

Motobu Choki Sensei Quotes - Commented by Me

First, this is a copy from the blog posting by Victor Smith Sensei. I found it as it was shared on the FB Wall of John Bartusevics Sensei. As many of you already know, I have an opinion so I am going to give mine on the following. I am not saying that by my comments that these are either good or bad, right or wrong or of questionable meaning but rather that I take a certain perspective and perception when I read them.

Here we go:

In 1978, an essay entitled "Collection of Sayings by Motobu Choki" was published in Japanese (translated by Sensei Joe Swift). This essay is based upon the oral teachings of Motobu Choki to his students, and was overseen by one direct student of Motobu, namely Marukawa Kenji. Let us now take a look at these "oral transmissions."

1. Everything is natural, and changing.

I honestly cannot think of one thing to say except that this reminds me of the Chinese yin-yang principles. Who knows what teachings and studies Motobu Sensei acquired during his time as a karate-ka.

2. Kamae is in the heart, not a physical manifestation.

Hmm, maybe this will help many clarify what they feel is the manifestation of kamae. We westerners tend to think in the direct immediate meaning when that is often just the tip of the iceberg. Kamae, for me, is a manifestation of a moment in time where one achieves a maximum efficiency when applying a strategy and a specific tactic that adheres to the laws or principles of martial systems. It is not just a stance but rather all those things in the principles that comes together like the perfect alignment of the planets and stars for a moment in time unique to all things in the Universe.

3. One must develop the ability to read how much striking power any person has in one glance.

With the availability of knowledge in today's eWorld this seems limiting yet I suspect as with many things Asian, similar to the Zen koans, this is meant more as a lead in to greater knowledge and understanding. That glance can see many things in an adversary provided that the person applying the ability has the basis or foundation to "know what they are seeing." In today's martial arts as in self-defense many don't know the before stuff or the after stuff, they just know that for this applied attack you counter with this application of technique. This can at least lead a karate-ka or martial artists toward a fully and more complete answer, understanding and ability. Maybe that is the point here.

4. One does not have to take care to block every single attack by an opponent with weak striking power.

Oh this is so true. This again alludes to more than merely the physical manifestation of martial arts. It is about understanding those principles that talk of power applied where even the most physically fit and strong specimen can not achieve power without the knowledge and ability to actually achieve power, power over what many believe as power called "muscling it."

5. One must develop the ability to deflect an attack even from behind.

Again, it seems logical and simple yet it involves a variety of things that must have a basis in knowledge before one can learn, practice and apply. Such things as self-awareness, environmental awareness, and situational awareness. Even with the big three if one fails to know about all aspects of conflict, violence and defense you cannot truly have proper "awareness."

6. In a real confrontation, more than anything else one should strike to the face first, as this is the most effective.

I have to disagree with this one. I would think that there are many far more effective ways to stop an adversary on the attack or who is confronting you in a conflict. First, if it hasn't gone physical then you have time and choices of which one is simply walk away, i.e. avoidance. If you have the type of awareness necessary for avoidance then those traits and applications will stop a need to strike a face first. The difficulty with such antiquated quotations are the assumption they apply to today's world of self-defense. In a literal sense, if one were to strike to the face first it could be viewed as an aggressive move making it a strong argument for "fighting" and that would be illegal resulting in an arrest and prosecution. It must be made clear that such things as ancient quotations toward teaching MA must be considered in the light to which they were created, i.e. ancient more violent times, etc.

7. Kicks are not all that effective in a real confrontation.

Can't argue with this as for my system of practice the ability to kick is more a supporting set of abilities since there must be other means to achieve defense. Real confrontations, as I understand them, tend to be very, very close

making kicks hard to apply. I also feel, mostly, that if you have the distance to kick then you have an opportunity to turn and run.

8. "Karate IS Sente" (Here, sente means the initiative, or the first move. c.f. Karate ni Sente Nashi - there is no first move in karate).

We can go deep and long on this one but fundamentally I find this true and false. There are always first moves when it comes to fighting or self-defense even if the first move is avoidance. I believe that there are and should be "first moves" in karate or any martial art. This is especially true if self-defense is involved. You must look to the entire spectrum of self-defense (reading the book "In the Name of Self-Defense," by Marc MacYoung will get you a lot closer) in order to achieve a first move. You can take this to the extent of the OODA loop where achieving the "Act" of the loop while an adversary is still stuck in the OO section makes for a first move that will achieve a goal or an end strategy in defense.

