

EDMOND OTIS

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EDMOND OTIS, 7th dan, is Chairman and North American Chief Instructor of the American JKA Karate Association-International (AJKA-I). He began training in 1967, under the leadership of JKA legend, Hidetaka Nishiyama. At 18, he moved to Riverside, CA, to become a full-time student of former AJKA chief instructor, Ray Dalke, 8th, then one of only three non-Japanese graduates of the prestigious (USA) JKA instructor's training program. Presently, in addition to teaching at his dojo in Carlsbad, CA, and at the University of California, Riverside, Sensei Otis travels throughout North America and Europe conducting instructor seminars and clinics on all aspects of Shotokan karate. He serves as the Pan American Chairman of WUKO - The World Union of

Karate-do Organizations, which he describes as a oasis of sanity in the, often irrational, world of international karate competition. Sensei Otis is co-author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Karate*, and is featured in the outstanding video/book series, *Essential Shotokan*.

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QUESTION: What makes karate special for you?

OTIS: There are so many ways you can look at karate, and so many aspects you can emphasize, but fundamentally, karate is a form of emergency training - a way of preparing ourselves to face unexpected events, difficult challenges, and dangerous or life threatening situations. Now, with the martial arts this usually means the threat of physical assault. But really, in the teaching methodology and effect on human psychology, it is fundamentally no different then the goals of other types of emergency training; police and fire personal, pilots and military personal, emergency medical responders, elite competitive athletes, and to lesser degrees, business people, dancers, musicians, actors, parents, and so on...

QUESTION: Can you explain a little more about what you mean?

OTIS: The challenge to anyone who is dealing with any type of true emergency is universal. Our best chance for success or survival depends on our ability to **be our best** - when we really need to **do our best**. Done well, that is exactly what karate prepares us to do, and asks us to do, each and every time you walk onto the floor of your dojo. That's why karate is so challenging, often difficult, and ultimately so satisfying.

Specifically, so that we can be spontaneous and effective, karate training, like other types of emergency training requires us to do 3 interrelated things. First, we must *learn actual skills*. If we don't have good skills and techniques, and drill them until we can do them in our sleep - we have nothing. Second, we must develop our *spirit*. I think of spirit as the ability to create energy. Not when we feel like it, but more importantly, when we don't - when we're scared, or angry, or tired, or injured, or confused, or overwhelmed. Third, it teaches us to develop *self-control* - the ability to control our emotions so that we can be selective and expert in the application of our spirit and technique - at the moment of truth. Only when we balance these three tasks, can we consistently **be our best** - when we really need to **do our best**.

If we look at the world around us, we see that this is the ultimate life lesson. A person who can integrate skill, spirit and self-control can do anything, overcome any challenge, achieve any goal.

Also, and this I find fascinating, think about your own training and the whole concept of "perfecting the character". The dojo really is the perfect environment to develop our strengths and strengthen our weaknesses. One thing I've noticed about training is that the most difficult challenges we face on the floor, is always representative of the most important personal challenges we face in "real life". It's like a living 3-d Rorschach test. The timid struggle with learning to become bolder, the explosive - to be more patient, the hothead - calmer, the scattered - more precise, and so on. Look closely. This is true for the beginner as well as for the most advanced instructor. There are no secrets on the floor. We are the sum of our strengths and weaknesses. We are naked. Everyone knows everything.

QUESTION: How did you get started in Karate, and what your early experiences were?

OTIS: I started training in 1967, when I was twelve years old. At the time you didn't see kids doing karate; in fact, I was the only one I really ever saw. I started out with a club in Santa Barbara that was a member of Nishiyama's organization who was in Los Angeles. I wasn't very good at the beginning but I trained as much as I could. It hooked me. In fact, most Fridays through high-school, I'd sneak my gi out of the house, hitchhike to LA, and spend the day training and hanging out at the dojo. When I was 18 I moved to Riverside, CA, and began training full time with Nishiyama's senior student at that time, Ray Dalke, who remains one of the best instructors I have ever seen.

I've trained consistently since that time. As I said; there weren't any other kids training at that time, and it took me a while to get the 'knack' of it. I don't think anybody really cared if I stayed or went, or certainly about my "self-esteem". Most dojos were populated by working guys, cops, hippies, and Vietnam veterans. Their culture, and certainly their "business model", was not about accommodating children. Nobody went out of the way to get rid of me, but nobody made any effort to keep me there.

