

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL & SPIRITUAL TRAINING
The Spiritual Training of Marvin Labbate, 8th Dan, Okinawan Goju-Ryu Karate

“Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

-The Holy Bible: 1 Timothy 4:7b-8, (NIV)

The Far East

My first exposure to Okinawa, Japan was in 1984. I was a 3rd degree black belt in my late twenties. I trained in Okinawa for two weeks, and experienced the culture, people, diets, training...it was overwhelming. I really didn't have interaction with the leadership at that time because I was in the rank and file. It wasn't until three years later that I had the privilege to host Master Shinjo and the Okinawans in my home. At dinner one night, Shinjo Sensei asked me, "What are you thinking about when you are in *seiza* (*seated meditation*)?" At that time, I was struggling with incorporating Christian ideals and values into my training. I knew karate was more than just physical and mental, and as a Christian what I believed to be important for spiritual development came from Jesus Christ through the Bible. I was faced with the question of how to blend two important areas of my life (Christianity and karate) into one. So I told Shinjo Sensei, "When I am in *seiza*, and leading the class as an instructor, I pray for the students; I pray for their well-being, I pray for the safety of the class, and I pray that any knowledge or information imparted in the class will directly benefit the students in whatever way it needs to. I also pray that I am receptive to what God wants me to do as I direct and guide the class, and I am willing to serve anyone who needs a word of encouragement or a sympathetic ear. It is my responsibility to ensure the quality of the class by having a positive training environment. When I am in *seiza* as a student in the class, I have the choice to focus my mind on three areas: my physical, mental, or spiritual training. I have the option to contemplate (focusing on the physical training given by the instructor), to meditate (focusing on mental /internal training - breathing & energy work) or to pray (focusing on God and reflecting on my spiritual needs and development). Shinjo Sensei said, "Very good." I continued, "I know that in your country you practice Shintoism /Buddhism. But I am a Christian, so when I talk about philosophy or virtues in class, I am relating it to my faith in Christianity." Shinjo Sensei said to me, "That's ok. I don't expect you to follow my faith. But I do expect you to have spirituality in your karate." As I think about that conversation with Shinjo Sensei, his response was significant, because it shows an Okinawan karate master in agreement with the spiritual teachings of one of his foreign karate students. He continued by saying that most of American Karate, a karate without spirituality, is "boogie-woogie" karate.

Karate without spirituality is just physical. He was very pleased that we had included spirituality to our training. This is also important in relation to the Okinawan training process. There are three areas of focus in addition to physical training: They want to make sure you have 1) a good mind (intelligent, creative, bright, able to teach), 2) a good heart (humble, teachable, kind, gentle), and 3) a healthy relationship (regular communication, mutual respect, considerate, serving). The Okinawans believe that if a student is not spiritual, then he doesn't have faith in a higher being of goodness, and therefore they can't trust him, because he is relying on himself and his own ideals/desires. This became the catalyst that helped me introduce Christianity into my karate.

The Wild West

The next struggle I had was developing a spiritual curriculum to help my students learn how to grow spiritually. When I first started training under American instructors, one was an atheist and another was a Buddhist. You can just imagine the different types of philosophical/spiritual instruction I was or was not receiving. Karate training provides physical, mental, and spiritual health. As an educator and a responsible leader in the dojo, it is my obligation to ensure the development and well-being of my students – physically, mentally, and spiritually. In my own personal training coming up through the years, the dojo philosophy of “Honor, integrity, courtesy, and respect” was not there to ensure one's personal development. It was there as a means of control. An analogy I like to use is that, in the days of the Wild West, there were a lot of “fast guns”, and those fast guns had a code of ethics. If someone breached that code of ethics, he would get shot. The same thing happened in the dojo. In the dojo there was a code of ethics, and if one breached that code of ethics he would be reprimanded and disciplined, which was referred to as an “attitude adjustment.” Usually, if an instructor decided that a student had a bad attitude, the typical consequence would be 50 pushups followed by physically abusive sparring sessions for an extended period of time with various black belts, often with no explanation of what the infraction was. This was an inappropriate way of teaching respect. Instead of educating the students, this kind of discipline taught fear and promoted this “macho” behavior within all the students. In a sense it was ego-driven out of respect for the rank. Students would learn to respect the rank and not the person. If the instructors weren't governed by their spirituality, they were probably governed by their egos. As one might imagine, it was bizarre and out of control. This type of instruction was detrimental to the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of the students. Physically, it caused injury. Mentally, it caused humiliation and emotional anxiety. Spiritually, it did not provide any growth towards one's character. It ultimately promoted a culture of “survival of the fittest”. I realized that under a non-spiritual instructor, the character traits of “honor, integrity, courtesy, and respect” were a

