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**SHOTOKAN KARATE:**  
PRESERVING THE HERITAGE

**AUTHENTIC WING TSUN**  
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THE SPEAR AND  
HAND COMBAT OF MICRONESIA



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# SHOTOKAN KARATE: PRESERVING THE HERITAGE

by Jim Nail

*The way of Funakoshi in modern times*

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*Gichin Funakoshi, who brought karate to Japan from Okinawa in 1922, understood his art in a spiritual as much as physical sense. The word shotokan comes from Funakoshi's pen-name, "Shoto," which connotes the sound of wind blowing through pines.*

"This is authentic one. These stones will not wear away. The other is fine for people who do not know, but the stones will not last. The course of the stream will change. The stones will be worn away."

The speaker, as we walked through the gardens of the Japanese Cultural Center in Los Angeles, was **Tsutomu Ohshima**, one of the last students of Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Japanese karate. With Funakoshi as head instructor, **Ohshima** had been team captain of the prestigious Waseda University karate club in Japan. He arrived in the United States in

1955 to found Shotokan Karate of America, the first shotokan karate association in this country. Since then he has maintained his organization as the most traditional branch of Japanese karate in the world—more pure, many would say, than Japan's own Japan Karate Association, which was formed at about the same time. "Karate is a crystal of the human spirit," **Ohshima** is fond of saying; its heritage is a gem he intends to preserve.

"I remember when Master Funakoshi was teaching at Waseda University. He was already an

old man. We had to carry him up the stairs to the dojo, and after class we had to carry him back down again. The seniors of the class did this. But even though he was already in his 80s, his understanding of karate was incomparable.

"For a long time there was confusion about the right way to perform the side-up kick. When Master Funakoshi was showing us how to do it, he just made a small, low motion with his foot, exactly like the front snap kick except with the body facing to the side. Many of us assumed he did the kick that way because he was old. At that time, we thought the side-up kick should be delivered higher, with the knee turned in, which looked fancier but was harder to do. That was the way I practiced it when I came to the United States.

"I practiced that way for many years, but I began to develop problems with my back. Finally Senior Obata, the first captain of the Keio University karate club, was visiting this country (at my invitation) and I mentioned this to him. I said, 'You know, I think there is something wrong with the side-up kick. If you perform it this way, it is very bad for the back.' Obata said, 'Of course. That's not the way to do the side-up kick. Didn't you see how the Master did it?'

"Master Funakoshi was showing us the right way all along, but we didn't understand what was wrong with our own way until many years later. If I had never questioned the

**“Master Funakoshi was showing us the right way all along, but we didn’t understand until many years later.**

technique I would never have learned to improve it, but that doesn’t mean I questioned it right away, just because I felt like a change. First I practiced almost 20 years.”

Such is the spirit fostered by Ohshima’s organization, the SKA, which prides itself on its adherence to the philosophy and methods of Funakoshi. The kata that Ohshima teaches are the original 19 forms published in Funakoshi’s *Karate-do Kyohan*, the “master text” of karate. Ohshima was the first to translate the work into English; it is required reading for all SKA members. The Japan Karate Association, by contrast, uses essentially the same kata but has deleted a few and altered a few others. Meanwhile Ohshima has remained in contact with his seniors in karate—men like Obata, Egami, Kamata-Watanabe and others, the elite of Japan’s earliest cadre of karateka—and as with the side-up kick, he will not readily change any detail.

Even the SKA’s grading system retains its earliest nature. When the belt system was first begun there were no official color distinctions at all. Everyone started with a white belt, and the more senior students’ belts grew dark with age, gradually turning black. Funakoshi introduced the practice of awarding brown belts to intermediate students and black belts to advanced students, to mark individual progress in some external manner. Only later was a multi-color grading system innovated by the



*Tutomu Ohshima, head of the SKA, was known in his youth as one of Funakoshi’s strictest, most uncompromising disciples. Throughout 26 years of teaching in the United States he has tried to maintain the purity of Funakoshi’s art.*

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**"It's more popular to award a belt every few months; we don't want people who think the art is an external accomplishment."**

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Besides teaching black belt practice at the SKA's central dojo in Los Angeles, **Ohshima** instructs students of all levels at Cal Tech University in Pasadena. "It is not easy to bring any art form into a new society," he says.

new generation. But **Ohshima** will have nothing to do with that.

The SKA awards only three colors of belt—white, brown, black. White is for students of eighth through fourth kyu. Brown is for fourth kyu through shodan, a period that will last three or four years for most people. The highest belt ranking awarded is godan (fifth-degree black belt), which is the highest rank Funakoshi awarded during his life and the highest **Ohshima** has accepted. It is felt that handing out higher ranks than Funakoshi ever did would insult the founder's memory. "We lose a lot of

potential students that way," says Tom Muzila, one of about 15 yodan (fourth-degree) black belts in the association. "It's more popular to award some kind of belt every few months or so. That way, the beginner changes colors every so often, and maybe he feels more like he is making progress. But we don't want people who think the art is an external accomplishment. We want to train people who can understand that the real struggle is against yourself."

