

Burmese Bando in America

Work of Dr. U Maung Gyi

[1960-2004]

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The Beginning

In the early 1960s, U Maung Gyi formally began teaching Burmese Bando at American University in Washington, D.C. The university's physical education and athletic departments placed several restrictions on the curriculum, such as no full-contact sparring, no Burmese boxing [Lethwei] and no weapons training [Thaing].*

*[Before teaching at American University, for two years Dr. Gyi informally taught old style Bando at several recreational parks in Washington, D.C.]

Cultural Adjustment

In the 1960s, there were numerous Civil Rights demonstrations in Washington, D.C. Racial tension gripped the city. Learning to be tactful on racial and cultural issues was challenging to him. Adjusting to fast-paced, competitive and industrious American society was at first, very difficult. Learning the American work ethic, social customs, rules of interactions, verbal and non-verbal patterns of behavior and other codes of conduct was very challenging for Dr. Gyi. He made numerous mistakes and, quite often, serious errors in dealing with people from different national, ethnic and racial groups regarding social expectations and social protocol. It was a learning experience and growth period for him.

Legitimacy

During this time forty years ago, the field of martial arts in America was totally dominated by Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Okinawan karate systems. Leaders of these mainstream systems did not recognize the martial arts from Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma, as legitimate arts. If the systems were not from Japan, Korea, Okinawa or China, they were not considered "True Art." At that time, Burmese Bando was the only system from Southeast Asia officially taught at a major university in the United States. The Bando program at American University had to conform to the protocols of mainstream karate systems.

Adaptation

At the beginning, it was very difficult for Dr. Gyi and his Bando students to participate in karate tournaments. Ancient Burmese forms [Thon Gwet, Lay Gwet, Ko Gwet, etc] and the traditional style of sparring and fighting had to be modified. There is an old Burmese poem, which states:

A Small Fish in the Sea

**A small lone fish
swimming in the fast current of the open sea,
in the company of large fish
has no choice but to adjust its path.**

With adjustment, adaptation and changes in training, the Bando students performed brilliantly, winning numerous bouts at Japanese, Korean, Okinawan, and many open karate tournaments in the United States.

Appointments

Very soon Dr. Gyi was recognized by the leaders of the karate community for his skills, his attitude and his dedication to martial arts.

In 1964, Dr. Gyi was requested by Korean Grandmaster, Jhoon Rhee [considered to be the founder Korean Tae Kwon Do in America] to serve as one of the 3 Chief Referees at the **National Karate Championships** held in Washington, D.C.

In 1964, Dr. Gyi was requested by Grandmaster Robert Trias, President of the United State Karate Association, to serve as one of the chief referees at the **World Karate Championships** held in Chicago.

In 1965, Dr. Gyi was requested by Japanese Grandmaster Mas Oyama [the founder of Japanese Kyokoshinkai karate system] to serve as one of the chief referees at his **North American Open Karate Championships** held in Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1966, Dr. Gyi served as one of the chief referees at the World Wide Karate Championships held by Grandmaster D. Pai of Chinese Pai Lum Kung Fu system, in Richmond, Virginia.

In 1966, Dr. Gyi was appointed as the Chief Instructor of the United States Karate Association. At that time USKA was the largest karate organization in America, with a membership of more than 150,000 practitioners. For the next 10 years, he served as the Chief Referee at all the National Karate Championship Tournaments sponsored by USKA

In 1968, Dr. Gyi served as the Chief Referee at the First Professional World Karate Championships, sponsored by Grandmaster Aaron Banks, held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City.

In 1968, Dr. Gyi was requested by the Korean Grandmaster Richard Chun to serve as the **Chief Referee at the All Korean Karate Championships**, held at the Manhattan Center in New York City.

In 1969, Dr. Gyi was requested by the Board of Directors of BLACK BELT Magazine [the largest martial arts magazine in the world] to serve as Chairman of the Rules and Regulations Committee, to establish standardized rules for all major karate tournaments in the United States.

In 1970, Dr. Gyi served as the Chief Referee at the Tournament of Champions, [consisting of karate champions from all over the United States and from different systems], held in Cleveland, Ohio.

