

A Master in the Making: An interview with Murakami sensei (5th dan)

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Two times S.K.I.F. World Champion, sensei Manabu Murakami recently conducted a set seminars around the country on his visit to Australia. A regular to our shores, he has often been a source of great knowledge and inspiration to the S.K.I. fraternity of Australia. During his 2 day seminar in Melbourne, Victoria he graciously took some time out of his busy schedule to discuss some of his thoughts and ideas on karate and to share some personal recollections including his humble beginnings.

Sensei, at what age did you start training in Shotokan karate and why?

I was 10 years old when I started training on the island of Kyushu which is in the south of Japan. I started karate for the same reasons as other children - I wanted to be strong, make new friends and watched Bruce Lee movies which inspired me to learn karate. Another reason was that I told my mum I either wanted to start karate, or get a telescope to see the stars. In the end my mother said I better start karate, because we thought this would be cheaper.

Did you try any other martial arts or styles of karate before Shotokan karate?

From the beginning I trained in shotokan. I began training with sensei Maruo in Kyushu, and this dojo was a part of S.K.I.F.

Do you study any other martial arts today, and if so, why?

I practice Tai Chi... Tai chi and karate are totally different. Training in another style is like seeing your house from the outside instead of the inside... I am travelling with sensei Kanazawa a lot at this moment, and when we go over-seas he teaches Tai Chi so I train with him in this. I started training in Tai Chi 3-4 years ago, but it was only 1 year ago, when I travelled to Ireland with sensei, that I suddenly realised that this art was truly interesting. Before this time I practiced it, but it did not interest me as much... I don't know why it became interesting. I think it was because it started to feel good when I would perform it. I also found it interesting how the ankles, knees and body in general was used differently in Tai Chi than in karate. However I still don't completely understand Tai Chi. I understand the movements okay, but this is only the surface to understanding Tai Chi... It has helped me with karate. In karate we move by muscle. But Tai Chi is moving by intention. So now I use my intention even more than before in my karate to help me execute technique with good kime and commitment.

Sensei, you have achieved a lot in your karate so far, at this point in your karate life, what is the most important part of your training?

Karate is my job, my work and I am always travelling teaching it, so I always need to improve... If I stop training, then not only does my technique become poor, but the way I teach becomes poor as well. My technique must always improve both mentally and physically. If the instructor improves, then the student improves. So I must always improve every part of my karate, not just one area. All parts of karate are important.

Sensei, what challenges you most in your training?

Basically, to have control over my body so I can perform a technique the way I want to. Sometimes I want to kick a certain way but I can't. So we must always imagine our best movement, even if we can't always do it. But if we try our best and aim for the best, sooner or later we reach this level. So our best gets better as does the standard of our best imagined technique. There is no limit to how good we can be. But in controlling our body we also mean that we control our mind. The body cannot perform a technique if we cannot control the mind to start with. So control is very important - physical and mental.

There are many kata that we practice and study in the Shotokan system, but if you had to pick one kata you would like to study in depth, which one would it be and why?

Oh this is a difficult question because the body and mind are always changing. When we are young we have speed, when we get older we don't have as much speed. So the kata we like changes as our body and mind changes. For example, when I was young, I liked Kanku Dai, then I liked Kanku Sho. Next I liked Unsu, so I'm always changing in the kata I like to study. Lately I have performed Sochin at tournaments. Now I want to perform Gojushiho. I've practiced this kata a lot this year. Last year I practiced Nijushiho a lot. Next year I might again change the kata I like to study.

Sensei, can you explain the concept of oyo and how it differs to bunkai?

Oyo is a bit different to bunkai. Oyo is the intention of a technique. For instance in Heian Shodan we do age uke. This is a block, but we can use this as a way to break someone's arm. This is my intention. So oyo is not just the movement as its conventional application, but whatever else this movement could realistically be interpreted to be. We have a set bunkai, but this can also vary with different levels of application expected from different rank, but bunkai is more literal in relation to the movement of the kata. Bunkai for instance, (*sensei picks up the telephone*) is what components make up the telephone, how is it pieced together. But oyo is how we can use the telephone to ring people and speak to them. So although bunkai and oyo seem the same, they are different.

Do you practice any of the Goju-ryu kata practiced by Kanazawa sensei?

Yes, Seiyunchin and Seipai.

In your opinion, what are some of the distinct differences between Shotokan and Goju kata?

Shotokan kata is more related to physical education and is more dynamic, with deeper stances and bigger style of block, etc.. But Goju is based on narrow stances and a smaller type of block. But when we fight, we too have a narrower stance. We use bigger stances because we want to make our legs and bodies strong - more physical training. Goju is more like real fighting. For Shotokan - first, is to develop the body then self-defence, but Goju is the other way round. That's why some people say Shotokan kata application is not real. The reason we make a wider stance is that we distribute a large amount of body weight over our legs to make them stronger. Wado, Goju, Shito ryu all have narrower stances so they use a lot of quick tai sabaki; this is closer to real fighting. But in Shotokan when we fight we also do not stand still and punch in deep stance like in kihon training. Training in shotokan is for physical development.

What is the purpose behind the S.K.I.F.'s development of the kata Gankaku Sho?

This is sensei Kanazawa's work... This kata was originally Shorin-Ryu Chinto. Some other styles practice this Chinto, but sensei Kanazawa organised this kata and adapted it to Shotokan. Gankaku Sho has many stances - kiba dachi, kosa dachi, fudo dachi, shiko dachi, kokutsu dachi, etc., which make it a very useful kata to train in.

Will Gankaku Sho become a kata commonly practiced in S.K.I.F.?

