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Reconsidering the Relationship between Japanese Martial arts and Religion: Case Study of Mt. Mitsumine and Kyokushin Karate

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Abstract

Japanese martial arts, including karate, have been often associated with religion. Although Shintō, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism may explain cultural background of Japanese martial arts, contemporary martial artists do not necessarily consider these traditions as important in their everyday life. To research the relationship between martial arts and religion in contemporary society, it is instead important to take into the account martial arts students as well as their emotional and spiritual needs, such as mental well-being and the sense of belonging. In the case study of Kyokushin karate I attempt to show that Kyokushin karate practitioners tend to develop strong sense of belonging and high degree of loyalty toward the Kyokushin karate school. I have conducted the research mainly through regular training of Kyokushin karate in Japan, participation in winter camp at Mt. Mitsumine, participant observation of tournaments and open-type questionnaires. Research results show that Kyokushin karate practitioners consider Kyokushin karate not so much as sport and recreation, but rather as a lifestyle. Participants believe daily practice provides them with life-meaning, sense of belonging, mental well-being and spiritual support, as well as with guideline for values, etiquette and interpersonal relations. It is possible to argue that Kyokushin karate and its teachings to some degree function as religion and spirituality since it is able to provide psychological support in accordance with practitioners' needs.

1 Introduction

Japanese martial arts are a part of Japanese culture and history as well as one of Japan's most successful export products. In the academic field, however, martial arts have not gained much attention. The existing studies that explore the relationship between Japanese martial arts and religion have been focused mostly on the religious and cultural ideas, such as Zen Buddhism, Shintō, Confucianism and *bushidō* and their role in martial arts. Modern martial arts students, however, do not seem to be particularly interested in these ideas. Therefore, to research the relationship between martial arts and religion in contemporary society, it is important to take into the account individuals, their mental and spiritual needs, such as mental support and the sense of belonging to particular martial arts school or *ryūha* (流派).

A number of martial arts are fragmented into numerous organizations, suborganizations, schools or *ryūha* and many independent dōjō (*dōjō* 道場). In the context of martial arts, a *ryūha* can be defined as a group that consists of a teacher (or more teachers) and students. Teacher gives directions through established orthodoxy and orthopraxis, however, he can also begin to develop his own practices and methods of teaching (Lorge 2016, 910). While in the context of Japanese martial arts the word *ryūha* already appeared in Edo period, in the context of karate, however, it was first used after 1922 when karate entered Japanese mainland and started to blend with indigenous Japanese martial arts culture, i.e. *kobudō* (古武道)¹ and *gendai budō* (現代武道)² (Mottern 2001, 235). In 1974, Draeger claimed that there are more than seventy different karate schools (1974, 124)³. Modern *ryūha* are labelled with different reputation and prestige. Moreover, each *ryūha* has its own methods of training, techniques, rules and ethics, history and even mythology. The question, “To which *ryūha* do you belong?” therefore is not so unimportant as it may seem. Namely, it is the sense of belonging and loyalty to the particular *ryūha* that is of crucial importance.

There is no *ryūha* that could truly count as representative one as well as there is no *ryūha*'s teaching that could reflect a general image of Japanese martial arts. There is, however, a sufficient amount of the same essence among all the *ryūha*. With words of Friday and Seki⁴, “While the anatomy of each *ryūha* is unique, the physiology of most is similar” (1997, 10). Detailed study of individual *ryūha* may thus enable a researcher to gain a broader insight into Japanese martial arts.

I have chosen Kyokushin karate as a case study because (1) Kyokushin karate as full-contact

¹ Meaning “old martial arts”. Refers to Japanese martial arts that were established before Meiji Restoration in 1868.

² Meaning “modern martial arts”. Refers to Japanese martial arts that were established after Meiji Restoration.

