

# Professor HIDENORI OTSUKA

Story: TERRY O'NEILL     Interviewer: LIAM KEELEY

On the 29th of January, 1982, just 4 months short of his 90th birthday, one of the last great masters of Japanese karate passed away. **Hidenori Otsuka** — the man who founded the Wado-Ryu style of karate-do and who was decorated by the Emperor of Japan for his great services to the art — was truly a 'giant' of the martial arts world.

Accomplished people are often referred to as having had a 'lifetime of experience' in their particular field of endeavour . . . well, in Professor Otsuka's case, even this description seems slightly inadequate, his experience spanned 84 years of deep involvement with the martial arts!

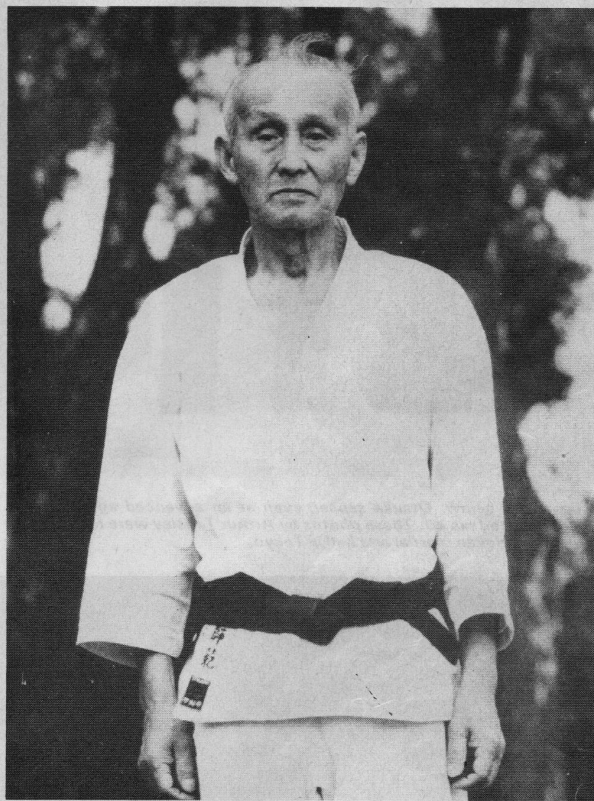
When Otsuka began his study of karate-jutsu, at the age of 30 under **Master Gichin Funakoshi**, he already held a teachers licence in the Shindo Yoshin Ryu (school) of jujutsu, having been studying that art since he was 5 years old. He ultimately emerged as one of Funakoshi's top disciples and then in 1939, drawing heavily upon his knowledge of jujutsu he merged the two arts and founded his own school — the Wado-Ryu. This amalgamation of the yielding principles of jujutsu — the non-opposing of strength — to the traditional Okinawan Karate techniques gave a 'softness' to the style that is unique in Japanese karate systems.

Notwithstanding the fact that Otsuka's Wado-Ryu is a tremendously fast (probably the fastest of all the styles) and efficient form of karate — both for self-protection and sport-fighting, the founder was never an advocate of the combative aspects. His advice to practitioners was "Have no regard for martial aspects, when training but rather adhere to the way of peace — harmony and tranquillity."

To **Professor Otsuka**, karate-do was primarily a spiritual discipline and the ultimate aim of all the martial arts was to help bring about a peaceful co-existence between people of all races and persuasions. To this end he always advocated hard, diligent and continuous training to mold and develop the true spirit of the martial arts. One of his teachings was that physical techniques and movements are the expression of one's mind, that the techniques are actually a manifestation of a person's spirit.

This great master and teacher once wrote a short poem in which he said . . . "I walk intently along the way of martial arts continuously until I come to the real end, until the extinction of my body." Well, all physical life must end and **Professor Otsuka's** did, earlier this year, but his spirit and his doctrines of peace through the medium of martial arts will live on through his successors — the hundreds of thousands of Wado-Ryu devotees all over the world.

**There follows an interview with Professor Otsuka which was recorded in Japan by Mr. Liam Keeley in 1976/77.**



Professor Hidenori Otsuka. 1893-1982.

