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# THE LEGACY OF GICHIN FUNAKOSHI

An Interview With Shotokan Karate's **Tsutomu Ohshima**

Conducted by Jim Rosenthal

Relaxing in his home in the Los Feliz section of Hollywood, California, **Tsutomu Ohshima** treats his pet pit bull with the same mixture of love and discipline he doles out to his karate students.

One minute training his young dog to be obedient with a move akin to the bowling prowess of Earl Anthony, and the next moment balancing the discipline with compassion and love, **Ohshima** demonstrates his ability to be strict and yet kind.

**Ohshima**, founder of Shotokan Karate of America (SKA), was one of the last students of Gichin Funakoshi, the originator of Japanese karate. **Ohshima** studied under Funakoshi for five years (1948-1953) while attending Waseda University in Tokyo. One of Funakoshi's most devout followers, **Ohshima** was selected captain of the Waseda University karate club, where he practiced with other prominent disciples of Funakoshi.

In 1955, **Ohshima** left Japan to start the SKA in Los Angeles. As the first man to teach karate in the United States, **Ohshima** was responsible for establishing the credibility of this art to Westerners. Despite a flurry of changes in many other karate organizations in the last three decades, **Ohshima's** group has remained stable and prosperous. For the first time in many years, **Ohshima** speaks candidly about his relationship with Funakoshi, his split with Hidetaka Nishiyama, and his attitude about life and the martial arts.

**BLACK BELT:** As the captain of the karate club at Waseda University, I would imagine you had a lot of contact with Gichin Funakoshi. What impressed you the most about him?

**TSUTOMU OHSHIMA:** Master Funakoshi was a very genuine person. He made such a great impact on karate because



Tsutomu Ohshima



*“If you lose the ability to be humble, you will never reach the highest level of karate training.”*





**Tsutomu Ohshima** trained at Waseda University under Gichin Funakoshi (far right above), who brought karate from Okinawa to Japan. While at Waseda, **Ohshima** (left below) was named captain of the karate club and was a fierce competitor.



*“Pride, dignity and confidence are what Gichin Funakoshi tried to pass along to his students.”*



he stressed the mental aspect of training. When I was at Waseda he would watch us practice on Saturday afternoons. He never told us we weren't practicing hard enough. In fact, he felt we practiced a bit too much. He always said there is no use hurting yourself when you are young. But of course we tried to hurt ourselves anyway. He taught us how to be strict with ourselves and he set a wonderful example by being very honest. His honesty and simplicity were something we took for granted, but it was very important. He also showed us how to be humble. He said if you lose the ability to be humble, you will never reach the highest level of karate training.

**BB:** What was the extent of your training with Funakoshi?

**OHSHIMA:** Most of my time with him was at Saturday afternoon practices, when he would supervise the training and lecture us and tell stories. He taught mostly by example. I remember he once challenged me to attack him. Here he was, an old man, and he's asking me to attack him. I thought . . . all right, I'll just jump on him and he'll fall down. But when I looked at his face, I realized he was able to do anything he wanted to do. His confidence made me feel like a stupid young punk or something. So when I did attack him, he reacted with great fluidity and blocked my technique.

**BB:** Did Funakoshi favor particular techniques in training exercises?

**OHSHIMA:** No, not really. He never gave me the impression that he was telling us he was the master and we should follow him and copy what he was doing. He refused to accept that attitude in his students. He said that everybody should walk on the same path with him, and if you make a mistake, he'll correct it. He knew human beings and the human mind very well. He had the full confidence of an honest and humble person who believes in giving his best effort for the martial arts and karate. His pride, dignity and confidence are what he tried to pass along to his students, more than this technique or that.

**BB:** What are your personal recollections of Funakoshi?



**OHSHIMA:** It is unfortunate that, at the time I was his student, I did not realize he was such a great man. Many people ask me questions about him and, the fact is, what comes across most is that he was a decent and simple person. After I left Japan and started teaching in the United States it suddenly occurred to me that I had hundreds of questions to ask him, yet I never asked him any questions when I trained with him. I simply said "Yes, sir" when he addressed me.

**BB:** Did Funakoshi ever say that karate could lead to a type of spiritual attainment?

**OHSHIMA:** He didn't have to explain anything because his example proved karate could lead to a higher level of advancement. His existence itself was beautiful; he was a beautiful, honest human being and that is enough to accomplish in life, but it isn't easy. I try to follow this example, but it is very difficult. He wasn't one to give metaphysical explanations for everything. He was very practical and was influenced by the teaching of Confucius, who never talked about great mysteries or spiritual issues. Funakoshi, like Confucius, was more interested in the realistic world of people, ideas and events.

