

MITUSUKE HARADA

'Change and development are essential to true practice'

Clive Layton, in his book *'Karate Master: The Life and Times of Mitsusuke Harada'* he describes Sensei Harada as 'One of the last disciples of the legendary Gichin Funakoshi and Shigeru Egami'. This in many ways conveys exactly the background of this Master of Karate-Do. Here in this interview, he speaks about his beginnings in karate, the influence of Sensei Yoshitaka and Egami and the development of his own karate. We have also included a small piece 'Word about the Master' written by Roy Margetts – student of Sensei Harada who helped us organise this interview.

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Questions by The Shotokan Way

(Marie Kellett) I know you have probably answered this a million times before, but would you mind just outlining how and why you first got started in the World of the Martial Arts?

(Mitsusuke Harada) Before the war, when I was a middle-school boy, we had heard the name of karate being mentioned, but not much else, and we didn't know what it was, and so, of course, some kind of myth or legend grew around this activity. Naturally, everyone was interested, but in my case I happened to have a school friend who knew a little more about karate as his father was a colleague of Yoshitaka Sensei's, being also a hospital radiography technician. So, occasionally my friend would show me some little things concerning karate, such as the way to make a fist, etc. But of course none of this was done correctly, but rather schoolboy fashion.

In any case I was definitely interested too. Then, another friend told me that close to where he lived there was a karate dojo, and this is how I came to join the Shotokan dojo as a young beginner. And this was where I saw Yoshitaka Sensei himself.

As you know the dojo was later destroyed during the war, which led me for a while to practise with O'Sensei at his home (*Editor's note – On April 29th 1945, Funakoshi's dojo was destroyed during an air raid on Tokyo*). And then later, after the war, I joined the Waseda University karate group whose seniors were still under the influence of Yoshitake Sensei.

(MK) Could you please tell us about Master Egami. What was he like as a man, inside and outside of the dojo?

(MH) As a person he was extremely emotional, but outgoing too, and he would easily communicate with strangers. His was a rather open personality, but he would quickly and strongly either like or dislike a person.

On another hand there was a streak of eccentricity in his character, and you could say that basically his philosophy was special too, nonconformist if you like to put it that way, which is why he would not hesitate to go against commonly accepted ideas.

In terms of karate he did not believe that karate as he saw it was as strong or as powerful as it was claimed to be. He considered it in fact as rather weak, which is why he started approaching it differently, researching different ways in his practice.

Interestingly enough, nobody ever said that Egami was very strong; but all would admit that he was 'special', different, indeed doing things that no one else could do.

(MK) And what was his influence on you as a karateka?

(MH) It is a fact that I practised with him, person to person, and it is true that his views and approach influenced my karate.

In that respect, not so long ago, in Japan, a senior I had not met before, happened to see me practising. He then came to me and said that he guessed who I was because he could see that my karate was really like that of Egami.

(MK) It's well known that Master Egami was influenced by Aikido's Master Ueshiba, and Aikido's use and understanding of power. In what ways do you think Master Ueshiba influenced Master Egami?

(MH) It is a fact that Mr Egami was interested in Ueshiba Sensei, but he never practised with him at any point in time, and even if some of the ideas of the aikido Master appealed to him you cannot say that he was influenced by him. They simply both happened to choose ways which were not alien to each other.

(MK) And were you or your seniors inspired by many other systems besides Karate and Aikido?

(MH) One cannot say that there is direct technical influence from any other system. It is mostly in the use of the body that can be found common ground. Thus, Yoshitaka Sensei himself practised with bo or ken, as Okuyama did later, and as I also did. But it is a purely physical approach, body training you may say, but never a question of acquisition of techniques.

(MK) And what kind of relationship would you say he shared with Master Funakoshi?

(MH) There was nothing special. Remember that when Mr Egami practised, O'Sensei was already a fairly old man who practised only kata.

For his part Mr Egami tried to go with us towards more realistically physically active forms of practice.

