

Meeting the Masters: Masatoshi Nakayama (1913-1987)



Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

Only a year or so before he passed away, Nakayama Sensei, head instructor of the JKA, offered a seminar at Boston University. As a Shotokan sandan at the time, even though I was not apart of the JKA, I was both allowed and expected to line up in front of the class. This, of course, put pressure on me to perform up to my rank level, but also made me aware of the subtle differences between JKA

Shotokan and the Shotokan I had been taught.

Teruyuki OKAZAKI (now of the ISKF, but then the East Coast representative of the JKA) conducted basics and introduced Nakayama Sensei who ran us through another sort of basics, attempting to show how the details of JKA form had a functional *raison d'être*. He had done a lot of research and had, in my opinion, reformed Shotokan as much as had Yoshitaka “Gigo” FUNAKOSHI during his father’s later years. I did not always concur with the JKA’s methods, but I was really pleased that its head instructor was taking the time to “prove” to inquisitive Westerners that the JKA stuff worked.

Some branches of Shotokan apply an upper block as if it were an out-to-in block, starting with the fist at the hip. I had learned it as an in-to-out block, starting with the forearm across the waist. The out-to-in certainly was more powerful as a strike but, in my humble opinion, did not encourage the elbow awareness that made for effective blocks with minimal effort. Ironically, when it came time for Nakayama Sensei to give an example of the out-to-in upper block, he pointed to me to be his *aite* (partner). I was a head taller than he, but so were all the other JKA black belts he had used. It would have been insulting to him not to be at my best. Without knowing what his intention was, he set me up to throw an in-place upper block as he punched in. I blocked successfully, but I had used the in-to-out method so he quickly pointed to the line-up to return me to position while he chose another student.

Only after he showed the intended result with an out-to-in upper block did I realize that I might have unwittingly put a wrinkle in his game plan. It did make me feel that my karate study was on the right path, however, and that politely questioning the status quo was not such a bad thing.

After the seminar, he was trying to escape the attentions of the adoring American students and he walked by me on the way to the locker room. I bowed and asked, “Sensei, Shashin-wa ii desu-ka? (Is a photo okay?)” I suppose he felt obliged to stop and be polite for one of the half-dozen black belts he had used as partner, so I had a friend take a quick photo. It is fading now and I really should find it and try to Photoshop it before it turns to a blue gray “maybe”.

I treasure the opportunity to have trained with Nakayama Sensei and to have been a partner if only for 60 seconds. Unfortunately, he may not have treasured the opportunity to have his methods challenged, albeit unconsciously. So it goes, moving West.