CONVERSATIONS WITH A MASTER:

A TRIBUTE TO SENSEI TAIJI KASE 9th Dan. By Graham Noble.

I had met Taiji Kase twenty years ago when I had the opportunity to talk to him about the development of Shotokan Karate. It was a fascinating conversation for me, but unfortunately it only lasted twenty minutes or so, and since that time I had always wanted to meet him again, because Kase had pretty much seen it all... Gichin Funakoshi and his talented son Yoshitaka, the old Shotokan dojo, the post war years and the competition with other styles, the founding of the JKA... over 60 years of experience in karate and budo. Well, it took a long time, and I thought Kase Sensei's heart attack in 1999 might have prevented it, but when he gave a comeback course in Belgium in May 2000, I made arrangements to meet him and the following is a summary of our conversation.

When asked in several past interviews the question... "What do you feel is the secret of karate?" Kase sensei was often quoted as saying... "The secret of karate, is how to move your body."

Taiji Kase was born in 1929 and he started his martial arts training in judo at the age of six. But, then, when a young Marine Cadet of fifteen he saw Gichin Funakoshi's book 'Karate-do Kyohan' and that generated an interest in karate which never left him. He went along to the Meijiro section of Tokyo to enroll in Funakoshi's Shotokan dojo, and then, when he saw Yoshitaka Funakoshi practising kicking techniques – and here Kase gestured, *"Mae-geri, mawashi-geri yoko-geri, Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!"* He was amazed, and even more determined to learn such a strong fighting art. At that time Gichin Funakoshi had retired from teaching and passed leadership of the Shotokan to Yoshitaka, his third son: Yoshitaka, apparently, was given a stamp, a seal, to recognise this authority. Master Gichin may have given a little instruction now and then however, because Kase remembers one occasion when he was shown how to make a fist by the old master. This was in the form shown in Gichin Funakoshi's first books, but by then more or less obsolete, where the index finger is not curled up in the fist, but stretched out so that it rests on the palm at the base of the thumb. At the next training session Yoshitaka noticed this and asked Kase, *"Who showed you how to make a fist that way?"* Although a little hesitant the young Kase replied that it had been his father. *"My father taught you that?"* said Yoshitaka, before correcting Kase's fist and saying that that old method was, *"Farmer's karate,"* – but when he said all that it was in a humourous, good natured way.

Yoshitaka was the Chief Instructor of the Shotokan but he was assisted by seniors Genshin Hironishi (who had returned from the Chinese battlefront a couple of years before), Yoshiaki Hayashi (who was the model for Ten-no-kata in the 1943, 'Karate Nyumon') and Wado Uemura. Shigeru Egami, another of the leading lights in Shotokan karate was back in Kyshu looking after the family business. Although this ran into difficulties after the war, during the war years it was a significant business employing a hundred people and Egami was a fairly rich man. At any rate, this kept Egami back in Kyushu, although Kase thought that he would come up to Tokyo now and then to train for short periods with Yoshitaka.

There is a well known series of photographs of Egami and Yoshitaka taken in the late 1930's. I showed Kase sensei some of these and he commented that they were taken some time before he started at the Shotokan. When Kase knew Yoshitaka, he had put on a little more weight, and had a noticeable stomach. He wasn't big or muscular, but he had a whole-body power which made his karate very powerful. *"Yoshitaka style was a 'speed plus power' karate,"* said Kase.

And yet although Yoshitaka appeared healthy and strong on the surface, he had suffered from tuberculosis since he was a child. In fact, said Kase, *"Yoshitaka had been told at seven years old that he would not live past twenty, and so when he reached twenty, then twenty one... twenty two... he was surprised and he may have attributed his survival, or part of it, to his karate training."* Kase thought, however, that Yoshitaka may have had something of a 'complex' about all this, since he knew that at any moment he might become seriously ill and die. Although Yoshitaka did teach at the Shotokan in those later years, Genshin Hironishi told Kase that he would have to sleep, or rest in bed all day, to conserve his strength for those evening training sessions.