(MK) So often in the Martial Arts, people put Senior Karateka on pedestals, making them 'demi-gods' if you will and so often we forget that they are in fact just normal people with exceptional skill. I wonder how realistic people's view of Master Funakoshi really is. What do you think Sensei?

(MH) It must be admitted that he was no god, nor in any way special. He was a good-natured old man who was completely unselfish, the opposite of self-centred.

(MK) You were also highly influenced by Master Yoshitaka Funakoshi. Can you please tell us about him and how he changed Karate-Do?

(MH) Well, like Egami he couldn't believe in the so-called special power of karate. Therefore he chose a way that was completely opposite to that of his father: confrontation karate, kumite sparring was his primary aim. He chose to experiment and accept any form of attack (*in the course of which he had indeed quite a few accidents!*). But it was through this process that he developed such training exercises as Ten-no-kata, Ippon kumite, sanbon kumite, etc.

On an other hand he never ignored kata but simply reconsidered it in view of a greater reality, which led him in fact to change some elements.

(MK) Yoshitaka placed much emphasis on stances such as Fudo-Dachi, which greatly influenced the likes of Sensei Taiji Kase. What are your feelings on this and the importance of this development to the Shotokan Style?

(MH) I don't know if I can answer this question as I never saw Mr Kase's using fudodachi, so I can't tell you how influenced he had been by Yoshitaka Sensei's postures. I know that he never directly practised with Yoshitaka Sensei and that in fact his real heritage in terms of practice came from Motonobu Hironishi.

However, when we met and talked in Paris on several occasions he showed a distinct interest in Yoshitaka Sensei and asked many questions about him, Egami and Okuyama. It shows clearly that he had a real desire to develop his own practice and evolve away from his original JKA practice.

(MK) Karateka such as Taiji Kase discussed the importance and power of the 'hara'. Could you please explain its significance and relevance to our karate training?

(MH) It is not really a question I can answer as this concept is too vague, and its perception means different things for different persons.

Moreover, I would advise people to beware not to be too easily attracted by mysterious-sounding words whose meaning and value is far from clear.

(MK) And what about it's relevance to Budo and the Samurai?

(MH) Simply remember that samurai were warriors and consequently training in martial arts and techniques was a basic necessity for them. Soldiers need training, that's all.

(MK) What are your memories of Master Nakayama and would you care to just share a few memories of him with us from your time teaching alongside him?

(MH) There was a time, it is true, when I was close to him. It was the time when we taught the American Air force groups after the war.



My impression then was that he was not particularly special, just a karateka with some experience. So I do not really understand why the JKA later chose to turn him into some kind of demi-god.

(MK) You have previously said that Master Funakoshi's approach to karate was somewhat 'Gymnastic' rather than fighting. How do you think Master Funakoshi changed karate as a Martial and fighting art because of this approach?

(MH) O'Sensei's karate was really "gymnastics karate", and it was an opinion shared by many in Okinawa. But personally he sincerely thought that such was the true nature of karate, and he must be respected for this.

In fact the real initiator of change in Shotokan karate was Yoshitaka, something that at the time none of us was really conscious of.

(MK) Do you think karate has widely lost its functionality because of Master Funakoshi's approach?

(MH) What I express here is of course my personal opinion. But I do believe that what people constantly refer to as "real karate" is a myth that did not exist.

Okinawa's karate was basically kata and no one had in fact seen proof of this mythical or idealised karate so often mentioned. Even kumite then was nothing but bits of kata arranged for sparring and nothing more. And everybody in Okinawa, including Master Funakoshi, believed this was all there was to it.

But then, when O'Sensei taught us in Japan, most students weren't satisfied with what they were getting, and they started developing their own ideas. Consequently many different opinions and evolutions appeared, some mixing Jiu-Jitsu or other things to satisfy their needs. But again I repeat, none of this was O'Sensei's fault.

(MK) Master Egami and many of his peers did extensive research into the significance of relaxation in karate; research you yourself have been incredibly interested in. Would you please explain to us what your research has revealed and could you please talk us through your understanding of it?

(MH) As I said before, Master Funakoshi only taught kata, and many could not understand what was the meaning or use of it all. So, gradually, they started putting a lot of unnecessary tension or strain into the moves, believing that this way they would achieve greater power.