³ Fourteen most widespread schools are: Chitō-ryū (千唐流), Gōjū-ryū (剛柔流), Gosoku-ryū (剛速流), Isshin-ryū (一心流), Kyokushin (極真), Shūkōkai (修交会), Shindō jinen-ryū (神道自然流), Shitō-ryū (糸東流), Shōrin-ryū (少林流), Shōtōkan (松濤館), Shuri-ryū (首里流), Uechi-ryū (上地流), Wadō-ryū (和道流) and Yōshūkai (養秀会).

⁴ Seki Humitake (関文威) is nineteenth generation *shihanke* (師範家 headmaster) of the Kashima Shinryū (鹿島神流).

school has developed rather unique philosophical and spiritual way of thinking which is very different from traditional semi-contact schools of karate, and (2) Kyokushin karate is one of the few martial arts that has formed a sacred site.

Regarding research methodology, I participated in the International Karate Organization Kyokushinkaikan (Kokusai Karatedō Renmei Kyokushinkaikan 国際空手道連盟極真会館, hereafter IKO Kyokushinkaikan) winter camp on Mt. Mitsumine in Chichibu in Saitama prefecture in January 2018 and 2019, and four times in various outdoor trainings between 2017 and 2019. Furthermore, between February and March 2018, I was conducting a research in which I was gathering students' opinions, views and impressions through interviews and questionnaires.

2 Religious and spiritual aspects of Japanese martial arts

At this point I would like to clarify the definition of martial arts. There are three established terms in Japanese which can be interpreted in English as “martial arts”: *budō* (武道), means “martial way”, *bujutsu* (武術) indicates “martial techniques”, and *bugei* (武芸) denotes “martial art”. The Nippon Budokan (日本武道館), currently one of the central organizations for the promotion of Japanese martial arts, uses the word *budō* as the equivalent word for martial arts. Namely, *budō* originates from combat and martial techniques (*jutsu*) and has evolved through centuries into a method of self-development, which is implied in the word “dō” (道) or “way”. The main aim of *budō* is seeking to cultivate a character through physical training, meaning that one improves sense of judgement, and becomes disciplined individual who is capable of making contribution to society (Bennett 2009, 17). There is, however, no consensus among researchers on definition of martial arts and how can they be distinguished from martial or combat sports, such as kickboxing and mixed martial arts. Some researches, e.g. Lorge (2016) and Lloyd (2014) do not make a distinction between martial arts and martial sports. Lorge (2016, 906) defines martial arts as “taught skills for violence, leaving the definition of violence a quite broad category that would encompass sports. [...] the primary aim of martial arts is skills in the use of violence, leaving any spiritual component in a subsidiary role.” On the other hand, researchers such as Monahan (2007), Keenan (1989) and McFarlane (1990) limit their definition of martial arts to systems that can roughly be called “traditional”, emphasize internal training and morality, respect the cultural background and tend to have spiritual or humanistic value. I agree with the latter group and consider Kyokushin school of karate as martial art because beside sparring (*kumite* 組手), it also places great importance on studying the forms (*kata* 型・形) and basic techniques (*kihon* 基本), respects its cultural background⁵, and emphasizes strict behavior standards in *dōjō*⁶ as well as at tournaments⁷. Moreover, spiritual and humanistic

⁵ E.g. bowing to the *kamidana* (神棚 Shinto altar) when entering and leaving dojo, as well as at the beginning and at the end of each practice.

⁶ E.g. bowing to the partners whenever training together, and group cleaning of dojo after each practice.

⁷ E.g. at 50th All Japan Open Karate Championship on 28 October 2018, one of the competitors did not bow properly when entering the sparring area and thus immediately received penalty point (*chūi* 注意).

value is observable through daily practice and belt examinations, when it is specifically emphasized that “the ultimate goal of Kyokushin karate is not victory nor defeating a partner but aiming toward perfection of character”.