Twice a year Shotokan Karate of America offers what is called "Special Training." Essentially, the

training consists of a three-to-four-day camp, modeled after the training camps held in Japan under the guidance of Funakoshi and his senior students. "These are the most important events for any karate student," says the SKA student handbook, "for they allow him to push himself to his limit." Indeed they do. Students rise at 5:00 a.m., practice techniques a thousand times each, engage in kumite against up to 40 consecutive opponents, run, practice some more, stand in the horse-riding stance for an hour and a half, and so on, for a four-day session the

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**"Karate is a way, a little lower than religion perhaps, by which anybody can reach a higher level of mentality."**

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student handbook does not exaggerate to call "the most demanding and strenuous mental and physical experience of their lives." Students who leave Special Training for any reason other than emergency are thrown out of the SKA and never permitted to rejoin.

"People may want to leave Special Training after a day or so," Muzila explains, "because they are afraid they might get hurt. Well, the fact is, they really might get hurt slightly—bruises and such. But if they give in to their fear they will be hurt worse. Bruises heal, mental scars do not. If you're not willing to give yourself 100 percent to the training, then we don't want you—because the idea of all this is to forge a new power in yourself, a new mental level. The ability to fight is really just the lowest achievement of karate, almost a side-benefit."

This refrain is heard again and again at the SKA. And something must be working right, because Ohshima's students are clearly all achievers. Of the 550 or so black belts he has awarded, 120 are also Ph.D.s. "You see," says Ohshima, "we are trying to bring something priceless to people. Having a black belt in karate is not a trivial thing. It is not a badge only of physical accomplishment, but a sign that a person has achieved a certain mental level. These people have learned to face themselves, and that carries over to the rest of their lives.

"Do you think I would



be teaching this art if I thought it was nothing but kicking and punching?" he asks. "Look, I went to Waseda University, the oldest university in Japan. I could have had any kind of good job, I didn't have to teach karate. But karate is more than fighting.

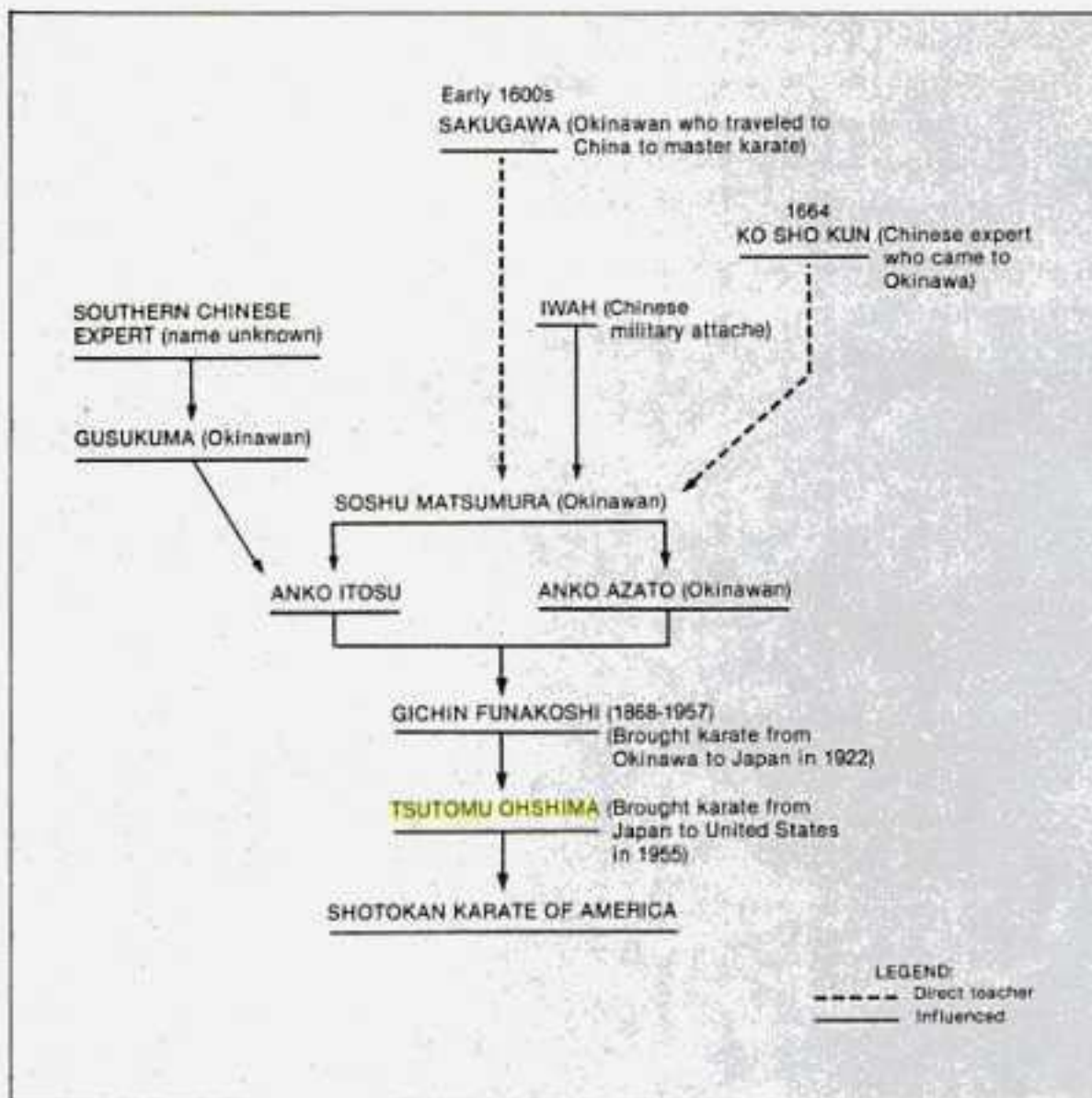
"I am a modern man about religion; I have many doubts. But karate is a way, a little lower than religion perhaps, by which anybody can reach a higher level of mentality. Even if they are not spiritual enough or intellectually motivated enough for religion or philosophy, they can find spiritual attainment

