

Nachruf auf Sensei Hidetaka Nishiyama

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By John Cheetham.

Master Hidetaka Nishiyama 9th Dan Chairman and Chief Instructor to the ITKF lost his battle with illness on November 7th 2008. "Mr Nishiyama passed away peacefully following his struggle with cancer", a family spokesperson said.

In this edition of SKM we pay tribute to one of Shotokan's true 'legends'. ITKF acting chairman, Mr Rick Jorgensen writes: "Nishiyama sensei's vision was very broad. It included people of all ages and all styles of karate. Sensei Nishiyama strongly held the belief that the Martial Art of Traditional Karate was a path of self development. School children, adults and seniors can use principles of Traditional Karate to achieve their highest potential through the human development of mind, body and spirit. In the last years of his life, he created a system of training these Budo principles for the use in all styles of karate. He believed that creation of a universal system for self development through Budo training was his greatest achievement. He left the ITKF with that treasure of knowledge."

Born in Tokyo, Japan, on October 10 1928, Mr Nishiyama had a long history of Martial Arts training beginning at a very early age. He began training in Kendo under the instruction of his father, an accomplished Kendo master, at the age of 5. At the age of 10 he began his training in Judo and in 1943 he joined the Shotokan Karate dojo where he achieved his first degree black belt in 1946 under Master Gichin Funakoshi. He was named captain of the Takushoku University Karate Team and was co-founder of the All Japan Collegiate Karate Federation. He received a Master of Arts degree in economics from Takushoku University and in 1951 he co-founded the Japan Karate Association and was elected to its Board of Directors and was also instrumental in developing the first JKA Instructors' Course Programme, as well as helping to devise the first rules for competition karate, both kumite and kata. In 1960 he published his first book: Karate: The Art of Empty-Hand Fighting. Today, this book still remains one of the foremost authoritative writings on the Martial Art of Traditional Karate.

As part of the tribute we have a quite recent interview with Nishiyama sensei and also, interestingly, an in-depth article explaining in detail Nishiyama sensei's approach and ideas whilst teaching a seminar in Edinburgh, Scotland. The reporter, Tom Ristimaki who speaks Japanese and translated for Nishiyama sensei throughout the course had the privilege of accompanying Nishiyama on each class that he taught, thereby getting first hand information and insight into Nishiyama's karate. Tom gives a very accurate description of what he (Nishiyama) was trying to convey with his karate and in fact the legacy which he leaves behind. Nishiyama sensei was one of only a handful of karateka who actually trained under Shotokan's founder, master Gichin Funakoshi and as such was a massive contributor to the history of Shotokan karate-do. A great loss.

Good health, good training, Editor.

NISHIYAMA: MY SENSEI.

By Avi Rokah.

A legend, a true master, a passionate teacher, a dignified and humble man. A true believer in karate as budo and as a means to being a better human being.

A legend has left us, Sensei Nishiyama passed away on November 7, 2008, leaving a void for all of his students and the people he influenced all over the world, through many decades. But as sad as we are, we are also grateful for having this man share his knowledge and wisdom with us and for leaving with us incredible and profound teachings.

Sensei Nishiyama was a believer in karate as Budo and karate as a tool to develop character and become a better and higher human being. Sensei was open minded about learning and developing karate, but he was very uncompromising regarding keeping the purity of karate as budo. He believed that the small details make a big difference, he was very strict regarding details and the fundamentals of technique and applications, but also about how a person carries himself, how a person behaves and represents karate. Many times he commented to people about a sloppy bow, or a bow without intention. Almost every night he would remind me to keep upright posture. He would say we should fight like samurai with dignity and honor, not like Yakuza, not like gangsters, and he would imitate a sloppy posture, gang like. He believed that every moment in the dojo should be meaningful, with intent, to help us develop not only better technique, but also more awareness, stronger spirit, sincerity, respect to everyone around us and the will to learn from everyone and everything around us. He believed that through karate as budo we can expand human potentials.



Nishiyama sensei (left) teaching in Israel with Avi Rokah

For example he insisted that we spar seriously even with the most beginners, he constantly told me that one can learn something from anyone, even facing a kid.

He used to warn me that many so called masters are sloppy when they face their students because they are use to being much better than everyone, and one day they find out that they lost the edge, he said to always do your best against everyone.

The teachings of sensei Nishiyama are so incredible, because he was able to put together a unifying set of principles of karate and a training method to allow students to bring those principles to life. The karate he taught evolved into such a complete and logical system, an integrated system where every concept is linked to all other concepts, and the mental and physical are not separate, and their interdependence can be understood. His teachings were so systematic they can be understood and transmitted to the following generations without loss. In fact, they can actually evolve and become more profound; just like Sensei improved on the karate that he received.