There have been only few researches made on the topic of religion in Japanese martial arts. Research approaches that were used in previous studies can be sorted into three categories. First, historical approach discusses how religious ideas intertwine with martial art culture within the context of Japanese history. Bodiford (2001, 2010), for example, offers historical insight into the interlacement of Japanese martial art culture and spiritual development, with particular focus on how Zen Buddhism, Confucianism and bushido ideology have become incorporated into martial art practices and developed within martial art culture. Moreover, Gainty (2013) briefly discuss how social movements in late Meiji period appropriated the meanings of national body, bushidō ideology and martial arts and in this way helped to form the modern Japanese nation and state.

Second, philosophical or ethical approach deals with manners, etiquette and appropriate behavior of martial artists. In the center of this approach are phrases such as *zazen* (座禪), *mushin* (無心-no-mind or mindless), self-control, ethical virtues, etiquette and hierarchical order. The book of Graham Priest and Damon Young (2014) is supposedly the first academic work that explores the significance of martial arts for the contemporary philosophy and deals with religio-philosophical dilemmas within the study of martial arts, such as why does sparring in Japanese martial arts require courtesy and what kind of explanation for ethical behavior do Shintō and Zen Buddhism provide. Furthermore, Keenan (1989) and McFarlane (1990) debate over the concept of *mushin* as well as over spiritual and humanistic value of East Asian martial arts. Moreover, Yamada (2001) critically discuss Herrigel’s work *Zen in the art of archery* and clarifies the process through which the mystical bond between Zen Buddhism and archery has been formed.

Third, mind-body problem (*shinshin mondai* 心身問題) approach considers human mind and body as unity. This approach most often studies the relationship between human mind and body through the techniques of abdominal breathing (*fukushiki kokyū* 腹式呼吸) and usage of *ki* energy (*ki* 気). According to Friday and Seki (1997) and Yuasa (1993), martial arts teach that abdominal breathing enables practitioners to control and defeat opponents without relying solely on physical strength. They supposedly learn how to manipulate and harmonize their *ki* with the *ki* of their partners, and thus become able to predict partner’s movements before they become perceptible by other senses. Perception of *ki*, however, is supposedly possible only through specialized mind-body training and cannot be perceived by the ordinary consciousness. Namely, *ki* moves with breathing, and when it moves, it affects the activities of the mind. The rhythm of breathing can be thus used to focus and culture the *ki*, as well as to change and stabilize the mind. Through these practices, the martial artists are supposedly able to liberate the creative force which help to sense an opponent’s movements and intentions, intercept his attack, treat diseases, and even prolong their lives.

Furthermore, triumphant posing (*gattsupōzu* ガツツポーズ) as well as any other disrespectful behavior is strictly forbidden at tournaments.

While these discussions all occur on macro level and may explain cultural background of martial arts in Japan, it does not seem that they in fact have important impact on general population of modern karate practitioners. I instead conducted a research on micro level and focused on the viewpoint how students relate karate practice to their everyday life, and what kind of emotional and spiritual support, values and morals do they gain through practice. The results of my research, which I conducted in collaboration with students of IKO Kyokushinkaikan, suggest, that practitioners place more value to the teachings of the karate school they belong to, i.e. Kyokushin karate, rather than to the general ideas of Shintō, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. This brings us to the question, what role do the attachment and commitment to particular karate school have in the meaning that practitioners obtain emotional support, achieve self-growth and develop worldview.

