

Hanshi Paul Mitchell – Background & Thoughts on Karate

Please note: The following Q & A session is a set of edited extracts from interviews conducted with Impact Magazine (Issues 31 & 33 in 1995) and Blitz Magazine (Vol 10 no. 12 & Vol 11 No. 1 in 1996).

Sensei could you tell us a little bit about your background?

I grew up in Manchester, I wish I could say otherwise, but in the back streets of Manchester. Manchester is an old industrial city, there are some nice place and some not so nice places, but basically it's not the sort of place I am glad I grew up in. I think if I had a choice, growing up in Australia would have been far more preferable. I did my schooling in England and left when I was 17 for South Africa. I lived in South Africa from 17 through to the ago of thirty and then I came to Australia.

When did martial arts first come into play?

I started out doing boxing at school as a kid. I was at boarding school and did reasonably well in boxing but then I found the mysterious oriental martial art of Judo and started training with a Judo Sensei called Jackie Gleason, who went on to coach some of the British Olympians. So that is when I was first introduced to the martial arts.

I got involved in Judo and trained hard and enjoyed it as a young man. I started at 14 and in three years earned my black belt. However at the same time there was the whole Bruce Lee explosion and we were all looking for something. I started training at the Kyokushin school in Manchester that was associated with Steve Arniell, who in those days, I think, was a 3rd Dan. Our instructor was a green belt. He used to read Oyama Sensei book, Vital Karate and teach us in the evening. The book was always in the Dojo and as students we would look at the book and try to decipher what it was that Oyama Sensei was teaching.

In 1967 you went to train with Oyama Sensei in Japan, can you give us some reflections on your training with him?

I'd met Oyama Sensei the year before in South Africa and I thought the guy was awesome, he had great charisma. It didn't have to be pointed out that it was Oyama Sensei; you knew it was him and I was fortunate enough to be given permission to go and train with him in Japan. I graded to Shodan in Kyokushin under Oyama.

It was through Sensei Kimura that you were introduced to Shukokai, how did this come about?

I unashamedly went on a course with Sensei Kimura when he was only about 28, about 8 years older than me. He was hard, strong and fiercely independent. He had certain ideas about how to do things. Even though he was part of a large international organisation, he was fiercely independent in terms of where his technique was going - he was innovative. He introduced things like the impact pads that we use today as a way of testing technique. The important thing for him was the honesty of technique; he was a quietly spoken man. I can remember one time when he was asked to speak up he replied, "No, you just listen louder."

That was the way he was - he just did it his way and people were drawn to his technique.

Sensei was at his strongest when he was performing his technique, which he did constantly. I can tell you stories of times in restaurant when we were having dinner and suddenly he'd have everybody up doing something because he was trying to demonstrate a point. He was very impressive in terms of the execution of his technique, he was very impressive in terms of the way he applied his technique. He genuinely could fight and fight very well. So I think as a young man I trained with a hard man in terms of Oyama Sensei but realised at that stage that I could probably never train with him on an ongoing basis. Yet here was a man, (Sensei Kimura) who was all of a sudden very accessible, someone that I could spend a lot of time with and for the next 27 years that is what I did.

You are a direct student of Sensei Tani, under him you were the first Westerner to be graded to Shihan in Shukokai. Can you tell us about your time with Sensei Tani?

In 1978 I asked Sensei Kimura for his permission to travel to Kobe to work on certain elements of my Karate that I wanted to develop. I had been to Japan in 67' and I wanted to go back and do more training and Sensei Kimura quite happily gave me permission to train at the World Headquarters with Sensei Tani.

I must say that it was an awe-inspiring experience and an experience that I have tried to give to a number of my students since. Many of my senior students have trained and graded with Tani Sensei. To walk onto the floor of the Dojo where Kimura trained as a white belt, where Nambu started as a white belt where Yamada started as a white belt was quite an experience and gives me goose pimples thinking about it.

It was a tiny little dojo and Sensei Tani has an incredible presence. I was fortunate enough that he taught me personally. He obviously had some time and he was a hospitable man and here was me, at that stage a lowly Shodan and he spent a little time with me himself. There was never any conflict with Sensei Kimura with going back each year. A lot of 8th and 9th Dans are very guarded about their organisations, even within their organisations - Sensei Kimura never had a problem with that. I practiced his basics and kumite with every ounce of strength I had, but he was comfortable for me to train

with Sensei Tani and he was comfortable for me to learn a wide range of skills because Shukokai is more than one man. It was interesting looking at Sensei Tani when he trained, which he still did at 78. You could watch him train and see the same movement patterns where Kimura came from. You can see that family link and it is interesting when you look at it that you can see where the roots came from even though Kimura Sensei was so incredibly innovative.

What do you mean by traditional karate?

I don't believe there is any such thing as traditional technique. If we start talking about traditional technique that worked a thousand years ago or a hundred years ago as compared to today then I must say that in order to live a martial art must progress or it will die. What I mean by traditional karate is traditional values and morality, training values and training for the sake of training. The hard grind of training to improve yourself as a person, first physically and ultimately, internally. I don't believe that traditional means that your technique should remain the same forever. If it does it will finish up like tai-chi where once what was a martial art is now an art form. Traditional is really an attitude rather than a technique. It is important to keep that traditional attitude, whilst progressing technically.

Sensei Kimura was very adamant that you must maintain your roots and your link to the past, but he also said that your technique must be honest. Let me say also that karate isn't about style. You can go to any style and find people of tremendous stature, people of immense skill and courage. And this has nothing to do with style but with them as people. It's not the style, it's the person.

Take kata for example. People practice kata for the sake of learning numerous kata. Not to see what they can actually learn from it. Kata teaches balance, focus, concentration and it also teaches valid self-defense techniques. Over the centuries the masters had techniques that were tried and proven in combat, they put them together, logically and in fighting sequences. What you've got to do is study the kata properly and look at its portions and pieces, very often you'll find that they stand alone as valid techniques.

What the old masters did, of course is put together techniques that were related. So, for instance you'll have a kata that is largely dealing with close quarters fighting, you'll have another kata that deals with attacks from the side and another that deals with defenses against weapons. So the masters grouped together like techniques in kata. They are not designed to teach you how to fight multiple opponents in order. This is where many people fall short with kata.

What you have to look at within the kata are the fighting sequences and you have to study how to apply them in today's environment. If you are attacked in the street, you cannot defend yourself by using a pretty kata, but by using honest, valid technique. A fact that Sensei Kimura would constantly remind us of. So when you study kata you have to account for the realities of modern combat, including the closeness of the combat, the mobility of your opponent, clothing etc. All these things have to be taken into consideration when studying kata. So when you transpose from the reality of kata to the reality of modern combat you have to be creative. That is one reason we all need a teacher. There are some things you just can't discover for yourself without training for 30 or 40 years, so everybody does need a teacher.

What is the most valuable lesson you have learnt in your career?

That there is always room for improvement. That has affected my whole life, personal, business and training. Unfortunately it is a long-term lesson. Many of the lessons when we begin Karate are physical lessons – block, punch, move, fight. People ask me when are we going to get into the more internal things, and of course that starts from day one, particularly in traditional training. You discover who you are, your weaknesses and your strengths. You also reach a stage as a student and instructor where you believe that you have achieved a lot of your goals and there is not an awful lot of improvement to be done. But if you keep training you will come to the realization that regardless of how good you are, you know very little in terms of what there is to know. I suppose you get to the stage where you accept that you don't know everything and you are prepared to learn from people that you work with. The biggest lesson that I ever learnt was that you can learn from anybody.