Yes. It will happen in near future. At the S.K.I.F. world championships held last year in Milan, the competitor who won silver in the female open kata division was from Spain and performed Gankaku Sho in the final.

Why doesn't the S.K.I.F. (or even the J.K.A.) recognise the Taikyoku kata of Funakoshi sensei?

I don't know about this, because when I started karate, I practiced the Taikyoku. Some S.K.I.F. dojo still teach it, but we usually teach Heian Shodan first; even the J.K.A. still teach Taikyoku sometimes. Why it is not part of the syllabus, I'm not sure. The kata is good for beginners. If you remember this kata, then Heian Shodan is much easier to learn. It is also easier to remember embusen for the Heian kata if you learn Taikyoku first. Sometimes I teach the Taikyoku kata.

Sensei, how do you think the standard of the S.K.I.A. measures up with the standard of other S.K.I.F. countries you have visited in recent times?

Quite high. One reason is that the senior instructors are quite serious about their training and have a good level of karate. So, if instructors are good, naturally the students will have a high standard as well. Another reason is that sensei Kanazawa often visits Australia to teach the S.K.I.F. syllabus, so Australia closely follows the syllabus and teachings of sensei Kanazawa.

What was your best or worst moment in your karate life that sticks out in your mind.

The moment I most remember was the 1988 S.K.I.F. World Championships when I fought a German man in the quarter final and lost by hansoku. I thought I could win the championship so I was very disappointed. After that match, I cried in the toilet and felt very disappointed. I knew I could win, so when I didn't I had to practice more. I really wanted to continue to practice until I could win the world championship.

If I had won that championship, I'm not sure that I would be practicing as hard as what I do now or even become a full-time instructor... I may have gone back to my home town, gotten another job, and not put everything I have into my training. But after I lost that match, I went to the S.K.I.F. headquarters to train.

It seems to me that it is becoming more and more difficult to produce karateka that are both good competitors in kata and kumite, do you agree, and if so why do you think this is the case?

Yes, I agree. I think this is the case because its much easier to concentrate on kata or kumite. But to do well in both, one must practice harder. If we want both to be of a high standard, then we must practice kihon more. But if we only like kumite, or tokui kata and only think of one part of karate, we will only keep a high standard when we are young, during our competition days. If practice kihon, we can maintain a high standard of karate much longer. By practicing kihon a lot, your kata and kumite automatically become good. For me, kihon gives us the physical and mental control which we need in kata and kumite.

Do you think that karate is any closer to being accepted into the Olympics, with the recent discussions between the I.T.K.F. and W.K.F?

I still think it is difficult to get it into the Olympics in the near future... Mr. Delcoul, the president of the W.K.F. recently resigned. Now the situation may be different with a new president - for better or worse, I'm not sure, but he worked towards getting karate into the Olympics for a long time, as has sensei Nishiyama.

It is difficult for people to agree on karate as a sport because karate is also budo, and this is different to sports. Sport is fair, if you run 100 meters faster than me, then you win. I think the rules of sport karate still have some budo in them and this makes it difficult to call it an Olympic sport. Our own competition rules (I.T.K.F. and W.K.F) are not enough... Maybe we need some new rules. Separate Olympic rules might be better than I.T.K.F. or W.K.F. rules or trying to mix both.

Karate is like football. In America it is called American football and they use helmets and protective gear, in Europe, football is rugby or soccer and your football is different again. So although all are football, each has its own set of rules. Karate at the moment doesn't divide the difference between sport and budo so clearly.

Sensei, would you mind discussing the relationship between kata and kumite?

Kata and kumite are like the right and left hands of our body . They are connected at the basics. Some people say you can't use kata technique in tournament fighting. But tournament kumite is only one part of kumite. Dojo kumite is different again. We can use many techniques from kata, like elbows, etc. in dojo kumite. If people think kumite is just competition, then they only use mai geri, kizami zuki, gyaku zuki etc., but if think of real fighting then kata is more closely related to kumite where we can use throws, locks, strikes amongst other things. However, we can use some kata techniques in kumite. For instance in Jion kata, after kakewake uke we do mai geri, kizami zuki, gyaku zuki. This sort of technique and foot work can be used in kumite. So kata can even give us techniques to use in sport kumite. Also, if you understand how to relax and tense your body in kata, you can also learn when to relax and tense your body in kumite.

In S.K.I.F., jiyu-ippon kumite is based on set combinations, but the J.K.A let's the defender decide their own defence to the set attack. Do you think any one method is better over the other, or do you think we need both kinds of jiyu-ippon?

I practice both types, so I think both are important. S.K.I.F. jiyu-ippon is set, but this just gives you one idea of what to do. You can mix these combinations together to make something different to suit the circumstances you are in. If your distance is too close, you may not need to kick, so change your counter to a punch. But what some people think, is that what you are taught is what you must do - nothing else. This is very narrow-minded... Through jiyu-ippon and kihon-ippon, Kanazawa sensei

just teaches how to move and use your body, but you must create from here what techniques work best for you.

Sensei, theory has us believe that what we learn in jiyu-ippō kumite, we can eventually successfully apply in jiyu kumite. Do you believe that this is true in practice for both budo and sport kumite?

Yes... For instance, in a tournament once, someone kicked me mae geri and to my surprise, I blocked the kick with juji uke and then followed up with uraken uchi. I did not want to do this block, but it just happened. So if you practice many times, the technique becomes part of your body and mind. If something happens we automatically react with a technique, if that technique is inside us.

Sensei thank-you very much for your time and comments, I'm sure many people will be interested in what it is you have to say.