3 Mt. Mitsumine as sacred site of Kyokushin karate

Kyokushin karate school as well as IKO Kyokushinkaikan organization was founded by Ōyama Masutatsu (大山 倍達, 1923–1994) in 1964. Kyokushin karate is considered to be the first form of full-contact karate and is often seen as a contrast to traditional semi-contact karate or *sundome* (寸止め, meaning “stopping before one *sun*⁸”). The terms “full-contact” and “semi-contact” refer to the amount of the body contact with the partner during sparring. According to the semi-contact rules of sparring, the attack should stop just before touching the partner’s body, therefore not making any direct contact between partners. In the case of full-contact rules, however, the attack touches the partner’s body and thus making a direct contact. Because of the direct full-contact it is necessary to take into the account partner’s body features, such as sex, age, physical strength and weight, and adjust the strength of the attack. Ōyama pursued the idea of real-life style of combat and efficiency and built his image as martial artist based on physical strength for which he was named “Godhand” (*Goddohando* ゴッドハンド, also *Kami no te* 神の手) (Ōyama 1973, 3). In his career, he supposedly fought some dozens of bulls (Ōyama 1977, 167–171). Even though it cannot be proved whether or not these fights actually occurred, his image as bull-slayer (*ushikoroshi no Ōyama* 牛殺しの大山) together with his public demonstrations of *tameshiwari* (試し割り)⁹ and his charisma helped him to gain reputation and popularity. On the other hand, however, he also received much criticism and disapproval from traditional karate organizations, such as Japan Karatedō Federation (Zen Nippon Karatedō Renmei 全日本空手道連盟, JKF), and Japan Karate Association (*Nihon Karate Kyōkai* 日本 空手 協会, JKA). They labelled Kyokushin karate as “fighting karate” (*kenka karate* 喧嘩) and considered it as “false way” or heresy (*jadō* 邪道) (Kojima and Tsukamoto 2006, 137).

The practice of *kangeiko* (寒稽古 cold training) on Mt. Mitsumine is considered as one of the most difficult challenges in Kyokushin karate school. It is held every year from 4 to 6 January and I participated in 2018 and again in 2019. During these three days participants underwent various

⁸ *Sun* (寸) is unit of length, approx. 3.03 cm.

⁹ *Tameshiwari* means a practice of breaking bricks and wooden boards.

training sessions and the average temperature was around -7°C to 0°C . The camp started with all of the participants dressed in *karategi* (空手義) paying respect to Ōyama at his memorial site. The following two days started at 6 am with the morning practice on the shrine grounds (*keidai* 境内). It was followed by *sanpai* (参拝 visiting a shrine and praying) inside the front shrine (*haiden* 拝殿), which was conducted by the *kannushi* (神主 Shintō high priest) and lasted for 45 minutes. During prayer, the shrine was open and participants were sitting in the *seiza* (正坐) position wearing only *karategi*. After the *sanpai*, participants performed a memorial service for Ōyama in front of the ancestral spirit shrine (*soreisha* 祖霊社). The most important practice of the *kangeiko* is so-called *takiabi* (滝浴び), which means training under the frozen waterfall.



FIG 1: Morning prayer inside the front shrine.
IKO Kyokushinkaikan. 5 January 2018.

In Japan, mountains are a very common location for martial arts training, and many practitioners of karate, aikidō, jūdō and kendō conduct *kangeiko* with the purpose of strengthening their physical and mental endurance. The origins of *kangeiko* can be traced back to the Shintō myth related to the purification ritual called *misogi* (禊). Izanagi visited his deceased wife Izanami in the “Land of Darkness”, the underworld, where he came into contact with the dead. After he returned to “the Land of the Middle”, he washed off the impurity (*kegare* 穢れ) at a small river in Himuka in Kyūshū. The washing of impurity with water is called *misogi* and Izanagi’s purification is considered as the first ritual of cleansing. According to Shintō texts *Kojiki* (古事記) and *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), during *misogi* Izanagi first produced “deities of evil” (*magatsu hi no kami* 禍津日神) and then “deities to rectify evil” (*naobi no kami* 直毘神). At the last



FIG 2: Part of the group training under the waterfall.
IKO Kyokushinkaikan. 5 January 2018.

stage of his purification, when he washed his right eye, his left eye, and then his nose, his “three children”, deities, were born (Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大御神, Tsukiyomi-no-mikoto 月読尊 and Sunanoo-no-mikoto 須佐之男命). This indicates that *misogi* purifies the body and mind, but most importantly, it restores the vital energy necessary for life, helps the practitioner to overcome mental obstacles and prepares him for new challenges. This legend also explains why most shrines include clear streams (Nobutaka 2003, 58).