Taiji Kase had heard some Yoshitaka stories. There was the famous Shito-ryu instructor who supposedly had a 'special technique' which would always gain him victory. When he tried to apply this against Yoshitaka, however, he was countered and thrown back several yards across the dojo. Another well known teacher – it was Kanken Toyama, Kase said – was supposed to have a secret

'tearing the flesh' technique. Yoshitaka told Toyama to try that technique on his thigh muscles. So, Toyama gripped Yoshitaka's thigh but nothing happened. Yoshitaka told him to try harder... nothing. Kase chuckled as he told these stories.

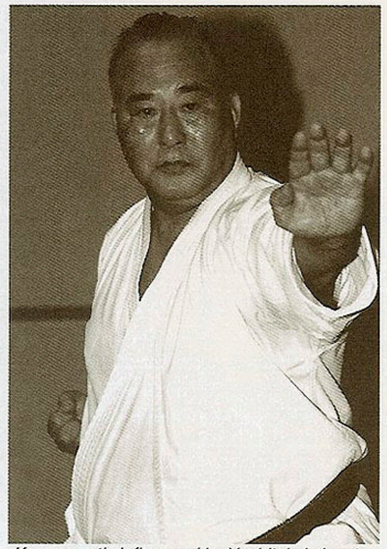
Was the training at the Shotokan hard at that time? *"Yes, because this was the war and the attitude to training was very serious. A lot of kumite was practiced, gohon and sambon kumite, and jyu-ippon, and every effort was made to hit with the attack. There was a kind of sambon kumite done in a rushing style where you tried to catch your partner."*

Were people hurt or injured during practice? *"Oh! Yes. Sometimes university students would come to the dojo and since they were often more experienced, very fast and strong, you would be very apprehensive about facing them in kumite."*

Well, in 1945 the Shotokan was destroyed in a bombing raid, then Japan surrendered, and then Yoshitaka Funakoshi died, all within the space of a few months. Karate practice stopped for a time, but then it slowly began to pick up. As early as 1947 in 'Life' magazine there was a two page feature on karate practice in Japan, and when I showed this to Kase Sensei he immediately identified the two karateka in the main photo as Hiroshi Kamata and Gojuro Harada. Karate was fortunate, in fact, in escaping the American Forces ban which affected judo and kendo at that time. Kase explained that this was because the karate groups described their art as of, 'Chinese origin' rather than Japanese, and the Americans left them alone.

After the war Taiji Kase enrolled at Senshu University where he continued his training and became the captain of the karate team. The Sensei there was Genshin Hironishi and his training was hard. Then Kase heard that Shigeru Egami was teaching at Chuo University, so he went over to Chuo to train with Egami too, *("Very sharp technique")*. In fact, the young Kase was passionate about karate, and when I showed him a group photo taken in 1951 he pointed to someone in the front row (I didn't quite get the name) and said that the well known Tadao Okuyama used to lodge at his house. So Kase made contact with this person because he really wanted to learn from the enigmatic Okuyama.

There is a karate story here which is almost forgotten. When we were talking about the wartime Shotokan, Kase Sensei mentioned that Yoshitaka's group was involved in teaching secret agents. "The Nakano School?" I asked, and Kase replied yes, and he stressed that the authorities had gone to Yoshitaka and asked him to teach there. But, he added,



Kase; greatly influenced by Yoshitaka's karate.

