

# Karate ni Sente Nashi: What the Masters Had to Say

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## Introduction

Perhaps no Japanese phrase is more familiar to karate practitioners around the world than “*karate ni sente nashi*.” Typically translated as, “There is no first attack in karate,” this maxim has become known primarily through the teachings of Gichin Funakoshi. The founder of Shotokan and, according to many, the “father of modern karate-do,” Funakoshi made the principle the second of his *Niju Kun* (“Twenty Precepts”), following only the directive to not forget that “karate begins and ends with courtesy” (Funakoshi, “Karate-do nijukajo”).

Clearly, for Funakoshi, the maxim *karate ni sente nashi* was of great importance. In addition to including it as one of his “Twenty Precepts,” he stated in a 1935 magazine article that he “view[s] it as [expressing] the essence of karate-do” (Funakoshi, “Karate no hanashi” 65). Nor is he alone in this view: Shoshin Nagamine, respected founder of the Matsubayashi school of Shorin-ryu karate, wrote that, “This phrase [. . .] embodies the essence of Okinawan karate” (Nagamine 13). Similarly, Masatoshi Nakayama, longtime head of the Japan Karate Association, stated that, “[. . .] it is not an exaggeration to say that it is these words that succinctly and fully express the spirit of karate-do” (Nakayama 80).

With such esteemed masters as these expressing such strong sentiments regarding the significance of the *sente nashi* principle, one can only assume that the principle represents a way of thinking that is – or at least should be – profoundly important for those who consider themselves to be serious

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practitioners of the art of karate-do. Specifying just exactly what that way of thinking is, in all of its subtleties, would perhaps be a difficult task, but obviously, at its most basic level, the maxim at least clearly proscribes the use of any “first strikes” on the part of *karate-ka*. Or does it?

### Differing Opinions

Certainly many of today’s karate practitioners would argue that striking first is a violation of *karate ni sente nashi*. Iain Abernethy notes, for example, that when he published an article in some British magazines advocating the use of pre-emptive striking in certain situations:

[. . .] I received a markedly increased level of correspondence. Some were very supportive of [my position] [. . .]. Of those who contacted me in the positive, many stated that their immediate peer group were wholly opposed to the idea [. . .].

The ones who responded in the negative were often VERY strong in their opposition. Their objections were essentially based on moral grounds, but a number cited “*karate ni sente nashi*” as if I was encouraging the breaking of an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment! (Abernethy, “Striking First?!” Emphasis in final sentence added.)

Similarly, in his book *Steady Training*, Antonio Bustillo notes:

I’ve heard many instructors quote the [*sente nashi*] slogan stating it means you must first wait for an opponent to attack and strike out before you retaliate. As verification to their testimony they use the katas as examples. “Every kata starts with a block. [. . .]” (Bustillo 247)

Yet, there are also those *karate-ka* who disagree with this position, who believe that the *sente nashi* principle does not necessarily rule out all first strikes. These practitioners typically argue that a “first attack” can also consist of something other than a physical blow and that once an opponent has engaged in such an attack the *karate-ka* is free to “defend” himself by striking first.

Abernathy, for instance, says:

I believe that 'karate-do ni sente nashi' and the pre-emptive strike are in no way mutually exclusive and can exist side by side. To my mind, once an assailant has decided to attack us, the attack has begun. We are then well within our rights to use whatever methods are appropriate to ensure our safety. [. . .] If an individual is behaving in an aggressive way whilst attempting to invade our personal space then there is a strong possibility that their verbal aggression is about to escalate to the physical. This verbal assault is an attack in itself and waiting until the attack becomes physical is foolhardy in the extreme. (Abernathy, *Bunkai-Jutsu* 122)

Similarly, an anonymous author, after describing a hypothetical situation in which a female *karate-ka* dispatches three men who accosted her on the street late at night, writes:

Only when we factor in the intent of your opponents do we get a better picture of "karate ni sente nashi." [. . .] They surrounded you at midnight. They closed mae (*sic*) [i.e., engagement distance]. They assumed kamae [i.e., fighting postures] even if only American streetgang type nonchalant kamae. [. . .] Their intents were probably violent for such actions as the above can hardly be interpreted as altruistic.

