

SHIZENRYU

PHILOSOPHY STUDY GUIDE

The deeper elements of the art — for advanced practitioners

*To ask may be a moment of shame,
but to remain in ignorant silence leads to a lifetime of shame.*

— Oriental proverb

Compiled from the papers and teachings of Ian Smith and the Shizenryu group:
Zen & Karate · The Maxims · Tui Shou · The 6 Human Needs · Grades & Titles · Retreat Notes 2026

Shizen translates as 'nature', 'natural' or 'spontaneous' — referring not simply to wild nature, but to a state of being that is authentic, effortless and in harmony with its environment. It implies things that happen of themselves, without forced interference: a flow, a 'self-sown' philosophy. **Ryu** means style, school, or path. Shizenryu is therefore *The Natural Way of Karate* — a name suggested to Ian by Toru Takamizawa, one of his last Japanese Wado-Ryu teachers, who provided the calligraphy that depicts it.

The aspects of *shizen* repay study in their own right: **naturalness** — a simple and unforced aesthetic; **spontaneity** — action arising without contrivance or planning; and **harmony with nature** — which, unlike the Western view of nature as separate from humanity, includes human contribution, interpretation and interaction with the environment. In Zen and Japanese art, *shizen* is the aesthetic of the natural, the unadorned, the unforced. Every one of these ideas has a physical counterpart in the dojo: the natural stance, the unforced technique, the spontaneous response cultivated through pushing hands.

Be an example of the art. It is a personality that initially shines a light on the path.

— Retreat Notes, May 2026

Related terms complete the picture: **Ha** is a personal rendition of a Ryu; **Do** is the umbrella 'Way' — the Tao. A teacher's lineage may thus read like a sentence: person, rendition, style, Way.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- Where in your own practice do you still force what should be allowed to happen?
- What would 'unforced' look like in your Sanchin? In a difficult conversation?

Okinawan karate is traditionally traced to three classical streams, named for the communities where they developed. **Shuri-te**, from the old royal capital, is known for quick, linear movement, agility and natural stances — it strongly influenced later styles such as Shotokan and Shito-ryu. **Naha-te**, from the port city, emphasises rooted stances, breath control, close-range technique and body conditioning, and was heavily influenced by southern Chinese martial arts — it led to styles like Goju-ryu. **Tomari-te**, from the village between them, is a bridge of the two: speed joined to practical close-range method.

From a Shizenryu standpoint, the styles of greatest interest are those that keep the three archetypal kata as their root: **Sanchin** (held by the Naha-te systems as the master kata), **Naifuanchin** (holding the same status in the Shorin/Shuri-te systems), and **Rokushu** (Tensho) — a later development, a play on Sanchin. The presence of Naifuanchin practice within Naha-te lines suggests both streams may have originated from a single source, each traveller taught different aspects of the same art, as was the way in southern China.

KAKIE — THE SURVIVING BRIDGE

A small number of styles formally preserve pushing-hands practice today — among them Goju-ryu (which uses kakie to develop close-range sensitivity and transitions into locks and throws), Uechi-ryu, branches of Shorin-ryu, Toon-ryu, Ryuei-ryu, and Motobu-ryu, whose aggressive *kakedameshi* may represent the original free-sparring of Okinawan karate. Shoshin Nagamine's kumite drills point the same way: *once in contact, they stay in contact* — very different from the karate taught around the world.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- Why would an art built for close contact be practised today almost entirely out of contact?
- Which parts of your training would survive if the lights went out — if you had to feel rather than see?

'Zen' is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *Chan*, itself derived from the Sanskrit *dhyana* — meditation, contemplative absorption. Tradition begins the story with Bodhidharma (Daruma), who travelled from India to China and took up residence at the Shaolin Monastery, where meditation and martial discipline became inseparably linked. At first glance the pairing seems contradictory. Yet contradiction lies at the very heart of human experience.

In ordinary life we are internally divided. One part wants action while another hesitates; one desires comfort while another demands discipline; fear against courage, impulse against restraint, thought against action. This inner division is a defining feature of human consciousness — and Zen meditation is a discipline designed to reconcile these opposites. Its aim is not escape from life, but liberation from fragmentation.

Seen in this light, the deeper purpose of the martial arts becomes clear. In their highest form they are disciplines for reconciling apparent opposites: stillness and movement, softness and hardness, yielding and force, mind and body. In authentic karate these are not conflicting forces but complementary aspects of a unified whole.

Karate is not fundamentally about fighting. The capacity to deal with conflict — physical or psychological — is largely a by-product of the deeper process: self-mastery.

— Zen & Karate

If training were only about learning to fight, we would be treating symptoms rather than causes. Aggression, fear, insecurity, anger and the need to dominate are often expressions of internal imbalance. Our greatest opponent is rarely another person, but our own loss of equilibrium. To react blindly is easy — it requires no training to surrender to instinct. True training is the cultivation of control, awareness and appropriate response.

