

Karate The Japanese Way

Reviewed by Edmond Otis

Amazing.

Just a few years ago, would anyone have thought that one of the most influential voices in the world of shotokan karate today would be that of Mark Groenwold?

Mr. Groenwold is a young Canadian professional, living, working and training in Kanazawa, Japan. He is the creator of the internationally popular karate website, www.KarateTheJapaneseWay.com, as well as the author of a great new karate book by the same name.

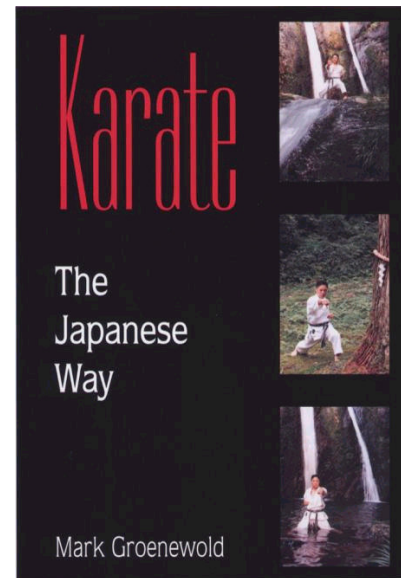
However, what is really interesting about Mr. Groenwold and the influence he has, is not who he is, but rather – *who he is not*.

Mr. Groenwold is not the chief instructor, technical director, or president, of a new international karate organization. He is not a current, former, or repeat world karate champion. He is not the coach of a karate dynasty. He is not the sole direct descendent (genetically or philosophically) of either Funakoshi or Nakayama. He has not had a tremendous impact on the way karate has developed, is practiced, or is taught. He does not have millions of students. He has not started his own style, nor has he decoded ancient kata secrets in startling new ways. He does not profess to be an expert.

As far as I can tell (we have not met, but we have exchanged a few notes back and forth) Mr. Groenwold is simply an advanced karate student, who after several years of practice continues to love karate, and who has a desire to share what he has learned, and what he has figured out, with others. He does this with great success on the Internet, and now in book form.

Well, then, what is the source of Mr. Groenwold's *influence*? And what specific influence is he having?

Clearly, much of his influence can be attributed to good timing. Mr. Groenwold, his site, and his book, come along at a point where there is a proliferation of competing world shotokan karate organizations, many of which are led by wonderfully skilled, honest to god, genuine, world-class experts. There is also an even greater number of strongly held theories about what the art is, and what it should be. Clearly, for better or worse, the day of one infallible Shotokan gospel is gone for good. It is not coming back. In real terms this means that the more



organizations there are, the less influence they have, either individually or collectively.

Additionally, the Internet exposes modern karate-ka to an endless stream of opinions and ideas regarding our art and our teachers; some profound, and some (to be charitable) not – but all delivered with an equal amount of credibility. Unfortunately, since this “virtual karate dojo” has no accountability, this potential educational tool is frequently faddish, fickle and riddled with what is really nothing more than gossip. It is an electronic world populated by voices that range from obsequious sycophants espousing “the real truth”, at one extreme, to vitriolic revolutionaries intent on hunting down and killing every “sacred cow” that ever existed – except their own, on the other.

Combine these two realities and we get what I think of as today’s *Shotokan World Dojo* – a chaotic, worldwide, *non-organization*. This disconnected group is populated by numerous independent dojo’s of varying sizes (what today’s associations have really become), and a multitude of free floating un-affiliated karate-ka. Most of these refusing to associate with the other, and all with varying levels of loyalty (or deep seated resentments) towards their own instructors.

Which brings us back to the influence of Mr. Groenwold and “Karate The Japanese Way”. In the midst of all this chaos, his work makes a tremendous contribution, and stands out boldly from the pack for two unique reasons.

First, simply because he is RATIONAL. The information he presents is informative, and accurate, without being dogmatic.

Second and perhaps more importantly, because Mr. Groenwold writes with a voice that we do not hear very often. Members of the great amorphous *Shotokan World Dojo*, I describe above, really don’t need another senior karate instructor to tell them right from wrong as much as they desperately need what Mr. Groenwold has become – a really outstanding senpai.

As many of us forget, the senpai plays a valuable and critical role in any and all good dojos. For students, the senpai is frequently a safe harbor that allows them the space and sanctuary to integrate many of the apparent paradoxes of karate practice into a level of visceral and intellectual understanding. For instructors, the senpai is often an honest reflection of the karate and values they are teaching to their students.

In Chapter One of his book, Mr. Groenwold describes the senpai’s role in this way, “... the *senpai* looks after the *kohai*, lends a listening ear, and a guiding and protective hand.” He continues later with, “...the senpai serve the kohai, they help them, and they do whatever they can to encourage and uplift them in improving

their karate.” And that is exactly and precisely what Mr. Groenwold does, with good humor and sound reason, throughout entire text of *Karate The Japanese Way*. Whether Mr. Groenwold is writing about techniques, principles, customs, traditions, the dojo culture, Tanaguchi Sensei (his beloved instructor), or simply sharing his observations about karate, he manages to reflect an optimism and enthusiasm in his critical analysis of the art that every member of the *Shotokan World Dojo* needs to hear.

Clearly *Karate The Japanese Way*, was initially intended for those who are new to the art, or are curious about how closely their dojo resembles a Japanese dojo. However, it presents something of deep value to everyone (teacher and student) who reads it – a spirit and appreciation of karate-do that is expressed all too infrequently.

Aside from all the valuable information and insights that are contained in, *Karate The Japanese Way*, I was left with one overriding thought as I finished this book – how fortunate Mr. Groenwold is to have found Tanaguchi Sensei, of Kanazawa, Japan, to be his instructor and guide in learning karate. And, conversely, how fortunate Tanaguchi Sensei is to have Mr. Groenwold as his student.



Reviewer:

Edmond Otis – 7th dan, has practiced Shotokan karate since 1967. He is Chairman and Chief Instructor of the American JKA Karate Association (AJKA) and Director of Martial Arts at the University of California, Riverside. Sensei Otis is featured in the international video series, “Essential Shotokan”, and is co-author of, “The Complete Idiots Guide To Karate”. He can be reached by visiting www.AmericanJKA.com