In general, the image of sacred mountains is based on animistic worldview of nature. The animistic worldview includes the idea that deities, demons and other supernatural beings dwell in natural objects and phenomenon such as wind and rain, fire and water, thunder and lightning, rocks, trees and mountains. These objects are believed to be alive with consciousness and spiritual powers of their own and are therefore able to influence human life in both good and evil ways. Animistic beliefs caused a sense of awe and respect in people towards these objects and natural phenomena (Miyake 2005, 27). The case of Kyokushin karate and Mt. Mitsumine, however, is different from general interpretations of sacred mountains where *kangeiko* are held. Namely, Mt. Mitsumine is worshiped as sacred mountain among Kyokushin students because Mt. Mitsumine is considered as birthplace of Kyokushin karate, or in other words, birthplace of Kyokushin community. In the center of the sacred site is the founder of Kyokushin karate, Ōyama Masutatsu.

Ōyama practiced *kangeiko* on Mt. Mitsumine together with his students every year from around 1957 until his death in 1994. He chose Mt. Mitsumine for mountain training because he was inspired by Yoshikawa’s novel *Musashi* (1935), which is a life story about swordsman and warrior Miyamoto Musashi (宮本 武蔵, c. 1584–1645) but with some fictional elements and events. In chapter “Two Drumsticks” Yoshikawa describes how Musashi supposedly developed a style of combat with two swords (Nitō-ryū 二刀流) on Mt. Mitsumine while watching the hands of one of the *taiko* drummers wielding two short club-shaped drumsticks during a performance. He realized that the principle in drumming is the same as in swordsmanship. Ōyama was more than impressed with Musashi and admired him since he was not only skillful swordsman, but was also accomplished in writing, painting and carving (Ōyama 1994, 97).

In 1989, the Mitsumine shrine presented Ōyama with a gratitude letter for the years of dedicated mountain practice on Mt. Mitsumine. After his death in 1994, his soul was enshrined as divided soul



FIG 3: Memorial service for Ōyama in front of the ancestral spirit shrine. IKO Kyokushinkaikan. 5 January 2018.

(*wakemitama* 分御霊) in ancestral spirit shrine (*soreisha* 祖霊社) in Mitsumine shrine. Furthermore, his students built a monument to publicly commemorate him. In terms of Shinto belief, *wakemitama* indicates a divided soul and is created through religious ritual. During this ritual original soul is split into two and the second soul is then invited to another location where it is re-enshrined while the original soul remains in the original shrine. Speaking metaphorically, the re-enshrinement process is similar to lighting a new candle from a burning (original) one, namely, the light of the first candle is in no way diminished as it becomes two. The *wakemitama* has therefore all the qualities of the original kami and is therefore “alive” and permanent (Smyers 1996, 89). Although the process of creating *wakemitama* is rather common practice in Japan, in this case I believe it indicates a special connection between Mt. Mitsumine and Ōyama.

Kyokushin karate practice on Mt. Mitsumine goes beyond the concept of a *kangeiko*. Namely, karate training together with *sanpai* and memorial service for Ōyama form a practice which has many similarities to pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are one of the most common phenomena found in almost every major religious tradition, however, they are not necessarily limited only to official religious domain. Authors, such as Reader and Walter (1993) and Margry *et al.* (2008) deal with so-called secular pilgrimage and sacred sites in popular culture and claim that the concept of pilgrimage is not limited to visiting churches, shrines and holy sites connected to official religious traditions. The concept of pilgrimage, especially in modern culture, also includes the secular sphere, such as sports, entertainment and places where tragedies and accidents have occurred. A variety of activities, such as visiting the homes of famous authors and visiting the graves and memorial sites of musicians can be understood in terms of pilgrimage (Reader and Walter 1993, 5).