In 1970, Dr. Gyi organized and promoted the first full contact Bando Amateur Kickboxing Championships in America. This tournament has become the largest and longest on-going martial arts event in the United States.

In 1972, Dr. Gyi was requested to lead the planning committee to establish rules for the newly formed Professional Karate Association [PKA], headed by Masters Joe Corley and Don Quine. He served as the Chief Referee at the First PKA championships held in Atlanta, Georgia.

In 1973, Dr. Gyi served as the Chief Referee at the International Karate Championship Tournament, sponsored by Grandmaster Paul Arel, held in Hartford, Connecticut.

American Bando Association

After World War II, many Asian martial arts systems were introduced in the United States by ex-servicemen from the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. Thousands of Americans served in the China-Burma-India Theater and the Pacific Theater of WWII. Dr. Gyi felt that the Americans and the Allied Forces, who had fought and died in the Burma Campaign against the Imperial Japanese Army, should be remembered and honored.

Therefore, in 1966, Dr. Gyi established the American Bando Association [ABA] in Athens, Ohio, as a private, non-profit martial arts organization for the purpose of:

1. Honoring the veterans of the China-Burma-India Theater of WWII.

Burma was a major battlefield between the Japanese and Allied forces in Southeast Asia. The Japanese suffered their largest land defeat during WWII in Burma.

2. Preserving the combative arts practiced in the CBI Theater during WWII.

During the Burma Campaign from 1942 to 1946, soldiers from many nations were involved. There were British, Americans, Chinese, Indians, Gurkhas, West Africans, Japanese, Koreans, Okinawans and Manchurians. There were also Burmese, Kachins, Chins, Shans, Mons, Arakanese and other tribesmen.

Many battles fought in both northern and southern Burma involved jungle warfare and close-quarter hand-to-hand fighting. Burma became the testing ground for many of the combative arts of the Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Gurkhas, Burmese, Kachins, Karens and other tribes. There was active exchange of martial techniques at various training camps and among various troops and tribes.

3. Promoting cross cultural exchange of martial arts and martial sports in the United States.

Many Bando tournaments, seminars and clinics are open to other systems. Bando practitioners participate in numerous karate tournaments sponsored by Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Okinawan and other systems. Bando instructors are encouraged to promote cross-cultural exchange of knowledge about sports and martial arts.

Dr. Gyi feels that **Bando in America must be an open system and not a closed one.** Members can grow from new experiences through interaction with practitioners of other systems.

Guiding Lights

The most revered Buddhist monks and teachers of Dr. Gyi, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were

His Holiness the Venerable Amarapura Sayadaw
His Holiness the Venerable Mandalay Sayadaw
His Holiness the Venerable Mogok Sayadaw
His Holiness the Venerable Homalin Sayadaw
His Holiness the Venerable Halin Sayadaw
His Holiness the Venerable Mingun Sayadaw

The teachings of these **late Venerable Buddhist monks** provided Dr. Gyi with inner balance and strength to overcome his failures and accept his successes with humility. Their teachings of patience, perseverance, tolerance, centeredness, mindfulness, compassion, forgiveness, emotional and physical healing, perceptual clarity, mental discipline, internal energy and inner balance and strength have continued to influence and guide his life.

Bando Sayas

Dr. Gyi's father was U Ba Than Gyi. He was the Director of Physical Education and Sports in the Ministry of Education. After WWII, he was posted in Mandalay, and later in the 1950s, he was transferred to Rangoon.

He always encouraged his students, teachers and son to maintain good health, participate in both individual and team sports, and practice different martial arts systems. Dr. Gyi is also deeply indebted to his sayas [teachers] who guided him and taught him different national and ethnic martial arts systems on weekends at the Gymkana Club in Mandalay, at the Maymyo and Rangoon Athletic Clubs, and at the Chinese Athletic Center in Chinatown, Rangoon.

