

# SHOJI NISHIMURA

## *Excellence in Action*

By Jose M. Fraguas



**O**ne of the first things that strikes about Sensei Nishimura is his confidence. He knows what he can do and he is sure within himself. When you look at his roots and experience in the art of Wado Ryu Karate, he just seems to have completely defined an important era in the U.S. for the style developed by the great Hironori Ohtsuka. His approach to karate training is reminiscent of the attitude of those who reached greatness: "In Karate you have to train hard and relentlessly, chase the perfection in technique, knowing full well that it doesn't exist and you will not reach it because nothing is perfect. But you have to chase it because in the process you will reach excellence," he says. "You can't settle yourself with being just good."

### *How many styles have you trained in and who were your teachers?*

I have been practicing karate since I was 14 years old. Also, I have been practicing Ryukyu kobudo, sai, nunchaku, and bo. In addition, I train in iaido, aiki-jujitsu. My first experience with Martial Arts was in the Saga prefecture of Karatsu, Japan. I was first introduced to karate when my friend invited me to go see the new dojo that was built in the area. This dojo practiced full contact sparring, breaking stones, bricks, and makiwara punching. Watching the punches and kicks of the black belts from the main branch dojo lit up my eyes. I started attending three times a week and built a sandbag filled with sand and stones to practice my punches and kicks.

My first experience with karate was full-contact style karate. It did not really have a name to it, but they practiced sparring with other clubs and even kick-boxers. A couple of years later, we started wearing protection similar to that worn by Nippon Kempo. However, it made almost no difference; everything still hurt really bad. I especially remember this one way of training where you held your kamae stance while others hit you from all directions. The purpose of this exercise, if you can call it that, was to improve your balance and strengthen the body. For kyu tests, we had to break stones. When I started attending Risshyo University, I naturally joined the karate club. This university had many styles of karate, including Goju-ryu, Shito-ryu, and Wado-ryu. I joined the Wado-ryu club because it had the most members. All we did for the entire first year was practice kihon to remove any bad habits. Then, we slowly added kumite and shadow-training. There was no kata practice until maybe two weeks before the kyu or dan testing. At the time, kata was not a big priority.





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*Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in karate?*

Suzuki Susumu was the head coach of the karate club at the university. He was incredibly strict and always made us do kihon for one hour and then kumite afterwards. If kiais were weak, you were slapped. Sensei Suzuki had very good kicks, usually targeting his opponents' shins. He also demonstrated many open-handed techniques targeting the face. Sensei Suzuki subsequently moved to Brazil where he continued to teach karate.

After Sensei Suzuki's departure, Sensei Setamatsu from the Honbu dojo came to teach. This instructor taught us concepts of parry, deflection, and efficient body movement. He was especially skilled in kumite, generally keeping very little distance from his opponent as if to lock the opponent from using their techniques. During college, it seemed all we did was practice, and quantity over quality was our motto. Suzuki Sensei always told us to get involved in street

fight to strengthen ourselves mentally and physically. I tried it once but I was too excited and my punches and kicks were inaccurate and I remember tripping and falling.

When I first started karate, our sensei would take us to other dojos to learn other styles' techniques and skills – kumite, especially, with many different fighting styles. I was able to experience an array of different skills. It was very inspiring and motivating. I remember specifically the Ryu-kyu style; they hit everywhere: the shins, knees, ribs, with their toes. Today, we rarely make contact with other dojos, and we would not even think to practice with Kung Fu or Tae Kwon Do people. Dojos today are full of kids and what they teach is mostly the same: how to score points in kumite and making a kata look good in tournaments. There doesn't seem to be any diversity anymore.

*How has your personal expression karate developed over the years, and what is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?*

When I first started karate, the emphasis was on brute strength and being able to win fights. But nowadays, as people – including myself – get older, such ways of training are detrimental to the body. What I utilize and teach now is based on *rigitankyu*. Rigitankyu is a doctrine whereby one pursues the ultimate goal in life while searching for skills of effortless movement and freedom of body motion, which abide by Natural Law. After long years of training, researching and experimenting in Martial Arts, I feel that there is no one ultimate technique. There is no guarantee that a kumite champion will remain the champion year after year. Techniques are infinite, like the stars in the universe. *Bugi* (Martial Arts techniques) has no one perfect technique that can overcome any other. Techniques are not immune to change and must be able to adapt according to each situation. A block can defend against a certain punch but may be ineffective when the punch is thrown from a different angle. One should not limit him/herself to learning just a particular punch or block but having your body move reflexively to each situation, and is what I think to be the true meaning and essence of Wado-ryu. Martial Arts is not all about fighting; its foundation is *shizen no ugoki*, the natural movement of the body. Rather than opposing or resisting an





opponent's attack, one should evade, parry, or ride the attack. It is vital that you do not go against the force.