9. The position of the legs and hips in Naifuanchin no Kata is the basics of karate.

I am not arguing this point but rather taking a stance that assuming any one kata is a basic of any martial art is misleading. The position of the legs and hips are a dynamic moment to moment, circumstance to circumstance type thing where applying the principles of physiokinetics, etc. are better suited to achieve a positive outcome in a violent situation or in conflict in general. Granted, kata are teaching tools for such things and this is why I advocate not using such a specific but a more general approach so karate-ka are not locked into one aspect of many aspects.

10. Twisting to the left or right from the Naifuanchin stance will give you the stance used in a real confrontation. Twisting ones way of thinking about Naifuanchin left and right, the various meanings in each movement of the kata will also become clear.

Go back to number 9 and also consider that this may derive from the feelings of Motobu Sensei as to a specific that worked for him in his application of fighting or even self-defense. It is best a student remember this as it may or may not actually apply to that student. It is really necessary each student take a sensei's teachings and then apply them in a manner best suited to that individual. What works for one may not work for the next person.

11. One must always try and block the attack at its source (i.e. block not the attacking hand, but deeper on the arm).

No argument but a comment, if one were to focus on the body hubs (phrase coined by Marc MacYoung in his book, "Taking it to the Streets: Making Your Martial Art Street Effective." Those hubs will tell you more about the source of the attack. Also, read "In the Name of Self-Defense," where he addresses how one can learn to see an attack, etc. with greater success than simply knowing that one should go deeper. What does it truly mean to go deeper when you can achieve your goals and strategies before you have to go deeper on the arm.

12. The blocking hand must be able to become the attacking hand in an instant. Blocking with one hand and then countering with the other is not true bujutsu. Real bujutsu presses forward and blocks and counters in the same motion.

Maybe true but today's street defense would be better served by the attack positioning where the leading hand is for grabbing, etc. while the other is for a powerful application be it a fist, hand or something else. It is a matter of achieving a position to maximize your ability to apply power. If this blocking hand is forward and changes to a strike the strike may not achieve enough power to achieve success but it also could be a means of achieving success with successive techniques but then again in today's SD world ending it fast is more beneficial then turning it into a long, drawn out fight, fighting is illegal today.

13. One cannot use continuous attacks against true karate. That is because the blocks of true karate make it impossible for the opponent to launch a second attack.

I suspect this is geared more toward the sport aspects or the dueling aspects of the times Motobu Sensei lived. When one says, "Impossible," I tend to think, that is not possible. Violence itself does not always allow for such actions except maybe in either sport or the more social fight scenes. Again, clarifications and such need to go hand in hand with this type of insinuations.

14. I still do not yet know the best way to punch the makiwara. (note: this statement was made when Choki was over 60!!!)

This is a personal feeling, no comment.

15. It's interesting, but when I just think about performing a kata, when I'm seated, I break a sweat.

Doubt it but it makes for a nice sound bite. I would like to research how one could break out in a sweat just by visualizations such as this. If it involved dynamic tension while not moving, i.e., tensioning the body part and

muscles as you visualize then I suspect one could break out in a sweat. There are other aspect to visualizations where one visualized a recent violent situation causing the body to react with one symptom of sweating is possible.

16. When punching to the face, one must thrust as if punching through to the back of the head.

This particular one is dangerous for many reasons today. One, even with makiwara and other conditioning methods, is that a fist to the hard part of the body as is the case with a fist to the face tends to lend itself to hand injuries. I have been told as well that on conditions one can be hit or hit someone in the face with no results but making the adversary angrier and more aggressive. Also, if you were actually hitting in such a manner is the level of force going to be justified. Does the technique when viewed by others appear more aggressive and over the proper level of force - circumstances in the moment apply and that is part of why expanding on such sound bits is important.

17. When fighting a boxer, it is better to go with his flow, and take up a rhythm with both of your hands.

No, are you a boxer? The last thing I would want to do is go toe to toe with a boxer if I am not a boxer with equal or greater boxing skills. Now, if this were to apply toward a sport event then that is another matter but still I would not want to challenge a boxer to a boxing match if I am a karate-ka. This seems inappropriate.

18. It is necessary to drink alcohol and pursue other fun human activities. The art (i.e. karate) of someone who is too serious has no "flavour."

A philosophical viewpoint. Not one I would take. I can have fun without resorting to mind and body altering chemicals such as alcohol. We are all humans and as such tend to lean heavily toward social connections and inter-connections because nature provided us with these as a survival instinct type thing. Remember fighting and self-defense are "serious matters" yet one should practice, train and apply such things in a manner that allows the greatest encoding to the mind, body and spirit.

19. It is OK to take two steps forward or back in the same kamae, but over three steps, one must change the position (facing) of their guard.

A complicated view that can be argued in many different ways. In the first part the kamae is something more than taking a particular static kamae or stance and remaining in one for one or more applications may not be the most effective way but possibly more of a novice learning and teaching tool but again is this explained fully.

