

MASTER TAIJI KASE 9th Dan

SHOTOKAN RYU KARATE-DO

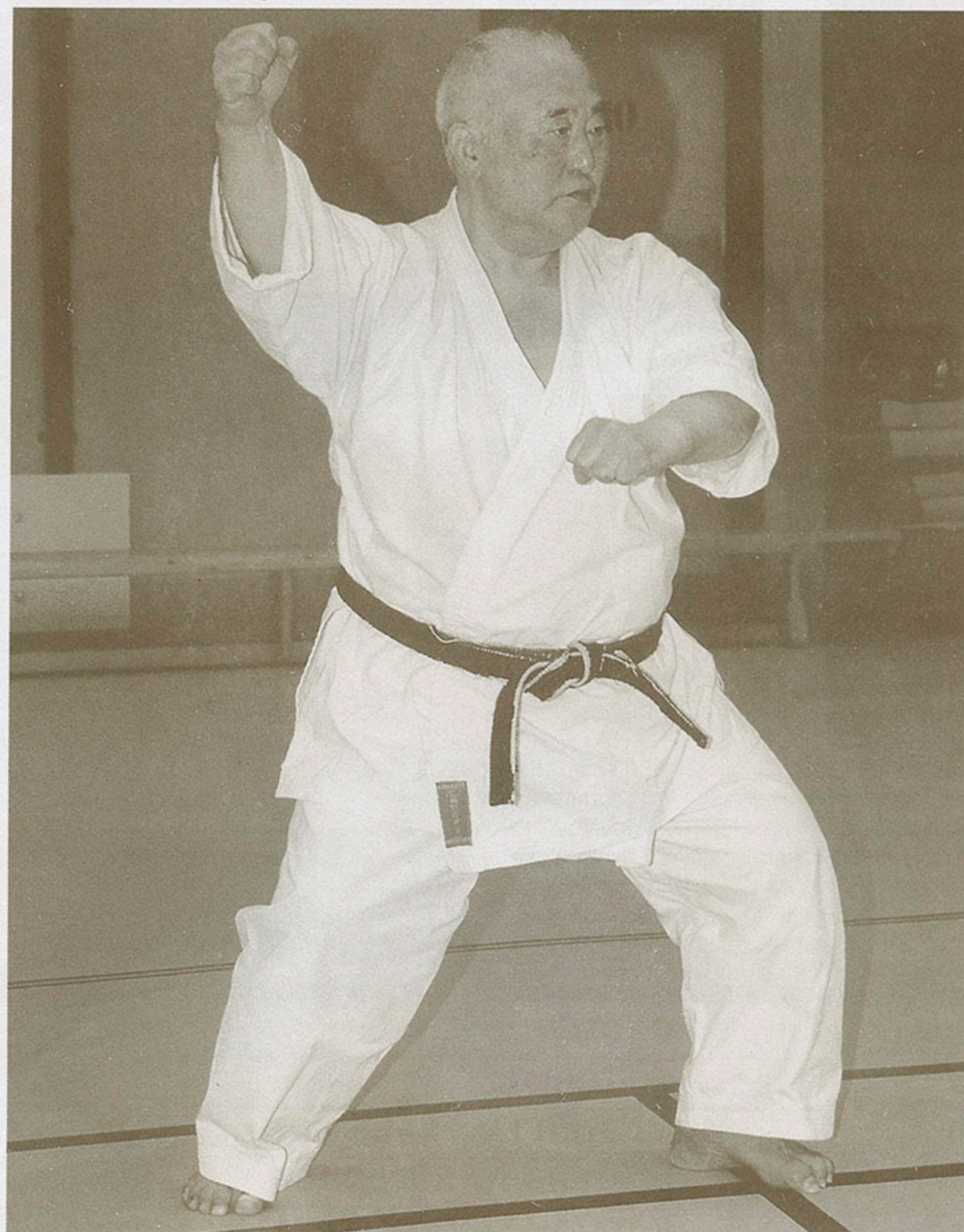
Story and Interview By Martin Fernandez.

Taiji Kase 9th Dan Shotokan Ryu born on the 9th January 1929 is one of the few masters who at 72 still remains fully active. Married and father of two daughters, he has dedicated his life to the practice and instruction of karate-do. He suffered a heart attack on the 31st of May 1999, from which he had to be re-animated with electroshock, and stayed twenty days in the American hospital in Paris. This has not stopped him from continuing with his aim of elevating karate to its highest peak, allowing all karate practitioners access to the deeper aspects of this admirable and fascinating art.