Dr. Gyi's Instructors in Burma

| Name of Saya | Ethnic Group | System |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Saya Saw Ni | Kayin | Bama Letwei |
| Saya Thara Po | Kayin | Kayin Bando |
| Saya A. Khan | Yakhine Kala | Kala Dhot |
| Saya U Tin Hla | Burmese | Bama Dha |
| Saya Zaw Pan | Kachin | Kachin Dha |
| Saya U Tin Tun | Mon | Mon Dha & Dhot |
| Saya Lu Shai | Chin | Chin Dha & Dhot |
| Saya Ba Thein | Burmese | Bama Bando |
| Saya Batanji Rai | Gurkha | Kukri sword |
| Saya Gunju Lama | Gurkha | Kukri sword |
| "Tiger" Ba Nyein | Burmese | Boxing |
| Sifu C. Chu | Chinese | Yunnan System |
| and several other teachers. | | |

Old and New Systems

Burma is a nation of many ethnic groups. It has numerous ethnic and regional Bando systems, such as Shan, Kachin, Chin, Mon, Talaing, Arakanese, Karen and other tribal and family systems. Each system provides its own unique history, philosophy, principles and practices. Attempts to unify, standardize and nationalize various Bando systems have generally resulted in resistance. Attitudes of regionalism, ethno-centrism and xenophobia have kept many of these ethnic systems isolated.

For the American Bando to survive and thrive, numerous changes, adaptations and adjustments had to be made. Any system, which is not willing to change and improve, becomes obsolete and cannot survive in the highly competitive American society. Old Bando systems, which were considered obsolete, had to be upgraded, reformed and restructured.

Nature of Systems

No system is completely unique.

**No system is completely independent
from external and internal influences.**

Every system is the result of change.

Every system evolves over time.

**by integration, modification and restructuring,
resulting in what we then call "uniqueness."**

Overtime, this unique system will also change.

[His Holiness the Venerable Amarapura Sayadaw, 1910]

Modern Bando System

American martial arts systems are dynamic and ever changing. Many martial arts leaders are open-minded, always exploring, testing and experimenting with various techniques from different systems. They try to improve their arts by borrowing, adapting and integrating various elements and components from different systems. American Bando reflects this.

As Budo or Judo is used in the United States, the term BANDO is used in place of "BAMA THAING," for easy pronunciation and identification. In addition, the numbering system of **ancient Burmese astrology and numerology**, based on the numbers **3, 6 and 9**, was incorporated into the new system.

Modern Bando, based on ancient philosophy, principle and practice, was introduced in America as a blend of several regional and ethnic martial arts systems from northern Burma. The following table illustrates the modification of different Bando and Thaing systems.

TABLE 1

Modification of Burmese Thaing

| WEAPON | NUMBER OF FORMS |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Dha [Burmese Sword] | 9 Modified Forms |
| 2. Dhot [Burmese Staff] | 9 Modified Forms |
| 3. Dhoe [Empty/Free Hands] | 9 Modified Forms |

TABLE 2 lists the categories of different sub-systems.

TABLE 2

Modern Bando System in America

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| 1. 9X9 Bando Matrix |
| 2. 9 Bando Empty Hand Forms |
| 3. 9 Bando Animal Forms |
| 4. 9 Banshay Staff, Short Stick and Cane forms |
| 5. 9 Thaing Sword Forms and Kukri Drill Sets |
| 6. 9 Basic Skills for Bando Free-Fighting |
| 7. 9 Basic Skills for Bando Boxing |
| 8. 9 Basic Skills for Maintaining Physical Health |
| 9. 9 Basic Skills for Spiritual and Emotional Growth |

Tireless Worker

Dr. Gyi is a tireless and dedicated teacher. He is always working and doing something to improve modern Bando in America. When time permits, he attends seminars, clinics and workshops given by masters from other systems. He is always learning, reading, discussing and questioning. He is constantly planning and organizing Bando events to improve the quality of his students.

There is no idle or leisure time in his life. He could be classified as what Americans call a "workaholic." Dr. Gyi's wife, Patricia, and his two daughters, Melinda and Serena, have been very understanding and supportive of his work.

He is driven by his short-term and long-term goals, and his strategies to achieve them. He has faced many obstacles and failures in his life. But he never yields. He is never discouraged. He considers failures and mistakes to be learning experiences. He meditates to regain his inner balance and moves on to accomplish the next project.