## Interview with Otsuka Sensei

**Could you tell us something of your early life?**

I was born in Ibaraki-Ken on 1st June, (Meiji 25) (1893). My father was a doctor. I was a sickly child, and my mother worried about my health. I began the study of Jujutsu at the age of 5. I received a masters certificate in Shindo Yoshin Ryu Jujutsu at the age of 29, and became the 4th headmaster.

**What kind of techniques were contained in Shindo Yoshin Ryu?**

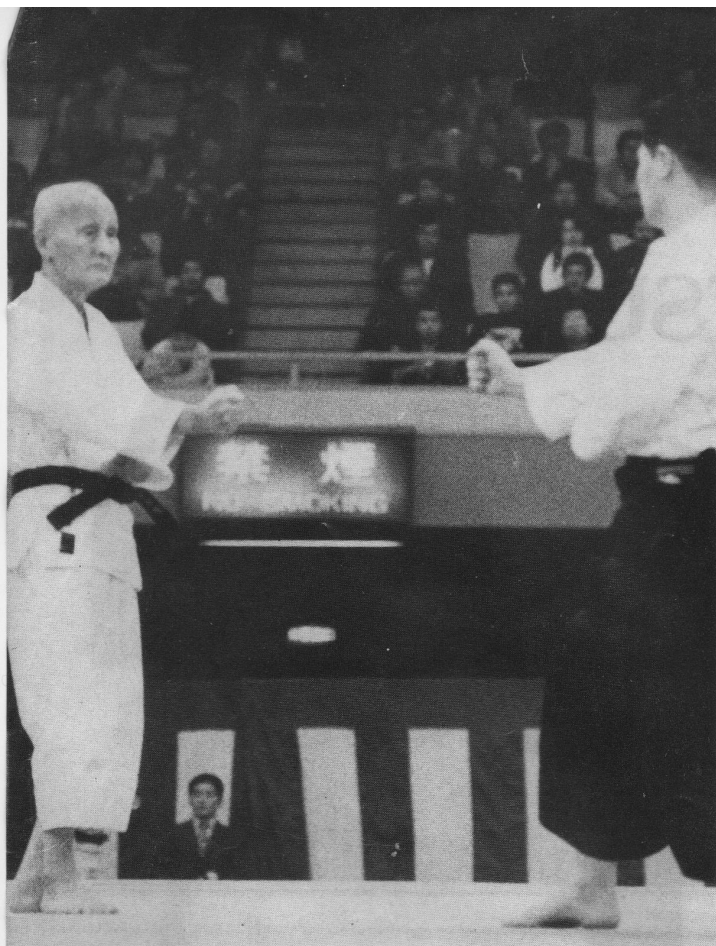
Pretty much the same as the other Jujutsu schools, I imagine. There were throws, atemi (attacking vital points) and of course strikes. My teacher, Nakayama Tatsusaburo Yukiyoishi liked Kempo techniques. He was the 3rd headmaster of the Ryu.

**Do you feel the Jujutsu influenced your Karate?**

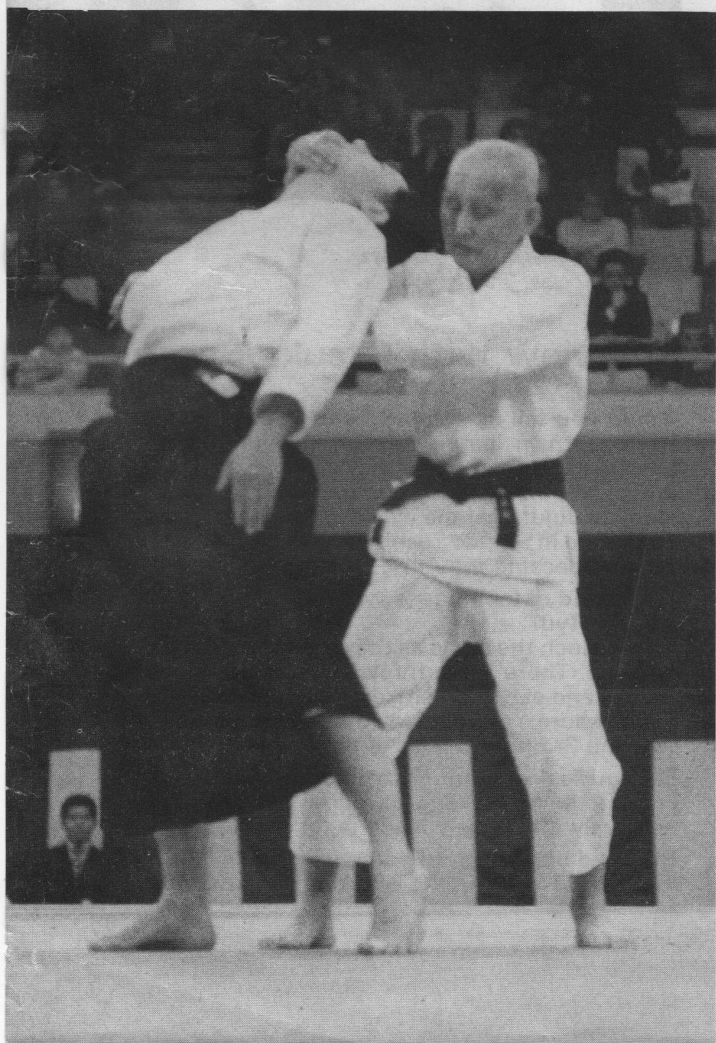
I don't think of Wado as purely Karate, although obviously it is largely made up of Karate.