Many times Sensei used to tell us that when he learned under Funakoshi Sensei, not much was explained, mostly just the external, but Sensei Nishiyama took those teachings and researched and contemplated and his karate became wisdom in motion. Only about two years ago he felt that he had a complete system, a unifying set of principles and the training methods to allow students to apply those principles. That is not to say that he felt that that was it and karate is perfect, at the same token he felt that karate is infinite and we can and should always strive to learn and improve further. He used to warn me that the moment I feel that I know, I am finished, he told me to always study from everything.

One of his older students from Japan who is a famous master today, told sensei years ago in summer camp when he had a hard time understanding Sensei's teachings: "but you did not teach me all these concepts in Japan" and Sensei replied: "I do not stay in place, I keep learning and you must come and study more often".

Another old student from Japan who is a famous master today told me once: "you are lucky to be with Sensei every- day, I need to come and be with Sensei for 2 years but I cannot afford this luxury when I have 40,000 students in my organization which I am responsible for".

Sensei Nishiyama was not only a gifted athlete who had a talent for karate, but there was a combination of qualities that made him the innovative master that he was. He was highly intelligent, a searcher, and a perfectionist. He was passionate and disciplined; he wanted to understand the reasons for the details in the kata and basics. He knew that it is all there for a reason, and it is for us to search and break the code of the kata, nothing is superficial. He strived to understand the underlying principles of karate, and he understood that some things about karate are beyond logic; however, he knew that they are true and could only be acquired through experience. Therefore we have to accept and follow the oral transmission. Accept, meaning tirelessly finding ways to apply these concepts, even if they cannot be grasped intellectually for the time being. Sensei Nishiyama searched for the connection between the mental and the physical, and he could express all the concepts in simple and real words and actions. Sensei Nishiyama's teachings were not mysterious or far from our capability to grasp, but nothing is easy, it needs work and contemplation, and then it becomes magical; but the way that sensei Nishiyama taught made all difficult concepts attainable. Many times when something is not understood, some teachers will present it as something magical and mysterious. This was not the case with Sensei Nishiyama. He searched and searched until he was able to understand and convey even the most difficult concepts to his students. Sensei Nishiyama never got tired of researching and experimenting. He looked through many areas such as Budo, sports science, psychology, and even dance, to help him deeply understand karate principles and human movement.

He understood that the understanding of karate could not be only intellectual; one must train hard and then contemplate. Training mindlessly would just strengthen bad habits and bring stagnation.

Sensei Nishiyama was truly passionate about karate, in 27 years that I trained with him, every class, every day, he was always excited and enthusiastic, always looking for new ways to understand the old principles deeper, he truly lived and loved karate, and therefore as a student you felt the need to do your best in every class. When being in his class you had no excuse not to do your best, he was a spirited person who really led by example and practiced what he preached.

How demanding was he? He expected you to come to class, whether you were sick, injured, no matter what. Nishiyama did not expect you to injure yourself more when you were injured, yet he thought that there was always something you could do to get better in some way, maybe if you were sick and trained softly, you could learn to conserve power and produce force with minimum extraneous effort, if you could not use your arms because your shoulder was dislocated, you could concentrate on the use of the hips and legs; if you could not use one leg, you could train on the other and learn to use

ground reaction from one leg, develop proprioception and stabilizing muscle strength. But above all, develop a spirit that is unstoppable ... never give up.

His passing away is a big loss for the karate world, and it leaves a void in me and in many others. Especially since my life was and is about understanding and digesting what this man was teaching.

But just as it is a big loss, we also have to celebrate having this man teaching us for so many years, his life was very productive and he left us with a treasure, which we have to protect and nurture. He might not be with us, but it is up to us to keep his true teachings alive so as many people as possible can enjoy this wisdom that he left with us.

Sensei Nishiyama's karate is definitely unique, it is truly a whole system, a whole puzzle, and in this karate every detail has a reason and links and affects all other aspects of movement and combat.

Sensei Nishiyama stuck to budo principles and created a very effective karate that depends on skill rather than muscle strength and size, it is a very complex karate yet the complexity was meant to lead us to simplicity. Without understanding the complexity one could not reach a skillful simplicity.

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Nishiyama's karate is karate that is based on budo concepts, and simultaneously it is not some mysterious idea that you just have to accept and believe in, our ancestors arrived at those principles through experience and survival necessities, but those sound principles are confirmed again and again by sport science and research, and are based on the way our human body and mind are designed to function.

Sensei Nishiyama understood that the form we received from previous generations was a vehicle for us to understand and digest the underlying principles of karate; it is a symbol of principles. Principles of karate cannot just be talked about like chemistry and therefore we received the form with the oral transmission. The form is not meant to be imitated and repeated mechanically, it is to help us understand and digest good habits into our body. This is what Sensei Nishiyama called "body system", or what sport science calls movement patterns or motor engram, it is like instilling good software into a computer.