through training hard in the traditional way, learning to face themselves 100 percent."

So karate is a crystal of the human spirit. Its tradition and practice are a cultural gem. And many aspects of the art are aesthetically pleasing, aside from any potential combat value—the cleanliness, the purity of form, the power of technique, the mutual respect between students and instructors. But that isn't all.

"Karate is an ancient discipline," says Ohshima. "It comes originally from China, from the Shaolin temple, which the Japanese call the Shorin temple.

Though Ohshima originated the form of judging still used at many karate tournaments, he feels that competition can never express the meaning of karate. That, he would maintain, is a far more private, and significant, experience.



to offer.”  
**Ohshima** brought this sentiment with him from Japan at a time when tradition was at its lowest ebb in Japanese society, shortly after World War II.

“The atomic bomb changed many things for the Japanese,” he explains. “Before the war, we were very proud of our traditions, not just the martial arts, but our society’s whole spiritual heritage. Also, of course, we felt that the old martial artists and the samurai were the best fighting men in the world. But then we were shocked into believing that the foreign technology was stronger. What could the martial artist do against a B-52? So, after the war, the Japanese people lost respect for themselves and their old ways. The new generation adopted the West’s materialistic attitude. They worked hard, they copied Western technology, they abandoned the old. I was just the opposite. During the war, I was something like a super-liberal. I felt that the war was a bad thing, that Japan could never win against the giant USA. But then, after the war, when I saw how our people no longer respected their own culture, I felt there was something that had to be saved.

“You can say what you want about the ancient samurai. Perhaps they were cruel, perhaps they were missing some things that we consider important. But they had shining spirit. My grandfather was a samurai, and I could see it in him. These were honest people, truthful and courageous. They were willing to face themselves, they could overcome their fears, and they did not have to hide from anyone. This was a mental development the modern age can learn from.”

Then, at some unknown time, but surely very long ago, the art was brought to Okinawa, where it was modified and further developed, and finally through Funakoshi it came to Japan. It is an ancient discipline, filtered through four cultures—India, China, Okinawa and Ja-

pan. In that time, all the excess has been stripped away; the bedrock of the art has been exposed. These movements of karate are more than one man’s idea of how to fight. They are the product of a long cross-cultural evolution. The movements are more than the most effi-

cient control of the human body. They are part of a spiritual path that is based on physical reality.

“With religion, you deal always in abstractions. It is easy to lose your way, to become proud or confused. But in karate there is the experience of the total moment. When you are facing an opponent, waiting for his attack, your mind empty, your body relaxed and awake, you experience something that cannot be put into words, because it has nothing to do with words. It is experience. When you assume the meditation posture, your back completely straight, your posture stable and balanced, you come into contact with a feeling that is much more than just a cultural treasure (though it is that also), and more than just the ability to fight. This is what the art of karate has

KATA	ORIGINATED	MEANING OF NAME
1. Ten No Kata Omote	Funakoshi	Kata of Universe
2. Taikyoku Shodan	Funakoshi	First Cause One
3. Taikyoku Nidan	Funakoshi	First Cause Two
4. Taikyoku Sandan	Funakoshi	First Cause Three
5. Heian Shodan	Shorin	Peaceful Mind One
6. Heian Nidan	Shorin	Peaceful Mind Two
7. Heian Sandan	Shorin	Peaceful Mind Three
8. Heian Yodan	Shorin	Peaceful Mind Four
9. Heian Godan	Shorin	Peaceful Mind Five
10. Tekki Shodan	Shokei	Horse Riding One
11. Tekki Nidan	Shokei	Horse Riding Two
12. Tekki Sandan	Shokei	Horse Riding Three
13. Bassai	Shorin	To Penetrate a Fortress
14. Kwanku	Shorin	To Look at the Sky
15. Hangetsu	Shokei	Half Moon
16. Jutte	Shorin	Ten Hands
17. Empi	Shorin	Flying Swallow
18. Gankaku	Shorin	Crane on a Rock
19. Jion	Shokei-Shorin	Name of a Buddhist Saint or Temple (Jion-ji)