



Connecting to the Source

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Since the day I began training in martial arts I have felt a calling to make a pilgrimage to the source of my chosen martial discipline. I believe that, at least once in a lifetime, everyone who truly embraces the essence of Karate-do must visit Okinawa. With great respect to the various instructors and mentors who have guided my development in the martial arts, my pilgrimage has been one of self-discovery and purification. I have felt it necessary in many aspects of my life to systematically remove the filters that my parents, teachers and instructors have unintentionally and without ill-intention passed on to me. While respecting the direction and influence of these people in my life I have found it necessary to also test and verify that what is presented as “truth” is indeed true since many of our beliefs tend to be based more on assertion or inference than known fact. Tell me the tea cup is too hot to pick up and I’ll probably grab it – not out of disrespect, but in recognition of everyone’s fallibility (my own included). Tell me I can’t finish a marathon in under 3:30:00 and, you guessed it, I’ll train to pace at 3:25:00. So why is this pilgrimage so important to me? Because going to the source makes my training more personal. I want my senior instructors to compliment my development, not define it. I want a personal relationship with the source of Karate-do. I want to see pictures of the Hombu Dojo and know that my sweat pooled on its deck as my kiai echoed from the walls. I want to know that my image of highly effective technique is accurate – not because of a story or video from some far off seminar – but because I saw and felt it demonstrated five feet in front of me by the highest possible authorities on the subject. This has been my calling.

Last year, with the help and influence of those who organized the 2010 WMKA International Seminar, I answered my call. I made my pilgrimage and feel a new birth of development growing from within. Despite a Dan promotion and much advancement in my technical understanding of Matsubayashi-Ryu, the lasting effect has been one of cleansing and purification. Like the brand new Shureido Gi I purchased in Naha City (gotta love it!) I feel my training slate is clean. My obi feels as stark white as the first day I ever wore a gi. I am renewed with that sense of childlike amazement with the Way and the gung-ho attitude toward training typically exhibited only by youthful beginners. Last year I answered the calling; and oh how God and the universe reward those who answer a calling!

The Training

For most, and I am no exception, the top priority while in Okinawa is to train. The seminar as well as open hours at the Hombu Dojo afforded much training time. Training included Kata, Basic Bunkai, Ura Waza (“back” or hidden techniques), Yakusoku Kumite and Kobudo. (I would be remiss if I did not also note the many impromptu technique demonstrations and “learning moments” occurred after the formal seminar sessions ended; with surprisingly few resulting in injury or property damage.). Most of

the training was covered during the seminar and came directly from Soke Nagamine. However, the Kobudo was provided by instructors and seminar participants who routinely dedicate a significant portion of their training time to these ancient Okinawan weapons forms.

Kata was my primary focus during this trip. If you have read my other writings and trained with me you already understand that I consider kata the core of my martial way. I take it with me everywhere and utilize it as a source of total wellness. In seminar sessions we covered Fukyugata Ichi, Fukyugata Ni, Pinan Shodan, Pinan Nidan, Pinan Sandan, Pinan Yondan, Pinan Godan, Ananku, Wankan, Rohai and Chinto. The rest of the kata (Wanshu, Passai, Naihanchi, Kusanku) were practiced at Hombu dojo during regular classes and informal gatherings. I have



The Okinawa Budokan Training Hall where the seminar sessions were held

trained long enough to know that none of my kata is ever error free. As the senior instructor at my home dojo, though, it is rare to receive the watchful eye of someone who can expand my awareness to my errors. The group kata training was meaningful for me for two reasons. First, I appreciated the fact that in the WMKA all Dan ranks share a productive sense of humility. When questions arise about movement details and applications we all work together to gain deeper understanding and get the questions answered. Throughout the week I never encountered what I describe as “ego issues” on the Karate deck. Second, it is always amazing to me how well-communicated the kata appear to be in Matsubayashi-Ryu. While there are some differences (and, for some, the urge to shout “that’s the wrong way to do that!”) the level of consistency in kata practice is nothing short of incredible. Even though we are all separated by thousands of miles, cultural and language differences and the error inherent in the passing of verbal knowledge from human to human; the basic movements and interpretation of kata are quite consistent. This portion of the seminar and training provided a strong sense of community and connectedness with the world. To me, this portion of the training, while valuable to my technical advancement, was most valuable as a demonstration of O’Sensei’s vision for world peace through Karate-Do.