I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but when I was 14-15 it took me four examinations to get my brown belt, my third kyu, I just kept failing. Then it took me four times to get my shodan, I'm sure I was terrible. But then, something seemed to click. Maybe it was because the worse I did, the more I practiced, but I received my nidan just three months after I received my shodan. And then I got my sandan in 1978, which was about two years after I received my nidan. All from Nishiyama.

Sensei Dalke's Riverside dojo had a very strong reputation at the time, and we were fortunate enough to have Nishiyama's other senior student, Frank Smith (who had won the JKA Nationals 7 years in a row, and the best overall practitioner I have ever known) train us 2-3 times a week for about 12 years. Although to be honest, we didn't feel that lucky at the time. Except for a core of four or five of us, I don't think we had anyone stay with our team for more than a few months, or 2-3 years, at the most. We pretty much drove them out.

QUESTION: Can you tell us a little about how you view Shotokan.

OTIS: One of the things that I learned earliest at the time our dojo was in direct competition with Nishiyama's dojo, was that you don't have to be Japanese to practice a good level of karate. Karate is a human art, with a Japanese origin. But the principles we find in karate you can find in a variety of cultures. You know, the self-discipline, the need for integrity, the work ethic, the need to control and better yourself, the respect of experience and hierarchy. These things are found in all successful cultures and organizations. With good instruction, and strong internal motivation, anyone can do good karate.

I would say that the essential element of the Shotokan style of karate is that we really have no style. Shotokan Karate is very simple, very basic, very direct. I always say 'there's nothing better than good shotokan, but nothing worse than bad than shotokan'. Because if you don't have good fundamentals, good timing and a well developed sense of distance, and the ability to focus your techniques - you'll be in trouble, because we don't really have a lot of gimmicks to fall back on. Shotokan is very simple. It's not very fancy, not very elaborate. You walk out, you bow, you do your kata and you go home. Its beauty lies in its simplicity.

The style depends heavily on the immediate application of fundamentals, but that's also what makes it practical. In a real emergency situation, and I'm not just talking about in karate, I'm talking about anything from law enforcement to medical emergencies. If something happens, the only thing that guarantees your survival is how good your fundamentals are, and how immediately and effectively you apply them. The truth is, if you have time to dazzle your opponent with all the fancy techniques you have - you aren't in a self defense situation - you're just slapping some guy around. It's self defense, when you don't know the outcome, and here is true danger, real risk, if you fail to respond in the right way.

QUESTION: After that long in karate, does anything still surprise you.

OTIS: I think the fact that still, after all this time, the large and small karate politics remains relatively unchanged, unproductive, and silly. I don't know, maybe it's just human nature, or as I said earlier, the fact that our weaknesses in a dojo get worked out in public. On the individual level, we see instructors acting as if they are lords of the manor, **forbidding** students from going out and seeing other instructors, tournaments or interpretations of the art we all practice. How can one adult, in this day and age, tell another adult, that they "**forbid**" them to go out and do something? I don't know if these instructors realize, but most of the students see it for what it is - insecurity, and although they put up with it out of a sense of loyalty and a desire not to "upset the apple cart", they know that it is really just silly.

You know, people stay loyal to their instructors for a lot of different reasons. I have a lot of students who have been with me since they were seven or eight, and I encourage them to go and train with as many different shotokan instructors as possible. If they go see somebody who's good, they learn something and bring it back with them. If they see someone who isn't as good, they realize it and feel lucky that they have it good where they are. Either way it's a win-win for them, me, and our dojo or association. Students don't stay with an instructor or a dojo simply because of the class he teaches, or because it never occurred to them that there might be someone else with something to offer.

Do you have Children?

QUESTION: Yes. Two

OTIS: It sort of reminds me of when my thirteen year old boy comes home every now and again and he says "I wanna go over Johnny's house to play", or, "I've been invited over to a friend's for dinner". It would be so silly for me to not let him go over there just in case he might like that family better than he likes our family

On a larger scale we see the same type of thinking with many of our large national organizationally, often leading to traumatic and acrimonious predatory wars over athletes who end up being pulled back and forth like puppets. Unlike, professional sports, one group or another, does not own our country's karate athletes, and it really doesn't help our athletes, or our national performance for them to act as if they do.

That's why I am so happy to be part of WUKO. It presents an even playing field, and while the AJKA concentrates entirely on producing and fielding the best US ippon fighters we can, we also actively help top level US sanbon fighters from across the nation get a chance to experience as much international competition as possible.