**BB:** Are the 19 forms published in Funakoshi's book the basis for your *shotokan* karate?

**OHSHIMA:** Not exactly. Master Funakoshi never really taught the *ten-no kata* (kata of the heaven) or the three *taikyoku* (first cause) forms. When he got to Tokyo from Okinawa in the early 20th century, Master Funakoshi was pressed to reveal how many kata he knew. If he said he knew 20, someone else would say they know 50. The same thing happened to me when I got to the United States. People ask how many kata you know, and the more you say the more they think of you. That is ridiculous. Master Funakoshi said that to practice kata is not to memorize an order—even the 15 kata are too much. You must find the kata that work for you, understand them, digest them, and stick with them for life. That is a very honest approach. Life is too short to understand every-

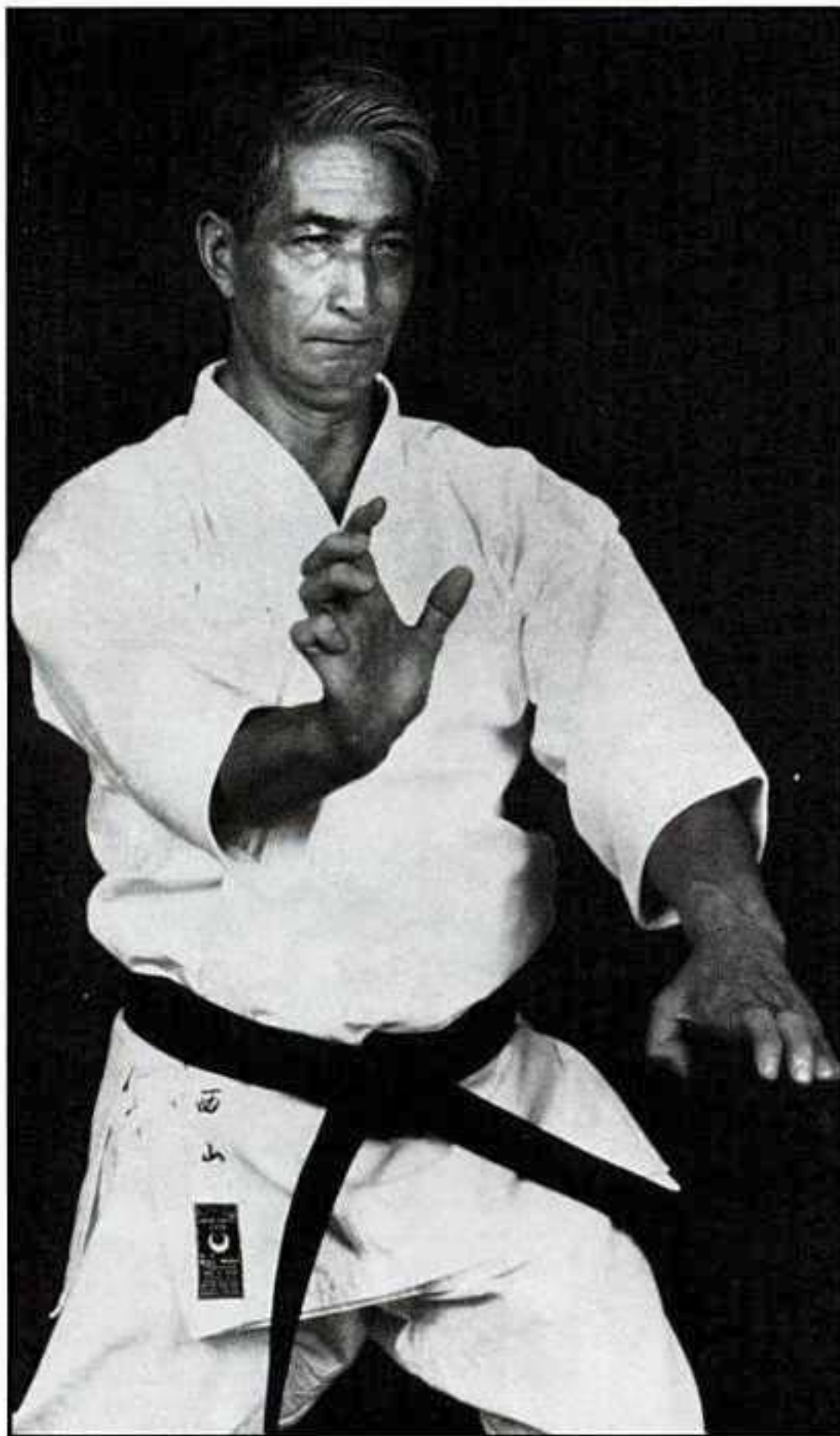


**Ohshima** (center above and left below) teaches his classes in a highly traditional manner. "The fundamental element is that we are strict with ourselves," Ohshima says. "We look at who we are with honesty and try to admit to our own weakness."