20. When I fought the foreign boxer in Kyoto, he was taller than me so I jumped up and punched him in the face. This is effective against people who are taller than you.

I disagree. It may or may not be effective but it promotes the idea that the face is his main target. I would rather have several targets and methods to get the job done, fast and quick and right now vs. a more sport aspect of a contest with rules. An example over jumping up off the ground to hit someone is to use your smaller stature to unbalance the adversary and let gravity to the work for you sounds like a good alternative.

21. I started having real fights at Tsuji when I was young, and fought over 100 of them, but I was never hit in the face.

Great luck, I am happy for him. Apparently Motobu Sensei was focused on the face in his practices and applications. I would not want my students of MA and Self-defense to get mired down in just one target, one strategy, one tactic and one hope of ending the violent conflict. Not a good strategy on the whole.

22. When I was 4, I was made to go to a school, but I hated studying, so I often skipped class and played somewhere with my friends.

Oh well, skipping school and remaining ignorant may be good for those times and Motobu sensei but the ability to learn, study and gain knowledge seems to me as an imperative toward understanding all that is necessary to achieve those "awareness" goals as stated earlier in this post.

23. When I was still in Okinawa, Kano Jigoro of the Kodokan visited and asked to talk with me, and through a friend we went to a certain restaurant. Mr. Kano talked about a lot of things, but about karate, he asked me what I would do if my punch missed. I answered that I would immediately follow with an elbow strike from that motion. After that, he became very quiet and asked nothing more about karate.

Great story but what does it promote except that when one technique fails don't get caught in the infinite looping one can when under the adrenal stress flood in a violent encounter. Good advice but is this about the principle or is it about him and his association with Kano sensei?

24. There are no stances such as neko-ashi, zenkutsu or kokutsu in my karate. Neko-ashi is a form of "floating foot" which is considered very bad in bujutsu. If one receives a body strike, one will be thrown off balance. Zenkutsu and kokutsu are unnatural, and prevent free leg movement. The stance in my karate, whether in kata

or kumite, is like Naifuanchin, with the knees slightly bent, and the footwork is free. When defending or attacking, I tighten the knees and drop the hips, but I do not put my weight on either front or back foot, rather keeping it evenly distributed.

I get the impression he is trying hard to explain those fundamental principles of all martial systems as they would apply in a violent situation. He is also trying hard to address kamae in combat. I also think he is trying to say that learning stances is a good basic teaching method but one must move beyond merely taking a stance and becoming fluid to the moment and circumstances.

25. When blocking kicks, one must block as if trying to break the opponent's shin.

I am against this one entirely. No matter how conditioned one's body when in combat that same body part will break when applied to a hard target. I advocate the hard-to-soft-n-soft-to-hard maxim in defense. If you are also far enough away to block a foot then you are far enough away to leave the scene, avoidance. Take into consideration this model of teaching is leaving out two-thirds of what combatives/defense require and must be known and understood to achieve victory. Again, this is a huge problem with modern martial arts outside of the more philosophical practices.

26. When I came to Tokyo, there was another Okinawan who was teaching karate there quite actively. When in Okinawa I hadn't even heard his name. Upon the guidance of another Okinawan, I went to the place he was teaching youngsters, where he was running his mouth, bragging. Upon seeing this, I grabbed his hand, took up the position of "kake-kumite" and said "What will you do?" He was hesitant, and I thought to punch him would be too much, so I threw him with "kote-gaeshi" at which he fell to the ground with a thud. He got up, his face red, and said "once more" so we took up the position of kake-kumite again. And again I threw him with kote-gaeshi. He did not relent and asked for another bout, so he was thrown the same way for a third time.

Sounds like he succumbed to the monkey emotional ego pride that often get folks into trouble more than getting them out of trouble or avoiding trouble all together.

General: *It seems that for historical purposes these quotes are educational but my concern as a sensei and karate-ka is when these are thought of as a means to "winning the fight" over simply defending against aggression. Even in the sport arena this may be far more detrimental to the overall mental and physical philosophies of a martial artist leading to a more aggressive ego pride driven approach that can become aggressive in nature over other more appropriate and acceptable ways of martial arts. IT IS IMPERATIVE that a more full and complete understanding and explanation accompany such historical references. It is good to know the mind-state of our ancestral teachers but it must be about its intent at the time through the cultural beliefs systems whereby those systems apply or don't apply to current standards, practices and societal needs and acceptance.*

I applaud Swift sensei's efforts to bring us such enlightening historical translations so that we see through the eyes of that person, in the times in which they lived so as to show contrasts in comparisons to today's practices and applications.

Translation By Joe Swift