

Japanese Karate: THE OLD MASTERS

Proffessor YASUHIRO KONISHI

Story: MOHAMED KHAMIS

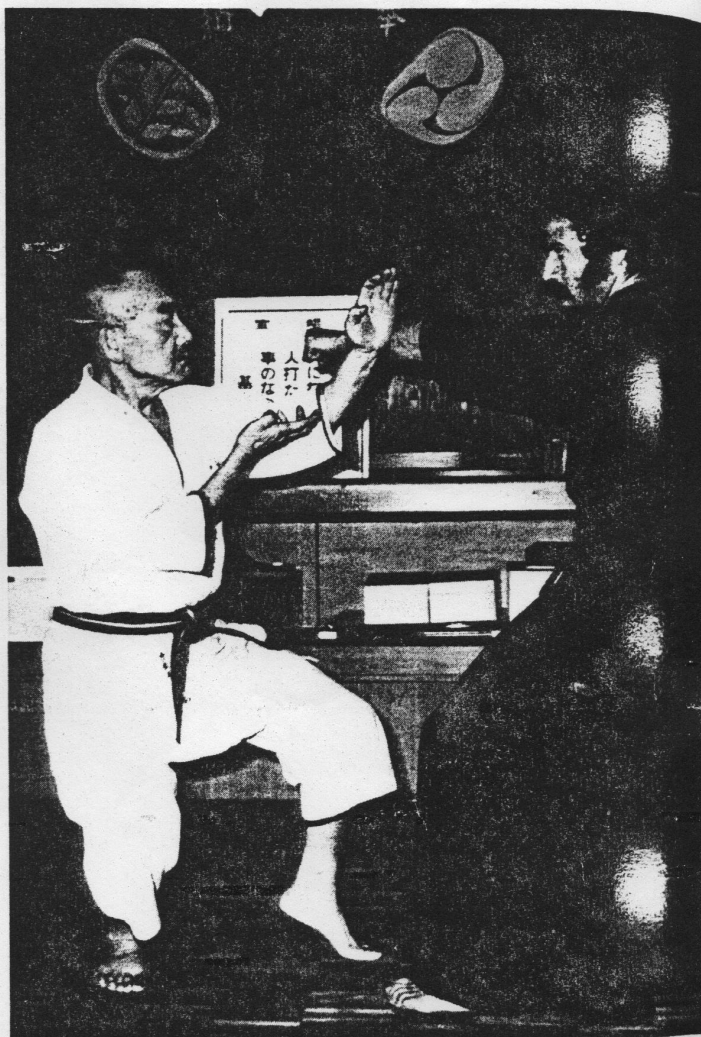
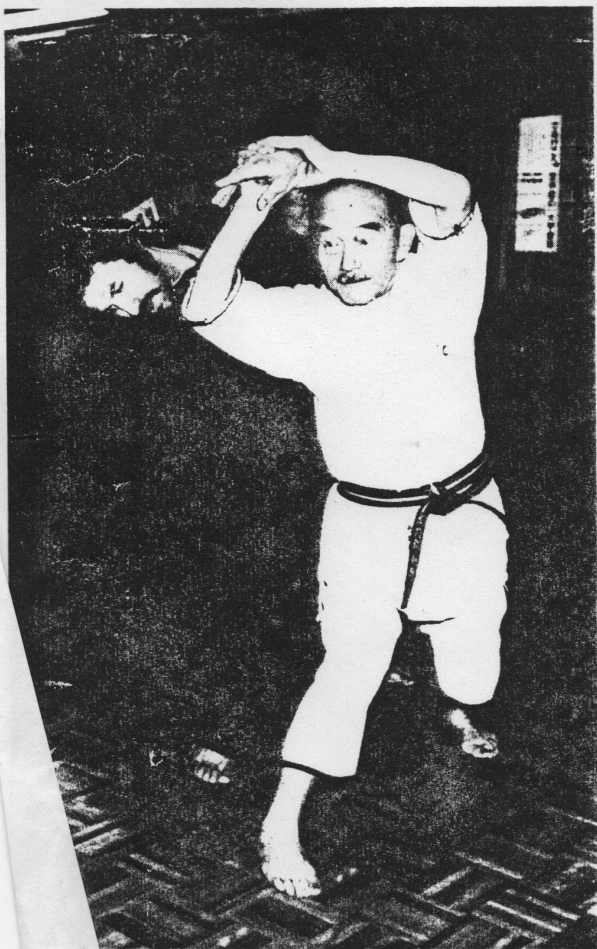
Interviewer: LIAM KEELEY

All Photos: ARTHUR TANSLEY

Yasuhiro Konishi is one of the great venerable master of Japanese karate. As one of **Master Funakoshi's** senior disciples in Japan, he has played a prominent and very influential role in the development of modern Japanese karate. **Konishi** had two of the finest teachers of his day — he trained under both **Gichin Funakoshi** and **Choki Motobu**. He founded his own school, the **Shindo Shizen Ryu** in 1934.