Sensei Nishiyama's dojo was like an island in the big Los Angeles, an island of searching for truth. It was separate from the race and everyday life of the city. You did not have to go to some far away mountains, a true master was there for you everyday and you just had to recognize it, come and take the treasure he offered. When you stepped into sensei Nishiyama's dojo, you could feel the intensity and special energy in the place, it was like nothing else.

This dojo was as simple as can be, unchanged for decades just as karate principles are beyond time. Unlike the many fancy gyms or martial arts facilities in Los Angeles, if you were to pass by you would never suspect what kind of treasure lay there.

Within the past 27 years I've seen how Sensei Nishiyama's teachings were constantly evolving. His karate and teachings were always precise and deep, but every year they got deeper, more subtle, and became less rough and softer, more skillful and more effective.

27 years ago he taught timing and precise external movement; we had some great fighters, spirit was strong, and the training was rough and sometimes almost violent.

But with the years it evolved, the spirit and the intensity stayed the same, but training methods got more profound, more purposeful. The technique began depending more on making power from the inside rather than only precise mechanics, more on using the breath, intention and ki energy with the technique being extension and expression, and the timing and strategy became more profound. The principles of good technique and good timing became more connected and interdependent. Being spirited was not enough anymore, it became less rough, but the fighting was at a much higher level of skill. One can see the teachings evolve by looking at the transformation in the sparring at the dojo; one will see spirited but calmer people, one will see a plan and strategy, rather than an exchange of techniques.

Sensei Nishiyama was not afraid to abandon completely some of the old ways and admitted that something he taught in the past was not the best way; now we do it differently.

There became more understanding of how to capitalize on small spaces, how to tune to the opponent, set up and strategize. You could begin to see that the best fighters were not necessarily the bigger ones, but the thoughtful ones, the ones who could understand and implement what Sensei Nishiyama was teaching. When Nishiyama's older students would come to visit you could see the difference between brute force and the profoundness that had been developed.

One of the older students told me that for years he did not believe what Nishiyama was teaching was working, it sounded too mystical to his practical mind, but then he realized that the newer generation was actually using those concepts in their technique and it worked.

Ipatsum Shobu - one encounter, one chance to win or lose.

In Sensei Nishiyama's memorial ceremony the Buddhist priest used the Zen concept Ichi-go Ichi-e, (one moment, only once) to describe how Sensei lived his life.

And in Sensei's teaching that was one of the most important pillars.

My teacher used to constantly stress the importance of seriousness in training. He taught the idea that one has to give attention to every technique and every moment, sensei Nishiyama could not stand recklessness.

He used to tell us in class "think of each technique as if it is the last technique of your life".

He used to say that in older times, your life today depended on yesterday's training, and therefore the samurai had to train with utmost attentiveness and seriousness. Today, because we train in a friendly environment, we have to be especially careful not to lose this Budo spirit.

In a sport's game you might lose a point and then make up for it, you might lose a game and win the next, but in budo there is only one chance. Therefore, my teacher used to say: "Always do your best", or, "Give everything, don't think next".

This concept is about being present in each moment, about being fully in the moment. This is because no moment will repeat itself; you will never again be in the same moment. Each time you do a technique, even though it is the same technique, it is new, it has a different taste, and it is a different

experience. If one constantly keeps this in mind, one will never just repeat technique out of habit. Every kind of learning then becomes real learning with awareness.

Known in many Japanese arts, *ichi-go ichi-e* (literally it means "one moment only once", originally it is borrowed from Zen), does not necessarily mean that one has to be so stressed about being perfect all the time. On the contrary, doing one's best means that once you move, even if you make a mistake, be decisive, give it all. My teacher used to always say, "make a mistake, we need mistakes", but at the same time, "no hesitation, give everything".

Without making mistakes, we cannot step into unknown areas, where we are inconvenienced, if we are afraid to make mistakes, learning and habit changing cannot take place.

Doing one's best is not a burden or a pressure to be perfect all the time, but it is a joy and a pleasure of being fully present and committed to whatever you do at every moment.

My teacher truly lived this way, I never saw him teach just another class, everyday he taught with excitement and passion, giving all he had. That is why his teaching was never stagnant; having an example like that gave his students no excuse to not be their best.

He kept stressing not to do the easy and convenient way, yet to do the proper way, in other words sometimes we can get the results even if we keep using the wrong methods and means, but then we don't progress; we keep our bad habits and rely on natural ability, which is limited.

Sensei Nishiyama was very strict and uncompromising; however he was very sensitive and very social and funny on the other hand. I remember that at the first time I heard him telling a joke, I did not laugh, it took me a while to realize that he could be funny.