If you felt your life was in danger by their intent your first attack is defense. The war broke out when they stepped across the line of intent and into your personal protected space. [. . .]

When you feel the breach in peace it is time to strike. [. . .] The war has begun. The person who throws the first strike is immaterial (*sic*). The war began with mobilization, entrapment and perceived intent. [. . .] You would be foolish to delay until after the first physical strike is thrown at you [. . .].

[. . .] The well-trained martial artist [. . .] may find certain situations [. . .] as conditions where she justifiably throws the physical first strike without breaching "karate ni sente nashi." (*Karate Ni Sente Nashi*)

## What the Masters Had to Say

Kohaku Iwai lists four Okinawans – all of them legendary martial artists – as “the warriors who introduced karate-jutsu to the [Japanese] mainland”: Gichin Funakoshi, Choki Motobu, Chojun Miyagi and Kenwa Mabuni (Iwai 187–211). What, one wonders, did these men have to say about interpreting the *karate ni sente nashi* maxim? A future paper will examine Funakoshi’s thoughts; here, let us look at some of the writings of Motobu, Miyagi and Mabuni.<sup>(1)</sup>

### Chojun Miyagi

To the best of this author’s knowledge, there were only two documents produced by Chojun Miyagi (or at least only two have been made public): *Goju-ryu kenpo* and *Karate-do gaisetsu* (“Outline of Karate-do”<sup>(2)</sup>). The first of these, a fairly short piece written in 1932, contains no reference to *sente nashi*.<sup>(3)</sup> In *Karate-do gaisetsu*, Miyagi does briefly mention the *sente nashi* principle, but not in any way that is particularly helpful to our discussion. In the version that appears in *Ancient Okinawan Martial Arts*, we find the following paragraph:

Folklore contends that the teaching methods of long ago focused mainly upon self-defense, with little emphasis placed upon training the mind, or cultivating the precept “*karate-do ni sente nashi*” (there is no first attack in karate-do). I have observed the neglect of this diligent principle, although, with the passage of time, teaching policies have gradually improved to where that imbalance has, for the most part, been corrected. My conviction is that the fist and Zen are one of the same (*sic*). Together, this balance cultivates intellect ahead of strength. The transmission of budo’s essential precept must be fostered. (Miyagi, “Karate-do Gaisetsu” 50)<sup>(4)</sup>

Other than in this passage, Miyagi makes no mention of the *sente nashi* maxim.

### Choki Motobu

Choki Motobu, in his 1932 publication *Watashi no karate-jutsu* (“My Karate-

jutsu”), expresses his thoughts on *sente nashi* in a way that is directly relevant to the question being asked here. In a one-paragraph section titled *Karate ni sente nashi*, he writes:

There is an expression, “*karate ni sente nashi*.” Apparently some people interpret this literally and often profess that “one must not attack first,” but I think that they are seriously mistaken. To be sure, it is certainly not the *budo* spirit to train for the purpose of striking others without good reason. I assume that you already understand that one’s primary purpose must be the training of mind and body. The meaning of this saying, then, is that one must not harm others for no good reason. But when a situation can’t be helped, in other words, when, even though one tries to avoid trouble, one can’t; when an enemy is serious about doing one harm, one must fiercely stand and fight. When one does fight, taking control of the enemy is crucial, and one must take that control with one’s first move. Thus, in a fight one must attack first. It is very important to remember this. (Motobu 58–59)<sup>(5)</sup>

Indeed, on at least one occasion Choki Motobu did demonstrate his willingness to strike first, if a story told to karate researcher Charles Goodin is to be believed. Goodin reports that he heard the story from Motobu’s son, Chosei, who in turn had heard it from Chozo Nakama, a former student of the elder Motobu.<sup>(6)</sup> According to the account provided Goodin, Choki Motobu, in his seventies at the time, was attending a large party when a former student burst in and, waving a knife, challenged Motobu. Goodin reports:

“I can use this,” [the student] declared stabbing the knife into Motobu’s table, “I will never lose the fight.” (*sic*)

[. . .] “I won’t fight with any weapon,” [Motobu] stated calmly. “I won’t fight with a knife.” Although he tried his best to convince the student not to fight, the student insisted. “Are you really that determined to fight me with a knife?” asked Motobu.