***What are the most important points in your teaching methods?***

Knowing how to use your body effectively is what I believe to be the most important trait one can acquire. Without relying solely on strength, you must use your body as a whole, not in parts. With that, the mind must be able to focus at a moment's notice. Techniques are useless unless you can execute them when they are necessary. These things and more will be attained gradually through practice and training. The ability to see what the opponent will do before he/she actually makes a move, and being able to move accordingly, is the ultimate goal. Also, congregating with other styles will expand your own knowledge of the art. In addition to learning various training styles, new techniques will start to develop. The specific emphasis points from each style will become useful information. Absorbing these different, yet very similar, techniques will help develop and advance your comprehension of the art.

***Karate nowadays often is referred to as a sport; would you agree with this definition or is a Martial Art?***

Karate has evolved over the years into a sport in

which safety is the top priority. In regard to that, techniques, which are coined dangerous, are disappearing. As for Wado-ryu, we still practice what is considered original, *kihon-kumite* and the supplementary *kumite ura*, *jujitsu kempo no kumite-kata*, *idori*, *tachi-ai*, *tantoutori*, *goshinjutsu*, and *shira-hadori*. Everything else has moved toward competition style techniques. As long as karate is considered a Martial Art, the utmost importance is respect. Everything starts with a bow and ends with a bow. People who want to be a good karateka must always honor their sensei, and the instructor will reciprocate by looking at each student's personality, strengths, and weaknesses and appropriately choose the right teaching method. Humans are not solitary creatures; people cannot live solely by themselves. The one who learns must aspire to become better. Bowing before everything and after everything, that is the spirit of Budo.

***Do you feel that you still have further to go in your studies?***

Of course. The road of Budo has no end. I am always training myself, feeling and developing and researching what is effective and efficient. When you become 50, 60, or 70 years old, you have to filter your vast knowledge of the art and decide what is an effective skill against an opponent. The fundamental nature of Wado-ryu is *nagasu*, *inashi*, *noru*, roughly translated as "flow, dodge, and ride." *Nagasu* is being able to manipulate the opponents' attacks with a combination of body movement and sweeping technique. *Inashi* is the concept of blocking and attacking at the same time. *Noru*, overly simplified into "ride," is a counter technique that utilizes the trajectory of the opponent's attack to neutralize his/her assault.

***What are your views on kata and kata bunkai?***

Kata is the physical representation of the specific movements and techniques of a particular style. Therefore, just because you know a lot of different katas, I don't think it would make much difference compared to someone else who knows 10 forms. Rather than doing a bunch of different katas, I think it would be more efficient and effective to focus on a small, set amount. Also, even if you are able to master all the katas, that does not make you any better in kumite.

Bunkai is an important part of karate training.



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Each movement in a kata, even if it is the same movement, can have more than one application. Bunkai also has to take into account the physique of the tori and uke (the attacker and defender), and the techniques, as well as the angle they are executed. Transporting these ideas of bunkai into a live situation like kumite is important. *Tai no shinshuku*, *chikara no kyoujaku*, *waza no kankyu*, *jyushin no antei*, and *zanshin* are the most important aspects when training kata. Ma-ai (combat distance), aite wo yomu (reading the opponent), and how quickly you can execute your attack is important in kumite. The things learned in kata should transition to kumite and one should experiment which moves are usable and effective.

### ***What can karate offer to the individual in these troubled times?***

Many Martial Arts have roots that are traced back to Japan. Aikido, iaido, karate, and other Martial Arts have morals and values interwoven into them. In this day and age, I think that morals in our generation are starting to diminish and I do not think that is good. This generation is always looking for instant gratification, like the joy you feel when you win a tournament or pass a kyu test. There is, however, another gratification of doing

Budo; looking back at your journey to see where you are today, a distinguished, capable karate-ka, is another fulfilling affair. For kids and young adults, sport style karate is safer and more easily understandable than its self-defense counterpart. However, self-defense also is a very important aspect when teaching karate. I think the more cultural and historical aspects of the art are more appreciated by the older generation. Karate's foundation is based on self-defense so I believe incorporating it into practice is vital.