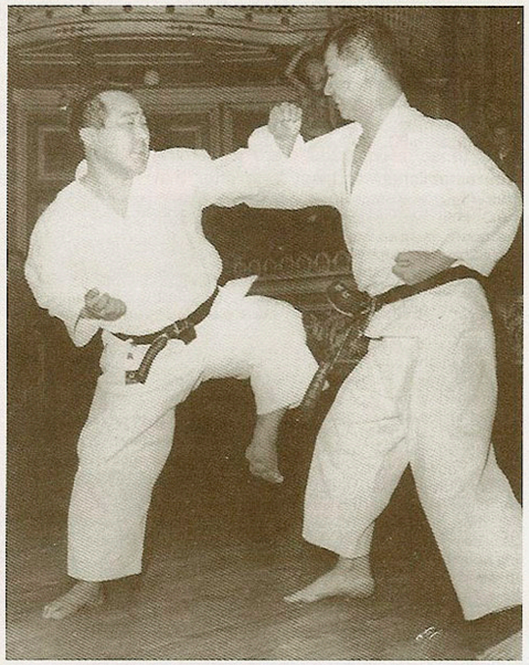
some of Yoshitaka's pupils advised him against direct involvement, so it was Tadao Okuyama who was actually sent. Yoshitaka Funakoshi was officially the instructor, and he may have gone there a few times, but it was Okuyama who did most of the teaching. What did he teach? I asked. *"Killing technique!"* Kase replied.

Anyway, Kase did study with Tadao Okuyama in that post war period, and he told me that Okuyama had, *"Very special technique."* When I asked him about that, he simply shook his head and smiled. Okuyama was indeed special, and looking again at that old photo, with all the various Shotokan seniors, Kase said that he thought, of all that generation, Okuyama was, *"The highest."* At one time he had gone away to the mountains to train, and then later he became involved with the Omotokyo sect of Shintoism, the same sect of Shintoism that had influenced Aikido's Morihei Uyeshiba, as a matter of fact. Okuyama became the bodyguard of the head of Omotokyo and lived in the group's main headquarters, which made him somewhat difficult to contact.

Yoshitaka Funakoshi's idea was that karate should develop continuously and Okuyama had taken this idea to its full potential – *"Develop, develop, develop, develop,"* said Kase. He didn't believe in hundreds of mechanical repetitions, but was always searching for the true technique, and Kase said that Okuyama had, *"A special kind of power; not from the muscles, not from kime, something else."* As an interesting aside to all this, Kase thought that Shigeru Egami may have got some of his later ideas from Okuyama. *"Not copied,"* he said, *"But got ideas."*

In those post war years the different karate groups would sometimes get together for joint training *(Kokan Geiko)* and often these sessions would get very physical, especially when style rivalry was involved. Kase sensei remembered the time in 1949 when the Shotokan universities of the East of Japan went down to Kyoto to meet the universities of the West – Ritsumeikan, Doshisha, Kansai and so on; mainly Goju groups, with maybe a couple of Shito-ryu. Kase recalls that, before the kumite sessions began the Shotokan seniors told the students that this was to be, *"Non-contact!"* – but they wanted it clearly understood that when they said, *"Non-contact,"* they meant, *"Contact!"* Since the Goju seniors gave a similar pep talk to their students, the kumite rapidly developed into something of a bloodbath, with many of the participants being knocked down or unconscious, or having their teeth punched out.

A meeting was called on whether the kumite should stop because of the injuries that were occurring. Some people did want to call a halt but Taiji Kase said that as long as they could stand up they should continue. Anyway, it was agreed that the captains should fight, and Kase

