

# KWF GRAND MASTER

## SENSEI MIKIO YAHARA 8th Dan

Interview By Marc Feldis.

(Translation By Frank Ackerer & Thomas R. Zengage).

**MF:** Sensei, we wish to thank you for taking this opportunity to answer several questions about Karatenomichi World Federation (KWF) and your approach to traditional Japanese Karate. First, we would like to ask you about the major changes that the world of Karate has seen in the past few decades.

**MY:** You might say that modern Karate is moving in three separate directions. It has been fully about half a century since I undertook my professional calling in Karate and became a Japanese Karate Association (JKA) instructor. Since then, I have travelled the length and breadth of Japan and the rest of the world to participate in matches and spread the practise of Karate. In doing so, I have come to understand that the meaning of Karate changes along with the changes in the societal environment. In violent medieval times, Karate was "Budo Karate" (Martial Art of Karate). In more peaceful times, Karate became a competitive sport. Finally, in shall we say apathetic or uninspired times, Karate has become entertainment. I first encountered Karate shortly after the Second World War, meaning Karate was essentially "Budo Karate" at the time.

Over the past 30-40 years, competitive Karate has spread through the world like wildfire. The long-time dream of having Karate approved as an Olympic sport has come true with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, so the world of Karate is bursting with excitement. However, of note is the fact that over the past decade "Budo Karate" has become increasingly popular among Karate aficionados; such persons are particularly interested in KWF's "Budo Seishin" (Martial Arts Spirit) and its techniques.

**MF:** Since the late 1980's, some observers have noted similarities between the late Tetsuhiko Asai Sensei and yourself. Are there similarities between Asai Sensei's techniques and your own approach?

**MY:** That is correct. I became interested in Asai Sensei's circular offensive and defensive techniques that incorporated Chinese martial arts principles. While similar movements do exist within some Shotokan "Kata", no one, not even the Japan Karate Association (JKA) Headquarters instructors, had ever put such techniques into action during



*Yahara sensei says, "Budo karate has become increasingly popular among karate aficionados."* a "Kumite". The linear movements of the Shotokan style defined Karate of that age, such that Asai Sensei's movements were fresh and intriguing to me.

I chose to study Asai Sensei's movements and incorporate them into my own Karate thanks to the personal instruction I received from him. We were originally senior and junior practitioners, and this situation marked the beginning of us working together both inside and outside the dojo.

**MF:** What was it that motivated you to create the KWF back in 2000?

**MY:** My biggest motive for launching the organization was my fear that authentic, traditional "Budo Karate" was dying out. I

felt that the creation of the KWF network on an international scale was necessary to bring "Budo Karate" back to its former prominence and also to spread awareness among martial arts practitioners about what we might call an existential crisis facing "Budo Karate". My view was that my distinctive style of Yahara Karate needed to be at the core of such an organization, and that this organization would be devoted to my study of "Budo Karate" based on the principle of "Ichigeki Hitto" (Single Overpowering Strike).

I believe that this cause inspired me to such an extent due both to my ancestry and business profession. In point of fact, my family history can be traced back to Japan's Sengoku era (Age of Civil War),

1467–1573) in the second half of the Muromachi period (1336–1573), when one of my ancestors on my mother's side was the leader of a clan of "Suigun", which was a kind of local naval force. I imagine that they spent the majority of their time battling enemies. They say that the clan gained sovereignty over the region that would later be my birthplace, and that they prospered there for a time. You can still find a large stone monument there that commemorates the history and merits of my ancestor.