The following excerpt is from **Donn Draegers** excellent book *"Modern Bujutsu and Budo" Vol. III of 'The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan' (published by John Weatherhill)*. "Konishi, who is also the holder of a **Kendo Kyoshi** (teaching licence), brought various ideas from the realms of swordsmanship into his teachings, which he prefers to call karate-jutsu. In particular, emphasis on **Zanshin**, the ability of an exponent to gain dominance over an opponent through an alert state of mind and the maintenance of proper physical posture, characterizes Konishi's techniques. Thus the spiritual aspect dominates the physical.

A decidedly strong bias of anti-violence cloaks Konishi's Karate-jutsu in its stringent ethic... Training in the manner demanded by Konishi is made for the purpose of developing a wholesome human being, one who is both mentally and physically sound. Though



Above and left: Professor Konishi and his student, Mohamed Khanis

dedication to training carried out over a protracted period of time, *shin* (mind), *gi* (technique) and *tai* (body) are united in the proper proportions. When this is accomplished the trainee becomes aware of his moral obligation to be useful to society.

Kata or pre-arranged formal exercise, is the basis for discipline in Konishi's Karate-jutsu; it is therefore the starting point of all training. Though the sufficient use of kata a trainee gains control over his mind and body and thus comes to understand that Karate-jitsu technique is to be applied only for the purpose of controlling undesirable personal traits in oneself and in others. Karate-jutsu must never be used to foster a malicious spirit. But kata alone, notes Konishi, is not sufficient to produce the fullest development of the individual. Accordingly, trainees are required to participate in controlled bouts with fellow trainees; to this end competition becomes one facet of training."

This feature is separated into two parts - a report on Master Konishi's training by one of his students and an exclusive interview with the Master. →

Training in Konishi's Karate-Jutsu. by Mohamed Khamis

When I came to Japan five years ago to improve my karate technique, I tried many different *dojo* but was constantly disappointed at not being able to learn anything new. Then my *Kobudo* (weapons) Sensei introduced me to his teacher, **Professor Yasuhiro Konishi**, who is the oldest Karate and Kendo master alive today, being nearly 90 years old. He is the holder of 10th dan in Karate and 8th dan in Kendo. His dojo is one of the oldest in Tokyo.

Upon my first meeting with **Master Konishi**, I was most impressed by him and began training under him. He took good care of me by advising me of movements that no other teacher had ever shown me. He believes that the Karate-ka should not wait in one place, but rather more similar to Kendo movement and he teaches special footwork and hip movements, ah the correct breathing to go along with the various blocks and attacks. When teaching punching techniques, he stresses the importance of not advancing the shoulders forward, because this can cause a loss of balance and can also damage the shoulder muscle if the power is extended, as sometimes happens in boxing.

Master Konishi has special kata called '*Taisabaki*', which are combined with Aikido movements, developed under the supervision of **Ueshiba Sensei** himself. These appear soft and gentle as they are performed but are still effective when they are applied in action. Another thing that distinguishes Konishi Shindo Jinen Ryu Karate-Jutsu is what the master calls the "*re'ausa*" which means moving in circles whilst blocking, punching and kicking . . . I have found this very effective in real combat.

Master Konishi is a fairly small man, which is why he favours first thrusts rather than kicking, although the younger instructors under him do not neglect any of the techniques. I am always surprised that the master, being of such advanced age can move as fast as he does, with the speed of a young man. If he takes the training that day, all of the students, including me, are worn out before he is. He is really the most active teacher I have ever met, since I started my Karate life, seventeen years ago.

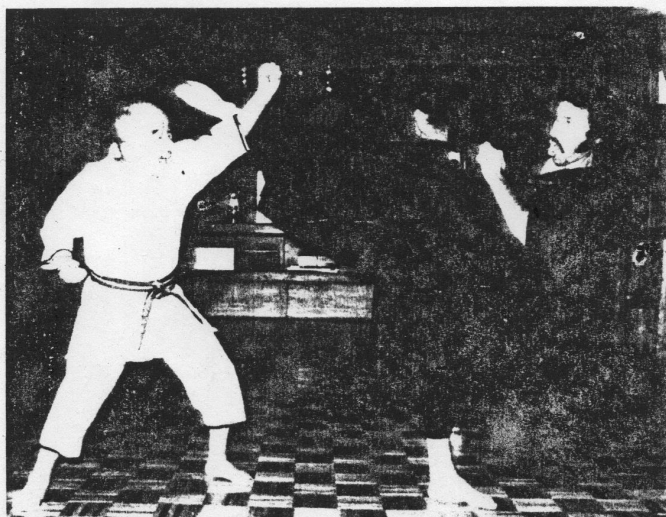
When **Master Konishi** teaches, you feel something very special from him and I believe him to be the foremost authority in Japan.