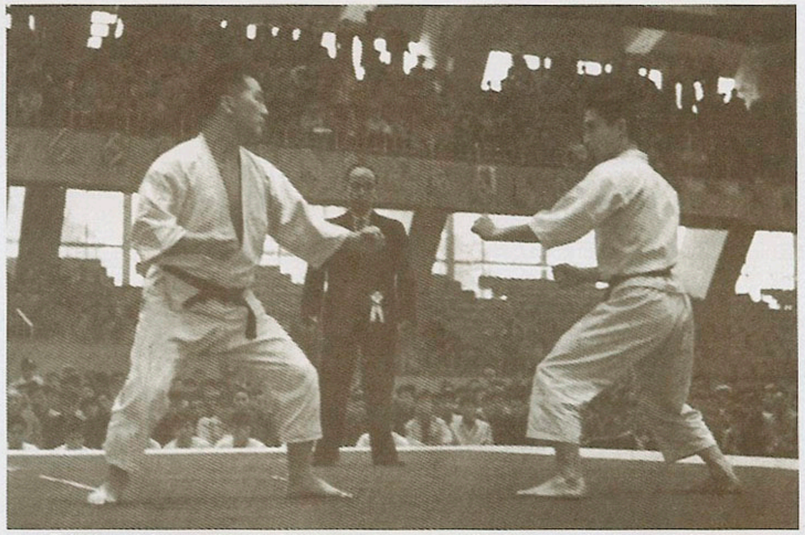


Two late, great masters of Shotokan Karate-do. A young Kase sensei (left), then aged 36 demonstrating kumite with Keinosuke Enoeda sensei (then aged 30) in Paris in 1965.

faced the captain of Ritsumeikan, who he succeeded in knocking down. Did he get injured himself? I asked. No, he was lucky, though he just managed to evade the Ritsumeikan's *haito*, which flew past his head – Kase remembers it rushing through his hair.

The Goju people were very rough, Kase recalled, although the Shotokan style, with its longer range *yoko geri* and *mawashi geri* attacks, worked well against them. Goju was more a close-quarters style and at that time the Goju karateka didn't use those kicking techniques. It was only more or less from that time that these techniques began to spread into Goju.

Shotokan karate wasn't highly organised at that time, but the various groups or factions – the university based groups of Keio, Hosei, Waseda, Takushoku, Chuo and Senshu – all managed to work together. When Kase passed his 3rd Dan grading in 1949 he did it before a panel composed of seniors from all the universities, and he passed along with Jokaro Tagaki of Chuo and Shimamura of Takushoku. Things seemed to be going well enough, but of course there were technical differences between the groups and also between those who had stayed in Japan during the 1930's and 40's, and those who had been away serving in China, Manchuria, and other parts of the Japanese Empire. Back in 1981, for example, Kase had told me that when Masatoshi Nakayama came back to Japan after the war he saw the younger students practicing *yoko geri, mawashi geri,* and so on, and said, *"That's not Shotokan karate!"* In Belgium, Kase sensei confirmed that story, explaining that Nakayama had said, *"Not accept, not accept."* Of course, by that time those techniques were becoming well established and not long after that

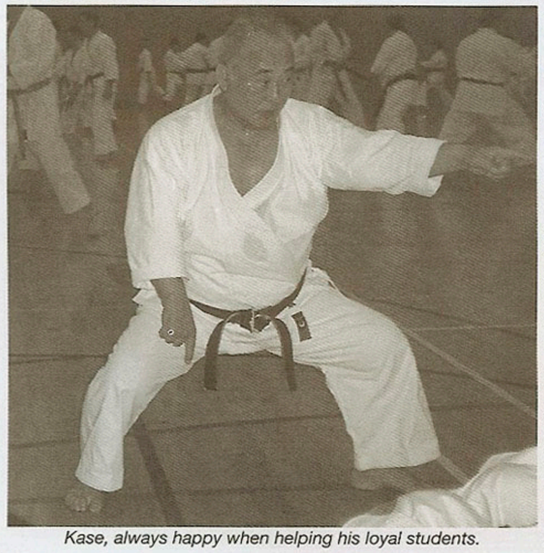


Taiji Kase (left) and Hidetaka Nishiyama demonstrate jiyu kumite at the first JKA All Japan Championships in 1957. Sensei Kase told Graham Noble... "The referee had to pull us apart!!"

Nakayama himself was including these techniques in his demonstrations.

