

**by Stanley Pranin**  
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*Having undergone special training in Shindo Yoshin-ryu jujutsu as a boy, Yuki Yoshi Takamura left Japan while a teenager and eventually settled in San Jose, California, USA. He operated a dojo in California in the 1960s and 70s choosing to provide rigorous training to a small group of dedicated students. His art, now called Takamura-ha Shindo Yoshin-ryu, embodies the philosophy and spirit of an earlier era of Japan adapted to a Western setting. Takamura's deep insights into the essence of martial arts will surprise and stimulate modern budo practitioners.*

**YUKIYOSHI TAKAMURA**

**For our readers who are unfamiliar with the Shindo Yoshin-ryu system, would you talk about its origin and characteristics?**

Shindo Yoshin-ryu was founded by a Tokugawa clan retainer, Katsunosuke Matsuoka in 1868. Matsuoka Sensei studied Yoshin-ryu, Hokushin Itto-ryu, Jikishinkage-ryu, Tenjin Shinyo-ryu jujutsu, and Hozoin-ryu. He based Shindo Yoshin-ryu on Yoshin-ryu, but added concepts from other schools as well. He believed that the Yoshin-ryu concept of passive defense was incomplete and needed the balance of positive heiho or tactics. The original Japanese characters of Shindo Yoshin-ryu were "new willow spirit," but they soon were changed to "sacred willow spirit."

The original Shindo Yoshin-ryu curriculum could be more correctly considered a bujutsu than jujutsu as many weapon techniques are included in the curriculum (mokuroku). However, the popularity of judo and the waning interest in weapons training resulted in much of their influence being lost by the early 20th century in the mainline martial arts traditions.

Several of the roots of our school begin in the early years. My grandfather Shigeta Ohbata was originally a Yoshin-ryu student of Hikosuke Totsuka like Matusoka. Totsuka was evidently quite fantastic. My grandfather trained at his dojo before he met Matsuoka Sensei. In his day, Totsuka was thought to be the match of anyone. An absolutely wonderful technician. In his prime, it is said he was unbeaten by anyone including opponents much larger than him.

Despite my grandfather's great respect for Totsuka, he left the Yoshin-ryu after meeting a student of Matsuoka named Ishijima. Shigeta eventually received a menkyo kaiden (teaching license) in Shindo Yoshin-ryu around

1895. Matsuoka and Shigeta both trained in Jikishinkage-ryu under Kenkichi Sakakibara so they developed a close friendship. My grandfather did not intend to start his own school but had effectively done so by the early 20th century. This became known as the Ohbata school. He built his own dojo with the help of a friend named Hasegawa in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. Shindo Yoshin-ryu is well-known in the Japanese karate world because Wado-ryu jujutsu kempo (karate) founder Hidenori Otsuka received a menkyo kaiden in Shindo Yoshin-ryu. A common misconception of most Wado-ryu practitioners is that Hidenori Ohtsuka became the headmaster of Shindo Yoshin-ryu. While he did receive a menkyo kaiden in Shindo Yoshin-ryu, several others did as well resulting in several schools. The original (Matsuoka) line succeeded through Motoyoshi Saruse to Tatsuo Matsuoka and still exists today in Japan.

### **Sensei, when did you begin your training in martial arts?**

I don't know for sure. My memories of being in the dojo go back very far. Both my father and grandfather made me train while a young boy. I was already accustomed to being in my grandfather's dojo so I probably started actual training around five or six years old.

### **Were you taught by your father and grandfather?**

Yes. As I mentioned, my grandfather received a teaching license from Katsunosuke Matsuoka. He, in turn, taught my father. My father and grandfather both taught me. Matsuhiro Namishiro Sensei continued my instruction after the death of my father and grandfather.

### **Would you tell us more about Namishiro Sensei?**

He was one of my grandfather's most talented students and my father's closest friend. He also trained extensively in Shinkage-ryu kenjutsu and Shindo Muso-ryu jojutsu. He had the greatest influence on my sword technique. Although my grandfather trained in Jikishinkage-ryu under Kenkichi Sakakibara and taught this art to my father, the majority of my instruction was in Shindo Yoshin-ryu. I learned very little sword technique, from my father and grandfather. My grandfather evidently considered the passing of his Shindo Yoshin-ryu teaching license to be extremely important. He intended to pass it to my father upon his return from victory in the war against America. However, sometime in 1944, the reality of what was happening in the Pacific War must have led him to realize that my father

might never return home.

When I was only sixteen years old my grandfather formally presented me with a menkyo kaiden at the dojo. This was entirely symbolic as I was in no way proficient enough to deserve such a license. He privately instructed Matsuhiko Namishiro Sensei to complete my training if he and my father did not survive the war. Confirming his greatest fears, both he and my father died in 1945.

### **Wasn't your grandfather afraid that Namishiro Sensei might also die in the war?**

No. Prior to the war, Namishiro Sensei was severely injured in an accident during kenjutsu practice. He was completely blinded in his left eye. This injury left him unfit for military service but did not seem to affect his martial ability. Upon his recovery he was as good as ever. We often tried to take advantage of his compromised vision, but it was as if he could see better without his eye. He occasionally wore an eye patch of sorts. The sliced-open eye socket made for a gruesome reminder of the seriousness involved in kenjutsu training. Occasionally, he would remove the eye patch and insert a wooden eye with a slice painted on it to frighten his opponents during a match. I remember one time when a young tough entered the dojo in military uniform saying that he could cross a bokken with anyone. Namishiro Sensei flipped his eye patch up and exclaimed that he had once been so bold but had lived to become more humble. The young tough sort of slinked out of the door as Sensei explained how hard it was to get a wife looking like he did. Namishiro Sensei bellowed with laughter after the guy left. He was quite a sight!