This should not be mistaken for passivity. Zen is not weakness, nor sentimental idealism; it points beyond emotional reactivity — perhaps its most difficult teaching, because humans naturally respond through emotion, preference and conditioning. Practice becomes the cultivation of clear action free from unnecessary disturbance: **to do exactly what needs to be done, when it needs to be done.** The principle applies equally to the smallest and largest acts of life — driving a car, making a hard decision, responding under the pressure of attack. Zen and karate are two expressions of the same pursuit: the integration of the divided self into harmonious action.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- Identify one recurring situation where you 'surrender to instinct'. What would the trained response be?
- Which opposite pair — stillness/movement, softness/hardness, yielding/force — is least reconciled in your practice?

One of the early clues to the roots of karate lies in the names. The older the kata, the more consistently they carry significant Buddhist names and numbers — the last spiritual, monastic connection pre-1644, though sacred geometry, numbers and symbols date back to prehistory. Consider: Sepai — 18 hands ($1+8 = 9$); Sanseiru — 36 ($3+6 = 9$); Seienchin — 72 ($7+2 = 9$); Gojushiho — 54 steps ($5+4 = 9$); Suparinpei — 108 ($1+0+8 = 9$); the Shaolin 72 gates; the Tai Chi long form's 108 movements.

THE THREE TRANSLATIONS

Sanchin — '**three conflicts**'. To the less initiated, simply the battle between mind, body and spirit; as you peel the onion, more is revealed. Outwardly Sanchin appears the simplest of kata — repeated movements, nothing outside the normal range of motion — and yet the old masters stated that all karate begins and ends with Sanchin. It is both basic and advanced. It contains the sacred geometry of the circle, the triangle and the square, echoed in the Zen calligraphic image of creation: unity (circle), through the triangle, to manifest form (square).

Naifuanchin — '**internal divided conflict**'. The grappling kata; the same inner division described in Zen & Karate, written into movement.

Rokushu — '**six hands**' — five animals, plus the snake that grips you. The kata of grip releasing.

The One engenders the Two, the Two engenders the Three. The Three engender all things.

— Tao Te Ching

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- All karate 'begins and ends with Sanchin'. After your last grading, what did Sanchin show you that it hid the grading before?
- Circle, triangle, square: find each of the three within one movement of Sanchin.

The pushing-hands practice of Shizenryu — *kakie*, *chi sau*, *tui shou* — is the method used to bridge the gap between kata and spontaneous application. Its purpose is to develop and maintain the ability to detect, redirect and counter force through tactile sensitivity and contact reflex.

The basic drills are first practised from a fixed position, training the body to receive and neutralise simple pushing forces — turning at the waist, or transferring incoming force from one hand to the other. This enables the practitioner to deal with superior strength by avoiding direct collision: yield, redirect, and return force efficiently. From these foundations, training progresses through **moving pushing hands**, **Sanchin boxing**, **Rokushu grip releasing**, and **Naifuanchin grappling** — the three root kata transformed from solo performance into living skill.

To students whose primary interest is fighting, the training may at first appear unusual. But it is only at close-contact distance that the hands-on methods contained within traditional kata can be properly understood and applied in combination — and, more importantly, these methods develop *without pre-arrangement*. Pushing hands cultivates sensitivity, timing, balance and adaptability; it teaches the practitioner to borrow and redirect opposing force, to cover, trap, neutralise and counter under pressure.

*Yield to force
And bend its angle;
This will avoid
An ugly tangle.*

— Ian Smith, 1996

Recall the maxims: *openings are felt with contact, not seen with the eye*. Watching an attack, thinking of a response, and then executing it is an action/response formula that involves too much thinking — the pushing-hands path replaces it with contact reflex.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- In your last pushing-hands session, where did you collide with force instead of bending its angle?
- What is the difference between relaxing and collapsing? Where is your structure when you yield?

The maxims are not slogans; they are compressed experience. Each is meant to be tested until it becomes your own. One lives at the top of every belt page in the passport — here they stand together.

“Once the kicking distance is closed, keep it closed.”	Distance is a decision. Re-opening range returns the fight to the fastest weapon; staying closed keeps it in the realm of listening hands.
“Combinations occur as a response to an opponent's actions, not because they are a favourite set of techniques.”	The opponent writes the combination; you read it. Pre-set favourites are the 'action/response formula that involves too much thinking'.
“Control and strike the opponent at the same time.”	Not block-then-hit. One beat, two functions — the defining rhythm of close-range karate.
“Openings are felt with contact, not seen with the eye.”	The eye is too slow and too easily deceived. The forearm is honest.
“Seek control of your opponent's posture as a prerequisite to a counterattack.”	An unbalanced opponent cannot deliver force; a balanced one always can. Posture first, punishment second.
“Always deflect, parry, cover, and trap. These defences are superior to direct blocks.”	A direct block is a collision — strength against strength. Deflection borrows the attack's own commitment.
“Footwork and position are a major part of the battle in unbalancing and controlling an opponent who is committed to attack.”	Angles do quietly what muscle does loudly.
“Dodging, ducking, and weaving require a high degree of physical stamina and are unnecessary if the opponent's attacking limbs are being properly controlled.”	Evasion spends; control invests.
“Everything moves from the hara.”	The centre initiates; the limbs express. When the hands lead, the art has already left.
“In defence, be like the dragonfly that perches on the stick raised to hit it.”	Perfect safety is not far away — it is impossibly close, and calm.
“Full mastery of one technique is better than the incomplete mastery of two.”	Depth defeats breadth. The syllabus is wide so that your attention can learn to be narrow.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- Pick the maxim you believe least. Test it honestly for one month of training.
- Which maxim describes something you do in the dojo but abandon under pressure?