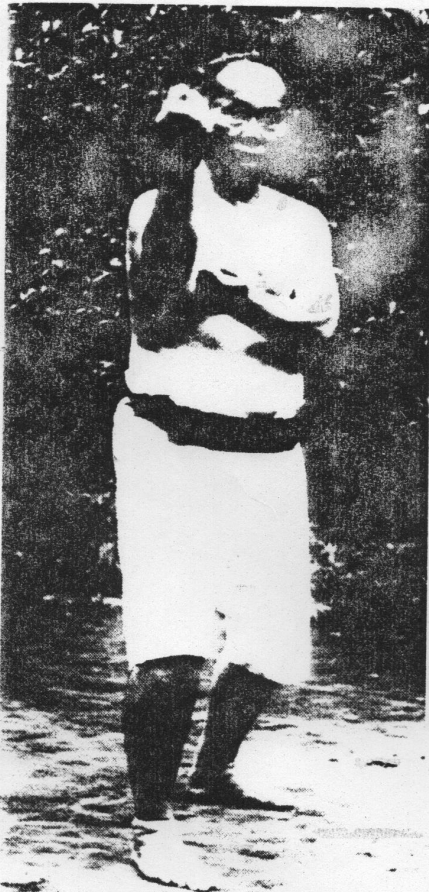
There are many branches of Konishi dojo (Ryobokai) around Japan and there are affiliated dojo in other parts of the world, including the U.S.A., Brazil, and France.

The author, is a Palestinian 4th dan Karateka, presently residing in Japan, where he is the editor of *The Arabic Sports Quarterly Magazine*. He has trained under Prof. Konishi for the past five years.



Above: Prof. Konishi's dojo in Tokyo. Below: Prof. Konishi blocks a kicking attack and moves in with a fast counter-attack.





A rare photo of Karate Master Choki Motobu - one of Konishi's teachers.



Another rare photo of the early masters of Japanese Karate. On the far left is Funakoshi Gichin, seated is Kenwa Mabuni. Konishi is second from the right. Far right is Mabuni's son, Kana.

Interview with Konishi Sensei

What does the name of your Karate-jutsu school, Shindo Ryu mean?

It means Shinto (as in the Japanese religion), Natural (Shizen) style.

What do you mean by natural?

Well, in some styles, women, children or older people may find it difficult, if not impossible, to do the Kata. I feel that Kata should be for everyone — I mean that the movements should be so natural that everyone can do them.

In what ways do you feel that some styles do unnatural Kata?

For example, I think the breathing Kata of Goju (e.g. *Sanchin*) aren't good for one's health, especially in the case of older people. I've noticed that *Sensei* (teachers) of Shuri-te and its branches seem to live longer than those of the Naha-te (*Shuri and Naha are two different locations on the island of Okinawa and form the two main differing sources of te (Okinawan Karate. They are also known as Shorin-ryu and Shorei-ryu. Editor).*

What do you think of women doing Karate?

This is fine, but they shouldn't try to be men — they shouldn't lose their femininity.

How about Okinawan Karate?

I think it's very good. The Okinawans really understand Karate. Many of my acquaintances, high ranking Kendo and Naginata teachers who were not

at all impressed with Japanese Karate, have been impressed with Okinawan Karate.

Incidentally I have also noticed a lack of understanding of true Karate during my travels abroad, possibly due to the lack of well qualified instructors. Even those instructors whose students had good form, didn't seem to have passed on more than a superficial understanding of Karate.

Getting back to natural movement, could you explain your ideas some more?

Certainly, for example, everyone's body is different. You must be flexible. Many teachers try to force all their students into the same mold. But there shouldn't be just one standard stance or technique. There are always variations. I want my students to move naturally, in accordance with their bodies.

What do you think is the best attitude for a Karate-ka to have?

The best way is just to keep on trying. Even if you lose a fight, don't let it bother you. Continue training and perhaps one day you'll be better than the person who beats you. Don't worry about petty victories and defeats — they are not important.

Do you have any advice on training?

