

TAIJI KASE 1929 – 2004

It was with deep sorrow that we heard of the death of Taiji Kase on 24th November 2004, in his adopted home town of Paris. It came as a shock because the recent reports from visitors and his daughter Sachiko indicated that he was in good spirits and planning to be active again in 2005.

Kase sensei's history is well known therefore I will not dwell on this except to say that from his earliest days in karate he was inspired by his all too brief interaction with Yoshitaka Funakoshi, the son of Shotokan's founder Gichin Funakoshi. The earliest encounters give some insight into Kase sensei's indomitable character; having been refused permission to learn karate by Yoshitaka because he was too young, he returned to kneel quietly in the dojo every day, refusing to leave when told too until he had convinced his hero that he was serious about wanting to learn karate and was accepted. Can you imagine the courage of a teenage boy to do this in the face of reputedly one of the greatest exponents of karate of the Twentieth Century?

The first time I saw Kase sensei was at Crystal Palace in the early 1970's. I was there for the KUGB National Championships and I when saw him coming down from the hall of residence with Tomita sensei I admit that I thought he was Tomita's father over for a visit; he looked far too jovial to be a senior karate master. How wrong was I to be proved later that day when he was introduced along with the other Japanese instructors, not only with them, but as the most senior. Any disbelief I might still have harboured was quickly dispelled when he performed a dazzling self defence demonstration against all the other JKA instructors who attacked him not individually but all at once. My knowledge of karate was limited at the time but I recognised that I had just witnessed something very special.

I was not the only one to have mistaken first impressions quickly dispelled. Paul Barron recalls "My everlasting impression of training with Kase was the first time I trained, at Crystal Palace as a 3rd Kyu. When he walked over to take my group, the only thought running through my head was 'What was this rather rounded individual going to show me'. Within minutes it became very apparent how little I knew and even less I could do. Over the years he continued to impress with his display of sheer power and an ability to think karate 'outside the box'."

Slater Williams' introduction to Kase sensei came when he travelled to Ireland with Steve Cattle. "What transpired on that weekend in Cork was far beyond the experience Steve had promised, Kase not only exceeded my expectations but touched a nerve deep inside that transformed my whole perception of Shotokan."

It was to be another decade before I encountered Kase sensei again at a one day training course in Trowbridge. Here we practiced what I now recognise as the typical Kase set piece, Hachi Ho Gyku-uraken Waza. At the time it was the weirdest thing I had ever done in karate involving as it does stepping at angles and spinning around an opponent. Kase sensei was very patient with us; something that I was later to understand was one of his many admirable qualities. Whilst other instructors on the same course heaped abuse on us for our inability to follow their teachings Kase just smiled, used encouraging words and asked us to do it again and again and again until we got it right. Interestingly his was the only part of that course that I remembered afterwards.

Soon after this I met the man who was to become my mentor until his tragically early death in 1995, Steve Cattle. It was Steve who really introduced me to Kase sensei's very special brand of Shotokan and set me off on the grand adventure of following Kase sensei around Europe for a decade and a half. Perhaps the greatest tribute that Steve Cattle paid to the Master was to give up his comfortable career in the KUGB to found the English Shotokan Academy dedicated to following the path Kase sensei created when he founded the WKSA in 1989. His words to those of us who joined him in the venture were, ***"Sensei Kase is planning a system of Shotokan Karate which will take us not into the 1990's but into the next century. I intend to follow him; I simply want to get better."***

In the following years we got to know Kase Sensei as a father figure. Sometimes stern making us endure the most gruelling physical training. Other times professorially lecturing us for an hour at a time on the theories and philosophies of his karate. Always moving us on steadily down the path he had planned. He always said that his plan was to take us forward in steps, so just as we thought we had mastered what he was teaching he would say "OK. Now for the next step we need to change....." whatever aspect he was introducing.

We were required to understand kata thoroughly mastering the ura form kata, then go form, then go-ura. Not content with that we learned the bunkai kata and Oyo interpretations. We changed our base stance to Fudodachi. We learned to move off the line, how to breathe in different ways and how to use our hara's properly to make kime. It was learning about the correct use of hara that was an early indication of just how different an instructor Kase sensei was. At a class for senior instructors in Edinburgh it became clear that we were just not getting the message so he called us around him and brought us up in small groups to press our fingertips into his commodious abdomen. We were all very tentative about this but no, he insisted that we push our fingers in as far as possible, and then he breathed in then out and focussed his tremendous hara driving us all back. I had been training for over twenty years at that point and no one had ever shown me how to use the hara properly. When the class reassembled and we repeated the exercise he beamed and said, "Yes now you understand" Understanding was one thing but it took another 5 years to master.

Mike Fedyk recalls "Whilst on an International training course held in Frieberg, Germany in a class of 100 very senior karateka we were practicing Tekki Sandan. Sensei Kase noticed that I was making an obvious inbuilt mistake mid way through the kata. He called me out to the front of the class to correct my error, I felt very nervous en route to him and I must have looked even more nervous than I thought. He asked me to perform the kata and at the point of mistake he came close to me and took my hand to correct my movement, at the same time he whispered into my ear "don't be afraid Mike I am only going to show you the correct way" at that point I totally relaxed and actually enjoyed my time at the front of class. I was never again afraid of being used as a demonstration model and indeed was always disappointed if I wasn't."

I had the honour of attending both his funeral and the Shinobukai later in the week. Over 350 people joined his family, including two of his brothers from Japan, to attend the funeral; there was standing room only in the Grand Salon of the Crématorium at Père Lachaise's cemetery in Paris. It was fitting that the burial place of so many of the great and good should be the place where we paid our last respects. At the Shinobukai, after a ceremony of flowers and a meal tributes were paid by instructors from around the world starting with Shirai sensei.

In the UK tributes were made by the some of English Shotokan members who had trained with him over the years. Mike Fedyk recalled, “sensei Kase always had time for everyone, he never spoke badly of any person and he was always willing to point the way in a manner that was always thought provoking and humble.”

Geoff Beasley said, “My memories of sensei Kase will always be of the warmth and friendliness that he generated inside and outside the dojo, senior Japanese instructors although very revered don't always come across as either friendly or approachable, however with sensei Kase this was never a problem.”

Paul Barron thought he was, “Genuinely warm, approachable and very considerate of everyone. He showed a great willingness to allow his students to express and develop their own ideas. It was apparent that he never stopped training and developing his own unique style of Shotokan karate.”

Slater Williams recalls, “Mostly, I remember him as someone who was passionate for life one who cultivated wonder; this is the Gift we should savour.”

However, there was much more than warmth and friendliness to the man. I have often heard it said that he was a great karateka, but that his karate was unique and special to him. However, the last fifteen year have shown that this was untrue. Starting with the WKSA and continuing with his Shotokan Ryu Kase Ha Instructor Academy from 2001 he was able pass on his system of advanced Shotokan that has taken adherents far beyond the narrow confines of the competition oriented Shotokan that we all started with. He was never critical of our roots but said there is much more to karate and if we wished to continue to develop for the rest of our lives then we must change and grow in the ways of Budo Karate.

As Slater Williams says, “Perhaps in another fifteen years I will fully understand sensei Kase; in the mean time we have an obligation to ensure his legacy continues to inspire future generations”

In conclusion then Kase sensei was a phenomenal karateka, a great man, an amazing teacher who touched the lives of us all and made them better. He leaves behind a devoted family of wife, two daughters and a grandson. He will be truly missed and our duty is to ensure that his legacy lives on as a living memorial to a life dedicated to Shotokan Karate.

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