

Interview with Sensei Kase, 9th Dan Shotokan 12.12.1997 in Müllheim / Germany by Pasquale Petrella.

Shihan Taiji Kase is without doubt one of the few remaining living legends of the world of Karate. At the present time Shihan Kase an 9th Dan Shotokan, is head of World Karate Shotokan Akademy (WKSA). Kase Sensei is visiting various countries on a regular basis to conduct numerous Karate seminars. The experience of WW II and the different way of thinking and training at that special time, his enormous knowledge and experience and his long hard training have all gone towards making Kase Sensei a Karate Master with a special image, a master who is a living legend, a master who is the image itself of his pure and strong Karate.

At the Winter-Seminars in Freiburg and Müllheim Kase Sensei had many interesting things to tell me, which were only known by a few people in the world.

Sensei Kase, when and where were you born?

I was born on 9th February 1929 in Tokio, Japan.

Did any one else in your family do any kind of martial arts ?

My father and my brother did Judo. Before WW II my father was already a 5. Dan in Judo. When I was six years old he pushed me to go to the Judo classes. In Middle School I was team captain. In 1944 I started Karate as well, in 1946 I stopped Judo because I thought, better do one good than two things bad. When I stopped Judo I had 3 Dan in Judo.

Sensei Kase, where did you first hear about Karate?

In a book shop in February 1944. I saw the book 'Karate Do-Kyohan' from Gichin Funakoshi. In the photographs I saw things that I never saw before. I was very interested and since there was no address in the book, I called the publisher and they told me where the Dojo was. The first time I went to the Dojo, Sensei Yoshitaka Funakoshi was teaching the class. When I asked permission to practice karate he refused at first, because I was very young. They

normally only accept students after University. But after I told Sensei Yoshitaka that I have been doing Judo for many years and after a long discussion about Budo, Sensei Yoshitaka realised that I was very serious about Karate and accepted me as a student in the Dojo. But Sensei Yoshitaka told me never use Karate outside the dojo.

Who was teaching February 1944 in the Honbu-Dojo at that time?

Sensei Gichin Funakoshi, Yoshitaka, Genshin Hironishi, Hayashi, Uemura and some other people.

How was the teaching style at that time?

The Dojo was small, but we trained in groups, beginners and advanced students were separated. But we had individual training as well. We did normally one step Kihon, like Ten No Kata. The emphasis was on long distance, speed and time. Kumite was very hard, we did reality Karate, touch and kill even with the block. Kata was like Kihon, no Bunkai. In the University we did only repetitions, 1000 mae-geris, 1000 tsukis (Sensei Kase was smiling) and 1000 punches on the makiwara everyday before training. A senior would normally stand behind the makiwara and he only counted, when the tsuki was really strong. Often, the skin on the knuckles was gone so I could see the white bone.

What do you remember of O-Sensei (Gichin Funakoshi)?

As a team captain at University I had to pick up O-Sensei every Monday from his home and bring him to the Dojo. Sensei Funakoshi was already very old and he came to the dojo only in his Kimono, and watched the training session and gave comments like 'Karate Ni Sente Nashi'. Never use a first attack, somebody could get hurt. I remember, one day we did heian godan and O-Sensei came with the bo and hit my feet, because my jump was too low and he said do you understand. He was like a grandfather, he spoke always very softly, he was a very kind person.

Sensei Kase, when Sensei Gichin Funakoshi came to Japan in 1923 do you think he knew more than the 15 kata he taught?