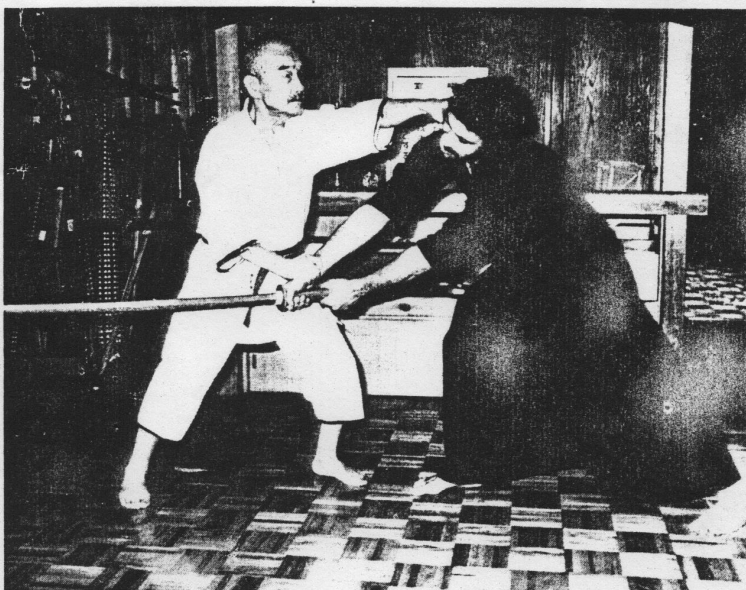
Train hard, but not too hard. Even when you feel Karate is too difficult for you, don't give up. As **Shinzo Koizumi** (a Japanese scholar) once said, "practice makes the impossible possible."

Could you tell us of your teachers?

Funakoshi Sensei trained me when I was young. I also trained under **Aragaki Sensei** after I entered



Prof. Konishi during the interview.



Defence against the bokken (wooden sword).

Keio University. That reminds me, I remember seeing **Aragaki Sensei** one day when he was a bit tipsy doing an Okinawan folk dance. I was fascinated by its similarity to Kata. After I graduated from Keio, I taught Karate at Keio Junior High School. I continued to call on **Funakoshi Sensei** and he would sometimes visit me to check my Kata.

Later I also trained under **Ueshiba Sensei**, the founder of Aikido. I can remember showing him some of the *Pinan (Heian)* Kata one day and he didn't like them at all. In fact, he advised me to give them up. I asked him to give me a year to come up with something different. After a great deal of thought, I devised Kata which I felt had better movement. After give or six months, I showed these to him, and he approved.

What about your relationship with Choki Motobu Sensei?

I was introduced to him by **Mr. Sotoyama**. **Motobu Sensei** couldn't speak standard Japanese very well. I would go with him to help and interpret when he went to teach at the Tetsudoshō (Railway Ministry). He taught me all he knew. I remember he was very poor then. A group of us helped him get by.

Who was in the group?

Oh, people interested in the Martial Arts. There was **Seiko Fujita** (the last officially recognised Ninja); "**Lion**" **Kamemitsu**, a sumo wrestler; "**Piston**" **Horiguchi**, a boxer and so on. **Motobu Sensei** made friends with **Mr. Horiguchi**, who had a very wealthy sponsor.

How about Kenwa Mabuni Sensei?

I can't remember how we met. He taught at my house in Tokyo for a time. Later he opened a dojo in Asahiku in Osaka. He was very poor, too. He usually stayed at my house when he came to Tokyo. One of **Fujita's** top students, **Iwata Manzo**, met **Mabuni** and left **Fujita** to study under him. He became one of the most senior of **Mabuni's** students.

(Here **Konishi Sensei** chuckled and said, "*You know, I've been around so long I've become an embarrassment. I know too much about everyone*").

I helped **Mabuni Sensei** enter the Butokai (*The Nippon Butoku Kai* - to give it its full title - was an organisation formed to identify and systematize the martial arts of Japan. The art of Karate was officially accepted by them, as a Japanese martial art in 1931. Editor). He didn't have enough money to pay. He was awarded the rank of Renshi.

Did you help introduce any other famous Karate-men to the Butokai?

Yes, many teachers from Okinawa came to the Butokai to take tests. I always helped them. I also helped **Hidenori Otsuka** (*The founder of the Wado-Ryu School. Editor*) enter the Butokai. He was given the rank of Tashi. (The same as **Funakoshi Sensei**). I also helped **Gogen Yamaguchi**. He was given the rank of Renshi. That was before he went to Manchuria. After the war, **Yamaguchi** suggested we teach together but I declined.

Luckily for him, **Yamaguchi** had an influential sponsor, **Maruyama** (head of the police force in Tokyo). He helped **Yamaguchi** start a dojo in Asakusa in Tokyo.

A few questions to finish up. Do you continue to teach?

No, I'm too old. I usually supervise the training. Unfortunately I often catch colds.

How many Kata are there in your style?

There are about 30 Kata of various origins.

What is your favourite Kata?

I like '*Niseishi*' (24). I know many Kata because I studied under many different masters.

Konishi Sensei . . . thank you very much.

This interview took place in December 1976. The interviewer was South African karateka, **Mr. Liam Keeley**, who is ranked 2nd dan in Goju-ryu.