Even though most conversations were about karate he knew a lot about everything and had opinions about everything, I was always surprised when he showed so much knowledge of politics, economy, or even history; he really was interested in many things.

He loved good food, and especially good coffee and chocolate, so he used to love to come to my side of town, (which has some good coffee places) and have a good coffee or meal.

How do you know that Sensei was a real, true person? A person who practices what he preaches, and never says anything false? There are numerous ways. You just had to look at Sensei laughing, when he laughed, his whole body was laughing. It is always a big true laugh, like a child.

Also, when he taught, most people did not understand his English even after many years (I did because I really wanted to), however you did not have to, when he was talking, his whole body was talking, you knew what he wanted, and in many cases that was better than understanding the word, words can mislead or be misinterpreted, but the way Sensei talked with his body was hard to misinterpret. He was a person whose thoughts, words, and actions were the same. Sensei had vision; he had a high intellect and was very intuitive. At many times when he told me things, I did not understand the reason at first, or I disagreed at first, but with time, sometimes even years later, I understood why he said certain things. He was usually right and could see ahead, whether it was in karate or life.

Facing Sensei was the most magical experience. Aiko san, his secretary, who passed away just a month before Sensei did, and whom I learned from as much as I learned from Sensei, used to encourage me to spar with Sensei. Sometimes after class she would make him face me, and man, this was always amazing, first of all when he just touched me, it felt like a hammer had stricken. His body was so well connected and he used it so well that he could produce so much force in a seemingly very small action. His technique would always seem so effortless; he only needed a few inches of movement to produce

destructive force. He really knew how to make power from within his body, without much external movement.

His spirit and his timing were even more amazing. Facing him was like facing a wall of energy, he barely moved, and yet I could still see no space to attack. The moment I moved he was already there every time. I remember that some athletes from other countries were watching and they could not believe that this old man was ahead of me every time. They kept asking me if I was doing my best, and of course I was. Each time I tried more things and tried them differently. I was definitely faster than Sensei when he was 75 years old, but it was not about speed and power, it was about perception, controlling the situation, and knowing to move just enough and only when necessary. He caught my intention, not my physical action. Aiko San kept telling me that he was already hitting me before I had begun moving. I began to see more and more of what he was doing and appreciated his mastery level more than before, but I never came close to challenging his ability. Just imagine that everyday a man stands in front of you who does not just recite beautiful ideas and concepts, but he is and lives those concepts, they are forged in him; what a privilege to be able to have this master with you everyday.

Aiko san used to tell me, "don't just listen to him, ride on his movement, and steal it from him in order to learn." What she meant by that was double folded; first, he won't feed you everything, you have to take and digest, he wants you to be worthy of it, and second, as logical and systematic that Sensei was, karate was so natural for him that there were things which he did not know he was doing, he could outline the most important concepts and principles, but there are some subtleties that you have to observe and steal, "you have to read between the lines", she told me.

Sensei was a master of saying a lot with just a few words. The things that he said always had a deep meaning, and I found that the more I trained, I understood more and more of what all these phrases meant. I still struggle with things that I had constantly heard from him. Only two weeks ago, I was writing to myself phrases that I constantly heard from Sensei and I collected 7 pages of just phrases. Each and every one can be elaborated on and expanded. They have deep meanings both in regards to karate and life. What wisdom there is in those short phrases he used?

Now, everyday when I am training, Sensei Nishiyama and Aiko San are still standing before me. I think of how they would react to my training and teaching, what kind of corrections would they give me, and I hope that I can keep the purity of their teachings; first through my own training and development, and then through that of my students. Sensei was teaching by example, he never taught anything that he did not experience or apply in his own karate. That is a big lesson I will try to always apply.

Sensei disliked people who philosophized about karate but did not train enough and could not back their words with action; he used to call these type of people "kuchi waza", mouth technique. He also used to get very upset if someone in his class was not making effort to change his habits. Many times when visitors came to train, I could see in his face that something unpleasant could happen.

In his funeral ceremony, the Buddhist priest said beautifully, that the Dharma, teachings, of Sensei could either live through his students or be destroyed through his students. I am committed to protect his beautiful teachings and wisdom and keep it alive. Sensei would not like his teaching to become a rigid system that is just being imitated, but he would like it to be kept alive and to keep evolving through true understanding and application of the principles he discovered. We must be careful not to neglect the original principles which took so much work, passion, and curiosity to arrive at. But once we understand those principles and digest them we can do whatever we want and apply them in numerous ways, adapting them to each practitioner, this is a lively karate, not limited by the external.

Each generation must build upon the previous generation, being careful not to misinterpret, and take the wrong directions. When I think of Sensei I think of uprightness, dignity, integrity, honesty, beautiful movement, purity and all the good and positive things in life.

The tradition continues ..."