### **Earlier you discussed the origins of the Takamura school. There seems to be an influence of Shinkage-ryu kenjutsu as well.**

Yes, the influence of Namishiro Sensei left a large impact on the Takamura school. He was a great teacher and his expertise in Shinkage-ryu really influenced my training. His grasp of the martial concepts and secrets of Shinkage-ryu are obvious within our school, especially at the upper levels of instruction. Although my father and grandfather both studied Jikishinkage-ryu, it was Shinkage-ryu through Namishiro Sensei that most influenced my kenjutsu. It was only natural that many of these concepts would be incorporated into the Takamura school.

**Did both your father and grandfather perish during in the war?**

Yes. My father, Hideyoshi Ohbata, was a high-ranking army officer and reportedly died on Saipan late in the war. My grandfather vanished in one of the firestorms that raged in Tokyo during the American bombing campaigns. We believe he was in the Asakusa area staying with a friend when he was killed. This area of Tokyo was completely destroyed by the bombing. One morning he was supposed to attend a meeting including the press and local politicians. He did not show up which was very unusual. The call immediately went out and many of his friends including his students started searching for him. Many of his friends had connections with the police and the search for him was intensified but he was never found. It was a great loss.

**You mentioned that your grandfather's dojo was located in Asakusa...**

Yes, Asakusa is in the north part of Tokyo. I think the dojo was located between Sensoji and the Otori Shrine. A wealthy man named Hasegawa helped my grandfather build it. He was involved in the construction business and was also a student. By the time I was training he was no longer around, but my grandfather mentioned him often. The dojo was destroyed during the bombing raids. I never saw it afterwards but Namishiro Sensei did. Tears were streaming down his face when he returned. He said nothing could be saved, not even my grandfather's swords.

**Was the dojo ever rebuilt?**

No. Several years ago we tried to find the location of the original dojo, but everything is so different now. It was impossible to tell where the exact location was. Even the streets are all different now. A few landmarks told me that I was very close, but again everything was so changed. The last time I saw my grandfather's dojo I was only about 15 or 16 years old. You see, we left Japan soon after the dojo was destroyed and eventually settled in Sweden. I returned to Japan many times over the years but never really tried to find the exact location until recently. My mother had moved back to her original home in Otsu so I seldom had the opportunity to look for it.

**You indicated that your grandfather trained directly under Kenkichi Sakakibara, one of the most prominent martial artists of the late 19th century. Would you tell us what you recall hearing about your grandfather's experience training in**

**Jikishinkage-ryu and what you happen to know yourself about the famous teacher? Takeda Sokaku was also supposed to have trained under Sakakibara Sensei. I wonder if this is the connection between your grandfather and Sokaku.**

Unfortunately, I know very little about Sakakibara Sensei except that my grandfather met him during a demonstration and had towards him an almost divine reverence. One thing I do remember that I was told by Namishiro Sensei was of my grandfather's strength in "positive heiho of ippatsu" (Instant victory with one stroke). He attributed this tactic to Sakakibara Sensei and said that it affected his decision to leave the Yoshin-ryu and pursue training, in Shindo Yoshin-ryu.

In going over my notes I find that Sakakibara, according to Namishiro Sensei, was quite aggressive in his kenjutsu. This influenced Namishiro Sensei in his application of techniques and his way of instructing me. He specifically talked about how Shigeta admired Sakakibara's strategy of employing feinting and countertiming followed by a very powerful attack. The use of hip movements in successful feinting is extremely important as, without it, the feint will fail when one is confronted by an experienced opponent. In my notes I also found mention of the heiho totsuzen-totsuken concept. This refers to the strike from the subconsciousness, so fast that you yourself are not aware you have made it. It exists in only the most dangerous and superior swordsmen. It is a technique of true masters.

I don't know very much about Sokaku Takeda Sensei either. I believe he was an live-in student of Sakakibara Sensei, but I don't think my grandfather and Takeda Sensei trained in the dojo at the same time. If so, my grandfather never mentioned it. My memory is not so good on these things. It's interesting, 20 years ago nobody had ever heard of Sokaku Takeda. Now I get asked about him all the time. Your magazine has done some very good articles on him. Many people attempt to minimize Takeda Sensei's perceived influence on aikido. That is too bad because it is very disrespectful to Ueshiba as well as Takeda. Would it not be just as disrespectful for my students to minimize my grandfather's influence on what I teach today? What I teach and the way I teach it is quite different from what he taught me, but his influence will always be there and deserves proper recognition. Many people also attempt to make Ueshiba Sensei into a god. What foolishness! Ueshiba Sensei was just a man. Maybe all this talk of Takeda Sensei will bring the aikido world back down to earth. Many will, however, resist it because it's always easier to convince people to follow a god.