But when Mr Egami taught at the Nakano school he saw rapidly that it did not work as claimed in reality. Full power of the body could only be achieved with a relaxed body.

You know that ice is hard, but it can be broken by something harder. When it is changed into water it can be used to create steam and then achieve enormous power. So, do not give your body the rigidity of ice.

(MK) And did you develop any exercises that one could use to help better develop this relaxation, as I know so many karateka suffer with retained tension in their arms that limit their ability to relax.

(MH) I can't describe any particular exercise. It is through the whole approach of practice that you will gradually understand the meaning of relaxation, which, incidentally, implies flexible, 'active' muscles and joints, not emptiness or passivity.

(MK) Would you please explain to our readers the meaning of 'Hakkei'?

(MH) In the 1990s, the word came to the attention of Japan and the world and it became rather popular. Of course, originally it came from China and we haven't got an equivalent word in Japanese. But in Japanese martial arts the kind of power it implies did exist, even if it is not easy to describe with words.

Personally I experienced it for the first time in 1955, when I met and practised with Mr Okuyama before I left Japan for Brazil. He showed this kind of power in Oi-zuki.

It appeared at the time as a completely unusual and even eccentric approach of karate, but I can now identify it as Hakkei.

(Editor Note – 'Hakkei' has been a huge part of Sensei Harada's study of karate-do and was inspired by Yoshitaka Sensei. It has been translated by some as 'Special Energy' or 'Special Power'. Putting the concept into words can result in a bastardisation of its subtleties, but most easily explained it's the projection of energy without touching).

(MK) When commenting about you, it has been said that you are sensitive to the opponent's energy flows. Would you please explain what this means?

(MH) I wouldn't explain what happens as sensitivity to energy flows – I find it an unnecessarily abstract, even obscure expression. But more simply it is a sensitivity to the whole body action. And I think any further description would distort its nature. In fact, more than in the use of the word, it is only through practice that you can expect to grasp what it is.

(MK) You describe your body as an 'expanded balloon'. Would you please tell us what you mean by this?

(MH) This too is not easy to explain, because once more it is only through practice that you can get the idea and see the value of this image. Outside practice this image is indeed pointless.

(Editor's Note – In my research into what Sensei Harada means by this term 'Expanded Balloon' I read an article written by a senior student of Sensei Harada – Jonathan de' Claire. He explains that the energy comes from the ground upward. 'When the balloon is released, the muscle power surges forward unconstrained by tension'. This is a great explanation from de' Claire for such a complex concept. The full article can be found at www.karatedoshotokai.com)

(MK) How would you say Shotokan and Shotokai differ in approach would you say?

(MH) Shotokan and Shotokai are basically the same. We call our group Shotokai, but we still try to continue Yoshitaka and Egami's way, through improvement and evolution. That's all.

(MK) What is your favourite kata and why?

(MH) Of course it's a completely subjective appreciation, but my favourite kata is Empi, and this for the simple reason that it was the kata which allowed me to pass my shodan. Unfortunately, at my age it is a rather physically demanding and difficult kata to perform.

(MK) I was recently reading through Karate-Do Kyohan and studying the photographs of the kata demonstrated by Ohshima Sensei. In many ways the kata look very different to what so many people practice today. How important is it do you think to keep the kata as close to that practiced by Master Funakoshi, or do you think development and change is a positive thing in this respect?

(MH) This too is difficult to explain, but remember that O'Sensei approached kata mostly in terms of forms and postures. Mr Ohshima's performance of kata in the book shows his own body development, which is the by-product of his learning career. But if it comes to telling how he feels about it you must ask him personally.

(MK) Kata Application today is very high on the agenda of many of the top Martial Artists as they claim they are unlocking the secrets of the Masters. Did any of your seniors place much emphasis on kata application?

(MH) My personal opinion is that kata forms as they are do not work in reality. The whole point of the exercise is rather to train your body to adapt, to be flexible and capable of meeting any situation. So, it is a form of physical education, not just a collection of techniques to be used as such.