means of control, while under a spiritual instructor these same character traits were a means of personal development. At times, my traditional karate training was abusive, degrading, and humiliating. I realized that quality karate training could still be nurturing without losing its intensity. The difference was promoting positive and encouraging reinforcement in training rather than negative, fear-based reinforcement. For beginning students, with their initial insecurities and uncertainty about martial arts training, their first experience with karate should be an opportunity for them to achieve personal growth and development in a positive and welcoming atmosphere. As a student, my early years in training were in an abusive, degrading atmosphere under the guise of "No Pain, No Gain." It occurred to me that my karate teaching should not be physically or emotionally abusive, but rather a means to promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Physically, karate would develop strength, endurance, speed, power, flexibility, etc. Mentally, karate would develop quicker thinking, sharper focus, concentration, creativity, a stronger mind, etc. Spiritually, karate would build character traits such as *sincere* respect, honor, integrity, kindness, love, etc. Together these three areas combine to gracefully develop us to be physically spry, mentally alert, and spiritually mature. That is what the physical, mental, and spiritual exercise of karate-do (the way of karate) is all about.



As an instructor, my Christian values are not used as a means to control others, but rather to expose my students to the importance of focusing on this area of training to ensure their spiritual development. My Christianity is focused on developing my character, and I do that by building my relationship with God as I understand and imitate His heart through my own personal training and study. As I thought about how to develop a spiritual martial arts curriculum, what I came to conclude is that everything I have is a blessing from God: my martial arts talent, teachers, legitimate credentials, and authentic karate from Okinawa. As a result, when I am implementing the philosophies of martial arts (honor,

integrity, courtesy, respect, etc.), I realize that the source of these character traits is God. These traits are not inherent or natural. They are learned behaviors that require training. In Proverbs 22:6 the Bible states, *“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”* Teaching is like parenting. The source of spiritual training comes from God’s Word, not from man’s philosophy. I would like my students to respect me as a person, not just as an instructor or a black belt. Being respected as a man, a husband, a father, a teacher, and as a disciple of Christ is my goal. So when someone looks at me as a martial arts instructor and says “What makes him unique?” I pray that my example will enable them to say, “He is a godly man and his life exemplifies his teaching.” If your desire is to have excellent martial arts that others can follow, you will need to set a godly example. “Sensei” literally means, “one who has gone before.” If you’re my student, you are on the same path, and it is my responsibility to expedite your training in martial arts so you can become proficient. In James 3:1 the Bible states, *“not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”* As a teacher, I realize that I am responsible for what I teach.