**I understand your grandfather also knew Kotaro Yoshida. He**

**was one of Sokaku's senior students and received a kyoju dairi or instructor certification. In what way were they connected?**

My grandfather worked for a Tokyo newspaper as a reporter and traveled often. He had many friends in government and politics. He met Kotaro Yoshida while traveling. Yoshida Sensei and my grandfather discovered they had much in common so he introduced my grandfather to Takeda Sensei. I know my grandfather met Takeda Sensei several times but I am not sure when or where. It was possible that it was Hokkaido because my grandfather Shigeta traveled often. I had the impression that my grandfather was more impressed with Yoshida Sensei than Takeda Sensei. I don't know why I have this impression. It may simply be that he talked about Yoshida Sensei more. I know my grandfather was very impressed with Yoshida Sensei's technique and regarded him as a martial artist of phenomenal ability. Yoshida Sensei was instrumental in Morihei Ueshiba being introduced to Sokaku Takeda. He is also well-known for instructing Mas Oyama, the founder of Kyokushinkai karate, and Richard Kim. My grandfather adopted several concepts and techniques from Yoshida Sensei and taught them in the dojo. We still do these forms as part of the Takamura school.

I know Yoshida Sensei and my grandfather still traveled together sometimes after 1930. Yoshida Sensei visited my father's house with my grandfather on several occasions when I was a small boy. I remember being scared of Yoshida Sensei. He dressed funny and occasionally played mean tricks on me. One time I even hid under the floor when I knew Yoshida Sensei was coming! It's very funny now when I look back on it.

I found out later that Yoshida Sensei had a son named Kenji. This was interesting news as my grandfather never mentioned that he had any family or children. The son evidently traveled to America and eventually passed their family art to a student in the USA. His name is Don Angier and I witnessed several demonstrations by him in Los Angeles many years ago. If I remember correctly he was a police officer at that time. He is an excellent technician.

I have an old picture of my grandfather with Yoshida Sensei, Takeda Sensei, Hiratsuka Sensei and Inazu Sensei. I'm not sure when or where it was taken. An interesting thing is that several years ago Don Angier Sensei sent me a picture of Kotaro Yoshida Sensei by way of a mutual student, Toby Threadgill. In the group with Yoshida Sensei is my grandfather! It was a big surprise to receive a photo of my grandfather from Angier Sensei. It must be from 1935 or later as my grandfather looks to be the age I remember him.

**Yoshida Sensei was purported to have been a member of the**

### **so-called “Black Dragon Society.”**

I believe Yoshida Sensei was a member of both the Kokuryukai and the Genyosha as I believe my grandfather Shigeta was. I know very little particular information about these groups. I know they purposely approached many who embraced bushido to raise their numbers and influence. The military version of bushido was seen as a distortion of samurai ethics by some of the upper class who resented the commoner military. Real samurai were not commoners so the commoner army would be destined to failure. This tactic was used effectively to encourage persons of samurai heritage to join these groups and the military. It was a grave error of judgement and the part these groups played in Japan's destruction should not be underestimated. But I do believe many who were members of these organizations were simple patriots and not aware of Japan's real imperial pursuits. Some families are still ashamed unjustly for their ancestors' membership in these organizations.

### **Please describe the present status of the Shindo Yoshin-ryu school in Japan.**

It has been a long time since I have had contact with the mainline Shindo Yoshin-ryu dojo in Japan. I last saw Headmaster Tatsuo Matsuoka around 1970, I believe, when I made contact through Taro Kozumi, a student of Hidenori Ohtsuka and Kinosuke Abe. I believe Matsuoka Sensei died about ten years ago. This left the future of the mainline of the school uncertain. I have also heard that the headquarters dojo was a victim of fire and do not know if it was rebuilt. I think Fujiwara Sensei is in control of the future of the mainline school, but I have no idea of his intentions. I am not even sure how many mainline dojos exist now in Japan. The last time I heard I believe there were four or five. Takagi Iso, until his recent retirement, maintained a Takamura school dojo in Osaka. Senior student Hashimoto Sensei is considering teaching at a new dojo, but the situation there is not settled. The Wado-ryu jujutsu kempo headquarters dojo still teaches Shindo Yoshin-ryu in Tokyo. I understand that Shindo Yoshin-ryu does not generate much interest within the Wado-ryu now. This is too bad as Wado-ryu founder Hidenori Otsuka held a menkyo kaiden in Shindo Yoshin-ryu. He received his license from Tatsusaburo Nakayama Sensei around 1921. My grandfather knew Otsuka only slightly but thought highly of him. He was a man of exceptional reputation. I hope that Wado-ryu does not lose its jujutsu roots which makes it one of very few karate styles to have a bujutsu heritage. I know some Wado-ryu dojos that still have a jujutsu influence as in earlier times. Kozumi Sensei came to me in 1968 from Wado-ryu with

excellent jujutsu skill. Many years later, one of our present senior instructors, Toby Threadgill Sensei, came to me from a Wado-ryu sensei named Gerry Chau with equally impressive Shindo Yoshin-ryu knowledge. It is regretful that this has now become the exception. Sport karate matches seem to drive the future of Wado-ryu away from its jujutsu roots. It would be good news to hear that this impression is incorrect.

**You mentioned earlier something I think is very important when you said that the original Shindo Yoshin-ryu school is more correctly a sogo bujutsu (comprehensive martial system) than a jujutsu because it includes weapons training in its curriculum. Would you talk more about the historical reasons for the elimination of a large part of these old martial systems and the pros and cons of practicing the specialized modern martial arts?**

The modern idea that old jujutsu are weaponless arts similar to judo is not correct. The truth is there are many jujutsu arts which are fundamentally different. The very old jujutsu bear many names such as yawara, kumiuchi, kogosoku, hakuda, and koppo, etc. Mostly these are true koryu (classical martial schools) and were conceived for battlefield combat against armor-clad soldiers. Most of these systems were not very intricate as they were quickly taught to ashigaru (foot soldiers) and include more simple weapons. Some of the more intricate systems included advanced techniques and weapons such as the kusarigama (chain-and-sickle), tanto (knife), or even kodachi (short sword). They were invented so that lightly armed and armored samurai could successfully engage superior armed and armored opponents.

