

Returning to the Source

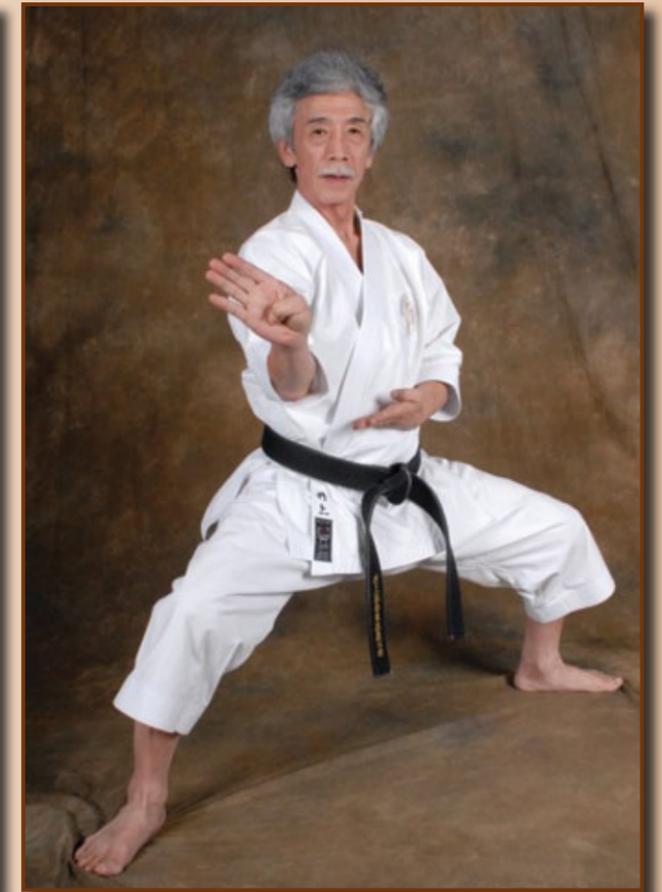
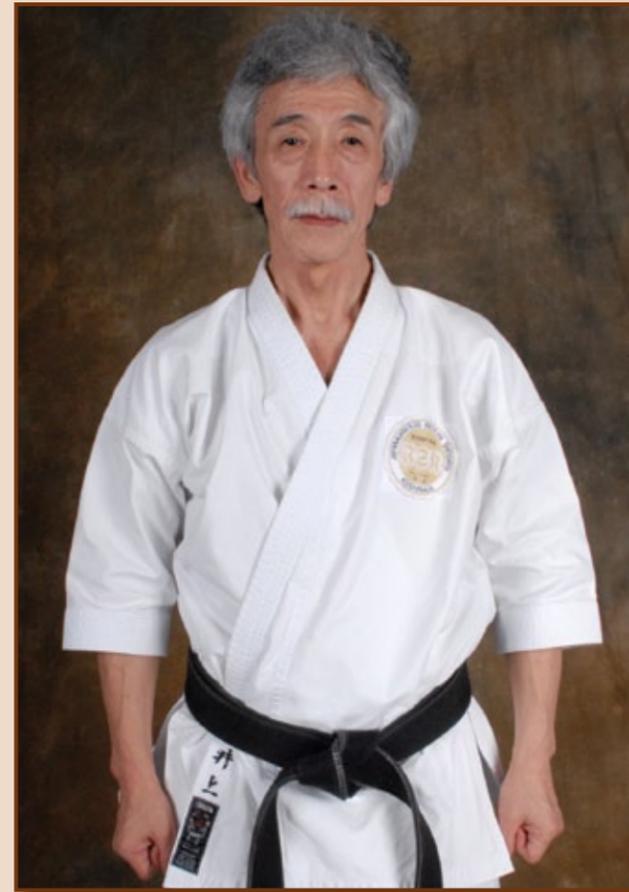
By Jose M. Fraguas

This quiet and reverent sensei is one of the most important Shito Ryu instructors in the world today. His position as Director of JKF "Inoue-ha Shito Ryu Keishi-kai" demands of him a constant travel schedule. With an exceptional level of skill second to none, Sensei Inoue displays all the major principles of the Shito Ryu-ha developed by the great Teruo Hayashi.