### ***What advice would you give to an instructor who is struggling with his or her won development?***

The very first thing is training. Research and experiment what works for you. Each person is different. Observe other styles and ask questions if you do not understand. Look for the best and try to mimic that. You have to train your eyes to differentiate the good from the bad. In Japan, there is a principle called "Suhari." This is very important for karate practitioners. "Su" means to obey, observe and follow. The teachings, both spiritual and technical, should be followed faithfully. "Ha" means to break; after mastering these teachings thoroughly, one needs to develop them even further. "Ri" means to separate from, or part from – to create something superior apart from the two precious stages "Su" and "Ha." This, however, is not possible to achieve in five or even ten years. You need inherent ability. Even then, you need devoted training for many years. Endurance, the will to go further, courage, and harmony are the traits one develops over years of karate training. Especially in Wado-ryu, wasted techniques and movement are the two major hindrances that will halt your progress so you must strive with all your might to purge them through training.

### ***What is your opinion of the direction that Wado Ryu took after the death of Ohtsuka Sensei?***

Firstly, I would have liked to learn in depth about *nagasu*, *inasu*, and *noru*; how the first grand master Hironori Ohtsuka, the founder of Wado-ryu karate, came up with them and how to use them properly. Second is Daitoryu aiki-jujitsu Yuki Yoshi Sagawa Sensei. This sensei is the master of hand-to-hand combat. His techniques are discrete and look as if they would not work, but nevertheless they did, and it looked amazing. He could throw an opponent with the slightest

movement, utilizing his momentum against him. However, his dojo was highly exclusive. Even if you were a high-ranking martial artist, you most likely would have been refused entry. He thought the dojo as a place to polish and advance one's techniques, not for beginners to start learning fresh. Even till the end, he kept refining and researching his techniques. His unique training style is what piqued my interest.

***After so many years of training in Wado Ryu, what is so appealing for you in this style of karate, and why?***

Karate is not only about kicks and punches; it is about mental strength, as well as physical strength, effort, and creating the right mentality. Once people start karate, I would want them to continue until they become a black belt. And within the journey to become a black belt, I would hope that one creates friendships and bonds with the instructors that will last a lifetime. It always is important to have a target or goal. Things like "I want to be like that" or "I want learn how he does that" are what are always on my mind. What is left is to just train and follow the path that leads me to my goal. And when I reach my destination, I look for another goal to attain. Being able to surpass my sensei is my ultimate goal. I believe that continuous practice or training will make anyone good at virtually anything. This is what my sensei always preached to me. At one point in our lives, I am sure we all have had the feeling to stop and quit, to give up, whether it is karate, work, school, etc. But the point is to not give up and overcome this. If you do give up, everything up until that point would have been in vain. It is important to always step up and challenge yourself, and to never give up.

***Do you think that Olympics will be positive for the art of karate-do?***

I think it is a major step for karate to be recognized as a sport. Whether it is a good thing or a bad thing is still up for debate. Once karate becomes an Olympic sport, it would unite all the karate groups and styles. Techniques will become "Olympic style" and I believe some traditional aspects of the art will be lost. Traditional karate dojos probably will see a decrease in membership as a result. The various styles of karate also most likely will disappear. The requirements for a black belt will certainly change. The need for different

styles will die out. I think it will inevitably follow the path judo has – practicing only techniques that are suited for competition – and the number and variety of techniques will unavoidably dwindle. This would bring about many changes to how we currently teach karate, and in the end may be detrimental to karate as a whole.

***Finally, what advice would you like to give to all Karate practitioners?***

You may first start karate with feelings similar to what I had; "I want to get stronger" or "I want to be able to do that kick," evolves over the years into something more complicated. The aspirations you may have had in the beginning of your training will evolve into respect, camaraderie, friendship, and your personality and behaviors start to change as you keep training. The will to never give up, good sportsmanship, and respect: these things become more important. The strictness of karate allows practitioners to become disciplined, being able to overcome obstacles and challenges in ones life.

There are many types of karate and I believe there will not be much change in the coming years. There are a handful of masters today and it is up to their students to continue. It is up to the next generation to keep training so it will not die out. The survival of karate will be dependent on the number of students who can surpass their sensei. In addition, the *Hokubei Karate-do Shinankai* in America is an elite organization of Budo instructors from Japan who teach here in the United States. All of these instructors are experts in technical and traditional aspects of their respective styles and can be contacted through the main website, [www.hokubeishihankai.org](http://www.hokubeishihankai.org). 🐉