I think he knew more kata than the kata he taught, because in that time you only taught your best student all you knew. In that time it was dangerous to show all to everybody, maybe somebody could finish you with that knowledge. But after my generation everything changed. Sensei Funakoshi always said he trained mainly with Sensei Azato and not with Sensei Itosu. So his first teacher is Azato and not Itosu. Azato and Funakoshi were the same generation. Azato had a very high social position in Okinawa at that time, he was something like a major of a town. Azato taught Funakoshi and afterwards Funakoshi had to teach Azato's son. That's why Shotokan kata and Shitoryu kata are different. In Shotokan we do a lot of o-waza, big techniques. In Okinawa and in Shito-Ryu they all do ko-waza, small techniques. Matsumura Sokon was the bodyguard of the king of Okinawa. With him he traveled to Kyushu, Japan and there he got to see Kendo. He was very impressed of the style Jigenji-Ryu therefore he studied this martial art in Kyushu. In Jigenji-Ryu they do big techniques as well and this influenced Matsumuras Karate. He taught it to Azato Sensei and Azato Sensei taught it to Funakoshi Sensei. And another example is the Kata Sochin, only in Shotokan we do sochin. A few years back Sensei Shirai went to Okinawa to study some Goju-Ryu. The instructors asked him to show one of his favourite Kata, and Shirai showed sochin. The Okinawan instructors were very surprised, because they said this must be samurai sochin, they thought the kata was lost.

Sensei Kase I have heard a lot about Sensei Yoshitaka Funakoshi, how was his teaching like?

Yoshitaka was the third son of Gichin Funakoshi. He started practising Karate in 1916, at the age of 11. I trained only a few times with Sensei Yoshitaka, but I remember when he showed me mae-geri, yoko-geri and mawashi-geri, first slowly and then fast. I will never forget his speed and his dynamic techniques. What a pity that I was a beginner at that time, I could not do everything, but I could observe how he taught the black belts and on what points he emphasised in his teaching. Yoshitaka Sensei always pointed out how important speed, time and explosion power is. But he was quite sick, so during

the day he was in bed and in the evenings he went to the dojo to teach until he died in November 1945 in Tokyo. In 1938 Sensei Gichin Funakoshi gave the shotokan seal to his son Yoshitaka. So Yoshitaka Funakoshi was his inheritance as head of shotokan karate. So from 1938 to 1945 Yoshitaka and the group around him developed the shotokan karate to a different, a higher level. You see, the time we lived in was the time of war. There was a martial art spirit everywhere and karate had to be practised in the same way as katana training, "touch and kill. Reality. It was the time of Budo. And in that time Yoshitaka change the Karate of his father to a more dynamic and more stronger karate using kiba dachi and fudo dachi and doing ten no kata as well as taikyoku shodan to sandan to gain more spirit, more power and more energy. He also developed yoko-geri kekomi and keage as well as mawashi-geri. Sensei Gichin Funakoshi was already very old, so it was a pity that Yoshitaka Sensei died November 7th 1945, because when the seniors (Nakajama) came back from war they said this is not shotokan what you are doing here. So the seniors started to teach the Karate in the Universities which they learned before WW II and most of what Yoshitaka sensei taught nearly disappeared.

Who else was teaching after WW II?

Sensei Hironishi, Uemura, Egami from Kyushu, Obata, Nogouchi he's 85 now and Okujama and some more. During my University years, the team captains gathered together sometimes in groups sometimes individually for training. With Sensei Okuyama I studied Karate than very deep. He always said it is important to repeat and repeat to get more power and speed to reach a higher level of Karate. Sensei Okuyama was always asking himself how can he improve the speed and power of techniques, how he would have to practice to get faster and stronger. How could he use mental energy, breathing and muscle tension. Man has to liberate himself from form. One has to ask, how can I get more energy than only muscle power. He said you have to go the budo way. You have to get harmony between "Ten - Chi - Shin", (heaven, earth, human). How can I get this in harmony, how can I get universal power. We sometimes practised at night in total darkness and he showed me how to recognise block attacks in the darkness. Once I had to sit outside the dojo and watch the rain. I