**How did you come to name your style 'Wado'?**

In Showa 14 (1940) the Butokai held a Budo festival



*Above and below: Otsuka sensei, even at an advanced age regularly demonstrated his art. These photos by Arthur Tansley were taken at the famous Budokan martial arts hall in Tokyo.*



and each Ryu (School) had to register its name and the name of its founder. I first thought of calling my style 'Shinshu Wado Ryu', but I was advised by the 9th headmaster of Yagyu Ryu Kendo to drop 'Shinshu' and simply call it 'Wado Ryu'. (N.B. 'Shinshu' is a rather overly patriotic name for Japan, and sounds strange to the modern generation. Although the 'Wa' in Wado means Peace/Harmony, the word 'Wa' is often used to mean Japan or Japanese as opposed to China/Chinese). He felt that the name was repetitious otherwise.

#### **What do you think of the proliferation of styles?**

Basically there are only 2 Ryu in Karate – Shorei-ha and Shorinji-ha. For example Naha people trained in Shorei-ha. There was a lot of Chinese influence and many of the people were merchants with connections in China who wanted an effective form of self defence. There was little emphasis on *Do*.

Most of the teachers who came to Japan in the early days were exponents of Shuri-te, however. Most of them couldn't speak Japanese very well.

#### **When did you start to study Karate?**

I must have been about 30. I was working at a bank. At that time there was a lot of public interest in Okinawa. I seriously considered travelling to Okinawa to find out about Karate.

#### **How long did you study under Funakoshi Sensei?**

I think it must have been about 9 years. That would be from Taisho 11 to Showa 6 or 7 (1923-1932/3). I stopped working for the bank about Showa 2, and began working as a bone-setter. (N.B. Many Judo teachers were also bone-setters).

#### **Where did you teach?**

I taught at many universities. I first went to Waseda, but one of Funakoshi Sensei's sons took over. Then I went to Hitotsubashi University and then to many other universities – Todai, Meiji, Chuo, Rikkyo, Nichidai, etc. (N.B. Otsuka Sensei is very proud of his long relationship with Todai; this university is generally considered to be the foremost in Japan. Perhaps it could be compared to Oxford or Cambridge).

#### **A distinctive feature of Wado-Ryu is the 10 Kumite. When did you create them?**

I don't remember clearly, but it was quite early on. I was doing a lot of thinking about Kumite at the time. I actually made up more – 24 Kumite at first – and wrote a book which included them.

If students only perform Kata, it is hard for them to realise how deadly serious Karate is. Thus I felt the need to teach some form of sparring.

#### **What about the development of Kumite and Competition Fighting?**

In the early days there were no rules or judges. This was gradually corrected. Just as Judo emerged from Jujutsu and Kendo from Kenjutsu, I felt Karate should also change from a Jutsu form to a Do form, and include the element of sport. We had some sports Kumite for the first time in Showa 31 (1957).

