

The most frequently asked questions lately have been about the first Shotokan Karate practices in the United States. This year marks the 50th Anniversary for Shotokan Karate of America. Here is a little background on how it began and how its growth has accelerated to where we are today.

I arrived in Burbank airport in Southern California on May 12, 1955, wearing a heavy overcoat and having no idea what a warm spring day was like in California. It was warm. I came to the United States to attend the University of Southern California, having been accepted for the Ph.D. program in Political Science. I enrolled at USC soon after arriving. My English, as you know, was not my strong area and so I decided to take English classes at a community college just before going on to the university. At that time, four Nisei (second generation Japanese American) came to where I was living and asked me to teach them Karate. They were George Murakami, Takaaki Endow, Fred Suzuki and Roe Suzuki. All were Korean War veterans.

On March 30, 1956, we held our first practice at Denker Playground gymnasium in Gardena, California. Twelve eager young men came to that practice. They were: George Murakami, Takaaki Endow, Fred Suzuki, Roe Suzuki, Stan Tashiro, Akimasa Futami, Kenjiro Takahara, Hiroshi Harada, Ikuto Maruta, Eiji Ikeda, Masayuki Shibano and Mas Norihiro.

On May 11, 1956, we moved our dojo to Konko Church. Early on, we decided we had to have agreements between us that would guide our practice. Today, they would be called core values, but then we called them important agreements. These agreements would give us our purpose and our vision:

1. *Harmony is the most precious element in our lives.*
2. *Be strict to yourself.*
3. *Make sure your decisions and actions are clear and understood by all.*

The third agreement was related to dojo membership and regular practice. If you were

part of the dojo, then it would reflect in your dedication to practice. If you were out, then it was understood that your practice had ended.

Shotokan Karate has continued in America from that time until the present. Our first Nisei Week Karate exhibition was held in August 1957. It was held during the lunchtime intermission of the annual Judo Tournament at Koyasan Temple in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, California. The next year during Nisei Week, we were invited to hold an independent Karate exhibition at the same temple. On August 3, 1959, we held our third Karate exhibition. Now it had become an important part of the Nisei Week celebration. The Shotokan Karate exhibition was televised that year on the CBS television channel.

By 1957, Shotokan Karate had its first official Karate club at a university outside of Japan. The first University Karate club was at California Institute of Technology (Caltech).

The first black belt test was held on December 5, 1959. The following individuals became the first shodans of what was then known as the Southern California Karate Association: George Murakami, Roe Suzuki, Jordan Roth, Caylor Adkins, Mas Norihiro and George Takahashi.

In 1967, 36 people from Shotokan Karate of America, and two from France (Dr. Daniel Chemla and Mr. Tetsuji Murakami), came with me to Japan for a series of Japan-America-France exchange practices. This trip marked the first time individuals from other nations came to Japan as Karate practitioners to train side-by-side with Japanese karateka. The America-France karateka traveled with me to dojos in Nagoya and Tokyo. In the context of this time, this was a sizable accomplishment and it sent a message around the world that the serious practice of Karate was of value to people everywhere. And to the people of Japan, having people from around the world visit and practice with them sent a message of friendship much needed everywhere during the late sixties.

In 1968, we gave our association the name Shotokan Karate of America.

By 1973, Shotokan Karate of America had grown from the original 12 guys and me to more than 5,000 members throughout the nation, and by then Shotokan Karate had become popular in Canada as well. The relationship between Shotokan Karate of America and Canada Shotokan has always been very strong.

In 1975, Shotokan Karate of America was asked to host the Third [annual] World Karate Tournament, sponsored by the World Union Karate Organization, in Long Beach, California. Approximately 30 nations were represented at this tournament. This very important event incidentally helped to establish Karate as one of the most popular Martial Arts in the world.

In 1990, we held Harmony 1990 in Santa Barbara, California. It is with the help of all our Shotokan Karate organizations from around the world that we were able to create a vision of an International Dojo in Santa Barbara, California. I am humbled, and yet deeply satisfied, by the cooperation and collaboration it took from all our dojos from around the world to build such a masterpiece as the Shotokan Ohshima Dojo in Santa Barbara. Each of the affiliate countries, including Shotokan Karate of America, contributed the talent, expertise, time and funding to complete this legacy project. In August 2000, all nations participated in the Grand Opening Ceremony of Shotokan Ohshima Dojo.

I hope each one of you comes to Santa Barbara on August 19, 2006, for the 50th anniversary of Shotokan Karate of America. Bring your family with you because they are part of our family, too.

In my next article of this newsletter, I will share a little more about how SKA went from Southern California to the rest of the nation.

Tsutomu Ohshima