Jan Margry *et al.* (2008) similarly focused on the various new forms of pilgrimage, which are to some extent a result of changes in society and in the field of religion in the second half of the 20th century. These kinds of pilgrimages are usually categorized as “secular pilgrimages”. The term secular pilgrimage is composed of two contradictory words, namely “secular” and “pilgrimage”, and is often difficult to define. In this case, however, the term indicates an opposition to “religious pilgrimage”. In a wider sense, Margry defines pilgrimage as, “A journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred than the environment of everyday life, to seek transcendental encounter with



FIG 4: Ōyama's memorial site at Mt. Mitsumine.
Author's photo. 6 April 2016.

specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physical healing or benefit” (Margry *et al.* 2008, 17). Margry calls these secular pilgrimage sites “hybrid locations”, since they have mostly secular, but at the same time also some religious elements (Margry *et al.* 2008, 323). On the outside, visits to graves and places where tragedies have occurred do not show many similarities with religious rituals. For this reason, it is necessary to consider how visitors experience these kinds of places and take into the account elements such as finding meaning in life, identification with community, finding the sense of belonging as well as strength, support and resolutions and expressing gratitude (Margry *et al.* 2008, 32). Furthermore, one of the major themes of hybrid locations is the close relationship between pilgrimage, heroic figures and death. In other words, hybrid locations have distinct person-oriented veneration. Namely, at these sites, martyrs, cultural heroes, saints and those killed in battles and wars symbolically survived their deaths and now their graves or the sites that are associated with them function as place where their souls live on and where people can express emotions (Reader and Walter 1993, 17–20).

In my research, students often expressed that to them Ōyama is either cultural or personal hero. Among the fifty-three participants in the questionnaire survey, six of them have directly met Ōyama at some point in their life. The ones who never met him, however, expressed that he has indirectly influenced them and their life. For example, 19-year-old male *yūdansa* wrote that to him, Ōyama represents “unreachable and irreplaceable man”, while 51-year-old male *yūdansa* wrote, “I have never directly met or talked to Ōyama, but to me he is a god-like person”. Mt. Mitsumine as a sacred site of Kyokushin karate school has the ability to produce a feeling of group identity, sense of belonging and to strengthen group consciousness. As many participants expressed, Ōyama did not only found a particular karate school, he “created a brotherhood” which shares similar values.

4 Kyokushin karate as source of mental support and self-development for its practitioners

In my research I was focused on strong attachment and commitment of Kyokushin karate practitioners to Kyokushin karate school, as well as on how they gain emotional and spiritual support by practicing Kyokushin karate. I have conducted a research through open-type questionnaires where Kyokushin karate practitioners described in their own words their personal attitude, experiences and attachment to Kyokushin karate school. Among fifty-three participants involved in the research, forty-one of them were *dan* rank holders (*yūdansa* 有段者)¹⁰ and twelve of them were color belt practitioners (*iroobi* 色帯)¹¹, mostly with ranks from eighth to first *kyū*. The age of the practitioners involved in the research was between sixteen and seventy-four years old and belong to the various dojo in the Kantō area.

When describing their motives for beginnings, very few participants stated that their primary

¹⁰ Practitioners holding a black belt.

¹¹ Practitioners holding a “color” belt.