When Taiji Kase was six years old, he had already started practicing judo, obtaining his 2nd Dan in 1944. This same year, he began practicing karate-do. This happened after seeing in a bookstore the book, 'Karate-do Kyohan' written by sensei Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957). He was very impressed with it because, although he already knew judo, kendo and aikido, he was not familiar with karate-do. He then decided to meet Gichin Funakoshi, who took him on as his pupil in the Shotokan-Dojo, after being assured by young Kase's interest. Taiji Kase was then fifteen years old and remembering those days he told us the following story:

In 1944 the people who owned a katana (sword) firearm or practiced karate had to inform the police about it, because they considered it a weapon, which was not the case with the other martial arts. At this time, he was practicing both judo and karate. When he was about to obtain his 3rd Dan in judo, he had to stop practicing it, since karate took most of his time. And also – he said smiling – sometimes in the judo randori (combat) he used karate techniques and did not let his opponents practice! He also practiced some aikido, getting to know Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of this art, and Noriaki Inoue, the aikido master of Shigeru Egami, both masters – he said – had an incredible level. Master Kase was not only coached by Gichin Funakoshi but also by other masters and instructors, as we will see in this interview.

At the end of March 1945, when he was sixteen years old, he enlisted in the Japanese Navy, joining the kamikaze special force. However, the war ended in August of that same year, that is why he is still with us today. He usually says that since he could have died in the war and is alive, he never has a reason to be sad.



Master Taiji Kase began practicing karate-do in 1944 at the Shotokan dojo in Tokyo.

And this is so, because you can always see him smiling or with a special inner mood.

He graduated from the university of Senshu with a degree in Economic Science in March 1951 and says cheerfully, that sometimes, since he was training, he did not have enough time to prepare for the exams, and what he did was sign as captain of the karate team, getting good results.

When the war ended the Shotokan dojo had been destroyed due to the bombing. Yoshitaka Funakoshi (1906-1945) had died from lung gangrene or something similar and all his surviving pupils were scattered all around Japan. Master Kase was not able to find a karate dojo in which to practice so he went back

to judo, until Gichin Funakoshi got the Shotokan group together again.

In 1946 he obtained shodan in karate-do and in 1949, when he was captain of the team in the Senshu university, he obtained sandan (3rd Dan). In this same exam, the captain of the Chuo university team (Takagi), and the one from Takushoku (Shimamura), also obtained 3rd Dan. Shimamura was the sempai (senior) of the well known master, Hidetaka Nishiyama, who obtained sandan approximately one year later than Kase, Takagi and Shimamura.

Master Kase joined the JKA (Japan Karate Association) in order to become a professional karate teacher, which is what he had always wanted to be. However, he has always performed a special karate.

Even though he was chief instructor for European JKA, he always kept in touch with masters from the NKS – Nihon Karate-Do Shotokai (Japan Karate-Do Shotokai): Although these two groups; JKA (Kyokai) and the NKS, became separated at the death of Gichin Funakoshi due to different disagreements. However, it was normal for master Kase to keep up his relationship, since one of his main instructors was Genshin Hironishi, chief instructor of the Shotokan dojo and President of the Japanese Shotokai after the death of Egami (1912-1981) and until his death in 1999. He also had an excellent relationship with Jotaru Takagi, current President of the NKS, both being from the same generation and training colleagues. Tadao Okuyama was another of his instructors with whom he kept in touch sporadically, on his trips to Japan. We will also talk about him.

With respect to the comments mentioning that he did not follow the JKA standards, he just says that his karate is Shotokan Ryu Kase Ha, meaning Shotokan with the qualities he has added – his personal touch.

In Japan, one of his tasks was to train the JKA instructors in kumite (combat), among who were; Enoeda, Ochi, Shirai and many others. Something little known was that he was in charge of taking care of the 'challenges' against the JKA. In the post war period (1945-1952), when Japan was under control of the American forces, he won many fights and ended up with real combat experience. He mentions now that this was not true Budo spirit, but under those circumstances?

