

## An Interview with Hiroyoshi Okazaki

The name Okazaki needs absolutely no introduction at all. It is a name that, it could be argued, goes synonymously with not only karate in America, but JKA karate full-stop. I am of course referring to the legendary and iconic Teruyuki Okazaki. In this edition however we have an interesting interview with a younger generation of the Okazaki family – nephew and proud carrier of the Okazaki name and legacy Hiroyoshi Okazaki. The son of Teruyoshi Okazaki, also a direct student of Master Gichin Funakoshi, it seems somewhat inevitable that Hiroyoshi would soon follow in the family's footsteps and become a karateka to contend with.

Today, within ISKF, Hiroyoshi is one of its most senior members, and as a 7th Dan, is helping to further propagate the ISKF and Okazaki way. This is an insightful and interesting interview with someone that will undoubtedly be a significant force in the future of American karate. I hope you all enjoy!!! – Shaun Banfield

Questions by THE SHOTOKAN WAY

## An Interview with Hiroyoshi Okazaki

(Shaun Banfield) Hello Sensei Okazaki. Thank you for being so willing to give us this interview. I am very looking forward to speaking with you and hearing your thoughts.

(Hiroyoshi Okazaki) Thank you for having me.

(SB) You are of course the nephew of Master Teruyuki Okazaki 10th Dan, so perhaps this may sound like an odd question, but could you please tell us a little about how you first got involved with karate?

(HO) I was introduced to karate when I was early teens. My father Teruyoshi Okazaki (older brother to Teruyuki Okazaki) is a serious karate practitioner who is also a direct student to Master Gichin Funakoshi. He practiced at the Waseda University back in the day. They both took their 3rd dan examinations under Master Funakoshi at the same time. When my family lived in Tokyo, my father took me to Waseda Univ. to train with him.

When I decided to study abroad in the US, my father and uncle agreed that I must practice karate in order for me to live independently in the US, so I joined the Japan Karate Association before I left Japan.

Right before I joined JKA I had a chance to see the demonstration at the JKA HQ. It was the beginning of the year opening ceremony in the late 70s. The demo was very impressive.

(SB) Do you remember who was involved within the demonstration?

(HO) Sensei Asai, Ueki, Tanaka, Isaka, Osaka, Yahara, Imura, Omura and other trainees at that time.

(SB) You mentioned your father Teruyoshi Okazaki. Can you please tell us a little about him, both as a father and as a karateka?

(HO) Basically it is one in the same. He was a strict father, and is very methodical and doesn't rush into things. For instance, he thinks things through and does a thorough research to make educated decisions. He likes things to be kept neat and everything in its place.

(SB) Did he ever tell you stories about his time at Waseda University?

(HO) He told me that karate back then is different from karate today. He said it was a rigorous training and everyone trained for perfection of character and to build their character not for competition karate, winning or losing. The training was based on basics and the kumite was always basic sparring such as 1 step to 5 steps. The kata training was repetition training - that was the main point. Outside of group training everyday he practiced on the makiwara. He said that the soul of karate training is the makiwara and that is also the fundamental and principle of karate training. My father also said that because the makiwara is stationary and doesn't move, if you cannot hit at a stationary target then you would not be able to hit a moving target. He believes the biggest difference between now and then is karate as Budo and karate as sport. Sport karate is following rules and it is the judges who decide who is the winner and who is the loser. Real Budo karate is based on real fighting situations or self-defense, not winning or losing. Basically it is training with the attitude that it is life or death. In the past, the training method was such that they trained with the mindset that they knew if necessary they could cause serious injury or even death. In Master Funakoshi's Textbook he never mentions tournament however he often mentions self-defense situations. Master Funakoshi prohibited tournaments or competitions between other styles such as Goju Ryu, Shito Ryu and Wado Ryu.

My father also stated that in normal practice time now basic training is how to make a point. Therefore the basic training lacks 'kime'. This is because in the basic training they only kick or punch in the air they do not practice against a sandbag or do makiwara training. Nowadays the people who train do not hit the sandbag or makiwara at all and as a result do not have real power.

(SB) And how about Sensei Funakoshi? Did he ever tell you about his experiences with him, could you share this with us?

(HO) Master Funakoshi came to visit Waseda University every Saturday. He wore traditional Japanese attire and then he would change into his gi. He would always observe training with a smile and had a look of satisfaction on his face. He was always in a good mood. However, he was reticent and reserved. He never had a chance to have a conversation with him because back then the Master was unapproachable.

My father said he did have the opportunity to take him to the noodle shop to eat. He always ate hot plain noodle soup even in the summertime. When he ate he took his time and ate 1 noodle at a time! And he would never sweat even in the summer. After he finished eating he just smile and said, "it was delicious". Just looking at his eyes my father said he could feel that Master Funakoshi was the epitome of a martial artist. His eyes were focused and expressionless.