Where East Meets West

As stated earlier, three things are valued in Okinawa: Your mind, your heart, and your relationships with others. Initially, the Okinawans evaluated me by watching how I related to them and how I taught and interacted with my students. The primary focus of my training was to determine my commitment and wholeheartedness. They observed our martial arts training, (basics, kata, kumite sets, etc), but they were more concerned with watching our character and relationships than our physical proficiency. They wanted to know if I was capable of developing the character of my students as well as martial arts skill. The secondary focus was to correct my physical technique, while making sure my mind and heart were in the right place. It also became important to know the history, culture, and etiquette of the Okinawans to become thoroughly educated and equipped for my training. The final focus was establishing an ongoing relationship, a friendship that transcended martial arts. I wanted them to know that I had a teachable heart and a genuine desire to learn. Most people want the teaching without the relationship. They want to use the relationship for gain, rather than a genuine desire to develop a friendship. Conversely, if I immersed myself in martial arts, I would want to know about the lives of the Okinawans as well as their martial arts. I once heard a quote that stated, “A transfer of knowledge is not the focus; the transfer of heart is the task.” If communication with my teachers only occurs every two years when I travel to Okinawa, our relationship is very superficial, and can never lead to an intimate friendship. There needs to be an ongoing communication, otherwise what relationship do we have?

Spiritually, God wants to have the same relationship with us. He knows our hearts and minds already. Now He wants to cultivate a real, ongoing, relationship while helping us to see His heart and mind through the Bible and prayer. Consider God's focus on training us to be like Him. The first step is that God wants us to be committed and wholehearted to a relationship with Him. We can't be "Sunday Christians" or talk a good game without living the life. Being religious and being spiritual are two different things. People can be "religious" about cutting their lawn. That just means that they cut their lawn every week. Making God the ultimate authority in our lives and learning about how to develop a heart like His is the key to being spiritual. The question I had to ask myself was, "Do I just want to be saved, or do I want to know everything I can about Christ?" This relates to what I wrote about earlier pertaining to martial arts: Most people just want the benefits without being willing to make the sacrifice to train. A sincere effort is required. The second step is to learn from the Bible about how to imitate God's heart and mind through the life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as revealed through the Bible. In 2nd Timothy 3:16-17 the Bible states, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" In John 14:6 Jesus states, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" I needed to realize that Jesus's teaching was the only spiritual foundation that could help me know the truth about how to live my life and come near to God. In James 4:8 the Bible states, "*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*" The final step was to devote my life to an ongoing relationship with God. This is a friendship that I cherish and desperately need to rely on to guide me as I teach others through the way I live my life. In Matthew 22:37 Jesus states, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*"

The Relationship between Physical & Spiritual Training

In Proverbs 16:32 the Bible states (Translated from the Spanish Bible): "*It is better to be a patient man than a warrior. It is better to conquer oneself than to conquer cities.*"

The following examines the basics of Christianity in its relation to Goju-Ryu principles. The form of Sanchin, for example, is not a fighting kata, but rather a catalog of principles that develops foundational technique. These principles permeate all aspects of karate, and are the basis for all other katas (Labbate, 1999). Like Sanchin, Christianity is also focused on non-violence, however through the principles of Bible study, prayer, repentance (lasting change), and faith (trusting God's will and not our own), we can grow in our maturity as spiritual individuals through our reliance on God in the battle to master

ourselves. After all, who better to help us master ourselves than our Creator? The foundation of the Sanchin kata, with principles of structure, movement and breathing, is the foundation for our martial arts technique. The Bible is the foundation and infallible standard for Christianity. As overall technique improves, the quality and subtlety of kata training and also spiritual training through Bible study grows to incorporate more advanced movements. Thus each incremental improvement is fed back into every aspect of progressive training (Labbate, 2000). Finally, applications evolve not as a staged set of movements, but rather as an artistic expression of the practitioner's ideas and training. The Christian master of spiritual warfare will see the Bible as the consummate standard that affects their attitudes, thoughts, and actions throughout their daily lives. Christianity, like karate, is not concerned with mastering a technique; we must be concerned with mastering ourselves. For Christians, it is a privilege to imitate the perfect life of Jesus Christ. The following are basic principles that will help you to develop skills for spiritual training. Understanding the physical principles and training methodology will help you to understand spiritual principles and training methodology that will enable you to train yourself spiritually.