Jujutsu in the Edo period changed due to the extended era of peace. These arts adapted to address the new reality of an environment without armor. The old systems changed while many new systems were founded. These schools still included much weapons training as the basic principles and techniques of weapons were still the heart of martial systems. Certain weapons, however began to fall into disuse as others gained in favor due to the new reality. The end of armored warfare saw a decline in the use of the nagamaki (long-bladed halberd), yari (spear) and other weapons.

Weapons such as the jutte (truncheon), tessen (iron fan), sode garami (sleeve entangler), tanto and jo were more emphasized. Changes in weapon techniques, which were the core of an art, also affected the application of unarmed techniques. Eventually, unarmed techniques developed more of their own flavor due to the popularity of unarmed contests. This signaled the

beginning of judo-like jujutsu and the end of many true classical traditions. By the turn of the century, many schools began to ignore much of the weapons curriculum in favor of unarmed combat. The popularity of judo, founded by Professor Jigoro Kano, forced even greater change on many of the older jujutsu schools. This is somewhat of a mystery as the real innovation of judo was not in the area of technique as much as in teaching methodology. Judo adopted a more scientific approach to teaching and explaining physical technique. Older jujutsu schools still used mystical explanations using ki and other such concepts. Scientific explanations appealed to most of the public as more modern and superior to outdated martial mysticism. This resulted in the public embracing judo over jujutsu and other Japanese classical schools.

Kano was also successful in making judo seem to appear more upper class than jujutsu. This was very shrewd as the truth is exactly the opposite. Judo is more a commoner's art while jujutsu was an art of the samurai.

So, what is commonly called jujutsu today is, for the most part, not the jujutsu of old. What are commonly practiced today as jujutsu are actually small parts of complete martial systems called bujutsu or bugei. There are many reasons for learning only part of a martial system. The most obvious is the simple truth of the changing reality of the environment. Changes in technology and military tactics led inevitably to weapons falling into disuse. Where a weapon system survives it does so for a reason different from that of its original value. This is why iaido is more popular than iaijutsu and kendo is more popular than kenjutsu. Neither the spiritual nor sporting dimension of the sword existed when it was invented. The sword was developed as a tool of war. Other aspects of swordsmanship came later. Some of these aspects were adopted by the warrior class because they found them beneficial, but these things were secondary. The bottom line for the warrior is the vanquishing of the enemy. This must not be forgotten. This truth is what makes a martial art "martial."

Sometimes old martial arts or weapons retained their value over long spans of time and great changes. Tanto were used by samurai as an alternative weapon, but the knife is still on the belt of modern warriors as a companion to modern firearms. This is amazing when you think about it! The knife may be one of the all-time greatest weapons due to its versatile nature. History seems to confirm this.

Another reason for learning only a part of a bujutsu system is simply time. We are not warriors 24 hours a day now. The modern world only affords us so much time to train so we practice what is realistic to learn. To learn a bujutsu completely would be a full-time job. Very few people have time or wish to make sacrifices of this magnitude for bujutsu. It is better to learn one aspect of a bujutsu well than learn all of them poorly. Also, we are free to

learn what most appeals to us. Some learn the sword, some learn jujutsu, and some learn naginata (halberd). This is good in that it gives future generations freedom of choice and opportunity.

Some people think that learning only jujutsu without studying a complete bujutsu is not good. I regard that as the view of a dilettante. It is better to learn something well than to learn it poorly or to learn it to impress others because it is exclusive or difficult. Learning to impress someone else and not for yourself or for the teachers who came before you is not a proper motivation. The best martial artists are driven to train because of a love for the arts, a love for their teachers now and in the past, rather than themselves.

Lastly, there are those of us who are committed to and accept the sacrifices of learning and teaching a complete bujutsu or bugei. We are not better than our friends who choose one part of a bujutsu or who practice modern martial arts. We practice a complete system because we believe and hope that there is a bonus worthy of the sacrifice. It does exist. It is understanding the technical and historical core of a martial school. A true bujutsu or bugei tradition is a cohesive puzzle. Every separate aspect combines to strengthen the whole and complement each other. The realization that individual techniques are not the art but rather a temporary reflection of a deeper set of concepts and martial strategies is liberating. This allows us to embrace and understand the okuden (secrets of the art). Mastery of these principles allows a martial school to grow from generation to generation from old applications to new. Through the okuden we grasp the intellectual genius that appears after years of training in a true bujutsu. It is like an old signature of many masters, each one visible on top of one another, each one part of a greater whole. This is what makes a ryu (school or style) a ryu.

Cobbled together systems which include different arts like karate mixed with aikido are almost always missing the signature of genius. It would be better to keep the systems separate because combining them erases most of the signatures of all previous teachers' wisdom. They are separate traditions whose concepts and truths are not really compatible. They were conceived in different environments for different reasons. Let them succeed at what they are instead of failing to be what they were never meant to be.