In the 1950's the different Shotokan factions began to break away from each other, and Taiji Kase joined the JKA as one of its senior members. The way this happened... Kase had left university and was living in a suburb of Tokyo. Hidetaka Nishiyama lived close by and would often try and persuade Kase to come in with the JKA group. Kase was in two minds about it, as he had come up with the Yoshitaka Funakoshi, Hironishi group, and he told me in fact that many of Hironishi's students tried to persuade him to have a permanent dojo where they could establish an association to train in and teach karate. But that never happened, and so Kase did join the JKA, and that gave him the life in karate that he had wanted, (to be a professional instructor).

I remarked to Kase sensei that the JKA of that time, the Yotsuya dojo set-up, was predominantly run by Takushoku men; did that cause any difficulties for him, coming from Senshu? *"No,"* he said, and that was due mainly to Masatoshi Nakayama. *"Nakayama had a good heart and wanted everybody to work together so there wasn't a problem."* Actually, Taiji Kase was a very important member of the JKA. He was one of its directors, and was involved in formulating its first contest rules, and was a senior instructor, which meant that he was one of those responsible for teaching the very first generation of international



Kase, always happy when helping his loyal students.

instructors, names like; Hirokazu Kanazawa, Keinosuke Enoeda and Hiroshi Shirai. Those three JKA champions in fact, made a World tour in 1965 along with Kase sensei, giving demonstrations wherever they went. Terry O'Neill, ex-captain of the British Karate team saw one of those early demonstrations and he told me that Kase was clearly in charge, often telling one of the others to get up and work with him, and occasionally knocking them about a little. So they deferred to Kase as the senior? I asked Terry, *"Oh yes,"* he replied, *"Definitely!"*

The JKA began sending instructors abroad around about 1960, and Kase himself joined that exodus a few years later. He taught in South Africa for a while and then he settled with his wife and daughters in France, which had been his base for the past almost forty years.

It was Henry Plee, the founder of French karate, who brought him, and there was an element of chance to it all. Plee had organised his summer course at St. Raphael and had booked Hiroshi Shirai to teach. But Shirai couldn't make it and he arranged for someone else to come instead, and when Plee saw that it was Kase... well actually, he felt let down. Plee had never met Kase but he had seen photo's of him in 'Karate', a pocket book in the old series 'Marabout Flash', and had not formed a good opinion of his technique. But, he resigned himself to the change of teacher and then, as the course got underway, his view quickly began to change. Kase had a good rapport with the students, and in terms of karate, *"Un technique formidable."* At the end of the course it was agreed that Kase would come to teach at Henry Plee's famous dojo in the 5th Arrondissement of Paris... and Plee wrote an article for his

'Budo Magazine Europe' entitled 'Dangers Sur Les Interpretations Des Photo's De Karate', (Dangers in judging karate from photo's).

In fact, Taiji Kase was strict in teaching kihon and kata, but in kumite his technique was much freer – the important thing here was timing, movement, and applying power at the right moment. Tommy Morris, the well known Scottish karateka, who trained at Plee's dojo, told me that in kumite, Kase, *"Could really move."* Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be much footage of him from this time. I have a short clip of him defending against two attackers in a demonstration at a British Championships – he appears to throw them about easily – and a performance of Meikyo kata in an IAKF Championships a few years later. In contrast to the kata we see today, Kase's Meikyo isn't exaggerated or theatrical; the technique is economical but strong, and the movement is smooth, both across the mat and in the transition from one technique to another; the kata of a mature karateka, you might say.