(MK) How would you say Shotokai is different today to what it was before the death of many great seniors?

(MH) I do not really know the meaning of Shotokai. To me it is a group name, but within this group many evolutions, distortions even, have appeared since its beginnings. So it is impossible for me to answer globally, for each instructor has his own perception of what practice should be.

(MK) Kanazawa Sensei during his prime would often perform selective board tamashii-wari, transmitting ki to the board he chose, leaving the surrounding boards undamaged. What significance does Ki have in your karate and what is your understanding if it?

(MH) I don't know the nature of Mr Kanazawa's performance; so I can't judge it. But my personal opinion is that one of karate's great mistakes was the too frequent use of tamashii-wari demonstrations. Because of these, everybody thought that it proved how strong karate was, thus contributing to the myth and clouding the reality of things.

If you want to read more about our view on this I refer you to Karate-Do Nyumon.

(MK) Am I correct in thinking that you have witnessed or experienced a no touch knock out? Could you please tell us about this and how would you explain how it happened?

(MH) Yes, it did happen, but honestly I can't explain the process in logical terms. In fact, to know how it feels you must ask my opponent. He might even tell you how and why he fell over, but I can't really describe it.

Remember that many people have seen apples falling from a tree, but Newton was the only one ever to translate that phenomenon into physics. In this case too, someone, some day, might provide a scientific explanation.

(MK) Where would you like to see Karate-Do heading in the future years and what kind of future do you think Traditional Karate has at a time of popularity of Sport Karate?

(MH) Each person practising karate has his or her own objective, whether it is sports karate or traditional karate. We can't arbitrarily reject one or the other. The important point is that each karateka must do his or her best to improve constantly in the way they have chosen.

(MK) Finally, can you please tell us where your current research is taking you and how has your understanding of Karate changed in recent years?

(MH) Change and development are essential to true practice. It is reminiscent of Hegel's dialectics: Do something and a question arises. Act again and another question arises. If you do not develop and evolve, it simply means that you do not practise really.

(MK) Any conclusive thoughts?

(MH) There is my consciousness or awareness of things, and your consciousness; the whole problem being how shall we communicate? I gave answers to your questions but that is not enough.

The whole problem in communication is that we need words to express ideas. But these very words are perceived differently by different people. My understanding and your understanding of the meaning of the words we used, the concepts we tried to describe may indeed be very different.

Words are too often sources of misconceptions, misunderstandings, which is why true communication in our case can only come through practice, through the body.

Pain is something you can describe at length, but until you have directly experienced it you do not know what it is.

So, for us physical contact is needed, which is why in fact I tend to dislike putting too many things in writing. Words may indeed be very dangerously misleading.

(MK) Can we say a big thank you for your time, and may we wish you the very best of luck in the future.

Words about the Master:

By Roy Margetts – Student of Sensei Harada

"I first started training back in the mid 1970's. At the time, there were numerous 'Karate' clubs springing up all over the place with little control over the level of instruction that was taking place. I feel really fortunate to have joined an organization with Master Harada as its principal.

"When I first saw Master Harada, I was totally amazed by his demonstrations. He would get his attacker to attack at full speed then seemingly effortlessly dispatch them. His timing, control of distance and the way he managed his body was and still is impeccable.

"I have also been very fortunate to practice on a 1:1 basic and experience first hand how dynamic his technique is. What has impressed me over the years is that when he makes contact there is no smashing and consequently no pain but the block is devastating, knocking you out of your posture sending you sprawling across the floor.

"Through these sessions, Master Harada would continually highlight my areas of weakness or development (*of which there were and are many*) encouraging me to continually research and improve subsequently ensuring that with your development he would also maintain and improve his level. He has and continues to use this approach with his senior group from both the UK and abroad always ensuring he always has a good partner and a good level of practice.

"In the years I have trained under his guidance, I have always found his approach practical and logical. He uses his knowledge and vast experience to great effect always advising students on how to improve and how to practice correctly. With these skills and his knowledge and understanding of people, he has become a truly inspirational master of his art."