*"Find the kata that work for you, understand them, digest them, and stick with them for life."*





**Ohshima** turned his school over to Hidetaka Nishiyama (above) in 1961 and left for France. When **Ohshima** returned a year later, he was told Nishiyama had created a newer and better shotokan karate.

thing. Master Funakoshi didn't want us to just load up on learning many kata. The principle behind the kata is the most important thing. We must keep trying to reach a higher level of mentality. **BB:** Do you have philosophical differences with the Japan Karate Association (JKA)?

**OHSHIMA:** The point of the JKA was to support Master Funakoshi and to open his training methods to the public. That's what the JKA was supposed to be all about. I don't have any problem with that. I was in the original JKA—not the new JKA—and my name is probably in their books somewhere as a member. I was never kicked out or anything and I never considered the JKA my enemy. Unfortunately, I invited Mr. (Hidetaka) Nishiyama to run my school in Los Angeles in 1961 and he promised me that my organization would not belong to any organization of Japan. I didn't care how he ran it as long as he was consistent with Master Funakoshi's teaching and respectful to my students. I never said when I came back he'd have to give it back to me—when I give, I give.

**BB:** What happened when you returned to the school in the latter part of 1962?

**OHSHIMA:** When I came back I was told that Ohshima's karate was the old shotokan group. Nishiyama said he had reached higher than Funakoshi's level and was correcting his mistakes to create a new karate. One of my old students said I should go back to Japan to learn the new techniques because it's all been changed. Nobody but Nishiyama was saying such things. I am a traditional shotokan practitioner. I didn't want to make this kind of factionalism. I wanted everyone to work together and that's why I invited Mr. Nishiyama to take over my school while I was away. My dream was to have everyone spread Master Funakoshi's teaching in harmony, but I invited the wrong person to fulfill that dream.

**BB:** What makes your shotokan organization so traditional?

**OHSHIMA:** The fundamental element is that we are strict with ourselves. We look at who we are with honesty and try to admit to our own stupidity, blindness,

*“Nishiyama said he had reached higher than Funakoshi's level and was correcting his mistakes.”*





weakness and cowardice.

**BB:** Is this what it means to be "facing oneself?"

**OHSHIMA:** Yes, we are facing ourselves when we have the courage to admit to our own faults. We must stop blaming others and deal with overcoming our own weakness before we can be happy and fulfilled.

**BB:** It has been said that learning how to fight is the lowest achievement of karate. Do you agree with that?

**OHSHIMA:** It's a question of reaching a higher level of fighting. In *kendo* (way of the sword), once you've reached a certain level, the master and the pupil face each other but they do not make contact, even though they try to engage. Some people call this mutual escape, but to me it's a mutual getting even with the opponent. You get into the opponent's body and mind to overcome the conflict. I try to aspire to this mental level, reached by the top martial artists in ancient times.

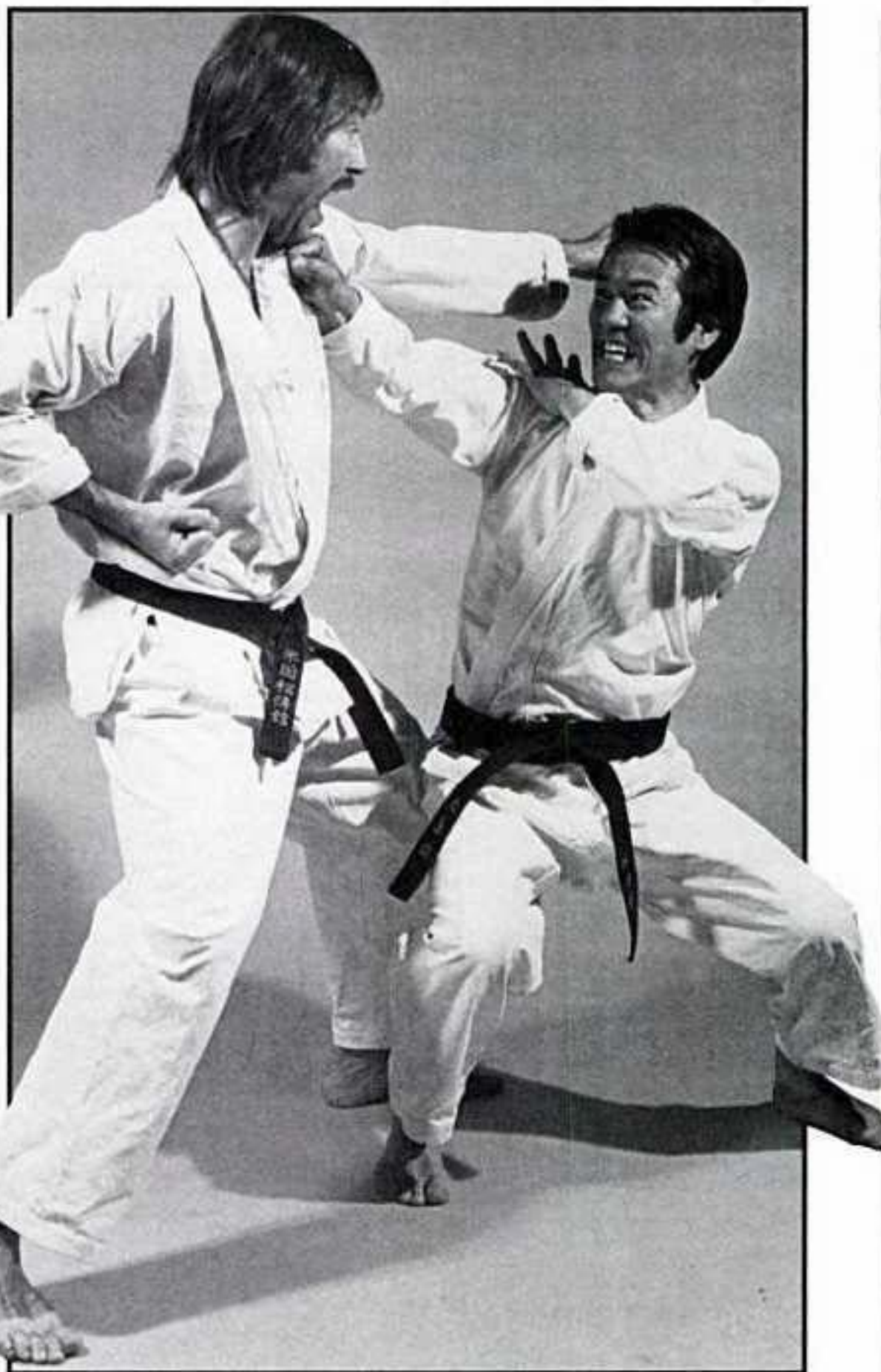
**BB:** How did most Americans react to you when you introduced shotokan to the United States?