Principle #1: Gross Motor Movement



As we examine this principle, the physical aspects are clear: Our stance is our foundation, our blocks are our defense, and our strikes are our offense. As we are all aware, blocks can be strikes and strikes can be blocks. It is through the gross motor movements of these basic techniques that we see the foundation of the Goju-Ryu system. The spiritual aspects of this principle in relation to Christianity are also simple to understand. Understanding the Bible is my foundation, while my defense is the use of the Bible as a shield of faith and offensively as a sword of truth. I use the scriptures to guide me in my daily life as a shield of faith against the world's viewpoint of spirituality, while also using

the Bible as a sword of truth by cutting through the worldly lies and replacing it with God's Word. Each book of the Bible and various studies that can be derived within have different sets of principles. We must learn the basics of spirituality through our Bible study. Only by doing this will these principles be incorporated into our character. In 2nd Timothy 3:14-17 the Bible states, *"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

A personal example of this in my life was the grounding that the Bible gave me, my "stance," during a very difficult time when my first wife left me. She wanted to take my son away from me and replace me as a father. My defense was that I knew that if I honored God, He would honor me and my children. In 1st Samuel 2:30b God states, *"Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained."* I held on to this scripture with all my might. I believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, and as a result, God was faithful to my prayers and allowed me to keep my son. Through prayer, God has allowed my son to excel academically and athletically, and has protected him from the negative influences of peer pressure. He now regularly worships with me at church and has his own personal relationship with God. The lesson learned for me was simply this: no matter what your struggle is in life, if you go to the foundation of the Bible, and you believe and trust in it, you will find strength and security, no matter what the subject is.

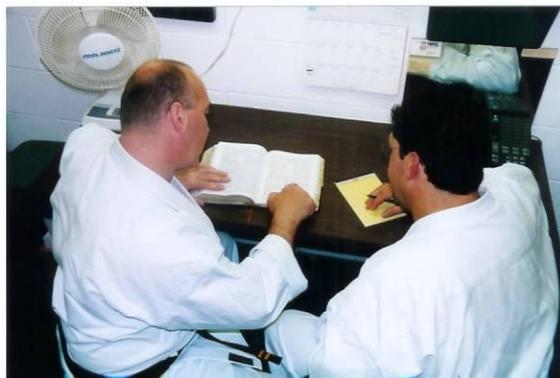
Principle #2: Structure & Movement



Here, our gross motor movements are refined to be structurally sound. The physical aspect entails our muscles and skeletal systems being aligned and locked. The spiritual aspects are also straightforward. By internalizing my

spiritual gross motor movements of Bible study into my daily life, I am putting these principles into practice through application. Like a kata, I need to know my Bible inside and out. I need to internalize it! Repetition is the mother of skill. It is the difference between head knowledge and application. In John 8:31-32, the Bible states, *“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* We must hold on to what we have learned, and it is through repeated application that our skill is really honed and “locked in.” The same eagerness and examination relates to being a Christian. In Acts 17:11 the Bible states, *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”* Without eagerly, examining, everyday, there is no way that I would ever truly refine my life. There must be practice, a “drill,” through daily study and interaction throughout the day using the Bible. For example, reading a book on karate won’t help you grow to maturity, you have to come to class to do it. Coming to class alone won’t help you become a seasoned black belt, but practicing it will do it. The same relates to the Bible. Reading it alone won’t do it. We need to study and apply it. In Romans 15:4 the Bible states, *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*

Principle #3: Generate and Transfer Power



Karate Drum is a catalog of principles that involves the generation and transfer of power into every technique from the center of the body. To learn this movement, a progressive sequence of drills is used that exaggerate and train the motion of the body. As the student becomes more proficient, these exaggerations gradually decrease until the motion becomes an internal element of the technique (Labbate, 2000). Spiritually speaking, it is through internalizing and practicing my spiritual movements in my daily life that I generate power through personal

experience and can transfer that power by sharing what I've learned with others. In 2nd Corinthians 4:15 the Bible states, *"It is written; 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."* Personally, a specific example of this in my life was the power God's Word gave me to love in order to reconcile a friendship with an individual who had hurt me emotionally. Even though, in my sinful nature, I did not want to be the first to reconcile, I obeyed the Bible, and felt refreshed as our friendship was renewed. In Matthew 6:14-15 the Bible states, *"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

