

Introduction

This is the story about a journey towards mastery of traditional Karate in a style called Karatedo Doshinkan. "Style" is actually not a good description, because "Style" merely implies physical implementation. Properly understood and practiced, it is more than kicks, punches, kata, and sparring. It is about defense, not offense.

It is about being healthy, but more importantly, it ultimately is about character. It is a physical journey, but also a spiritual one.

A quick bio: as I write this I am 82 years old. I've been training for over 50 years in Doshinkan and have been awarded the rank of 9th Dan (Black Belt degree).

This is the highest degree given in Doshinkan, with our leader, our Hanshi, being the sole 10th Dan. After I'd been training for a few years, I thought I knew a lot. After all these years of dedicated training, I realize how little I know. That's not being humble, just aware.

Beginnings

I started Judo when I was about 14 after being bullied while playing basketball.

It wasn't a fight, but close, and I realized that while I was pretty good at basketball, I had no idea about how to defend myself. I lived in Brooklyn, NY. Back then, before Bruce Lee, there were no schools of martial arts. There was a new Judo school in Manhattan, the first one in the US outside of Hawaii, started by an ex-Marine who'd gotten his 1st Dan while stationed in Japan.

The instructors were Japanese, 'imported' from Japan. I trained there until I went away to college, and was lucky to discover an exchange student from Japan who was a 2nd Dan in Judo. We trained together, and ran classes.

When I moved to the Bay Area of California, I trained briefly in a number of different systems - both Chinese and Japanese. They were good schools, but I felt something missing, though I didn't know what. Then I found Doshinkan in 1974.

Doshinkan Karatedo

Bruce Lee had hit the screens and suddenly it seemed like everyone wanted to study karate. I was training with John Choi in Oakland, who held classes 6 days a week, with 3 classes in the evenings, and more during the day. There was a waiting list to become a student. Classes were physically and mentally grueling. Back then, we'd end the classes with sparring, but basics and kata were the main focus.

I'd been training for about a year when Hanshi Isao Ichikawa, 10th Dan, and the 'father' of Doshinkan, came to Oakland to teach some classes.

It's difficult to describe my experience in that first class. I am a sceptic, a rationalist, yet what I experienced I can relate but not explain. After strenuous warm-ups and basics, we did a kata called Saifa. I had learned the movements of this kata already, but what it was 'about' was mostly a mystery to me. Just a sequence of movements. Hanshi started the kata, slowly the first couple of times through. The 3rd time through, he transformed into what I can only describe as a field of energy. I became transfixed, no longer able to move, watching in disbelief. "That is what it is about" I thought, afterwards.

In later years, Isao Hanshi showed that kind of energy less and less. He said too many students were trying to mimic his energy when they should be paying attention to correct movement. Only after many years of training can they discover that kind of energy in themselves - movement that goes beyond the physical.

Hanshi Isao demonstrated many remarkable abilities over the years, abilities I would not have believed if I didn't see them. For those who had the fortune to spend a lot of time with him, you understand. For those who didn't, you wouldn't believe me. He died in 1996. I'm still working on what I learned from him.

After his death, Hanshi Nobuo Ichikawa, his brother, took over as head of Doshinkan. He lead until his death in 2019. He was a wonderful teacher, but I think illness stopped him from reaching his full potential, from demonstrating that part of himself that went beyond the physical.

We are now in our 3rd era, with Hanshi Masako. This is an exciting choice. In the few years since she has taken over, I have seen impressive growth, maturity, and wisdom. In some martial arts systems, kata are passed down as if written in stone.

It is sacred, no more to be changed than one would change a note Beethoven wrote. The great masters of the past kept changing parts of kata. Hanshi Isao Ichikawa continued that tradition, and made it part of Doshinkan - a practice followed by all the Hanshi's.

Summary

I've spent over 50 years in Doshinkan because of the influence of Hanshi Isao Ichikawa. I continue to be part of Doshinkan because the two Hanshi's that followed have remained true to the core of what he created. Training has kept me healthy, and just as important, it has influenced the kind of person I am - which I won't list because it might violate one the traits I try to follow - modesty. :-)