**After World War II, I believe you left Japan and ended up in Sweden. Can you tell us briefly what happened?**

My family had a friend who was a diplomat and under obligation to my grandfather Shigeta Ohbata. This friend helped my mother and me leave Japan. My grandfather had vanished in a firestorm in Asakusa but had

arranged our departure earlier when he thought Japan would be invaded by the American and allied armies. My grandfather especially feared Russian retaliation because of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. We first went to Argentina and then to Sweden using my mother's maiden name. That's how we arrived here.

### **How did leaving Japan affect your martial arts training?**

Not too seriously. The first two years in Sweden were very difficult. Fortunately, Matsuhiko Namishiro Sensei came to Sweden about two years after our arrival. He had made a solemn oath to my grandfather promising to complete my training. He moved in and soon continued my training. This lasted until around 1958. He decided to move back to Japan during one of our many visits back home. At this point, he told me that my training was complete and that I needed to start teaching. I believe he liked Sweden very much or he would have moved back earlier. When my mother decided to move back to Japan in 1949, I figured he would encourage me to return with her. Instead he encouraged me to stay in Sweden. I was very surprised. Later he explained to me that I needed to learn how to survive on my own outside Japan. Years later, I ended up moving to America.

### **What led you to relocate to America?**

On a business trip around 1958 I visited San Francisco and met my wife-to-be Mishiko. She convinced me that the weather in California was much nicer than in Sweden. I agreed, so I asked her to get married!

### **Would you tell us a little about your teaching career in the USA?**

I first started teaching publicly in San Jose, California in 1966 I think. Back then karate was very popular and judo was also big due to its inclusion in the Olympic Games. I called what I taught "Ohbata-ryu judo-jujutsu." Classes were very small for a long time and composed mostly of judoka and college wrestlers. In time, Taro Kozumi Sensei became my assistant. He was a student of Wado-ryu jujutsu kempo under Hidenori Ohtsuka as I mentioned earlier. Although quite harsh in his teaching methods, he was well respected by the students. He brought in many students of karate. Around 1968, I decided to adapt the curriculum to address more realistic self-defense applications. This process took five years of hard work but it paid off. In 1972, I decided to officially change the name of the art to "Takamura-ha Shindo Yoshin-ryu." We changed the kanji shin in "Shindo" to the one

meaning “new” from the one meaning “sacred”. This was done to recognize the changes to the traditional curriculum we adopted during this period.

### **How did you come to reorganize the traditional curriculum of Shindo Yoshin-ryu?**

That is a very complex question. Let me see if I can explain it clearly. Any martial art is really a set of concepts and ideas. Physical techniques are important but not the defining elements of a style. I have heard some people say that this is not true, that they have secret techniques. So what! I bet another style has techniques that are similar to their “secret techniques.” I would guess that what they actually have is more correctly described as secret concepts. All jujutsu traditions do similar joint locks because the joints in all human beings operate in the same way. There really are no new joint locks. It’s how they perform the locks that differentiate the styles. The concepts used in the application of the locks are what are important. These aspects are what make one tradition different from another. They are often the okuden.

When I came to America I discovered that many traditional techniques were simply not applicable to the realities facing my new students. Jujutsu techniques in their original form were not intended to address these modern situations. When I first started teaching, students began to ask me how I would deal with a boxer, or with a karateka and so on. At first I was surprised because I was not sure that I had the answers. I had to carefully examine this. I realized that the answers were right in front of me. I was busy focusing on jujutsu techniques when it was jujutsu concepts that were the solution. Techniques did not matter because they were guided by concepts. New techniques could be devised to address new realities while embracing the time honored concepts that form the art’s core. This would not be abandoning the art. This would allow the art to maintain its effectiveness and relevance to a new generation and era.

### **What do teachers who embrace a more classical approach to the martial arts think about this? I would assume that they are critical of your position.**

They are free to have their opinions. I am free to have mine. I am not really concerned with what other teachers think because my authority to teach does not come from them. My authority to teach and to make the decisions I have made came from my teachers. I am most concerned with the welfare of my students and living up to the responsibilities that have been entrusted to

me. I am comfortable with the reality that my students may actually use the art they are learning. The same cannot be said about the students of most teachers that embrace a strictly classical approach.

Many classical martial traditions in Japan are now just pretty dancing. It is so sad. They have not adapted their techniques to address modern realities. They cling only to antiquated forms and, in this process, often neglect the concepts which form a particular tradition's core. Some people wish to preserve the arts exactly as they were in olden times. This is commendable, but usually folly. With very few exceptions, no existing classical school reflects even a fraction of the art's technical heritage as practiced in times past. It is impossible for any teacher to transmit 100% of an art's traditions, yet many classical schools believe that the student should do everything exactly like the teacher in order to preserve the art. Without the addition of an instructor's own wisdom, experience and, most importantly, technical innovation, the art is but a hollow shell of what it once was in just several generations. Without the consideration of modern realities to challenge an art's effectiveness, it becomes a museum piece whose only modern relevance is that of a historical curiosity. Remember that the ryu as they existed in the Warring States era were constantly changing and adjusting to the realities they faced on the battlefield. Only when this period ended did the innovation slow. Many of the classical schools as practised today are, at their best, reflections of the way that tradition operated in one short period of its existence. They are not an accurate reflection of its technical existence over its whole history.