Review and practice of Basic Bunkai was also covered. This was shown and practiced for the Fukyugata as well as several Pinan Kata. The Basic Bunkai are relatively simple and elementary interpretations of kata; often modified from the true interpretation to suit the constraints of public demonstration.



Specifically, techniques that involve joint locks, throws or other such entanglements with the attacker are largely eliminated in the Basic Bunkai deferring to simple blocks in order to allow the demonstration to flow smoothly. These are still useful not only for demonstration but for initial training in timing and distancing.



More advanced kata interpretations, referred to as *ura waza* (“back” or hidden techniques) were shown as well. Soke demonstrated some practical interpretations from Pinan Shodan, Pinan Yondan, Ananku and Kusanku among others. Though typically these techniques are practiced only by the senior Dan ranks at seminars, the mats were opened to everyone as the afternoon progressed. Again the spirit of hard training and humility surfaced as practitioners of various Dan levels shared tips and

assisted others in learning the applications. It was evident that we had all come to learn. Participants of every skill level appeared to capture something useful out of the experience whether it be a new technique, new perspective or simply the pleasure of training hard with two hundred or more dedicated karateka.

For many WMKA dojos the practicing of Yakusoku Kumite is a core element of training. All levels of practitioners from the earliest kyu ranks to the advanced dan ranks utilize these pre-arranged sets of attack and defense which were originally choreographed by O’Sensei Shoshin Nagamine. Over the years some minor changes have been made to these exercises. A periodic review in venues such as an international seminar is appropriate and very useful to maintain consistency and a common understanding of the essence of Matsubayashi-Ryu. The review of Yakusoku Kumite, like the review and practice of Kata, revealed how effective the current leaders in WMKA have been in accurately passing down effective technique. With few exceptions the direction from Soke focused more on refinement of technique than on the correction of gross errors.

For me, all of these sessions provided a strong sense of connectedness with the origins of Matsubayashi-Ryu. More than ever I feel responsible for the preservation of the style as a complete fighting art. This is something that I must maintain not just for myself and my benefit, but for the benefit of future generations. It’s truly the least I can do in return for those that have done the same for me.

It was fascinating to see the level of Kobudo practice among Matsubayashi-Ryu practitioners. Although I have not ventured beyond the basics of only two Kobudo weapons, I appreciate the value that Kobudo provides to the martial artists’ development. This is another area where I observed open and enthusiastic sharing and learning. With the limited or non-existent documentation of many Kobudo kata and applications, it is an area that is much more prone to inconsistency and varying schools of thought. Despite this propensity, the lead practitioners in Kobudo within the WMKA continue to strive toward preserving and maintaining a common set of Kobudo fundamentals and kata. It was fun to watch not only the exchange of ideas, but the demonstration of some very powerful and artistic technique.

Although each of these training experiences was memorable and rewarding, I felt the most benefit from spending time training at Hombu Dojo. For years I've imagined myself on that tiny section of pine floor captured in black & white in my worn copy of *The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do*. In this rare circumstance, the act



surpasses the anticipation as well as the memory of it. Two and a half hours of the steady rhythm of kata, continuous flow of sweat and the sweet smell of rain wafting across the deck (it was definitely “stay indoors” weather outside); I can imagine neither a topical beach nor a meditation chamber that could provide similar comfort to my soul. That’s all I have to write about that...

The Travel

Part of what makes a pilgrimage a major event is the travel. Really, how less significant would the trip be if it were just an hour drive away? The fact that the journey is in some way a challenge increases the destination’s value.

Time and money are the two most common challenges to making a trip such as this. As I’m sure everyone can relate to these in some way I also understand that each may pose more or less of a challenge to each individual. As a frequent business traveler I am fortunate to have accumulated sufficient frequent flyer miles to make my plane ticket “free.” However, with an already busy travel schedule and a wife and three young kids at home making the time for this trip was a challenge. I found it a useful part of the experience for me to coordinate this trip with the other priorities in my life. My wife understands the role Karate-do plays in my life and has always been enthusiastically supportive of my lifelong training. Without going into the personal details I can tell you that, for me, this trip had a significant positive impact on my appreciation for both the time I spend with my family and the mutually supportive relationship I share with my wife. Dealing with the challenges of time and money have proven to be, much like continuous Karate-do training, a means to eliminating self-limitations and improving quality of life in all aspects. I believe that how we each deal with the challenge determines, in part, the value of the experience.