Principle #4: Kumite



Kumite is another catalog of principles in which the physical aspects of timing and distance training are used to identify the range of the enemy's attack in order to develop a plan to neutralize him. Different ranges and attacks are determined, such as out of range, middle range (kick and punch range); close range (knees, elbows, and take down range); and finishing range. We learn techniques in the air that develop our skill set and power, but we don't have the ability yet to apply it. Partner training enables us to apply the techniques learned in solo training as we determine the natural reactions to attacks and how to guard against them through simulated attack and defense scenarios. We learn to respond properly, instead of reacting improperly. It is through partner training that the student comes to understand the mind-body transfer. You can't learn karate by reading it in a book or on the Internet. You need to learn from others. There is a mutual benefit as we work on timing and distancing with our partner and apply what we learned in a solo context.

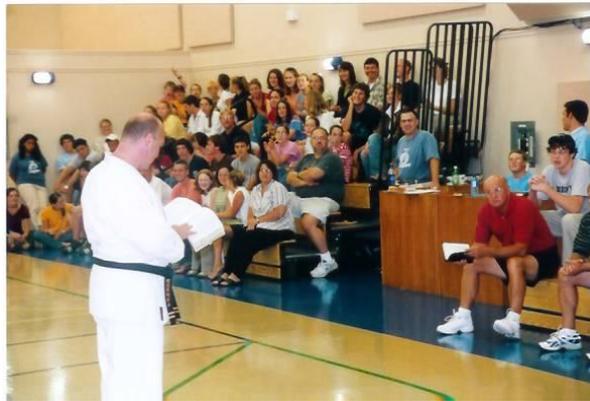
Like kumite, spiritual partner training is very important. Alone, we may not realize what situations we can be vulnerable to. Spiritual partner training allows each student to help another student to see the areas of their lives where they are spiritually weak, and help in developing a plan for victory. Most situations that compromise our spirituality are preventable. The problem is that we need to develop the spiritual eyes and awareness to see it coming. Through the help of others, we learn to see the nature of sin and how it attacks us. In 1st Corinthians 15:33 the Bible states, *“Do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character.”* We must be in this world, but not of this world. In John 15:19 the Bible states, *“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”* In Romans 12:2 the Bible states, *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* In martial arts training, if we over commit on a technique, we leave ourselves vulnerable. Similarly, if we over commit to the world, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the sin that will attack. In 1st John 2:15-17 the Bible states, *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”* Spiritual partner relationships, where fellow Christians get together with others to get help and spiritual training, are very important. This can be done either one-on-one or in a group setting. There are over 100 “one-another” verses in the Bible (encourage one another, bear with one another, spur one another on, admonish one another, etc.). In Proverbs 27:17 the Bible states, *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”* Through spiritual partner training we are practicing spiritual self-defense scenarios, preparing for an eventual attack by arming ourselves with the Word of God. An example of spiritual partner training may be to role-play about sharing our faith and dealing with the conflict that might ensue. By creating scenarios in a safe environment before the actual attack, we gain the experience in knowing how to encounter the real thing. As with training for martial arts, we need to train with someone who is qualified and committed to train with us. With the Bible, the only way for spiritual partner training to work is if both participants have a commitment to spiritual training to become more like Jesus, and a firm standard to obey the Bible.

Principle #5: Kata

Katas are the heart and foundation of martial arts training. They are stylized fighting forms, or sequences, developed over the centuries and based on actual combat experiences (Labbate, 2001). Katas are the textbook of the martial arts

system, and through the elevation of skill level and improvement of self-awareness and focus, katas allow students to understand their strengths and weaknesses and focus on areas where improvements are needed (Labbate, 2001). Katas are the study of anatomy to determine the vulnerability of our opponent and where we can attack. The spiritual viewpoint of katas is to approach the Bible as the foundation and heart of Christianity, with the themes of faith, hope, and love as we prepare for life. In 1st Timothy 6:17-19 the Bible states, *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”* The Bible is the textbook in the study of the mastery of man and how to develop spiritually through faith, hope, and love in God and each other as we resist the Devil and his schemes. As I look at the katas, the foundation for the Goju-Ryu system, and the books of the Bible, the foundation of Christianity, I see that katas are the way to master our martial arts. Christianity is the way to master myself spiritually.