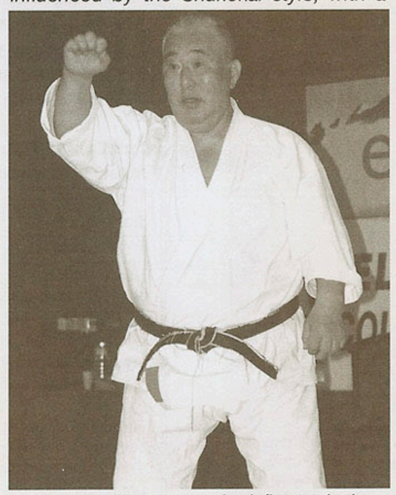
I've corresponded with Henry Plee for years, and when I was in Paris a couple of years ago we talked about the various Japanese Sensei he had brought over to teach at his dojo in the 1950's and 1960's – Hiroo Machizuki, Tetsuji Murakami, Tsutomu Ohshima, Mitsusuke Harada, Taiji Kase. Henry said that he would often test the strength of these instructors by sparring with them soon after they arrived. For instance he had hit Murakomi with a forefist punch, leaving a lump the size of a small egg on his forehead. Had he done kumite with Kase? *"Oh! Yes."* Henry had many years of judo practice behind him and so after a few moments he moved in and tried a judo throw. But Kase didn't budge – *"He was like a rock,"* – and then when Henry released his hold and tried to move back he was hit by a Kase side kick which doubled him up. *"Okay,"* he said to Kase, *"Now I know who is the strongest!"*

I asked Kase sensei about this and he chuckled. *"Yes, that had happened."* Plee had done judo, but then he was an experienced judoka too, and *"Japanese judo level very high."*

Plee told the French magazine 'Bushido': *"Kase Sensei is only a small man but one who has mastered the sense of combat. His exceptional worth lies in his practice of two forms of karate. One based on combat, and the other on practice of the fundamentals. Another advantage that he possesses is a simple strategy: he adapts to his opponent. He sees that opening, and helped by his sense of timing, he moves in. What underpins his strength is his experience of real combat. Here is an example, several times I witnessed the special*

Master Kase; a contented, warm hearted man.

training sessions between him, Shirai and Enoeda, during which they worked on fighting. If the reach and speed of the other two enabled them to extend him, then immediately Kase sensei would step up a gear. They would back off. These workouts, believe me, were something! They helped me understand what is combat in karate, and real combat, even if the rules are still respected. Moreover, it seems to me that his judo experience helps him. He has learned well the way bodyweight moves. He knows when the opponent can or cannot attack, that is to say, when the opponent is in the process of transferring his bodyweight then he cannot attack. That is the moment Kase sensei launches his famous deep attack. I think that judo is present in his method of fighting. I remember when he arrived in France, the French karateka were influenced by the Shukokai style, with a



Kase sensei was a massive influence in the development of Shotokan karate-do in Europe.

fighting posture where the weight was very much on the forward leg, and of course, it amused him to throw these unfortunates. But don't try to do the same with him. He can't be uprooted. Occasionally I would work out with the different experts who I brought to my dojo. Having some experience of judo, I sometimes surprised them and occasionally threw them. But I never succeeded in doing that with him. He's like concrete. For me, he is the best fighter I have met. He love's fighting and never refuses a match. Here is another story. I do not know if French karateka remember Baroux. (Note: Patrick Baroux was European karate champion in the 1960's). I was fond of him and I was very moved by his death, moreover, he was a great champion. He used to train with me. One day returning from the European Championships, where he had won the title, he said to me, "You know I think I can beat Kase sensei, I'd like to try." I told Kase sensei who said to me quite simply, "No problem, whenever he wants." The session took place in the dojo, near the entrance. He let Baroux do two or three techniques, then Kase stepped up the pace. He made a meal of him, as it were. Later Baroux told me, "I would never have believed it. What a man."

After his contract with Henry Plee finished, Kase set up on his own and gave courses throughout Europe. He was still with the JKA and remained with them until the political problems of the 1980's, when he left to set up his own group (WKSA). As Henry Plee said, Taiji Kase was never a politician or an intriguer. He just wanted to do karate, and the break allowed him to do that in the way he wanted.