(SB) We have touched on your Uncle Teruyuki Okazaki. How has he influenced your karate?

(HO) I have seen his karate on videos, and some times you can witness him training with students during class (every Wed. Night at the HQ dojo). In old films you can see that his techniques are just amazing. When you actually see, hear, and feel his techniques, it's incredible. His movement is like a machine while at the same time he moves with fluidity –his movements are natural and smooth. It is both impressive and can be scary as well.

(SB) Can you please tell us about his character, both inside and outside of the dojo?

(HO) Organization wise, he is extremely organized. He genuinely cares about each individual member. The honbu dojo is kept very traditional while at the same time he can be very innovative to new ideas and technology. Outside of the dojo he is a friendly person and approachable. His oldest friend and student, Robert Sandler always best describes my uncle saying that "he can be tough as steel and soft as cotton". I think that is a very good description of him.

(SB) Do you have any fond/important stories of your experiences with Master Okazaki that you could share with us, as readers would love it!

(HO) I remember when I first arrived in the United States and he picked me up at the airport he asked me what I thought about the US. I said everything is big. I was skinny teenager, so he said you have to eat a lot and forced me to eat all the time. He took me shopping for clothes and the clothes here are made much larger because Westerners have longer arms and legs than Japanese. When my uncle saw this he said, "You have to kick a lot and punch a lot to make your arms and legs grow!"

(SB) In what year did you enroll in the ISKF Instructor Program?

(HO) After I became 2nd dan, so December 1982.

(SB) What were your reasons for enrolling on the Instructor Program?

(HO) It was a natural progression for my training.

(SB) And do you think becoming an instructor is an important natural progression for martial artists? What are the benefits you take from teaching?

(HO) It is basically digging deeper down into Budo – the martial arts world. When I was competing, I was training more for competition. Nothing else. I had a clear goal in front of me. Becoming an instructor gave me the opportunity to improve myself physically and mentally. It forced me to go back to the basic so that I can teach correct basic technique (strong foundation) for beginners. Many of the karate practitioners who somehow reached advanced level with serious weakness often don't have good basic technique, therefore they create bad habit. That actually slows their skill development. The benefit for me to fix their problems is huge. I have to work harder to explain, show and remind them the proper basic training is important for their progression.

I believe that when a student practices hard for a long time and if they have a good instructor their techniques will improve and help them to step up to the next level physically, mentally and spiritually. That kind of success helps one to see the real meaning of Budo. I believe in Budo and if I make others believe in it that is an accomplishment.

(SB) And who were the main instructors on the program at the time?

(HO) Shihan Teruyuki Okazaki , Takayuki Mikami, Yutaka Yaguchi, Shojiro Koyama and Shigeru Takashina at the Master camp every year.

(SB) Can you please tell us a little about what the training consisted of whilst on the program? Could you describe what day to day life was like as a trainee instructor?

(HO) The Instructor Trainee Program at ISKF Headquarters is held once a month.

I would say 90 percent of trainees have their own jobs. They are either part time instructors who already have or rent a dojo, so they cannot attend instructor trainee classes every day at ISKF HQ. Dojo.

However, as a full time trainee like myself, I had an opportunity to train in the morning, afternoon and in the evening. As a trainee I was responsible to assist teaching in the evening class and also assist Okazaki shihan at the Universities. In addition I had various tasks at headquarters such as office duties as well as cleaning and washing all the instructors' gis, I did whatever needed to be done and I was also a full-time student at the university at the same time.

(SB) How would you describe your experiences on the program? What was the hardest and most rewarding parts would you say?

(HO) The hardest was the examination to become instructor. The experiences in the program were just training and learn. Okazaki shihan emphasize not only techniques, but more on philosophy on Budo, so it was very interesting. The examination on the other hand was the most nerve-racking experience. I had to stand in front of Masters Okazaki, Mikami, Yaguchi, Takashina and Koyama and they asked me a question. I answered which I believed to be a good answer. But their facial expressions were that of doubt and confusion. I cannot even blame it on language misinterpretation because they asked me in Japanese and I answered in Japanese. The most rewarding part was passing and then becoming a member of the ISKF Technical Committee.

(SB) You have enjoyed a very successful competitive career am I correct? How important is competition to you?

(HO) I wouldn't say enjoy, I'd say it was a great experience. Tournaments and examinations are a part of training. It is a totally different experience to put you into doing karate in a different situation. It is difficult because you have to control yourself physically, mentally and spiritually ready. Physically your body has to react – mentally you have to concentrate and control that situation. Competition was important to me because it was the only time I got feedback from the masters. They watched me compete and afterward would give me feedback. It was not good but constructive feedback. It was always something I should do to get better. Competing also gave me the opportunity to study myself on video, which is important to improving myself.

