

Zanshin

By Kenji Tokitsu

In Japanese martial art, one often hears the word “zanshin”. Its meaning? Let’s see what the dictionary says about the term and then I’ll comment on its significance.

This article is written in response to a request from Vincent Leduc, my 6th dan Belgian student and karateka. So at the end of the article, I will clarify the concept with regard to karate.

Japanese dictionaries give two meanings for the word “zanshin”. As their explanations are short, I will add my own personal comments below.

- 1 - The spirit that remains, or the fact of letting the spirit remain.
 - The spirit that does not break off
 - The fact of not being fully satisfied with things or events.

2 – The frame of mind sought and practiced in kendo and in kyudo (archery).

In kendo: the state of mind maintained after having delivered a strike.

Striking with the shinai (in kendo) corresponds to the action of fighting with the sword. The dictionary definition means the following: having attacked (confronted) your opponent, your mind must not dwell on this action. You have to be ready to face any other opponent that might turn up, while still keeping a watch on the first one. Suddenly stopping your gesture or continuing it in the void is no good. Even if your movement stops, your mind is still in action without being under tension. Vigilance, readiness and energy remain when your attack action appears to be over...



Historical timeline of modern karate

To my mind, modern karate is the set of currents and schools of karate formed and developed after 1920 on the main islands of Japan. I distinguish four periods in the history of modern karate.

1) First period (1921-1945).

The introduction of Okinawan karate to the main islands of Japan. This process begins in 1921 and continues to the end of the Second World War. It is a period of efforts to get Okinawan karate incorporated into the tradition of Japanese martial arts.

2) Second period (1945-1970).

End of World War II to the end of the 1960s. The formation of modern karate, which associates the karate of the first period with a trend towards competitive sport. It is the birth of what is known as “traditional karate”.

3) Third period (1970-1990).

After the first world karate championship held in Tokyo in 1970, karate experienced an upsurge the world over. Riding the wave of Bruce Lee films that would come a few years later, karate enjoyed real expansion in the world until the end of the 1980s.

4) Fourth period (1990-to the present).

As of the 1990s, karate began a period of decline. The furore of the preceding period began to fade and the number of karatekas diminished. At the same time, Chinese martial arts, including tai chi chuan, enjoyed a rise in public appreciation.

Conclusion

In this historical timeline of modern karate, we are now in the fourth period.

I believe that the concept of *kimé* was formed and developed over the course of these historical periods when karate had to develop as a martial art discipline that was both traditional and for sport. That is, modern karate had to develop as a spectator sport while maintaining the sobriety of a traditional Japanese martial art.

In a way, modern karate is the result of a dilemma: how to develop as a spectacle while successfully maintaining the sobriety of martial art. We can see this clearly in the anecdote about the cup of tea – how can you create a spectacle with a drop of tea in the bottom of a cup? The answer is in our reflexion on “zanshin”.