of Japan know that when they pressured the young Choi to take a Japanese name, the name he would choose, Oyama or "great mountain," was to lay the foundation for the karate empire he was destined to build. The young Masutatsu Oyama would eventually become not only the founder of one of the world’s largest karate organizations and one of the strongest men alive, but despite the cold welcome he initially received by the Japanese people, he was also destined to be one of the only figures in Japanese history to become a legend during his own lifetime.

It would be impossible within the limits of this article to give a complete account of the Oyama legend, both because of its complexity and size, and because, since Oyama is alive, it is still being created. The following story, recounted by his nephew Dr. Seong Soo Choi, is, however, representative of Oyama’s life and character:

The setting for this tale is early 1950s Japan. Oyama, who was in his late twenties and had studied under the greatest teachers of the day (including Giko Funakoshi, son of Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of shotokan karate), had recently spent almost two years in total isolation at a secluded mountain site called Kiyozumi. He had lived there single-mindedly in search of the mastery of the martial way. The strength he acquired during this time was so great that one of the first tests he gave himself upon returning to society was to fight against angered bulls
Mas Oyama developed an amazingly strong and conditioned body by breaking bricks (1), punching the makiwara (2), and practicing basic techniques repeatedly.

bared-handed. He would literally tear the horns off the skulls of raging bulls, and in at least one bout, Oyama killed one of the beasts with a single punch to the head.

Choi’s story begins with Oyama in a bar, mourning the death of one of his most beloved students. Although this student’s skill and devotion were unequaled, he had constantly gotten himself into trouble because he was unable to control his temper. Oyama, seeing no alternative, had been forced to order the student to leave the training hall and never return. According to Choi, the student’s last words, as he committed suicide, were “This is my love for you, Mas Oyama.”

Oyama, in his grief-stricken state, drank heavily at the bar that night, Choi claims. When Oyama noticed several men in the bar harassing a woman, he intervened, and one of the men reportedly pulled out a knife and stabbed Oyama in the left forearm. For Oyama, who was accustomed to striking bulls, this “tough guy” was an easy target. Choi claims Oyama delivered one blow, and the man never got up. The police considered the incident justifiable self-defense and did not charge Oyama with a crime, Choi said. However, as Oyama left the police station, he encountered the angry wife and child of the man, according to Choi. Deeply affected by the moment, Oyama realized that, had he been in a more stable frame of mind, he would have been able to avoid the situation, or at least temper his defense somewhat. Oyama reportedly dropped to his knees at the feet of the two and swore that he would never again use his karate.

Choi claims Oyama left his Tokyo dojo and followed the two to their home in the country. Even though they hated him, Oyama, Choi said, built a small shack on the edge of their property and worked their farmland for several months. The woman’s son managed to convince a group of boys that there was a crazy man on his property who was trying to hurt his mother. Armed with clubs, they went to the shack and beat Oyama severely, Choi asserted. Oyama made no attempt to defend himself, for he had sworn to never again use his karate.

When Oyama regained consciousness three days later, he found the woman at his feet. According to Choi, she had finally realized Oyama’s sincerity, and she begged Oyama to forgive her and her son, and to return to his life of karate. Oyama’s honor is so great that, even though he was capable of killing a bull with a single punch, he allowed a group of boys to beat him into a coma because of an oath he made to two people who hated him.

In Japan today, countless books, feature-length movies and even comic books relate the living legend of Mas Oyama. Now in his seventies, Oyama still teaches at the headquarters dojo of the International Karate Organization, Kyokushinkai, in Tokyo. For information, write the organization at No. 3-9, 3-chome, Nishi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo, Japan.

About the author: Davidson, North Carolina-based freelance writer Nathan Ligo studied kyokushin karate in Japan for two years with Matsutatsu Oyama, and has spent another eight years training with Oyama’s nephew, Seong Soo Choi, in North Carolina.

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