(SB) Can you tell us a little perhaps about your most memorable fights?

(HO) My most memorable fight was when I got kicked in the eye in a national tournament. My retina became detached and I had to have surgery, which ended my competition career.

(SB) And who would you describe as your most challenging opponent?

(HO) All opponents are challenging.

(SB) At the ISKF Championships, all competitors conduct the kneeling bow prior to beginning. What is the purpose of this do you think?

(HO) It is Master Okazaki's way. He always says that it doesn't matter whether you are in a tournament or at camp. Wherever you train is the dojo. We always emphasize traditional training and everything is dojo training. Also in tournaments, it calms competitors down and reminds them what the important principles of our karate are. Master Okazaki also always gives a 10-minute basic training before the tournament and this actually helps everyone to relax.

(SB) What are the most important aspects of ISKF karate do you think?

(HO) To follow Master Funakoshi's principles in the Dojo Kun and Niju Kun.

(SB) People often speak about your dynamic and very relaxed movement. How have you achieved this relaxed style?

(HO) I don't know about very relaxed. I try to make my movements as dynamic as possible within my range. I am still struggling to make myself relaxed. For example, when I perform kata, if I understand the bunkai of the technique I perform better. Bunkai is a personal interpretation and I need to find the right one for myself.

(SB) What is your favourite kata and why?

(HO) Kata training is also a natural progression and you must always challenge yourself. My favourite katas have changed from time to time, for instance, it was Empi, then Kanku Sho and then Unsu. When I was competing I would always challenge myself to work harder at my katas and gradually work on harder katas. However, I now know that all the katas are difficult and if you truly challenge yourself you will always learn from all of them. At this time my favourite kata is Bassai Sho because it has interesting bunkai and requires coordination, body control. It is difficult for me and I must continue to challenge myself.

(SB) Is kata closer linked to kihon or kumite do you think, and how should one practice kata to ensure they make the most of the experience?

(HO) You must understand the bunkai in order to understand the kata and you must practice it and try it with a partner – as in skin ship and that is basically kumite. To better understand the principle of karate you must practice the kihon – basics. You often have to go back and refresh your memory mentally and physically you must practice the basics so they are all linked together. You have to practice all of them in order to progress long-term. People who just do competitive martial arts without practicing basics reach a certain level of competence and never progress beyond that, they stay the same.

(SB) Central to ISKF karate is the emphasis placed on Dojo Kun and Sensei Funakoshi's 20 Principles. How important are these to you?

(HO) If you read them you know they are very important. Those guiding principles are hard to follow. In the dojo you are in a perfect environment to follow them but once you step outside of the dojo there are so many distractions you forget about dojo kun. Outside of the dojo you can express your feelings and opinions and you may even argue with people. In the dojo you do not talk back to your instructor or senior. You have to be humble, open-minded and to have a clear mind so you can observe and learn. When you study and know the Dojo Kun and Niju Kun they help you to understand each environment and behave accordingly. Non karate-ka do not have that.

(SB) Very few associations place as much emphasis on the perfection of character, favouring emphasis on the technical and physical aspects. What are your feelings about this?

(HO) Perfection of character does not come without hard training. Yaguchi Shihan said in order to achieve perfection of character it takes a lifetime and I agree with that. Perfection of character comes from hard training mentally and physically meaning you have to train your whole life.

(SB) Which carries more weight do you think, emphasis on self-defence or emphasis on improving your personality and character?

(HO) Strong technique is important in self-defence because you never know who the opponent will be. As you get older you cannot rely on muscle strength so you rely on your technique. This is important because if you study your technique you gain strength in character and also improve your skills. I believe that personality and technique is inseparable. By practicing your technique you basically learn about yourself. The way you train is crucial to the aspects of developing your character.

(SB) Can you please define your interpretation of Budo karate, and how it differs from karate that does not follow the Budo path?

(HO) All of the masters I have met through the years are special people. They are seekers of the truth and make a contribution to society to make the world a better place. That is their intention and their goal. On the other hand, there are fake martial artists who are concerned about fighting and winning and making lots of money and think of martial arts as a business. They basically promise your achievement without long hard work. Many Westerners believe that physical practice is the only thing that will help their progression in their art. There is not much emphasis on sincerity, politeness, humility, loyalty, honor and courage. If they understand these qualities it would help people to succeed in Budo and in life.

(SB) Are there any points that you would like to discuss that I have neglected to ask you about?

(HO) Not at this time.

(SB) Can we take this opportunity to say thank you for this opportunity to give you our questions, and may we wish you every success for the future!

(HO) Thank you.