The risk of classical thinking has many historical examples which should cause one to pause. Katsuyori Takeda (1546-82, son of Shingen Takeda and daimyo of the Azuchi-Momoyama period) clung foolishly to outdated techniques of battlefield engagement even though he was aware that its effectiveness was seriously compromised. New strategies involving a devastating technical innovation, the tanegashima (musket), were employed by his enemies. His samurai were cut to pieces in rotating volleys of musket fire by Nobunaga Oda's foot soldiers. One of the most impressive armies in Japan's history was efficiently decimated because its leader was unable to part with a strategy that he knew was compromised by changing realities. Romantically drawn into doing things as they had been done successfully in the past, he was defeated by his classical mindset. This strategy of old, and Takeda's failure to adapt in the face of overwhelming evidence to change, cost him everything.

I will not allow a similar flaw in technique or mindset to compromise my students' potential safety. My grandfather often emphasized that my jujutsu must really work. That it must become my own jujutsu. And that someday

my students' jujutsu must become their own. That was his legacy to me and it should be my legacy to them as well as him.

## **How did you find learning and teaching different in the West compared to Japan?**

When I first came to America I realized that the Western mind was not going to be taught in the same way as a Japanese mind. The American situation was just too different. Americans are by nature more skeptical and suspicious than Japanese. Western freedom of thought permits a student to examine and question things in a way that would be totally inappropriate in Japan. This is both good and bad.

On the bad side, it can lead a student to dismiss a technique or concept as invalid just because he has not put in the time to learn it properly or delve into its secrets. Students that fall into this trap never master their basics. Later in their training you find gaping holes left by ignoring important lessons that the student chose not to pursue because he couldn't see the value in them.

When I find a student like this I usually will not accept him. It is too much trouble to undo the damage done by this mindset and a mediocre sensei.

On the good side, it allows for a much greater flow of information between student and teacher. It also allows a greater level of creativity by the student. Students with strong basics and freedom of thought far outdistance the more traditional Japanese model.

The best of both worlds actually exists in concept in Japan. It is called shu-ha-ri. [lit., protecting the form, breaking the form, distancing one's self from the form] It is a theoretical method for transmitting any classical school. In practice, however, I believe it has had limited success. Cultural realities in Japan historically don't encourage individuality. So while a great foundation for learning is built, the creative freedom to expand upon it is seldom realized. For proof of this just look at what has happened in judo, or even sumo, for that matter. The more innovative foreigners have been dominating judo. Europeans and Koreans are impressively driving the technical innovations in that sport. Foreigners are slowly making these same inroads into sumo.

Sometimes shu-ha-ri is correctly applied and innovative traditionalism keeps the art's core and practical truths intact. Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu is one of the rare examples in the world of classical martial arts where shu-ha-ri has in my opinion been successful.

## **I understand that you are extremely selective about who you choose as a student. What are the criteria you use when**

## **selecting a potential student?**

The question about how I select a student is difficult to answer. Much of my criteria is based on gut feeling or “kan no me wa tsuyoi.” I just look at a student, look in his eyes and see what I see. If I don’t feel and see what I am looking for, I just say, “No thanks.” I am very sensitive to someone’s potential for learning. I do not like un-teaching students either. I prefer a student with past martial arts’ experience, but also a totally open mind. See, it’s not so much that I am selective, it’s just that so few potential students have the proper qualities.

## **Some people observing your training might consider it unusually rough. Is this true?**

I don’t think that is an accurate observation. The term “rough” implies to me frequent serious injuries. Are we more realistic in the way we approach our training? I must say yes. When we practice striking, we strike very hard. If you miss your block or technique you will get hit hard. We practice unorthodox attacks and we practice them at very high speed compared to most dojos. We intend to instill a more realistic amount of stress into our situational training. The fear of receiving hard strikes at high speed creates stress that simulates the fear response felt in a genuine confrontation. Eliminating this type of training only converts the art into calisthenics. It does nothing to prevent injuries. The false sense of security that exists in many dojos actually causes a complacent mind and increases injuries. With a complacent mind a student is allowed to relax his situational awareness. He lets his guard down and gets injured. If you want to see a lot of injuries, go to some aikido dojos. People are frequently injured because they don’t feel threatened in that harmonious environment. In my dojo the techniques are not harmonious, they are threatening.

Some aikido teachers teach aikido as a martial art while others don’t. This is okay as long as the teacher is honest with his students about the aim of his teaching. Some teachers claim they are teaching a martial art when they are not. I believe this is a big mistake. Other aikido teachers teach the art as a purely spiritual discipline and are honest about this with their students. This is okay by me. Aikido as a spiritual pursuit is an honorable thing and I believe this was the ultimate aim of Ueshiba Sensei. But the spiritual aspects of the art are more likely to apply when it is taught as a martial art. Martial arts are a big responsibility! Martial ability is a tool that allows spiritual discipline to flourish and work magic on the soul. The heart and mind must wrestle with demons and be victorious to find enlightenment. Without a struggle, the

character never really is challenged and never matures. That is why shugyo (ascetic discipline) is so important.

Some aikido teachers talk a lot about non-violence, but fail to understand this truth. A pacifist is not really a pacifist if he is unable to make a choice between violence and non-violence. A true pacifist is able to kill or maim in the blink of an eye, but at the moment of impending destruction of the enemy he chooses non-violence. He chooses peace. He must be able to make a choice. He must have the genuine ability to destroy his enemy and then choose not to. I have heard this excuse made. "I choose to be a pacifist before learning techniques so I do not need to learn the power of destruction." This shows no comprehension of the mind of the true warrior. This is just a rationalization to cover the fear of injury or hard training. The true warrior who chooses to be a pacifist is willing to stand and die for his principles. People claiming to be pacifists who rationalize to avoid hard training or injury will flee instead of standing and dying for principle. They are just cowards. Only a warrior who has tempered his spirit in conflict and who has confronted himself and his greatest fears can in my opinion make the choice to be a true pacifist.