Kase had not had a permanent dojo for years, preferring to travel around Europe (or wherever) giving courses, mainly to black-belts. Even at seventy years old he was still doing that most weekends until he suffered a heart attack in 1999. Of course, that was a bad setback, but then after nine months or so, he gave a comeback course in Paris in February 2000 which was attended by 200 black-belts. A couple of months later came the course in Hasselt, where I met him again.

I first saw Kase sensei teaching in London in 1981 on a course for the KUGB. He was going through kata and it was interesting to see the way he took the form apart and showed such things as how to best position the body in relation to the opponent. In Hasselt the class went through some pre-arranged kumite techniques and attacking combinations, but mainly Kase concentrated on fundamentals – stance, breathing, defence and blocking techniques. He started his first lesson with practice of the opening movement of Sochin kata, working on *kime* and rooting

yourself to the ground, and he explained that in such a position you should feel, *"As if you weigh two hundred kilograms."* The class then went through a sequence of open handed *(shuto)* movements, first done slowly with coordinated breathing – this resembles Goju practice – and then quickly, with sharp *kime.* When he worked on blocking techniques, Kase had the class first practice the blocks with a full-range movement and maximum power, but then the movement had to be reduced, firstly to a half-range movement, and then to just a few inches – while still retaining the power. In combat you wouldn't have time to do a full range blocking technique, but even with short-range blocks you should be able to hurt the opponent's attacking limb, or knock the opponent away with the force of the block. Kase told the students that this was a *"Speed plus power karate,"* and he also explained that in kumite you should be able to, *"Go from zero to one hundred percent in an instant."*

Kase stressed to his followers that theirs was, *"A Budo Karate,"* and when I talked to him later I was impressed at how he could talk with authority on the wide range of Japanese budo. He spoke about kendo; about judo and about such famous judo-men as Kyuzo Mifune and Masahiko Kimura, both of whom he had known personally; about Morihei Uyeshiba and Aikido, (which he summarised as; *"Daito-ryu plus Shintoism."*); about such figures as Yukiyoshi Sagawa, the ninety-odd year old expert in Daito-ryu who died a few years back and who some thought was better than Uyeshiba. (*"Some said second to Takeda,"* Kase mentioned).

When his senior student, Dirk Heene, mentioned a friend who was trained in Hakko-ryu Ju-jutsu, Kase was able to explain the origins of Hakko-ryu, of course, he was fully aware of the other styles of Japanese karate and knew many of the leading figures in the Japanese karate world; Mas Oyama, for example, who he had known way back in the post war years when they had briefly trained together in judo.

While teaching, Kase sensei was affable and patient. Understandably, he didn't exert himself too much, but when he did show a couple of techniques he was surprisingly sharp, especially for a 71 year old recovering from a heart attack. The classes were for black-belts only, with many of the participants having over 20 or 30 years karate experience behind them. Some had switched from other organisations, often after their competitive careers had ended and they became aware of a lack of depth or direction in their training. With Kase, some of them told me, they had found a fresh way forward.

I don't practice Shotokan karate, and I can't make any judgements on the various organisations which teach it, but the Kase group seemed very loyal and Taiji Kase's influence benign. After all the training and gradings and a long and busy day for Kase sensei, there was a meal, and this is where I was able to talk to him for a couple of hours and ask all my questions. He was straight forward and amiable, jovial even.

When the meal was finished Dirk Heene drove me, and Kase sensei and his wife, back to our hotels. Shortly before we reached my hotel Kase sensei asked me about the British karateka he had known from the mid 1960's through to the 1980's, Andy Sherry, Terry O'Neill, Bob Poynton, Frank Brennan. *"Are they still training?"* He asked. Yes, I replied, I thought they were. *"That's good,"* he said. He said they were separated now in different Shotokan associations, but they were still all one Shotokan family, and everybody should keep their karate strong. We had arrived at my hotel and I can remember Kase sensei's final words as I got out of the car and said my goodbyes. *"Remember," he said, "If you see them, tell them to keep training!"*

Rest in peace Sensei. Graham Noble.