He has taught extensively in Japan and Europe and recently in the U.S., and trained privately some Kata world champions who looked for improving their technical performance in competition. Currently living in Japan, Yoshimi Inoue Sensei is always generous with his time and agreed to speak freely about the present state of karate-do. He has walked the path of Budo for many decades and is one of the few masters in the world who can transcend style and politics. If some men possess a philosophical approach to life and can suffer in agonizing pain and still find some great instruction from the lesson learned, Inoue Sensei is without doubt one of them. "The goal of karate should not only be self-defense," explains Inoue. "The art should provide a guide for living and this encompasses the striving for self-control through the discipline of dedicated practice."

In an age of meaningless superlatives, it is difficult to describe the debt of gratitude karate owes to Sensei Yoshimi Inoue.

YOSHIMI INOUE



Sensei, how does Hayashi-ha Shito Ryu differ from other karate styles?

Hayashi Teruo Sensei trained in different styles (including Kobudo) and finally decided what was the best approach to combat. He developed a series of principles that should be used in combat, and his main idea was not to face strength with pure strength. His approach was substantially different from other masters who emphasized more kata over kumite. Hayashi Sensei realized the limitation of some traditional techniques in actual combat and began to modify the tech-

nical structure of the techniques to better fit into a realistic fighting situation. He studied with great masters to learn new things and eventually to mold what it would be his creation: the Hayashi-ha style of Shito Ryu karate.

What can you tell us about the balance of the opposites [soft and hard]?

In the universe, all is based on the balance of opposites: day and night, cold and hot, etc. Karate is the same: relaxation and tension, hard and soft, body and mind ... it is all in there.

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No Karate style is “hard” or “soft” per se if you truly understand Karate. Some people say Goju is “soft,” Shotokan is “hard,” etc... that makes no sense. All Karate styles use the principle of balancing the “hard” and “soft”. It is just a matter of the level of understanding and knowledge of the person or karateka who is talking.

What is your opinion about trying to make [in Kata] the external technique perfect from a visual point of view?

With the possibility of including Karate in the Olympics, there has been an attempt to standardize not only the actual kata but also make the physical movements “prettier,” to say at least. The idea of a perfect “outside” visual form has become the goal. But there is a big problem here because Karate kata is not gymnastics. Kata is not about the external technique only but about the “philosophy” and “meaning” of the actual technique. If we change the outside form to make it look better but lose elements that “show” the real meaning of the technique, we are losing a great deal of understanding. If we don’t maintain the “function” of the technical movement, then it is no longer kata. It’s gymnastics. Once kata is only visual (as we see these days), it has no point. The visual of the kata must represent technically the “bunkai application” of the movement. We have to consider the “bunkai” when we do kata.

Can you give us an example?

For instance, in some kata when performed in competition, the karateka jumps higher than what the actual technique requires; they slow down the techniques breaking the actual rhythm of the form, etc. Why? To impress judges. Every movement can be used and it has to be performed as it works. That is a choice you have to make: perform kata for looks or for true Karate. Real Karate kata may not be more beautiful but certainly is way more meaningful.

What about Kihon training?

Kihon training, although it may be boring is extremely important. If the foundations of a house are weak, as the house gets older, problems will arise. This is the same for all Karate styles, no matter their origins. A lot of people spend many years training to realize later on, after 30 years of karate practice, that they don’t have a solid foundation and their technique is not “polished” at all – that they lack solid basic, clean Karate technique and they feel embarrassed because they have a high rank. You find this situation mainly among karateka who have devoted their training mainly to kumite. Don’t misunderstand my words; kumite is not easy but it is not what makes a good karateka. Kihon and kata are the foundation for Karate. Kumite is a “personalized” way of using Karate technique. But you should get that [technique] first. Unfortunately, you see high ranks who lack good Karate basics and they try to cover it up focusing on kumite. This shows what kind of “attitude” and “personality” these practitioners have.

How can these practitioners who focus mainly on kumite correct that?