**OHSHIMA:** Most people viewed it as a type of hobby or something to do that was different from what everybody else was doing. So you can imagine that they were shocked to realize that this is a serious business. Maybe they thought I was a crazy guy or something.

**BB:** What was the reaction to your organization's "special training," with its rigorous ritual of practicing techniques thousands of times and sparring with as many as 40 opponents a day?

**OHSHIMA:** This is now a special feature of the SKA because many Japanese instructors believe if they do what I do in my special training, every American student will quit. And at first people had trouble adjusting to the hard training. In 1959 it was somewhat experimental. But I wanted to introduce a genuine atmosphere of the martial arts, and most of my American students took to it in the tradition of the pioneer spirit. Special training is a beautiful thing because the mental attitude creates a good atmosphere. Everyone pushes themselves,

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When **Ohshima** introduced shotokan karate to the United States in 1959, people initially had difficulty adjusting to the hard training. "Maybe they thought I was a crazy guy or something," **Ohshima** says.



*"In our organization, the white belt is king. The black belts are the first to clean the dojo."*



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## THE LEGACY OF GICHIN FUNAKOSHI

Continued from page 53

tries very hard and learns a great deal. If they are mentally alert, human beings can do great things. I always say at the end of each special training that whether each student continues with karate or quits the next day, it doesn't matter. They have proven through the special training that they can do it.

**BB:** How do Funakoshi's teachings relate to the way you run your organization?

**OHSHIMA:** The SKA does not elevate its senior members at the expense of the white belts. In our organization, the white belt is king. The black belts are the first to clean the *dojo* (training hall) on Sundays, for example. I do not believe in making a stupid feudalistic system for American society within the *dojo*. I'm trying to promote an idealistic human relationship—the way society is supposed to be. The person with the higher rank and power should sacrifice himself for the benefit of the others. This is a traditional virtue of the martial artist and embodies Master Funakoshi's teaching on being strict with oneself.

**BB:** You've apparently learned a lot about traditional martial arts values from your grandfather, who was a samurai. Do you apply any of the samurai culture to your life as a karate teacher and practitioner?

**OHSHIMA:** Well, I try to introduce the best part of the samurai way of life to my mentality. I try to compete with my grandfather's legacy because his mentality was strong, pure and clean. He was willing to sacrifice his own selfishness to benefit other people. A more symbolic way of saying this is that he was ready to die at any time. Many people like to always explain what they are doing and to make excuses. But I judge a man by what he does in his life—it's important that he be genuine.

**BB:** Would you say then that the martial arts to you are a way of being genuine as a human being?

**OHSHIMA:** Yes, that's right. I tell my black belts not to hesitate to be weak in front of good people. Some people think a martial artist has to be tough against everybody—that's not true at all. A martial artist has to be strong against bad people. But we must also be able to know and understand the feelings, moods and mentalities of good and bad individuals before we can comprehend when to be strong and when to be gentle.

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