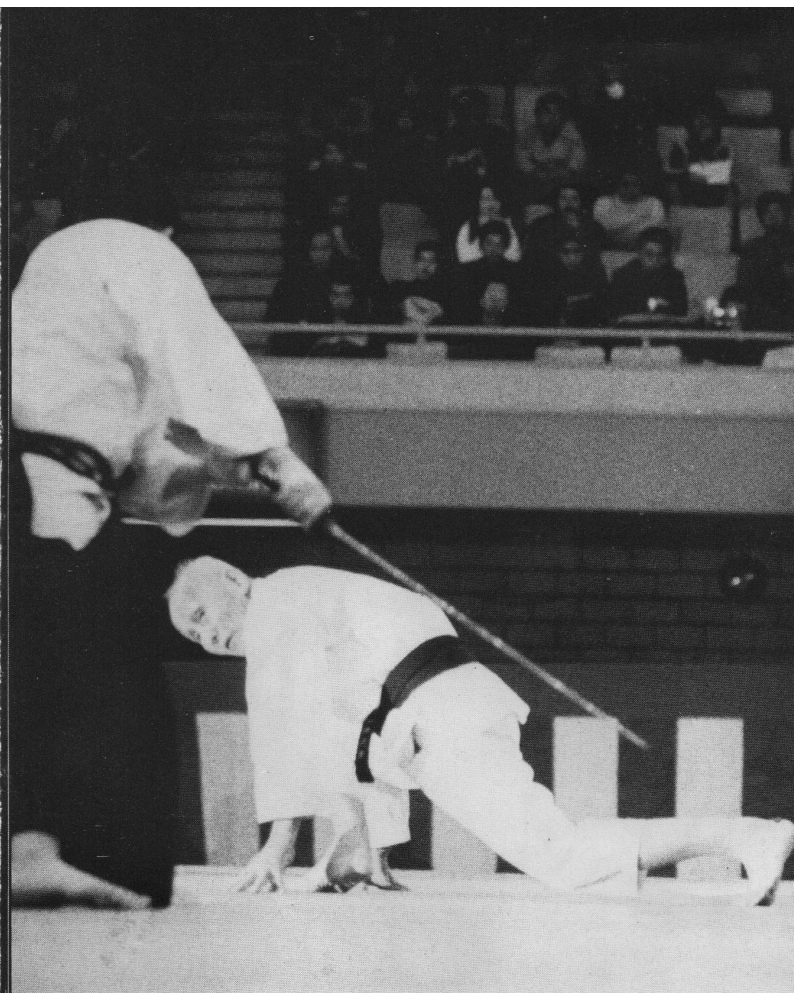
#### **What is the importance of Kumite?**

I make my students do Kumite to learn *Ma-ai* (distance between opponents) and *Kan* (perception). It is also important to develop the ability to respond instantly to any attack. For example, one should be able to move in any direction with ease. When attacked the natural reaction is often to go back. You should practise hard to overcome this.

#### **Do you have any specific advice on this?**

That's the kind of question that one of my students who now teaches in London often asks. And my answer is the same – Think for yourself.





*Left: Otsuka sensei drops low to escape a sword cut. Photo A. Tansley. Above. Otsuka sensei demonstrating a technique during a course in England, several years ago. Photo. T. Ward.*

**What do you feel is the purpose of studying Karate, or indeed any Budo?**

The true purpose of Budo is the search for truth. In Karate 3 elements are important – physical strength, spirit and heart. The end of *Do* (the way) cannot be achieved in a few years, rather it is a life-long search. Perhaps you could say the aim is to make us good human beings.

**What kind of attitude do you think a Karate-Ka should have?**

Well, one shouldn't train in order to learn to kill or injure other people. Your ability should only be used in the cause of Justice. Also, no matter how long you train, or how old you become, you should continue to learn from others, train yourself and make your own inventions. I have learnt things even from the children I've taught. Never be satisfied with what you

are – always try to progress.

**Are there any secrets to Karate?**

I've been trying to find those secrets all my life. Sometimes I've felt that I've had a glimpse – but then I'm in the dark again. Perhaps the secret lies in the search itself – that to reach for the unobtainable is the secret. Maybe that's a kind of enlightenment, but I still want to progress. I'm still struggling to the top of a high mountain.

**How about today's emphasis on competition?**

There are good points and bad points. But development of new ways is inevitable. For example, many schools of Karate have developed and spread. I think this is a good thing. The purpose of sport Karate is to allow it to appeal to young people. If Karate can help them develop their bodies and minds, then it is all worthwhile.

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