Well, that is a little bit difficult. They will realize this problem later on in their Karate training; they may be 5th, 6th or 7th Dan already. They have a reputation at stake [some may be Asian, European, American or

world champions] and it is hard for them to acknowledge what they truly lack in their Karate. They never had the motivation, patience, and sense of detail to begin with and that is why their Karate is like it is. So, it is very hard for them to accept that fact and go back and do thousands of basics to catch up with the deficiencies of their past Karate training. Karate’s basic movements are incredibly difficult to perform correctly and it takes a certain attitude and personality to focus on details. Kata is kumite at its most complex form. All the techniques and strategies used in kumite and also in self-defense are contained in the fundamental kata. You just need to know “where” to look and “how” to uncode them. In traditional Karate, kata equals kumite but kumite doesn’t equal kata.

Some people may argue that good technique is alright...but Karate is about “if you can fight or not.” What do you have to say about that?

Very simple; that shows how little these people know Karate and their level of understanding. That mentality shows why they lack technique. And no, Karate is not about “if you can fight or not.” Mike Tyson at his best could probably have knocked down 90% or more of the karate practitioners around the world, but that doesn’t mean he knows Karate. Fighting is a part of Karate but it is not Karate. People use this excuse to justify they own inabilities. MMA champions can really fight, but it has nothing to do with Karate or true Martial Arts. So, if these people only are interested in fighting, why do they do Karate and not MMA?

What can you tell us about kumite?

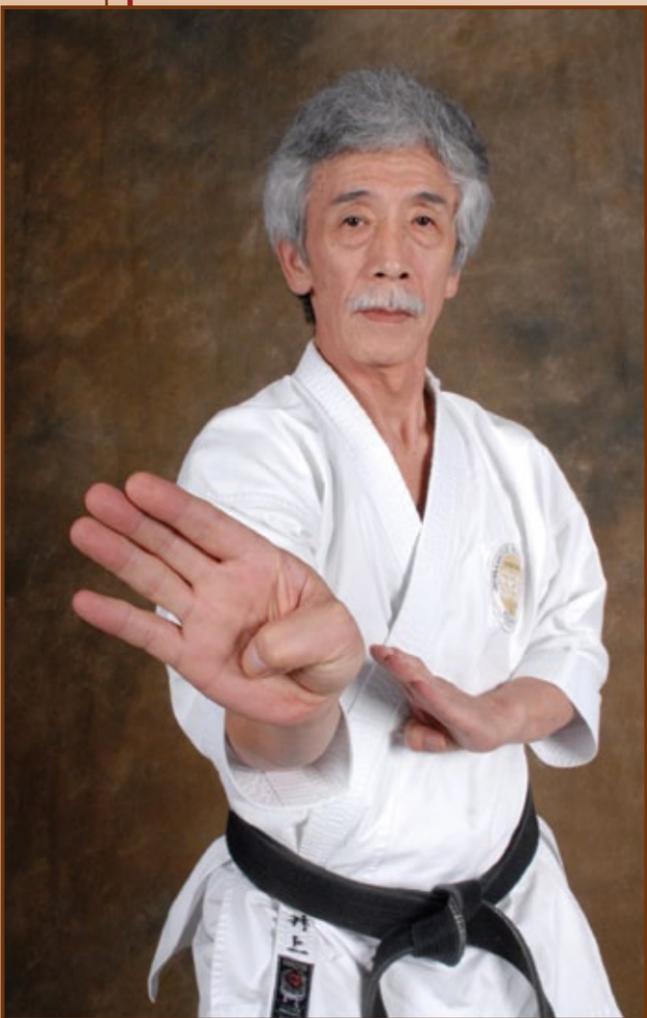
Kumite is based on two principles: distance and timing. Without these two, nothing else matters. Not matter how good your primary elements (techniques) are, they will be useless. But even with a lousy technique, if you have developed a decent amount of ability in using distance and timing, you can be very good in sparring. You won’t have a “good” Karate but you can win competitions, even world championships.

Would you elaborate, please?

If you don’t have the right distance, your attacks will fail and your defenses will be useless. The right technique without the right [delivery] distance is useless. Then, if you have the right distance but the technique (attack or defense) is not delivered at the right time, it will either fall short in execution or won’t be done to its fullest potential. The “when” to move is at least as important as the “how.” It is useless to have a powerful technique if your body movement can’t put you in exactly the right place and at the right time to use it effectively.