In 1964 he left Japan to teach in the following countries and continents: In 1964 he spent three months in South Africa. In 1965 he taught again in South Africa with masters Kanazawa, Enoeda and Shirai. That same year he taught a seminar tour in the U.S.A. and Germany. From October 1965 to March 1966 he was in the Netherlands and Belgium. From March to August 1967 he went to Milan, Italy, to help master Shirai establish himself there, until later in 1967 when he arrived in France and settled permanently in Paris.

During his first months in Paris he had to prove himself and therefore had to combat with the French karate champions and experts. Little by little he demonstrated that his karate was far superior, and had nothing to do with their knowledge up to then. According to Henry Plee, pioneer of French karate, "Once you saw Taiji Kase in action, you admired and respected him because, he goes directly to the essential, technique for him is only the means. What is really important is the result."

Another important date is when in 1986, he decided to close up his dojo in

Paris and go around the world teaching his art, which is what he has been doing.

With respect to the different karate evolution stages, he personally divides them into: the Okinawan, the Japanese and the Yoshitaka stage. And although he would never say this, his pupils, followers and their generations would add one more, the Taiji Kase stage.

In the 1980's he published two books including 18 superior kata and five Heian, with the applications of the main technical steps. These books have been published several times. In 1989, with Hiroshi Shirai, he founded the WKSA – World Karate Shotokan Academy – of which he is President. Its main assignment is the black-belts and professionals of karate-do Shotokan – and his principal interest is that they keep progressing. This way future generations will keep improving, and maintaining the karate-do as he sees it.

Even though Kase sensei controls the complete karate arsenal, his leg techniques were what really amazed everybody, especially the ushiro geri and kaiten geri, he created. Furthermore the same thing with his open-hand techniques, his fast and precise

movements and the different kamae, were his specialities. But more than anything, what I like most is his efficiency and the way he has managed to transmit the finer aspects of budo, and karate in particular.

For all these reasons, it might seem that master Kase is only a warrior, a samurai, but, those of us who have had the fortune of knowing him personally, know that besides being a samurai, he is an affectionate person with a great personality and modest, an example of harmony between body and spirit. He radiates harmony in abundance, which does not prevent him from being strict and forceful when necessary. With respect to his daily life, he divides his time amongst his family, the daily karate-do practice (in a room in his home) and reading old books on budo, poetry and philosophy among others.

INTERVIEW WITH MASTER KASE:

M.F: Could you tell us how you confronted karate after you got sick?

T.K: After I got over the worst part of my heart attack, I had a great surprise. The doctors told me I had accumulated a lot of liquid in my lungs. They did not know why, because according to them, this had to have happened over a period



Yoshitaka Funakoshi has been a major influence on Kase sensei's karate.

of years, and I should have noticed it, but I didn't have any problem with my health. In terms of my recuperation, it is important to bear in mind Yoshitaka Funakoshi's experience. Even though he was sick and spending most of the time in bed, at night he would put on his karate gi and he was strong and dynamic as if nothing had ever happened. That is the reason why during my recovery, I used to think about it and I decided to accept the challenge to show that with karate you can overcome problems, including health problems.

The doctors told me that it would be better to stop practicing and teaching karate and that I should abandon it completely. So while I was sick I also remembered the experience of sensei Egami, one of my other seniors, from whom I also received classes. Sensei Egami was likewise very sick and had several surgeries, which among other things caused him to have difficulty breathing. Nevertheless, when he gave classes with his assistant, sensei Takagi, Egami recovered his breathing in a special way and then he used to say, "O.K., now I am going to teach you," and he would let them attack and he would apply defenses and counter-attacks that were very fast and most of all very powerful. That is why I decided to learn from my seniors and to test the same things. That is, even though I cannot always be well, I can maintain an explosive power for a short space of time and then later recuperate myself and so on, successfully.

M.F: Who were the karate masters or instructors from whom you received classes?

T.K: We were members of the Shotokan-Dojo and officially the shihan (master) was Gichin Funakoshi and the second shihan was Yoshitaka (his son). Another instructor from whom I received classes was Genshin Hironishi. But also in addition to that, we also attended classes at the karate club at the university. Once a week, in an official way, different instructors were invited, such as Gichin Funakoshi, Yoshitaka, Hironishi, Kawata, Okuyama, Hayashi, Uemura, Kubota and others. Therefore, the education was not as generally understood, for we were influenced by several instructors. At least once a week we had an instructor invited to the university of Senshu.