My own personal organizational mission statement seems to have finally evolved to - life is too short, karate should only be hard on the floor.

QUESTION: a while ago you made an interesting statement for a shotokan instructor, "There is nothing better than good shotokan karate and nothing worse than bad shotokan karate." Could you explain that statement?

OTIS: All of the traditional martial arts approach both the "Do" and "jutsu" of their art from a specific, philosophical and physical perspective. As we progress, we develop more depth, greater skills, greater fluidity, and greater fluency in our ability to understand and use the art. But the essential principles that are unique to that art remain the same. Sometimes I think karate-ka, and especially shotokan stylists, lack an appreciation for what is special about our art. For example, most judo practitioners can tell you that the underlying maxim of judo is "minimum effort, maximum results." In the same way, most aikido practitioners know that their art is about harmonizing with, and redirecting their opponent's force. What's shocking to me is that many, many, karate-ka lack an essential understanding of what karate's underlying principle, or goal, is.

QUESTION: And that is?

OTIS: Although we use throwing and restraints, karate is fundamentally a percussive or impact art. First and last, we strike our opponent. But the art isn't simply about hitting things ... any more than playing a drum is just about using sticks to make a lot of noise. Karate is always about timing and distance. It is always about our relationship to our opponent. My view is that ultimately karate is about striving to be at our best, our most focused, our most balanced, our most dynamic ... precisely at the moment our opponent is at his weakest. We seek to find and attack the momentary lapses in the opponent's physical and mental attention. Of all karate styles, JKA-style shotokan seems to focus on this principle almost to the exclusion of anything else. When one style of karate is compared to another, what you usually see is that the shotokan stylist is the least flamboyant stylist. Our kata are relatively simple, our strategies are fairly straightforward and our training depends heavily on the endless repetition of very basic techniques. In a sense, our style has no style. There's a great scene in the first *Indiana Jones* movie in which a huge warrior swinging a big sword in an elaborate pattern confronts the hero. Without missing a beat, Indiana Jones pulls out a 45, shoots the guy, puts his gun away and goes on with his business. I see that as a very shotokan moment. Basically, we [shotokan stylists] really seem to concentrate on just three things: The quality of our technique or our ability to focus and to make [or create] shock with our techniques; second, our sense of timing and our use of distance is third. That's it. The trouble is, if we don't do our homework and if we don't study the dynamics of our techniques and stances adequately, we really have nothing fancy to hide behind. Shotokan karate can then become very stiff and very awkward. In that case, it's and not very effective. Although it is stereotyped as a "hard style," the best shotokan stylists understand the fundamental principles of the system in a way that lets them be fluid and soft whenever they are not hitting their target. They must understand both focus and zanshin.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit more about the idea of focus, or kime, as it relates to karate?

OTIS: Clearly there's nothing so special and unique in karate that we don't see examples of it everywhere in our daily life. The martial arts shouldn't make you different than normal, but rather "extra-normal". If we look at something like focus, where the idea is, "how much shock, how much force, can I generate to a specific surface area in as short a period of time as possible", we may say, "man! that's amazing." But really, we do this all of the time. If you chop wood, you hold the axe in your hands, and begin to chop, and your body naturally learns to experience focus. If you hit it wrong, the axe vibrates in your hand - causing you to absorb, rather than transfer the shock. If you do it correctly, your body collapses around it, and you're able to make your body dense at just the right time - causing you to "focus" the shock in a way that is very productive, because shock actually leaves your body by going out the blade of the ax.

QUESTION: How does that relate to the idea of zanshin?

OTIS: Zanshin is about being calm and comfortable enough to allow your technique (and focus) to finish naturally, and then, at the right time, move on. In a way it necessitates a total elimination of anxiety or unnecessary emotional chaos at the point that you are engaged in action. When we talk about focus and zanshin its very possible that we're talking about what sport psychologists have been calling, "being in the zone", for years. This basically means that you are so immersed in the activity that you lose awareness of past and future. You're not doing the activity for the result, but for the exhilaration and satisfaction of the moment. It's very meditative. Psychologically and physiologically, that

is the one experience that our body craves most - the feeling of being in the moment. Because if you think about what's going to happen, that's just anxiety and stress. If you worry about what happened or how good you were, that limits you and it makes you stumble. But if you're in the zone and you're so immersed in the technique, when you're done with it, you are able to move on to the next technique - without looking back.