Years ago I saw an aikido instructor named Tadashi Abe in France. He was a true warrior in every way. He was a great example of a man with martial spirit flaming in his belly while the spirit of harmony was visible in his eye. He was a real credit to Ueshiba Sensei's technical and spiritual legacy. He is 100% samurai!

**I find your thinking on this subject fascinating. Can you expand on this theme a little more?**

The term "martial art" is thrown around a lot without any idea of its meaning. "Martial" means "war" or "conflict." In a martial arts dojo we train for conflict. Without physical and psychological conflict there is no "martial" in martial art. Fear, to be overcome, must be confronted and experienced. Fear must become part of your life experience. Appreciation of fear and the appropriate reaction when confronting fear is the sign of a mature martial artist. Are not your dojo mates and teacher the ones that you should ultimately trust when learning to confront your fears? In a real dojo, they are. Remember that most people who call themselves martial artists are nothing of the sort. Most dojos are not martial arts dojos either. They are glorified social clubs thriving in an environment of emotional stimulation which is heightened by a false or extremely limited perception of danger. When real danger shows itself in such a dojo, the participants run for cover. In a real dojo the participants run towards the conflict.

## **Sensei, what are your thoughts on the concepts of tori and uke in martial arts practice?**

In Shindo Yoshin-ryu we do not use the terms tori and uke much, but the concepts are the same. By tori you mean the person executing the technique and by uke you mean the person receiving the technique. These terms are common in modern budo, but not very common in traditional bujutsu. In modern arts, the teacher usually demonstrates a technique on an uke who is a student. Although sometimes this is done in bujutsu, it is often the other way around. The teacher only demonstrates when students are beginners or don't know the technique. Then, the senior students demonstrate on the teacher. Eventually, all of the students demonstrate on the teacher. The student executes a technique on the teacher to allow the teacher to feel what is unseen to the eye. The teacher feels a mistake before it becomes a habit. The teacher feels the spirit of the student through his technique. The technique also becomes an eye to the heart of the teacher who allows himself to be thrown. This is a demonstration of the humbleness of the teacher's heart. This is very important. Watch out for teachers who never let themselves be thrown. If a teacher never takes a fall he is not really a teacher, but just an impersonation of one. Students are not just bodies for teachers to use to demonstrate or show off. Students are the whole reason for the teacher's existence. Without students there is no such thing as a teacher. It is unfortunate we do not see more teachers taking ukemi in modern martial arts, especially those that profess to be engaged in spiritual training. Often spiritual lip service is a pretty covering to hide a corrupt heart underneath. The sign of true enlightenment is not fancy technique, flowery talk or spiritual pontification, but is evident in the clear eye of the teacher and the respectful eye of the student who looks at the teacher. Look and you will see.

## **What about the sempai (senior) and kohai (junior) system in martial arts?**

These are other terms we don't really use in Shindo Yoshin-ryu. They are terms more common to modern martial arts. These concepts are actually more recent and used as a tool for the enforcement of discipline within a large group of conscripted military personnel. In karate dojos with military-like discipline, this system is often strictly enforced to the point of cruelty. I even see the sempai-kohai system enforced to an unhealthy level in some aikido dojos. In the military, it may be a positive thing to make the chain of

command obvious and assure a cohesive group mentality, but remember that samurai were not a conscripted army. The group dynamic of a samurai clan was very different from that of a modern army. The same is true for a bujutsu dojo—it is not the army. Do we need this sort of system in the dojo? Not my dojo! I do not need to bark, “Osu” at my students or wish them to respond with group shouts. This is not really useful in a true bujutsu dojo. The training and responsibility of students is much more personalized. Is there obvious seniority in the Takamura-ha bujutsu dojo? Yes and no. We have no rank and no specific uniform that demonstrates seniority. No one is asked to do any task that I or other teachers do not perform often ourselves. We do line up in the dojo according to experience and issue licenses. If you attend one of our dojos you will quickly figure out who is senior and who is junior without the instructor barking orders at anyone or watching who cleans the toilet. Barking orders at enlisted men in the military may serve some positive purpose, but I train students to be thinking leaders and not ardent followers.

### **Please give us your view of the popular Gracie jujutsu system.**

Like everything there is both good and bad. One must remember that Gracie jujutsu is very different from the jujutsu of old. Although I don't have a problem with it being called jujutsu it is really much closer to early judo. They have been quite effective, haven't they? Although the system appears mostly a ring art, I admire their effective application of jujutsu strategy and tactics. I also admire the honorable way the Gracies conduct themselves. I would like to meet this Helio Gracie very much. He, like Tadashi Abe has fire in his belly but harmony in his eyes. He has taught his sons to act properly. When they have appeared at these contests they just wear a simple white gi. They don't hop around in gaudy costumes or drag silly props onto the mat for television. That is so absurd. Martial contests are serious business. The Gracies conduct themselves with honor. This they learned from their father and sensei.

Unfortunately, the impression the public is getting of jujutsu and martial arts through these contests is rather barbaric I think. Many of the other contestants in these contests are not real martial artists. They have no concept of honor or dignity. I wish the Gracies had chosen to keep these contests more private. By making them public they have attracted men of compromised character who glorify violence and act like egomaniacal fools. This sort of environment is one element that led Jigoro Kano to found judo. Violence is a solemn reality to be confronted with the utmost seriousness. Only character forged upon the hardest anvil of shugyo can survive and

overcome the evil of rampant violence. Western society is sick with it. Individuals who conduct themselves in these contests without any concept of honor or dignity only contribute to the sickness.

