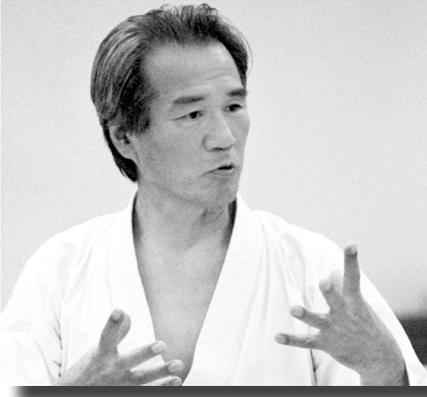


Meeting the Masters: Tsutomu Ohshima



Over my 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.

My Shotokan sensei was looking for further training and weighing the virtues of the JKA (Japan Karate Association) against those of Tsutomu Ohshima's SKA (Shotokan Karate of America). Ohshima Sensei was the founder of Shotokan in the USA and had trained under Gichin Funakoshi as a university student whenever Funakoshi visited his dojo. His Shotokan was different from the JKA's, which had been strongly influenced by the developments of Gichin's son Yoshitaka "Gigo" Funakoshi.

Ohshima Sensei (b. 1930) impressed me in several small ways. First, as I came out of the locker room, I saw him practicing in front of a mirror. Here was the most senior Shotokan person in the country practicing not a kata, not a portion of a kata, not a basic kick or hand movement, but a simple front stance.

Second, during our class, Ohshima talked a lot about ki, something that was very much in vogue during the 1970s. He said that big guys like my sensei would probably never need to develop internal power, but smaller guys would profit from cultivating it. He did not explain it, but demonstrated a simple double lapel release. He asked Elliott, the assistant instructor, to grab both of his lapels as strongly as he could. Elliott weighed about 220 lbs. to Ohshima Sensei's 160. Ohshima raised his arms then dropped them, back still straight, in such a manner that he not only stripped off Elliott's grip, but also produced a little whiplash. I was familiar with this technique from aiki-ju-jutsu and thought that, if Elliott had tucked his chin and bent his elbows somewhat, he could have diffused the power of Ohshima's "ki". When Sensei asked for another volunteer, I quickly raised my hand. The result was much the same albeit without the whiplash. Luckily I had known to tuck my chin. (By the way, it is stupid to be a know-it-all brown belt when dealing with a master.)

Third, I favored the way Ohshima Sensei explained why we should block a certain way (often not the way we had been taught) and backed up his reasoning with logical examples and demonstration so that we could see for ourselves that his method worked better. To this day, I use that same teaching device not to convert others to my system, but to emphasize that, if there is a preferred technique, there must be a logical training or combat reason for it.

Ohshima was trying to convince us to join his federation, of course, but was not doing so with promises of fast promotions, or the idea that we could bask in his celebrity. Rather,

everything he did was to explain why *he* preferred his system, hoping that we came to the same conclusion.

We joined neither the SKA nor the JKA for reasons completely divorced from his class and from the positive or negatives of competing organizations; nevertheless, his attitude, confidence, skill, and instructing ability stayed with me and influenced the karate I do today. And, if I could add a fourth characteristic that I favored: he managed to maintain his stature as the founder of Shotokan in America without being haughty or putting a bevy of lieutenants between us, lowly students that we were, and himself. Few other Japanese masters could say the same.