had to try to follow with my eyes the rain drops. It was a reflex training for the eyes, how can I recognise movements. Another thing was, I had to estimate distance, to get a feeling for distance. We trained the whole day and in the beginning I could not wake up in the morning because I was too tired and Sensei Okujama used to pour water on my face to shape my senses. After a while I would wake up in the morning when he opened the door so he stopped waking me up by pouring water onto my face. I had to develop all six senses. (Note: In the book "Karate Master, The time and life of Mitsusuke Harada by Dr. Clive Layton", page 71 : Master Okuyama was the finest and most advanced Karate-Ka with whom Harada ever trained ... Okuyama had not been looked in the past, as many of his contemporaries had been, but was concerned with the future - how to evolve. ... man who broke with tradition and found something. Along time training partner of Yoshitaka, Sensei Egami admitted to Harada that Okuyama's level was even higher than that of Yoshitaka. After WW II he went to the mountains to live their.)

When you entered Senchu University, who were your seniors at that time?

Sensei Hironishi 5. Dan. Yoshitaka, Egami, 5. Dan, Uemura 5. Dan, Kubota 4. Dan, Takami 3. Dan, Toratani Moshita, Mitzukami, etc. many seniors came back from war, they had no jobs, that's why they helped in the dojo. We trained every day for 8 hours.

Who were your training mates at that time?

Nishiyama, Tagaki - he was like my brother. Presently, Tagaki is Shotokai President and he is now after Hironishi holding the shotokan seal which comes from Gichi Funakoshi to Yoshitaka Funakoshi to Hironishi and then to Tagaki. Both of us are on the picture at the Karate-Do Nyomon from Gichin Funakoshi where I do the yokotobi-geri (page 42).

Were there major competitions at that period of time?

No, only Inter-Universities competitions, either in Tokyo or Kyoto. The different universities used different styles but were to compete with each other. Sometimes we were about 120 people. So the Shotokan, Goju-Ryu and Shito-Ryu students came together and had to prove themselves. It was very dangerous every time. There were a lot of injuries, but never very big ones. This was during the American occupation. After we had a Japanese's government again we had to stop.

How was the development of Karate from 1923 when O-Sensei came to Japan to WW II?

When Sensei Funakoshi came in 1923 for a demonstration to Japan all the martial arts experts like Jigoro Kano of Judo, Nakayama of Kendo and the Sumo Champion were very interested in Karate from Okinawa. That's why Funakoshi got to know all the Budo experts from Japan. Gichin Funakoshi understood the level of Budo in Japan, so he wanted to bring up the Karate level to level of Budo.

I've heard that during WW II everybody in the hombu-dojos used fudo-dachi as the major stance and not zenkutsu-dachi?

Before WW II the basic stance was kiba-dachi to develop stability and balance. We used zenkutsu-dachi to walk forward and kokuzu-dachi to walk backwards. But after black belt everybody used fudo-dachi to develop power. During WW II beginners learned immediately Ten No Kata in fudo-dachi to develop spirit and power.

Why do you prefer fudo-dachi to zenkutsu-dachi?

Because fudo-dachi is more flexible. In the endpoint of zenkutsu dachi, the back leg is straight, so you can't move anymore. In fudo-dachi your back leg is bend, so you have always reserve, and secondly it is better for the body because in fudo-dachi your muscles work like a suspension, therefore it is better for the joints and the spine.

I have heard that you taught the JKA instructor course as well, is that true?

During my University time I knew I only wanted to do Karate. After the University in 1951 there was no JKA. My father's friend was president of a company and he had problems with the union, so he needed a bodyguard. I took the job and went with him for meetings. Nakajama wanted to form JKA, so Tagaki and I asked Sensei Hironishi to open a dojo, we would follow him and do only karate, no other job. But he was a journalist and he wanted to continue his profession.

When the JKA opened in 1956 Nishijama asked me to join JKA. I wanted to do karate full time, therefore I asked Hironishi if I could join JKA so I could do only Karate. Hironishi agreed. I joined them and helped them teach. It was Nakajama, Nishijama, Okazaki and myself. The first instructor students were Mikami and Kanazawa. First Nakajama was very busy with travelling and then Nishijama as well, so I was teaching the instructor course 3 times a day. But officially Nakajama and Nishijama were responsible. So I taught many times the instructor course until I left South Africa in 1964.