“I am,” proclaimed the student defiantly. “I won’t change my mind!”

“All right then,” said Motobu finally. “I will take you up on your offer, but we should not fight in the house.”

The student grabbed the knife and headed for the door. Motobu followed closely behind. Just before the student reached the door, Motobu kicked him in the back, shattering his backbone. (Goodin 12)

Assuming that the above account is accurate, whether or not the situation in which Motobu found himself can truly be called one in which physical conflict was unavoidable is, perhaps, open to debate. Motobu’s willingness to strike first, however, is clear.

Additional information regarding Motobu’s thoughts on striking first can be found in *Motobu Choki sensei: Goroku* (“A Collection of Sayings of Sensei Choki Motobu”<sup>(7)</sup>). There, listed as saying number nine, we find a statement that seemingly contradicts the *karate ni sente nashi* principle: *Karate wa sente de aru* (“karate is the first attack”). (Nakata 42). Given the opinion that he expresses in *Watashi no karate-jutsu* (see above), it seems reasonable to conclude that with these words Motobu meant to stress the importance of striking first *when trouble is unavoidable*.

### **Kenwa Mabuni**

Kenwa Mabuni, the founder of the Shito-ryu school of karate, produced a number of publications during his lifetime. Among them, and co-authored with Genwa Nakasone, was the book *Kobo kenpo karate-do nyumon*, about which noted karate historian Patrick McCarthy has written:

Considered his best work of all [. . .]. [. . .] this [. . .] was considered by one writer to be the real “Master Text” of karate-do. [. . .] Mabuni Kenwa won widespread recognition during that pre-war era with this book and, considering the magnitude of this work, it is surprising to hear that it has never been translated into English. (McCarthy, “Standing” 30)

In this book, in a section of Chapter 10 entitled “Correct and Incorrect Understanding of the Meaning of ‘Karate ni Sente Nashi,’” we find the following

extremely relevant comments:

There is a precept “*karate ni sente nashi.*” Properly understood, this indicates a mental attitude of not being eager or inclined to fight. It is the teaching that just because one has trained in karate does not mean that one can rashly strike or kick others. It seems that there are two types of mistaken interpretations regarding this precept, and [I’d] like to correct them.

The first is a mistaken understanding held by some people who are not karate practitioners. Such people say, “In all fights the opportunity for victory is seized by getting the jump on your enemy; a passive attitude such as *sente nashi* is inconsistent with Japanese *budo.*” Such a view forgets the essential purpose of *budo*: *Bu* takes as its ideal the stopping of the spear,<sup>(9)</sup> and its aim is the maintenance of peace. Those who make such statements do not understand that the true spirit of Japanese *budo* means not being bellicose.

When faced with someone who disrupts the peace or who will do one harm, one is as a warrior gone to battle, and so it only stands to reason that one should get the jump on the enemy and preempt his use of violence. Such action in no way goes against the precept of *sente nashi.*

Second is a mistaken understanding found among some karate practitioners. It is a view that does not see *sente nashi* as an attitude, but rather as a literal, behavioral rule to be rigidly followed. As noted above, when absolutely necessary, when one is already facing a battle, it is an accepted truth of strategy that one should try to take *sensen no sen*<sup>(10)</sup> and forestall the enemy’s actions.

In conclusion, the expression *karate ni sente nashi* should be properly understood to mean that a person who practices karate must never take a bellicose attitude, looking to cause an incident; he or she should always have the virtues of calmness, prudence and humility in dealing with others. (Mabuni and Nakasone 82–83)

## Discussion

Examining the writing of Chojun Miyagi reveals little regarding his interpretation of the *karate ni sente nashi* maxim. Our look at the thoughts of two other legendary karate pioneers, though - Choki Motobu and Kenwa Mabuni - clearly shows that they strongly believed that striking first does not necessarily violate the *sente nashi* principle. Indeed, both men seem to have felt that a first strike is, under certain conditions, the only reasonable course of action for a *karate-ka* to take. It is interesting to note that, just as is true today, when Motobu and Mabuni were writing their books (in the 1930s), there were apparently those who viewed *sente nashi* as being a prohibition on striking first; both masters unambiguously condemn such literal interpretations.