**I understand you have an opinion on individuals of non-Japanese descent who adopt quasi-Japanese mannerisms and customs and take them to extreme. I am very curious to hear your response on this subject as I have met many of these types of individuals over the years!**

These persons you talk of are very bizzare individuals. It is as if they are ashamed of being what they are. Perhaps they want to be Japanese for some reason. Or maybe they want to appear Japanese so they will be taken more seriously in the martial arts. This may work on some Westerners but Japanese will always view them with mistrust. What is wrong with being American or English or Swedish? I have a student who is a teacher with a beautiful traditional dojo and Japanese garden. He still acts normal. He is from Texas so he wears cowboy boots and jeans, not kimono and geta. That would look silly in Texas! Years ago my senior student David Maynard and I met an American kenjutsu instructor at a festival in San Diego who acted more Japanese than a Japanese. This instructor had not even trained very extensively in Japan. It was very amusing for us, sort of like being at the theater with him playing the actor's part badly. This individual brought his own chopsticks to eat with during the festival. I will forever remember the horrified expressions on many of the Japanese who prepared food. Bringing his own chopsticks may have appeared very "Japanese" to him, but to the Japanese it appeared he thought the offered chopsticks were dirty. This left a bad impression on many people. It was quite embarrassing, especially to Dave because he was an American also doing a kenjutsu demo for the mostly Japanese crowd. I guess the point of this is to just be yourself. Martial arts are hard enough to learn without trying to be someone or something one is not.

Another common misconception is that one must go to Japan to get "real" Japanese martial arts training! I find this a very strange idea. What does the dirt under the floor have to do with the quality of training in a martial arts dojo these days? Some individuals who spend time training in Japan reinforce this idea with fanciful magazine articles and story books on mysterious secrets to be found there. Others make interesting claims that only by immersing oneself in the culture that bore the art originally can one truly understand its essence or spirit. These individuals are welcome to their opinions, but I must disagree with them. I was born in Japan, raised in the

pre-World War II culture of Japan, in a family linked for generations to many martial arts. I have since lived many years in Europe, America and back in Japan. I believe some of these Japanophiles are honest and well-meaning martial arts practitioners drawn to the romantic image they have of Japan and its martial traditions. But others I think are Nippon snobs. They believe by making the admittedly great sacrifice of moving to Japan and surviving the difficulties associated with training there, that they are superior students who have received superior training compared to their friends who stay and train in budo or bujutsu outside Japan. If their training is superior, it is the sensei who is superior, not the dirt under the dojo floor. Many superior sensei exist outside Japan today and many inferior sensei exist inside Japan as well. Training in Japan does not make up for a bad teacher. Train with a superior teacher abroad. Why go to Japan to train with an inferior teacher? Also, to imagine that the post-World War II modern Japan of today bears any significant cultural resemblance to that of feudal era Japan requires one to ignore some most obvious facts. This is especially true if you are training in a traditional bujutsu or koryu. Using the rationale of cultural relevance just makes no sense to me. I have seen incredible changes in the culture of Japan in my lifetime. Feudal Japan of old died long ago. The culture of the classical martial traditions was tied so directly to the feudal era that the end of this era also brought the end of the culture that bore the classical arts. That is just a fact of history.

What is left today in the non-violent modern culture of Japan that has superior relevance for training in traditional or modern martial arts compared to that of a more violence prone Western culture? Language perhaps offers some advantage; etiquette perhaps as well. But these are successfully taught outside Japan. In a more violence prone Western society one might have to train with the realization that he may actually use the art he is learning to save a life. That unfortunate realization is worth a great deal. In Japan, despite all the philosophical talk of training for death, no one really thinks they will fall victim to an attack on the way home and maybe die.

The realization that violent crime really existed in the West was a big shock to me when I went to America. It forever altered my impression of the bujutsu student who trains in modern Japan compared to the student who trains in the West.

### **If you had to provide only one bit of wisdom to impart for someone seeking a martial arts instructor, what would it be?**

Everyone is looking for a master or guru in the West, but the word “master” is so overused today as to be meaningless, much like having a black belt

today is meaningless. A genuine master is almost impossible to find because you won't quickly recognize him. He is much more than a teacher. Genuine teachers strive to be masters but only one in a hundred thousand finish the journey. There are only a handful of true masters on the whole planet. Funny how they all end up in the San Francisco yellow pages!

All the time I tell people this truth. It is not amendable or conditional. Anyone who calls himself a master or allows his students to refer to him as "master" in his presence, isn't a master. Occasionally, he may be a well-meaning teacher who misunderstands the definition of the word, but most of the time he is an ego-driven narcissist seeking adoration. He will have very little to teach because there is so little room in his heart for his students. Instead of looking for a master, just look for a good teacher with a sense of humor, especially if he's driving a crummy old car. (Laughing while motioning towards his old Toyota.) My old friend and Sensei, Matsuhiko Namishiro used to say, "There must be lots of smiles along the way or the journey is not worth it." He was correct you know!

*[The above interview combines responses to questions by Takamura Sensei compiled by Marco Ruiz and David Maynard about ten years ago and a series of e-mail exchanges conducted between January and April 1999 by AJ editor-in-chief Stanley Pranin. - Ed]*

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