How we can develop the “right” distance?

Let me begin by saying that there is no one “right” distance. It is true that the “basic” kumite distance is the one that is slightly farther than the reach of the rear leg of the opponent. For instance, if you opponent is facing you, he won’t be able to reach you with a kick from the back leg without taking a preliminary step toward you. That is your basic “safety” or “critical” distance. During a kumite match, the distance alters constantly so the key to obtain the right distance is “correct footwork.” If you don’t have the right kind of footwork, you won’t be able to attain the right distance efficiently during the match.



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What do you mean by the right kind of footwork?

You need to know what kind of footwork you should use to defend, to attack, to intercept, to shorten the distance, to create distance when defending, or to create distance in order to simply create space, etc. Not all footwork patterns are the same and shouldn't be used randomly. Right footwork "gets" you there and gets you "out."

What about timing?

Timing is a very complex element because it requires a sense of rhythm – not only of the correct [intrinsic] rhythm of how the technique must be used and works but also of the rhythm of the fight. Then, you need to have an understanding of the opponent's rhythm and the tempo and cadence of his movements. Distance can be drilled and developed by Sanbon and Gohon kumite but timing only through actual jyu kumite.

And ...?

Then, it is when you can actually find a certain pattern in your opponent's rhythm and find out how to break it. You can create it, too, and force it into your opponent, but that is more complex. You can read the opponent's rhythm and then break it to hit efficiently.

You mentioned Sanbon and Gohon Kumite but some modern practitioners might argue that attacking someone with Oi Tsuki is not "realistic." What do you say?

Oi Tsuki as a technique in itself shows a lot about the practitioner's technical level. If you can actually hit somebody with a full Oi Tsuki, that tells a lot about us as karateka. But let me say that for prearranged kumite drills like Sanbon and Gohon Kumite, many people don't actually do it right. The right starting distance is when you place yourself with your fist actually touching the partner's face. Then, you take one leg back to Zenkutsu-dachi. From there, you initiate the Oi Tsuki. It is not a long distance but an actual "striking distance." Your intention is to "hit" the training partner, not just pose the punch. The fact that Oi Tsuki is more "visible" allows the trainee to coordinate his reaction and timing better. This is a training process; it is not a fighting drill, but a training drill to learn how to time the defense, the counterattack, and the tempo of the response. If you don't understand the actual use of the drill, then you may make nonsense statements because of lack of understanding on what you are talking about.

It is believed by many that the power comes from the hip but studies proved different. What can you tell us about this?

It is true that people say that the power in Karate "comes from the hip." Let's start using the words correctly. Power comes from the ground up. This is pure physics. A Karate punch [or kick] does not begin with the hip rotation. It passes cleanly through the hips into the torso, but it is not the hips that cause the power or the turn. The power that starts/originates or comes from the ground is transmitted to the upper body [and eventually to the punch or kick] by the correct use of the hip and then directed to the target via the arm or the leg. Our hips will impede the



progress of the leg force/thrust if we don't know how to open them loosely as pivot points. Why the legs? Because if you have no base, you have no power. Once again, pure physics. Your connection with the ground is the base for the power. Studies have been made in universities where professional boxers and karateka have been placed in the air hanging, with no base or contact to the ground whatsoever. The result? Their punching power was gone, decreased to the simple arm power. Why? Because they had no base. Those studies proved that the power originates from the ground up, not from the hips. It is impossible to deliver a powerful punch without a strong stance to launch it from, as you cannot use the rotation of your hips without being rooted to the ground. This is the right way to express it. What is important to the body mass and the way the hip is used.

Body mass?

Yes. The real driver behind power in any punch or kick is the amount of mass behind the movement and the direction of that mass. Check all the physics equations for force, momentum, and impulse. The way to maximize the amount of mass behind your attack is to get as much of your body moving in the direction of your attack as possible.

So what is the role of the hip?

