

Japan Tour 2007

by Richard Kay, Goju-Kensha Karate-do

2007 saw another fantastic trip to Japan to train at the Goju-Kensha hombu dojo in Tokyo. Of significance was that this trip consisted only of the 4 founding members of the newly established Goshu Karate-do Yonshin Kai – John Forza, Frank Gullone, Les Potter and Richard Kay. However, the formation of a new training group was to pale in comparison compared with what awaited us during this trip.

As per usual, our training itinerary was negotiated and decided upon well before we arrived in Japan. For this tour, the focus of our training was to be:

- *Jitte* kata - new
- *Naifanchi* kata - revision
- *Sochin* kata -revision
- *Unsu* kata - revision

In addition to kata training, Ohtsuka Sensei also included:

- Advanced hip movement from Higa Yuchoku
- Power development through *makiwara* training
- Advanced *tenshin-ho* exercises
- Study of key combative principles



Obviously, quite an exhaustive schedule for 5 days of training, but Ohtsuka Sensei has a unique way of transmitting information in a very concise and efficient manner.

We arrived in Japan on a Thursday in April, with training due to commence on the Sunday. With 2 days to ourselves, we quickly settled in and acclimatized ourselves to the pace of Tokyo. All of us have been to Japan at least twice before, so this wasn't much of an issue. The gyoza and asahi went down nicely.

On the Saturday evening prior to training we met with Ohtsuka Sensei and senior dojo members, including Suzuki Sensei (8th dan), Miyasaka-san (7th dan) and Oshima-san (5th dan 'dojo chief') and Sakai-san (4th dan and our interpreter for the trip), for a pre-planned dinner celebration which we had arranged. Offering to take the Japanese out for dinner in their city can sometimes prove to be an expensive affair, but we had a wonderful reunion meal, and bonds of friendship were re-established quickly. Of course, the beer, sake and Chinese plum brandy helped a bit! We spoke of our new venture and Ohtsuka Sensei was very enthusiastic about the concept, even to the point of providing a name for our endeavour – Goshu Karate-do Yonshin Kai, the Yonshin Kan being our dojo name. He also generously offered the services of his instructors should we require them in Australia, and welcomed us back for regular visits to study at the hombu in the future. Of course we accepted!

The training started the following day, with 2 intense classes per day for 3 days, a day's break and then another 2 days. We started, as always, with revision of *Naifanchi* kata with Suzuki Sensei. Every time we train in Japan, we revise *Naifanchi* kata, a point that shows how much importance Ohtsuka Sensei places on this kata for correct development of form and power in budo. Suzuki Sensei is a specialist in Shuri-te, having training with Higa Yuchoku Sensei extensively, even to the point where he claims he no longer practices Goju Ryu or Nei Chia...he focuses entirely on Higa Sensei's Shuri-te (both Ohtsuka Sensei and Suzuki Sensei have been awarded Hanshi from Higa Sensei).

The focus of *Naifanchi* this year was the use of an advanced type of hip movement developed by Higa Sensei. Called 'tama *tanden*', the concept revolves around the 'idea' of visualizing a ball in your centre. Power is generated by 'moving' the ball, from side to side, revolving, tilting, etc, as appropriate to the technique. This method was quite unusual and took a bit of getting used to, but once we caught on it became quite natural and very powerful.

This 'concept' was developed further as we learnt *Jitte* kata. Yuchu-no-Jitte (Higa Sensei's 'version' of *Jitte* kata) differs quite dramatically from the standard Shotokan version. We trained *Jitte* kata intensively over the next several days, under the ever-watchful eye of Suzuki Sensei and assisted by Oshima-san. Suzuki Sensei also drilled us in Yuchu-no-Sochin and Yuchu-no-Unsu. We already knew these 2 kata, having learnt them many years before from James Sumarac Sensei, our teacher in Australia, but there was quite a bit of revision and subtle adjustments to be made.