Given his (assuming here for the purposes of discussion, well-deserved) reputation as somewhat of a ruffian who had more than his share of fights, one might argue, perhaps, that Choki Motobu's views on the properness of striking first should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. What of Kenwa Mabuni and his views, though? In what light should we see them? According to McCarthy, Mabuni was "a staunch advocate of the moral values established to govern the behavior of karate-do practitioners" (McCarthy, "Standing" 34). If this is true, then one could hardly "explain away" Mabuni's expressed willingness to strike first as the view of someone not particularly concerned with whether or not *karate-ka* behaved in a morally-proper manner. Apparently, when Mabuni (with Nakasone) stated that, "[. . .] when one is already facing a battle, it is an accepted truth of strategy that one should try to take *sensen no sen* and forestall the enemy's actions," he did so with complete awareness of the moral issues involved.

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## Notes

- (1) As far as this author can tell, the Mabuni passage presented here has never before appeared in English. The translation provided is this author's.
- (2) Actually, there are apparently two versions of the latter document: one written in 1934 and the other in 1936 (Kinjo 54-55). It is assumed that the 1936 version to which Kinjo refers is the one that appears in Higaonna (81-88).
- (3) The *Goju-ryu kenpo* document that appears in Toguchi's *Karate no kokoro*, dated August 29, 1932, and signed "Chojun," was one presented to a Mr. Kiju Azama. The author learned from Swift of the existence of a document with the same title and date, also signed "Chojun," but presented to a Mr. Tatsutoku Senaha (Swift, "Re: Miyagi Document"). Apparently Miyagi produced and gave out several copies of the document (Swift, "Re: Miyagi Translation"). It is assumed that the copies, however many there are, are the same in content.
- (4) Whether owing to differences in translation or to differences in the 2 "original" Japanese versions, Higaonna's account of this paragraph differs somewhat. It does not, however, provide any more information that is relevant to our discussion than does McCarthy's version.
- (5) The translation presented here is this author's. For an alternative translation, see McCarthy and McCarthy (*Karate-jutsu*: 96).
- (6) Noble was told essentially the same story by the same source (Noble 47).
- (7) This collection was put together by Mizuhiko Nakata, under the supervision of Kenji Marukawa. Nakata, while a martial artist, was not actually a student of Motobu's. He writes that from the time he first formally met Motobu (around 1935) until Motobu left Tokyo to return to Okinawa (which Iwai puts at 1939), he saw Motobu at least once a week. He reports that he and Motobu would eat and ("thoroughly") drink together while discussing karate and other things. Motobu would also actually demonstrate for him. The second person mentioned above, Kenji Marukawa, was one of Motobu's top students. (Nakata 56-58; Iwai 200)
- (8) That is, 武, the first syllable / ideogram of *budo* (武道).
- (9) This is a reference to the theory that the ideogram for *bu* is made up of the characters 戈 (*hoko*) and 止 (*tomeru*). The latter of these, *tomeru*, means "to stop." A *hoko* is defined by the *Kokugo Dai Jiten Dictionary* as a long-handled weapon used to stab or thrust at an enemy. The dictionary further states that this weapon developed into the *naginata* (a Japanese halberd) at the end of the Heian period (794-1185), and into the *yari* or spear at the end of the Kamakura period (1185-1333). It should be mentioned here that Shogakukan's *Shinsen Kanwa Jiten* also notes other possible origins for the character 武, in addition to the "stop spear" one.
- (10) *Sensen no sen* is one of three kinds of *sen* or initiative. *Go no sen* and *sen no sen* are the other two. Kim et al. define these as follows: *Go no sen* is reactive or responsive initiative, *sen no sen* is simultaneous initiative, and *sensen no sen* is preemptive initiative.

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