As I said, the hip is the transmitter of the power that originates from the ground and from your "rooted" stance. Hip rotation is an accelerator that adds speed, and of course, increas-

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ing the speed of your body mass will increase the amount of power. But hip rotation is only one way of increasing the speed of your body mass and never is a substitute for proper application of your body mass to your techniques – which involves the whole body. You also need to know how to use the counter-rotation of the joint and when to use it properly. Hips are where the body's center of gravity is located; our center point of mass is at the hip level and we should learn how to use our hips to increase velocity of the body mass – not necessarily speed. The right use of the hips helps to keep posture, balance, and stability for every move, but at the same time, being used incorrectly may shut off the powerful thrust of the legs. Hip rotation – not hip shifting – is used for adding speed to the body mass and therefore develop maximum power in karate techniques. That is why we say that in karate we always try to punch with the hips and kick with the hips, etc.

Power is generated by the muscles around the hip. Two of the largest muscle groups in the body are the buttocks and the abdominal muscles; therefore, utilizing their strength, as well as rotating or shifting the hips, will add power to any techniques. As the hips turn, the torso and buttocks are added to the force of the technique. The hips are part of the bone/skeletal structure. A bone does not generate power muscles do. The real power comes from the buttock and the abdomen muscles. But a tight hip with no flexibility will decrease the potential power that you can use from your body mass and technique.

What about hip shifting? What is the difference from hip rotating?

These are two different things and should be used in different ways. Shifting is the movement of the entire body from one point to another in a straight line. Shifting includes both stepping and sliding the feet. And this is how the hips should be used because if you don't move, you simply can't hit your opponent. So shifting your hips is the real key.

Shifting the hips and not rotating the hips is the method which allows the karate-ka to develop the greatest amount of force. This is possible because we use the maximum amount of body mass by using the legs driving against the floor [origin of the power] to push forward against the hips.

The rotation is developed by the circular motion of the body mass. Control of rotation is centered on the use of the hips. The outside hip joint moves forward and backward, while the inside hip acts as a hinge. This can be practiced without technique, and then with techniques added. It is very important that the knees remain locked in place without moving. The pivot point in hip rotation changes depending upon the situation. It is always either one hip joint or the other, never the center of the body. Rotating on the center of the body would mean that one leg is retreating while the other is moving forward, eliminating the effect of the rotation. With the use of hip

rotation, it is possible to create very powerful techniques in a small space.

Another important aspect is to fully understand the hip rotation around a central axis and the application of the hip shifting in the same motion. This is a completely different concept and a more realistic way of using body torque to use the technique effectively. One aspect we should be aware of is that different styles tend to use or move the hips differently, although they are based on the same principles. Shotokan uses a very "wide" application of hanmi and shomen and Shito Ryu, Goju, and Wado use the same principle but with more emphasis on shifting.

Why you think people explain it incorrectly?

They are misinformed. Hip shifting and hip rotating are both important. Hip rotating by itself won't do anything to your punch unless you are punching a stationary object and your distance is already there. It is like rotating the tap of a bottle ... it doesn't move/shift forward to reach the target. You need to use hip shifting and body mass, and then you finalize the movement with full hip rotation that concludes at the moment of impact, not before. And this has to be synchronized and not divided in parts or different movement sections.

What do you mean by "divided in parts"?

You see many people snapping the hips back and forth. They really get good at "hitting" and snapping the hips but this is useless in real Karate. It is just showing off. When they punch, you see clearly when the hip movement (rotating) starts and when it ends. You can actually see the "separation" between the hips and the rest of the body movement. Well, this is wrong. The hip movement or rotating should be "hidden" along with the punch [or kick]. It should be "one" with the punch [or kick]. These people snap the hips and then punch. The hip movement should be coordinated with the rest of the body. It is like the separate parts of a whip ... when snapped in the air, you see just one single action, not several segments moving one after the other. Only one single perfectly coordinated movement, that is what a karate technique should be. So drop that hip snap. It may look "impressive" to a beginner and fellow karateka's, but not to someone who knows and understands Karate.

What would be your final advice for the readers?

In Karate you never stand still. You always have to try to move forward, to get better and improve what you are doing. When you go to train every day, you have to go far beyond the idea of simply "training" and use your mind when you train. That is the only way to really progress. 🖐️