Failures

**Don't face failures with fear, anger and gloom.
Meet them as teachers.
They are lessons in our journey of life.**

[His Holiness the Venerable Mandalay Sayadaw, 1900]

Dreams

Dr. Gyi has many dreams. His dreams focus on his family, his academic and professional career, his Bando organization, his service to American veterans of the China-Burma-India Theater of WWII, and his responsibilities to other martial arts organizations in the United States and around the world. Dr. Gyi often says:

Nation of Dreams

**America is a nation of dreams.
People from all over the world migrate to America
with dreams to improve and advance their lives.
Dreamers built this great country.**

**Some have big dreams.
But, I have only small dreams, and
I have many small mountains to climb.**

[Dr. U Maung Gyi, 1970]

University Professor

Dr. Gyi did not make his living by teaching Bando or coaching boxing. He earned his **income as a university professor** in the College of Communication at Ohio University. As a college professor he won numerous awards for his teaching skills and dedication to his students.

His proudest achievement in his academic career was when he received an appointment as a **Visiting Scholar at Harvard University in 1981**, where he lectured on psycholinguistics and code-transformation in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Boxing Coach

In addition to his academic work as a professor and teaching Bando, Dr. Gyi made time to coach the Ohio University Boxing Team. For 20 years, his boxers competed in the Midwest Regional Collegiate Boxing Championships and also in the National Collegiate Boxing Championships. Dr. Gyi's team competed against the following collegiate teams and won numerous regional and national collegiate titles.

US Military Academy
US Naval Academy
US Air Force Academy
Virginia Military Academy
Citadel Military Academy
Notre Dame University
Penn State University
Villanova University
Miami University
Xavier University
Georgia State University
Colorado State University
University of Kentucky
University of Cincinnati
University of Illinois
University of Nevada
University of Michigan
University of Wisconsin
University South Carolina
University of Southern California and
other universities.

In addition, he also coached college boxers for **Friday Night at the Fights**. This is one of the most popular annual spring athletic events at the Ohio University and raises funds for athletic scholarships.

Special Citations

In 1982, Dr. Gyi received a special citation from the Ohio Senate [114th General Assembly of the State of Ohio] for his contribution in developing Ohio University collegiate boxing into one of the top programs in the United States and was recognized as one of the leading boxing coaches in the country. He also received similar citations and recognition from other states including Tennessee, Georgia, Maryland and Virginia.

Continued Work

In the 1970s, because of demanding academic duties at the university, Dr. Gyi resigned from his appointments with various national and international martial arts organizations. However, his dedication to developing the American Bando Association continued for the next three decades. **From the 1970s to 2000** Dr. Gyi personally trained thousands of students throughout the United States. Many of his students became instructors.

In addition, Dr. Gyi organized six major annual Bando events:

1. **National Bando Free Fighting Championships** are held during the Memorial Day weekend to honor the veterans of China-Burma-India Theater of WWII.
2. **National Bando Kick-Boxing Championships** are held on the Veterans Day weekend, again to honor the Allied veterans of CBI, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.
3. **Bando National Camp** is held during August to observe V-J Day [surrender of the Imperial Japanese 28th Army in Rangoon, Burma]
4. **Bando Women's Camp** is held each summer to honor the women in Bando and women from other the martial arts systems.
5. **Bando Monk Camps** are held at different places and times to promote the concept of "Ahimsa," the Buddhist principle of non-violence. Non-aggressive, non-lethal and non-violent external and internal techniques are shared and practiced.
6. **Bando Healing Arts Seminars** are held [coordinating with other healing systems of China, India, Japan, Korea, Tibet, etc.] at various times and places to promote emotional and physical healing and spiritual development.