motive and reason for taking Kyokushin karate up was intentionally seeking a way for self-development. They also stated, however, that they became interested in self-development through karate after a few years of practice. According to research results, most of the Kyokushin karate students use in the everyday life the idea called “Kyokushin spirit” (*Kyokushin no seishin* 極真の精神). Ōyama developed the philosophy of Kyokushin spirit by intentionally selecting ideas from established religious traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, which he then reinterpreted in a way that they corresponded to his own view of life and martial arts. He chose the idea of abdominal breathing from Daoist traditional Chinese medicine (*kanpō* 漢方), the concept of *mushin* and practice of meditation from Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, manners, moral and filial piety from Confucianism, and the idea of cultivating literary and military arts (*bunbu ryōdō* 文武両道) from bushidō ideology (Ōyama 1994, 24–27). Through this eclectic selection he developed personal brand of spirituality which he summarized in a saying, “Keep your head low, eyes high, mouth shut and mind open, base yourself on filial piety and benefit others” (Ōyama 1994, 72). In this context, “head low” symbolizes modesty, “eyes high” means ambition, “mouth shut” indicates calmness, and “mind open” is metaphor for kindness and selfishness. Furthermore, Ōyama believed that benefiting other people starts with respect and appreciation toward one’s parents (Ōyama 1994, 72–75).

To sum up, Kyokushin spirit emphasizes personal growth, respect, perseverance, courtesy, gratitude, endeavor and modesty. Participants often described Kyokushin karate, and especially Kyokushin spirit, as “an anchor for the heart” (*kokoro no yoridokoro* 心の拠り所) and “something that makes my life worth living” (*jibun no ikigai* 自分の生き甲斐). For example, 23-year old female color belt wrote, “Japan does not have so much sense of piety. It is possible to say that Japan is secular country. For this reason, I think that moral code such as ‘Dōjō kun’ is valuable for modern people as an anchor for the heart.”

Furthermore, many of the participant described Kyokushin karate as “karate with soul” (*tamashii no aru karate* 魂のある空手) or “soul karate” (*souru karate* ソウル空手). This refers to the full-contact method of training. Practitioners wrote that through full-contact you “give and receive pain” and as 22-year old yūdansa explained, because of direct blows with bare hands and feet this kind of pain is peculiar to martial arts and cannot be experienced in any other sport such as football, baseball or basketball. Participants believe that true strength is not merely physical strength, but kindness and compassion to others as well as cooperation and altruism and expressed that they believe they have more sympathy and compassion for other people’s pain than they would have without full-contact.

Moreover, participant wrote that they tightly relate karate practice with their everyday life. They claim that in their daily life they strive to behave according to standards taught in Kyokushin karate, meaning that one should be self-confident and show uprightness, but at the same time avoid arrogance and boasting about your abilities. It is possible that this awareness is present from the moment when one becomes formal member and makes a commitment to the Kyokushin karate organization. When joining, the member signs an entrance pledge which is addressed to *kanchō*, that

he or she will obey the rules of one's dojo, endeavor to behave as a student also in one's daily life, and never do anything to bring disgrace upon the dojo. Members thus strive in daily life outside of dōjō "not to damage the reputation of Kyokushin karate" and "not to dishonor the Kyokushin name" with inappropriate behavior.

5 Conclusion

In previous studies the relationship between Japanese martial arts and religion has been discussed though the religio-cultural concepts, such as *zazen*, *mushin*, self-control, *ki* energy and abdominal breathing. Martial arts, however, are not timeless, from social changes isolated entity, and religious traditions that played important role in the past are not necessarily considered as important among modern karate practitioners. I believe that the attachment and commitment to the particular martial art school has to be taken into the account because practitioners tend to develop a strong personal relationship with their martial art school.

In the research, I focused on the general students and their personal experiences with Kyokushin karate and realized that for Kyokushin karate students, training on Mt. Mitsumine and daily practice is not a mere recreation, but rather a lifestyle. Karate practice provides life meaning, sense of belonging, self-development, mental support, inspiration and empowerment. We can say that modern karate practitioners have transformed martial arts in a way that they correspond to their spiritual and mental needs. Furthermore, from the phrases and the words used in research descriptions we can see that students' way of thinking, worldview and whole value system in daily life is defined through "Kyokushin spirit". I believe that approach where *ryūha* is central study topic has a potential to further research the relationship between martial arts and religion and will help to explore the role of religion and spirituality in contemporary Japanese martial arts.

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