M.F: You have spoken to us a lot about sensei Tadao Okuyama who we understand was, and still is, a very special person. Tell us about him and why you appreciate him so?

T.K: In order to speak about sensei Tadao Okuyama, I will go back to the days when the five Shotokan universities

carried out their 'dan' level exams together. In these exams kata, kihon and kihon-kumite were practiced and the senior instructors graded them. The applicants did kumite with them after the exam, it was usual for one of the seniors to do kumite (combat) with one of the applicants. That was where sensei Okuyama appeared. The moment as I recall, was really sensational, because he attacked with greater speed and force than any of the others. The applicants could not even react. There was no way to defend oneself from sensei Okuyama, he was over you with his fist in your face before you knew what was happening. Everybody was amazed by his ability. Oh! and about the dan exams at the end of the 2nd World War, Shimamura, Jotaru Takagi and I were the first ones to take the exams of sandan (3rd dan). This was



Kase applies a technique on Dirk Heene.

the first exam in which we did kumite amongst us. In this exam, Motokuni Sugiura – presently the chief instructor of the JKA/World Federation – passed the shodan (1st dan).

M.F: Please tell us why Yoshitaka Funakoshi had so much influence on the evolution of Shotokan karate?

T.K: When I began practicing karate, our seniors told us that Gichin Funakoshi was the pioneer of karate. But they also told us that the evolution, revolution and development was carried out by his son, Yoshitaka. His karate was faster, stronger and more dynamic. Sensei Yoshitaka searched for validity, and efficiency. He wanted to know if the techniques really worked against attacks. But what is really important to understand, is that the great

development from Gichin Funakoshi's karate to the karate performed by sensei Yoshitaka, was possible thanks to the 'O-waza' (long distance technique) concept, with maximum speed and force. However, we must not linger on this point, as what is really important is to master the O-waza in order to be able to be efficient in 'Ko-waza' (short distance technique). Gichin Funakoshi even said that 'seite' (when one arm defends and the other counter-attacks) is important, but more so is, 'hente' (defenses and counter-attacks with the same arm). Hente is directly related to the Ko-waza practice. For this reason, it is especially important to understand the O-waza concept and its history.

Let's imagine that the performance of a tsuki (punch) at a distance of a metre took 'X' time. Well, what Yoshitaka did was increase the distance little by little, maybe two or three metres, trying to do it in the same amount of time. This would then be more efficient, and that is where the importance of fudo dachi position comes in. When at war the samurai gave great importance to the Ko-waza movements (short distance techniques), in need for immediate action, since their lives were at stake at this distance. Later, when at peace, the space for the techniques was increased, giving more importance to O-waza (long distance technique) as a training method. For example, long distance techniques were used in kendo, in order to develop and strengthen the body, as an exercise. However, a good use of this training system helps prepare the muscles and after that practice Ko-waza efficiently.

With respect to the position work, Gichin Funakoshi's speciality was kiba dachi. Yoshitaka watched it and after some experiments created fudo dachi position, following his style of more explosive and long distance techniques. This is the reason for this new position, since these techniques performed from a zenkutsu dachi position, lose a lot of their efficiency. The same thing happens with the different types of movements. From fudo dachi we can move and change our direction at maximum speed and stability, which is not the case with the others. A clear example of the aim for more distance and depth in the advance of a tsuki, is the technical sequence of, 'fumi komi – soe ashi, gedan tsuki – soto uke' of the Empi kata.

M.F: When did you see Yoshitaka Funakoshi for the first time?