Cross-Cultural Exchange

Dr. Gyi feels that American Bando must be an open system and should interact with leaders of other Asian martial arts systems. He has promoted cross-cultural exchange programs by serving as advisor or instructor to the following institutions and organizations:

1. **US Army Rangers at Fort Benning, Georgia**
2. **Jordanian Special Forces, Amman, Jordan**
3. **World Wide Kenpo Association, Baltimore, Maryland**
4. **World Modern Anis Alliance, Buffalo, New York**
5. **Joe Lewis' Fighting Systems, Wilmington, North Carolina**
6. **Bushi-Ban International, Houston, Texas**
7. **Nackord's Fighting Systems, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**
8. **American Combative Systems, New York City, New York**
9. **Inosanto's Martial Arts Academy, Los Angeles, California**
10. **American Kenpo Academy, Pompano Beach, Florida**

11. **Brown's Institute of Martial Arts, Dayton, Ohio**
12. **Degerberg's Academy of Martial Arts, Chicago, Illinois**
13. **Kelly's Kenpo Karate Academy, Wichita, Kansas**
14. **Canadian Martial Arts Academy, London, Canada**
15. **White Lotus Martial Arts Academy, Hartford, Connecticut**
16. **Kung Tao Martial Arts Institute, Denver, Colorado**
17. **Sell's Martial Arts Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin**
18. **Bando Club, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia**
19. **Denny's Martial Arts Academy, Hermosa Beach, California**
20. **American Karate Systems, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**
21. **American Combative Systems, Indianapolis, Indiana**
22. **Mejishi Martial Arts Academy, Ferndale, Michigan**
23. **Aegis Martial Arts Academy, Hubert Heights, Ohio**
24. **Paul Braddock's Goju-ryu Karate, Waynesburg, Pennsylvania**
25. **Kenpo First Foundation, Westminster, Colorado**
26. **Heaven and Earth Center, New York City, New York and others.**

In addition, Dr. Gyi has organized training for law enforcement officers, military and security personnel.

Private Organization

Dr. Gyi has never had any intention of promoting the Bando system to become one of the dominant systems in the United States. There are hundreds of successful commercial schools, teaching various forms of Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Okinawan and Brazilian martial arts systems.

He feels that "commercialization of the system based on a profit making motive" would affect the way we view and teach Bando in America. He intends to maintain the status of ABA as private and non-profit martial arts organization to honor the Allied veterans of China-Burma-India Theater of WWII and to encourage cross-cultural exchange of ideas and activities with members of other systems.

New Chapter

Presently, Dr. Gyi is now a Professor Emeritus at Ohio University. He retired from teaching at the university after 30 years. In the year 2005, Dr. Gyi plans to retire from all major Bando events in the United States, but will remain active in teaching non-violent systems of Bando.

Bando Monk System

Dr. Gyi wants to promote a non-violent [Ahimsa] and non-aggressive Monk System [Pongyi Thaing], which was advocated by His Holiness The Venerable Oo Pali [Upali] in Burma around 900 AD. He also wants to share the teachings of the six venerable Buddhist monks [mentioned above], which molded and guided his life. In addition, he desires to learn and share the ancient "Energy Healing Arts" of Burma, India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Native America.

The Future

ABA is one of the longest existing martial arts organizations in the United States. Dr. Gyi is confident that the organization will continue to remain strong after his retirement. He firmly believes that dedicated members will maintain high standards in training and performance, and will continue to promote the philosophy, principles and practices of modern Bando.

Deeds

During the last 40 years, Dr. Gyi has worked tirelessly to promote modern Burmese Bando and to be accepted into the expanding community of Asian martial arts in the United States. He has succeeded in presenting a positive image of the Burmese system through his students and numerous cross-cultural exchange programs with other systems. Because of his dedicated efforts, the Bando system has achieved acceptance and recognition by the leaders of martial arts systems in America.

Words and Deeds

**A man is judged by his works,
and not by his words.**

**Words are cheap,
and deeds are priceless.**

[His Holiness the Venerable Mogok Sayadaw, 1890]

Dr. Gyi's life has been a struggle in America. Along with some failures, he has achieved many successes. He has climbed many small mountains. There is still one large mountain he hopes to climb.

The development of the Bando Monk System in America will be his greatest challenge.

**May the friendship between America and Myanmar
continue to remain strong.**

Let there be peace in this Golden Land.