CONCLUSION



To become a proficient student in martial arts, one needs an ongoing commitment to study, research, and training. One needs to follow a curriculum in order to gain knowledge, experience, and insight. Karate training is structured and built upon principles that are methodical, and is a process to get the student from a white belt to a black belt. However the process is more than becoming a black belt and learning about martial arts. It is the collective training of physical, mental, and spiritual attributes that defines one's personal development. Like physical/mental training, spiritual training is also structured, however most people ignore this aspect of training. There is a process to get a student to maturity in spiritual training, and I believe it starts with reading the Bible and making it the standard for our lives. For karate, it would be silly to

think you could walk into a dojo and not have structure and learning. In my karate classes, parents of students come and observe on a regular basis the progress of their children for many years, however that will never give them the skills to become a black belt. Spiritually, many people can attend church services for many years without ever growing in their spirituality. The question is whether we are in training, or merely spectators. You can't just believe what you want to believe or train the way you want to train to become physically and mentally proficient. In order to develop the skills to become proficient, a qualified instructor, strong curriculum and a thorough training process is needed. The same applies to spiritual development. Christianity is the subject, the Bible is the textbook, and Jesus is the teacher. The dynamics of Bible study, prayer, and fellowship are how one should approach the training of spirituality. As an instructor of martial arts, I want to ensure my training and teaching are comprehensive and go beyond the scope of martial technique and theory by including spiritual training. I don't have the ability to teach my students everything about spirituality, however through my relationship with them, I pray that they will learn to recognize the importance of spiritual training. My purpose in writing this article is for it to be used as a blessing to others, and I pray that I have and will continue to be used as an instrument for God's purpose and will. In Romans 11:36 the Bible states, "*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God for the inspiration in writing this article, my loving wife Karen, my children, and the following friends for their insight, encouragement and support:

Richard Dickinson, Pastor, Faith Evangel Church
John Dickerson, Deacon, Faith Evangel Church
Chris Broom, Evangelist, Syracuse Church of Christ
Andrew Smellie, Campus & Teen Minister, Syracuse Church of Christ
Larry Buzzell, Elder, Believers' Chapel

In addition, I would like to thank the many students, parents, and friends that kept me and this article in their prayers.

BIONOTES



Marvin Labbate is an 8th-degree black belt in Okinawan Goju-Ryu, 6th degree in Okinawan kobudo, and a certified Yang tajiquan instructor. He has studied karate since 1963 and is the international representative for the Okinawan Seibukai Association headed by President Shintoku Gushikin, 9th-degree. Mr. Labbate is a representative for Okinawan Ryukonkai Kobodo Association headed by President Kotaro Iha, 9th-degree. Mr. Labbate is the director of the Central New York Karate and Kobudo Schools, founded in 1963, which is the oldest karate school in upstate New York. Contact information is sensai@cnykarate.com or reach us at www.cnykarate.com.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Holy Bible, *New International Version (NIV)*.

Taliaferro, M. (2002). *How We Got the Bible and Why You Can Trust It*. Joburgpress.

Labbate, M. (2001). Tensho kata: Goju-ryu's secret treasure. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, 10(1): 84-89.

Labbate, M. (2000). Developing Advanced Goju-Ryu Techniques: Illustrated in the Rising Block. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, 9(1), 56-69.

Labbate, M. (1999). Elements of Advanced Karate Techniques. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, 8(2), 80-95.

Ferguson, G. (1997). *Discipling, God's Plan to Train & Transform His People*. DPI Press.