Cloé Madanes describes six basic needs beneath every choice we make. The first four — **certainty** (safety, comfort, stability), **uncertainty/variety** (challenge, surprise, suspense), **significance** (to feel important, needed, special) and **love/connection** (togetherness, warmth, unity) — are needs of the *personality*: everyone must feel they are met at some level, even if they must deceive themselves to do so. The last two — **growth** and **contribution** — are needs of the *spirit*: not everyone finds a way to satisfy them, though they are necessary for lasting fulfilment.

A dojo is a machine for meeting all six honestly. Certainty: the etiquette, the structure, the same stretch in the same order. Variety: a new kumite, a resisting partner, the permanent surprise of pushing hands. Significance: the belt earned, never given — significance used well raises standards; used badly, it turns training partners into rivals. Connection: partner work is impossible without trust. Growth: 'when we stop growing, we die — anything you want to remain in your life must be cultivated, or it degenerates.' Contribution: the senior helping the junior — and the discovery that teaching a technique reveals what you never understood about it.

Contribution is the human need that effectively regulates the other five. Focused on contributing to others, you have certainty (there is always a way), variety, significance, deep connection, and growth.

— The 6 Human Needs

For the advanced practitioner the diagnostic question is sharp: *which need is your training currently serving?* A plateau often means training has quietly become a certainty ritual. An injury spree often means variety or significance is over-served. The art asks the personality's needs to be met in service of the spirit's.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- Rank the six needs as your training currently meets them. Would your training partners agree with your ranking?
- What would your practice look like for a year if contribution were its organising principle?

Dan grades represent progression in skill, knowledge and leadership: Shodan ('first step'), Nidan, Sandan, Yondan, Godan, Rokudan, Shichidan, Hachidan, Kudan, Judan. Alongside them sit teaching titles awarded on experience, age and contribution: **Sensei** — 'one who has gone before' (typically 1st–5th Dan); **Shihan** — senior master instructor (often 4th Dan and above); **Renshi** — polished, trained instructor; **Kyoshi** — advanced teacher, requiring exceptional knowledge of philosophy, history and pedagogy; **Hanshi** — model master, reserved for 8th Dan and above.

MENKYO KAIDEN — THE LICENCE OF TOTAL TRANSMISSION

Predating the kyu/dan system entirely, *Menkyo Kaiden* is not a grade but a title bestowed by a founder: a master-to-disciple validation that the practitioner holds the physical, historical and spiritual keys of the system. Ian was awarded Menkyo Kaiden at the Oxford University Gasshuku in 1996 — and tried to decline it, feeling he still had much to learn. His resolution of that tension is instructive: in a system where the research is ongoing, the award does not mean mastery of every secret; it means **custodianship of the keys that unlock the code of the art**.

Zen Shorin Do held Godan as its highest grade — a deliberate modesty against the inflation of high rankings. The lesson for the advanced student: rank is a responsibility gradient, not a status ladder. Shodan is the first step; the essay requirements at Shodan, Nidan and Sandan exist because by then the art must be understood, not merely performed.

JUNIORS AND THE MON PATH

Shizenryu's junior syllabus (from Blue Belt) gradually adds the adult syllabus so that Junior Shodan holders come into full alignment by Nidan — the coloured Mon tags marking the catching-up stages. A junior black belt is a promise being kept, not a finished claim.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

- If your next grade brought no belt, certificate or title — only the syllabus — would you still test? What does your answer tell you?
- What are you currently a custodian of, and who are you preparing to hand it to?

Physical training without study produces technicians; study without training produces commentators. The Shizenryu essay requirements at Shodan, Nidan and Sandan exist to force the two together. Some disciplines for the advanced student:

Read between the lines. The histories are partial, the translations contested, the lineages political. Treat every source — including this guide — as a hypothesis to be tested on the mat.

Keep a training journal. One honest paragraph after each session outlasts a hundred saved videos. Record what was *felt*, not what was done.

Return to the root. Whatever the question — history, application, philosophy — Sanchin is the lens. Study it across styles: closed hand and open hand, hard breath and soft, and ask what survives every version.

Practise the proverb. Ask. The moment of shame is cheaper than the lifetime.

Structure > Discipline > Measure / Accountability = Growth

— Syllabus 2026

Suggested reading from the retreat: *Okinawan Karate* — Mark Bishop · *The Essence of Okinawan Karate* — Shoshin Nagamine · *Bubishi* — Patrick McCarthy · *The Bodhisattva Warriors* — Nagaboshi Tomio