Another category of training included advanced *tenshin-ho* (movement) exercises. Ohtsuka Sensei always stresses moving naturally and with the whole body, and these drills focused on both these principles. We covered 4 main drills – *tenshin-ho* with *kiba-dachi*, *neko-ash-dach*, *shizen-dachi* and *shiko-dachi* – with progressive stages for each based on the level of the student.

Inter-dispersed amongst all the kata training, we received lessons in the practical applications of important budo principles for combat applications, often overlooked. A summary of these principles follows:

- *Kamae* (posture for attack and defense) - we looked at the use of *kamae* in defense and also how to analyse *kamae* for intent and vulnerability, including traditional *kamae* that can be found in kata.
- *Ma-ai* (distance and angle) - Ohtsuka Sensei discussed the *ma-ai* in relation to evaluating it, either as you approach someone or as they approach you. Knowing the effective range of your own 'natural weapons' in relation to the *ma-ai* and also where you are vulnerable to different attacks at different distances.
- *San-sen* (3 'initiatives') - we spent considerable time discussing and practicing various 'initiatives' used for defense. This included 3 categories of combatives timings - *sen* (4 timings used to defeat an enemy), *go-no-sen* (defend during the attack) and *ken-tai-no-sen* – to invade their space with your body but wait with your hands)
- *Sekkan* (disrupt balance) – this principle was demonstrated primarily through bunkai application, with Ohtsuka Sensei stressing that as soon as you 'touch' someone in bunkai you should disrupt their balance, negating further resistance and counter-attacks.
- *Tai-Jutsu Gogi* (5 elements of unarmed defense) - Ohtsuka Sensei discussed the 5 areas of techniques that are found in kata and applied through bunkai. These are *atemi* (strikes), *gyaku* (joint locks), *nage* (throws), *katame* (hold-downs) and *shime* (chokes/strangulations).

To say we were physically and mentally drained at the completion of the training schedule is an understatement. As usual, Ohtsuka Sensei was as concerned that we understood what they were teaching us, as well as us being capable in performing the movements, so that we could continue to train, develop and pass on this information back in Australia.

In terms of the training covered and relationships strengthened, the trip was an overwhelming success. However, unbeknownst to us, Ohtsuka Sensei had something else planned for us. On the first day of training Ohtsuka Sensei asked us to write our names down and tell him how they were pronounced. Ohtsuka Sensei typically keeps meticulous records, so we did so, thinking nothing of it. Near the end of training, Ohtsuka Sensei announced that he was going to present us with 5th dan certification through Goju-Kensha Karate-do Renmai. This in itself is an incredible honour, as to date only one other Australian has been personally graded by Ohtsuka Sensei...our teacher, James Sumarac. In addition to this, Ohtsuka Sensei also presented each of us with a *Bubishi* masters text (from Higa Yuchoku) and a *Shidojin* teaching license, hand written in kanji-style calligraphy on the inside of the *Bubishi*. Of all the yudansha Ohtsuka Sensei has graded over the 45-year history of Goju-Kensha, only about 30 have received a *Bubishi* text from him. We also received official registration with the Japan Goju Ryu Federation and our name plaques up on the board in the hombu dojo. A very rare honour for us, and one we were both pleased and humbled by. Our task now is to live up to the faith he has placed in us.

On returning to Australia it took several weeks for the significance of the events in Japan to take shape. Ohtsuka Sensei eagerly encouraged us to continue our training, and also to take what he has taught us and 'adapt' it as we see fit to suit our Australian culture. Not only does Ohtsuka Sensei always give freely, but he is also imminently practical in his approach to budo. He sees it as progressive and fluid, not regimented and inflexible. He does not stand on pompous ceremony, but focuses more on the important aspect of budo...training.

It was a fantastic trip, dare we say a 'once in a lifetime' experience. We look forward to consolidating the knowledge and skills we have been entrusted with, and to renewing ties again soon....perhaps this time with less plum brandy!



*Goshu Karate-do Yonshin Kai founders with Ohtsuka Sensei and senior dojo members.
With godan certificates (left) and Bubishi texts/Shidojin certifications (right)*