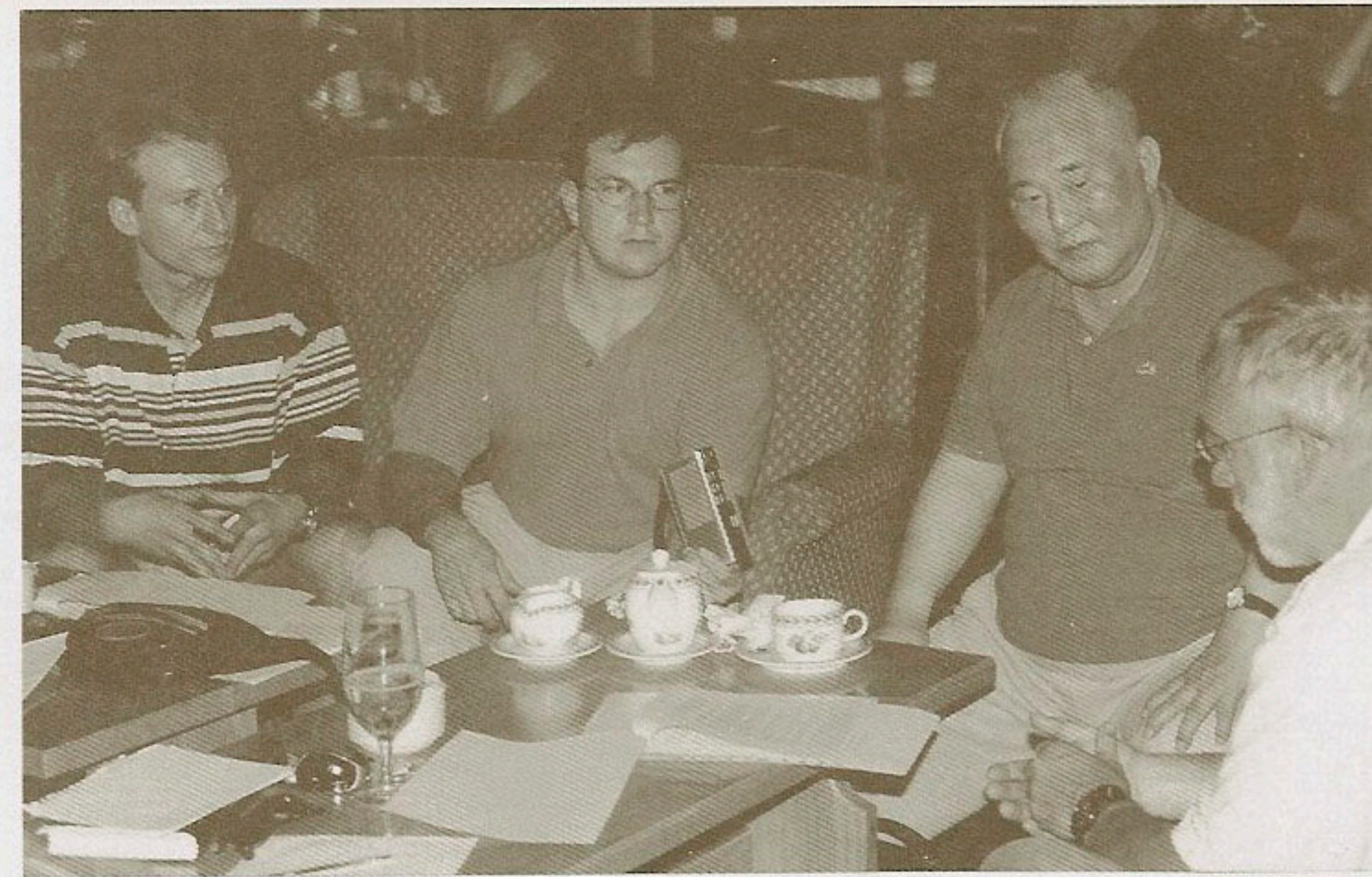
T.K: It was in 1944. Although the beginners class was usually taught by sensei Hironishi, one day a different sensei came in. I did not know him and when I asked who it was, they told me that he was Waka sensei (the young

sensei), son of Gichin Funakoshi. In this class, Yoshitaka sensei taught us how to practice mae geri slowly, and without lowering the leg to the floor, also, how to do a yoko geri, then withholding the yoko geri, how to do a mawashi geri. After that he said: "Now I will show you how we do it normally," and gave three kicks that were so fast and strong that I still remember seeing the white flash of the karate uniform pants, and a noise that sounded like a storm. We were all very impressed.

When our seniors taught us kata, they told us that when Yoshitaka Funakoshi did kata, those who saw him felt a special sensation, the tremendous impression of impending danger. That was the way – they said – kata should be performed. The people watching must feel and notice something, feel the vibration of our inner force and determination. If the spectators don't feel anything, then the kata is not correctly performed, it is a 'gymnastic or dancing' kata.

M.F: You always talk to us about the importance of breathing and the Hara, in your classes. Could you tell us about it?