Many JKA instructors were sent to foreign countries to teach, when and where did you start?

In 1964 I went alone to South Africa for 3 months and then in 1965 I went again for a 6 month period with Enoeda and Shirai. Kanazawa was in London at that time. After South Africa Enoeda, Shirai and I did a world tour including Europe, Germany was included. We arrived in Frankfurt by plane, we did not know where Bad Godesberg was, so we took a taxi from Frankfurt to Bad Godesberg, a really long journey. Later on we travelled to Holland and Belgium as well.

Do you still remember some German karateka from that time?

I remember Jürgen Seydel and Fritz Wendland from my first visit to Germany.

You have been teaching for over 30 years in Europe, are you happy with the result you have achieved?

For 32 years I have taught Karate in Europe, there are still many people whom started studying it with me, till this day practice with me. Some are over 60 years as well. It is nice to see us develop together. Till today I am still able to practice so that makes me happy. I have to carry on and see what kind of level I can reach. I always try to improve my level, to improve the level of karate I have learned, and I hope the next generation will do the same.

Sensei Kase, you and Sensei Shirai established WKSA, what was the aim of WKSA?

All life practise Karate. The idea is to develop Shotokan Karate and practices together until the end of life. No politics, just practice Karate-do.

What is in your opinion the most important dachi to study as a beginner and what as a advanced karateka?

I think people should start Karate in Hachichi-dachi and than in Hami-dachi and Zenkutsu-dachi that is the principle of WKSA (World Karate Shotokan Academy). The difference to traditional Shotokan Karate is that we use a lot of fudo-dachi instead of zenkutsu-dachi. Than we use a lot of open hand techniques, Haito and Shuto for blocks as well for attacks. To use the fist for attacking and blocking is the first level of Karate, to to open hands is the next level. With open hands you have a further reach for attacking and blocking, but to get kime open hand techniques is more difficult. That's why you have to use first the fists and than open hands. To move we use a lot of yori-achi, tsugi-ashi kae-ashi and 45 degree movements.

Nowadays many Karateka practice only Kata or only Kumite for competition. What do you think about this development?

It should have both for a total practise in Karate. Competition is only one part of Karate, the other is self-defence. Budo helps to develop the personality of people who practise Karate-Do. Budo Karate is so big that you can develop in

many directions. Many people do competition, but people should keep it more traditional, otherwise it's like boxing or something like this. If people only practice for competition, they are finished after the competition because, they don't know what else to practice. That's why it is important to keep the traditional idea of Budo Karate. In competition you learn mainly how to attack, in WKSA you learn how to block as well. So after competition you should do Budo Karate, like I do in the academy.

How should we practice Kata in your opinion?

Kata should be trained the Budo way. To practise kata the normal way is not enough, kata should be practised ura, go, in 4 directions as well, and bunkai of course. That's the way you study a kata deeply and understand it.

Sensei Kase, you are nearly 70 years old and you have been doing Karate for over 54 years. What makes you still enjoy Karate ?

Doing Karate is a pleasure for me. I can't live without Karate, it is like eating and drinking, it is natural part of me. For me it is not a pleasure to go to a cinema or something like this. Only Karate is important for me. It is the same like with an artists, dancers, painters writers, you just enjoy the art and I do.

Sensei Kase in books we can read that martial artists can develop their personality by practising martial arts. What is your opinion about this?

I think the development of a personality does not come only from martial arts, it comes as well from life experience, marriage and many more things. I think through Karate I got much more calm, more in control of myself. (Pause...) Karate is like research for foreign energy. Through Karate I developed a different level which makes the insides of me very calm. It is like some sort of spiritual energy.

Sensei Kase, thank you very much for your time.