

Karate's Master Class

Training with Masahiro Yanagawa

Written by Peter May (6th Dan)

Like many karate-ka, when looking back on my past, I recall many milestones in my karate career that have changed the way I think about things. These may have occurred at courses, tournaments, club fights or even my own training but regardless of the event it is the people, the individuals that I have met, who have inspired me to train harder or delve deeper into what I practise.

For me personally, the greatest milestones in my career have occurred when I have

been forced to question what I practice and why I practise as I do. In my forty plus years of training in karate I have had many teachers who have challenged me physically but only a handful who have managed to challenge me both physically and mentally. These individuals differ from what I call the 'factory manufactured karate instructor'; rarely does there come along a teacher who turns most of what you have learned upside down and leaves you questioning even the most basic concepts. One individual who did

just that was Masahiro Yanagawa (8th Dan, Wadokai).

It must be ten years ago that I heard Sakagami sensei first talk about Masahiro Yanagawa. "Yanagawa Sensei's Wado karate is different to the mainstream Wado. He seems to have reached another level both in technique and in his teachings". It wasn't long after that I acquired my first video footage of Yanagawa Sensei on which he explained, and demonstrated his theory on how to maximise the transfer of energy into an opponent and how to create the opening to knock an opponent out with one strike. To say it was entirely different to what I had seen previously would not be the complete truth but a lot of Yanagawa's explanations and demonstrations (including, amongst other things, detailing the penetrative angles of techniques), I had only come across once before. You really do have to be on the receiving end of one of his shots to fully appreciate the shock wave that goes through your body. I am not talking atemi point hitting against a compliant opponent, but how to use the transference of energy, whilst in motion, against someone of a decent calibre.

Yanagawa Sensei's Dojo, Suginame, Japan

It was to be August 2005, whilst visiting Japan for the World Wadokai Championships that I would have the chance to train at Yanagawa Sensei's Dojo along with Sakagami Sensei, Keith Walker, Steve Barber and Jamie Ellson. We visited him at his dojo in Ogikubo, Suginame on the outskirts of Tokyo.

Yanagawa Sensei's Dojo visit (Aug 2005)

Yanagawa Sensei was of small stature standing about 5' 4" and at the age of 68 his movement and entry to the technique was completely un-orthodox, yet seemingly



based on natural movement. When facing him the power and shock impact that he generated through his kicking and punching into the body, using the momentum generated by these uncanny body movements, was to be truly amazing. He stressed the use of internal mechanics and muscle, rather than external muscle in the 'making' and releasing of energy; in nature wild animals know how to do this naturally.

Although his group was quite small the quality of his students was extremely high,

with all of them punching and kicking tremendously hard. Throughout the visit his two top students Wantanabe Sensei and Moranaga Sensei demonstrated and explained the unique style of Yanagawa Sensei's Budo Karate.

Wantanabe Sensei's well developed knuckles gave away the many hours that he had spent facing the makiwara and conditioning his body in general. Moranaga Sensei showed a drill which demonstrated his amazing flexibility that

involved him squatting down in very low, wide shiko dachi with his backside lower than his knees. He then proceeded to kick mawashigeri to a punch bag without moving his centre of gravity or height; a drill you really have to try to appreciate its difficulty.

The 'Floating Step'

Yanagawa Sensei also demonstrated Ukemi which roughly translated means floating step. This drill had Sensei walking across the Dojo and over a kick pad placed on the floor. He would approach the pad and then, with both feet, he would stand on the pad without putting any weight onto it, resulting in no movement of the pad along the floor, and would then continue to walk on without breaking step. This was used to highlight the meaning behind his theory that in order to generate maximum power split second weightlessness is necessary to make use of the accelerations before reapplying the weight into the technique at the moment of impact. To achieve this 'weightlessness', at the moment of standing on the pad it was detailed that we should draw the body weight up into the body including the weight of the feet so for that split second we would 'levitate'. When our students tried this exercise some of them could recreate his movement with one foot, but with two it seemed impossible. Sensei then went on to show how he used Ukemi movement in both attack and defence.

In Conclusion

Now some students would say what and how Yanagawa Sensei and his students performed that evening boarded on mystical, all I can say is that he is a teacher and they are students who have dedicated their lives to training and developing Budo Karate and have truly mastered the bio-mechanics of what they practise. I feel Yanagawa Sensei's constant strive for all knowledge of Budo has certainly taken him to another level within the Wado Karate fraternity.

Yanagawa's UK visit, Nov 07

With the support of Wadokai England, Yanagawa Sensei will be visiting the U.K. in November 07 to perform and teach on a number of seminars. The courses will not be of the usual Wado type as they will go beyond style and will focus on giving the individual an insight into his budo karate. This course will be open to all styles and grades over the age of 16 years and the details will be published in Traditional Karate when they become available.