T.K: The importance of the hara (a



L/R Spanish based Frank Schubert, Martin Fernandez, Kase sensei and interpreter Dirk Heene.

point about three centimetres under the naval) in Budo comes from two different sources. One is zen meditation. In zen they discovered that after the normal chest breathing, in the lungs, the air could be lowered, while breathing to the centre of the body – to the hara. This allowed a greater stability and ability to control the

inside of the body. With this method the movements improved considerably. On the other hand there are the samurai. Some of them noticed that if instead of using the muscular strength of the shoulders, they used a point that was lower, meaning the hara, they realised that the techniques were more efficient and had greater possibilities for success.

Since kendo, ju-jitsu, etc., already existed in Japan as Budo arts, little by little this direction was followed by karate-do, breathing the following way: You push the air towards the hara, keep it compressed there and use that extra energy as a powerful force to perform the techniques. The correct breathing towards the hara and subsequent compression, allows the development of the powerful force that is essential for example, in sambon tsuki, sandan tsuki, or in the hente (techniques carried out with the same arm). These could not be efficiently performed with the lung level breathing, nor with the muscular strength of the shoulders. Maximum efficiency is only possible with the powerful force generated by the breathing, the stabilising and the compression of the hara.

M.F: You have spoken sometimes about unknown concepts, such as Toate. Could you give us a simple explanation?

T.K: Toate means to touch without touching. An example of how to begin controlling this capacity is: when we block the attacker vigorously, with a lot of energy, at the beginning of the attack, and continue doing so repeatedly many times, with a lot of concentration and the correct breathing, and then one of the times we do not block him, he feels as if we had and does not attack, he is doubtful. This would be an example of the initiation of Toate, but there is a lot more and only a few like sensei Egami and Yoshitaka have



"One of the most important parts of Budo arts practice is the repeated technique or combination."



studied this thoroughly. With respect to this angle of Toate, on a higher level, Egami once told us that long ago, some Budo masters or samurai were capable of paralysing small birds or bats without touching them, focussing them with their eyes, breath or kiai and paralysed them long enough to be able to drive a spear into them.

M.F: What part of Budo practice would you like to emphasise?

T.K: One of the most important parts of the budo arts practice is the repeated technique or combination. But they must not be made at random. For example: when somebody repeats a certain technique or movement many times – about 500, 1000, or 10,000 tsuki blows (direct fist blow), he must look inwards and feel his sensations, because probably only about two or three tsuki have been correct (speed, force, settlement), in short, efficient. And only these two or three tsuki are important ones, the ones we must remember. Therefore we must be very perceptive and be able to feel the moment when we have done it correctly, look inwards and impress that sensation in our mind and in our body. After that you must ask yourself: Why have I done it better this time than others?

This is the step from the quantitative

(amount) to the qualitative (quality), this is what is really important in the process of learning – how to go from one level to another. Next time you practice that technique or any other, you must try to recall the sensation, so that on future occasions you perform the technique with it. This way, maybe only doing it 100 times, you can get two or three correct. Therefore you go faster every time and can incorporate the correct sensation to more techniques. This is one of the keys to success. What is not sufficient is to work on the same exercise for 30, 40 or 50 years, thousands of times without noticing what is happening inside our body, not improving the quality of our techniques and counting only on the repetition. This is not enough, you have to see which has been the correct technique, how you have felt it and work with that sensation.

M.F: Do you believe that karate-do or the budo have some mysterious elements, only accessible to a few?

T.K: No, what happens is, that in the correct practice of budo, you must cover a long distance. I believe I have reached it many times while on other occasions I think I am near but have not yet arrived. For this reason, anyone can progress in budo, just as long as they follow the

correct direction to go from one level to the other. This is what really makes a difference with performers. What is really important is not the number of years you practice but the correct practice during those years. This is the only way to progress towards a superior karate.

When somebody asks me why we practice so many attack techniques, so frequently and stronger each time, my answer is that when you experiment with the sensations, attacking and searching for more force, our defenses get stronger. When we manage to perform a stronger attack, we must ask ourselves if we would have been able to repel such a fast and powerful attack.

M.F: Finally sensei, could you give us karateka some advice?

T.K: My advice for the pupils of karate-do is simple. You must remember what Gichin Funakoshi said: "*Karate Ni Sente Nashi.*" (There is no first attack in karate), and understand the idea. Mentally as well as technically. You must do everything possible so that the attacker mentally understands that it is better for him not to attack, to feel it and accept this. This is the true meaning of '*Karate Ni Sente Nashi*' – that the adversary does not begin attacking and so there is no fight.