There is one more thing I must mention about the travel to Okinawa and that is the food. It is apparent to me that while the cost of living seems a bit higher than my neck of the woods, the taste of the food more than makes up for it. There are three items I tasted in Okinawa that left a permanent impression on my memory. Most people who like to eat Japanese food can tell the difference between “good” and “bad” sushi. There are two elements that go into the quality of sushi – the raw materials (pardon the pun) and the skill of preparation. I can say without a doubt that the best sushi I ever ate was in a small sushi bar about two blocks from Hombu. The second notable taste experience, and this stands to reason, was a wonderful cup of sake. Since I am not trained



as a sake aficionado I will not attempt to describe the flavors in words, but rest assured that it was superior to any sake I've ever tasted before. It was fresh, clear and crisp and elevated the sushi experience from culinary delight to near culinary nirvana. I remember thinking, "It's like they were meant to be enjoyed together!" The third and final gustatory memory for me requires some explaining. Now, I typically pay close attention to my diet. As a martial artist and triathlete I know well the detrimental effects that fatty, processed foods can have on body function. These facts notwithstanding, I enjoy a McDonald's cheeseburger from time to time...at least I did. Now every time I taste one I can only wish it was as good tasting and well-prepared as the one I shared with my brother in Okinawa. The quality of meat, the precision of its preparation, the cleanliness and attention to detail of the establishment were beyond impressive. It's like walking into a McDonald's commercial; the food even looks exactly like the pictures on the wall.

The Socializing

Getting together with almost two hundred fellow karateka guarantees two things; there will be kata practice and, afterwards, someone will offer to buy you a beer. What luck to be in Okinawa where one of the best-tasting lagers is brewed; Orion Beer. I must reveal at this point that I am a beer enthusiast. I sample local brews whenever I travel and even brew my own beer at home. The fact that Orion was so well-liked by many of us training together facilitated rapid agreement on social destinations and hours of cheerful conversation.



My first taste of Orion was at a place we came to call "Hombu Bar" during our time in Naha City. It is adjoined to the Nagamine Hombu Dojo and makes for a convenient place to stop in after a hard workout. The food there is light and made-to-order; primarily rice and hibachi-grilled skewers of meat and vegetables. The cozy (some may call it confined) space, friendly service, melodic tone of traditional Okinawan music and of course the endless frosty mugs of Orion combined to create an oft repeated and fondly remembered experience.

The socializing highlighted for me the truly international and borderless bond that we share as Karateka. I enjoyed making friends from all over the world who, if not for Karate-do, I likely would never have had the pleasure of meeting. Not only did I meet many interesting and truly cheerful people, but the common experience of the seminar facilitated a rapid progression through the initial stages of friendship. While I must also give some credit to the social lubricants in play, I believe that the primary reason for the development of such rapid bonds is the fact that dedicated training in Karate-do builds a similar set of beliefs among karateka. We tend to accept people for who they are, not what we wish they were, and this definitely makes it easier to get to know and appreciate others. I may be wrong about this, but this is the way I experienced the week.



The Take-Aways

I have spent over two months reminiscing on the Okinawa trip before completing this very brief memoir. I have attempted to highlight the key parts of the experience that left a lasting impression on me. More than the memories are the beliefs that have been created and/ or reinforced through the experience. I have several take-aways that are meaningful to me and that I think are worth sharing.

- I used to believe that large classes or groups practicing together makes Karate-do training less personal, more generic or even “watered-down.” Since this trip I have come to believe more and more that training with others and inviting others into developing your technique actually makes Karate-do more personal.
- I have never measured the value of a seminar by the number of hours of instruction I received. As subjective as it is, my measure for a successful event is how I feel when it is done. This trip reinforced for me that the value of life’s experiences cannot be measured in hours, objects or dollars.
- If you must eat at McDonald’s, do it in Okinawa.
- Never say, “Ichiban Orion oneigashimas,” when it’s just as easy to say, “Niban Orion oneigashimas!”

Domo arigato gozaimas,

-Don Seiler