Regarding my business profession, I established a bodyguard services company at the age of 28 while I was still working as a JKA instructor. My objective was to confront the evils in Japanese society with nothing but the body I was born with and my Karate. It may seem extreme to say, but my own demise was of little concern to me as long as I could accomplish this task. Working as a bodyguard was like killing three birds with one stone: It was a perfect opportunity for me to put my training into action; it let me defend people in need of protection; and it paid well. Of course, being a bodyguard is a hazardous profession, but it is precisely because of my numerous encounters with danger that I was able to develop the "Santen Rikiho" (Three Methods of Power) utilized in KWF's "Ichigeki Hittou". In a sense, working as a bodyguard put me in an environment where I was required to model my Karate for use as a practical weapon. (Note: Today, Yahara's company



*Yahara sensei teaching on the recent seminar in Paris.*

*employs around 300 persons.)*

Based on these unique principles of "Budo Karate", in 2000 I established KWF together with Akihito Isaka and Malcolm Dorfman. The KWF organization currently has branches in some 58 countries and territories with further expansion planned for the future.

KWF is a gathering of "Karateka" from all Karate schools who wish to pursue authentic, traditional "Budo Karate". The Single Overpowering Strike of Yahara Style "Budo Karate" is rooted in the Okinawan Shotokan style of "Budo Karate", and takes a physiologically and psychologically modern approach to traditional "Budo"

while still remaining true to its origins.

**MF: Is there a special meaning behind the path of "Karatenomichi"? What sets it apart from "Karatedo"?**

**MY:** They have the same English translation and are generally similar, but KWF's "Karatenomichi" holds a deeper meaning. Adding the Japanese preposition "no" (of) to the noun "Karatedo" turns it into "Karatenomichi", which serves to emphasize a certain path. The term does not refer only to Karate as a martial art, but it also refers to the pursuit, path, or "Way" experienced while studying "Budo Karate".

In other words, the Way is the journey of ordeals undertaken while studying the technique and spirit of "Budo Karate", as well as the objective found beyond that stage. As a lifelong undertaking, the "Way of Karate" must ascend to the level of a "Way of Life." I believe that all KWF members would benefit by sharing this goal as well.

**MF: What is the current main objective of KWF, and have you changed your objective since starting out?**

**MY:** A key idea for me is "Shoshin Ittetsu", which means always stay true to your original intention. My faith and convictions as a martial arts practitioner have never changed. In order to use the principle of the Single Overpowering Strike to revitalize "Budo Karate", I have pledged to dedicate myself as central advocate of the study for these methods, to recruit a sizeable network of like-minded practitioners, and to spread our ideals across the globe. At heart, Yahara Karate is entirely about how to turn every single movement of the human body into an effective weapon while remaining unarmed, and not about how to earn points in a tournament.

While KWF has some 58 branches, it is still developing as an organization.



*"It took me over 10 years to be able to use my signature kata Unsu, in actual kumite."*

Many of our members, excluding a select few, seem still to have their own take on what Karate is. Going forward, one of our primary tasks is to have our practitioners refocus on KWF's unique "Budo Seishin" (Martial Arts Spirit) and techniques.

The first step we need to take is to change our way of thinking, meaning to refrain from viewing Karate as a sport but to properly see it as a traditional martial art bringing together spirit, technique, and physicality to achieve "Ichigeki Hittou".

**MF:** Tell me about the kind of research KWF is conducting on the fundamentals of Karate.

**MY:** The concept of defeating your opponent with a Single Overpowering Strike is not something that you can accomplish by just willing it with your mind. Martial arts are all about how to use your body to achieve devastating power, which is something that KWF Yahara Karate can make possible.

At the foundation of my theory lies our own methodology, which we have termed "Santeren Rikiho" (Three Methods of Power).

Using the Three Methods of Power allows one to use the human body's kinetic chain system to instantly compress the body's muscles and joints to their limits, storing energy that can be amplified using the body's kinetic chain system for the purpose of focusing all the power of the body on a single target.

"Santeren Rikiho" (Three Methods of Power): One: Hip Rotation and Compression Power. Two: Lower Body Joint Bending-Extension Power. Three: Full Body Rotation Torsional Power.

The Three Methods of Power utilize the body's kinetic chain system to achieve "Ichigeki Hittou" (Single Overpowering



*Yahara sensei demonstrating Tekki kata on the Paris seminar.*

Strike), which is the essence of Yahara "Bujutsu Karate" (Martial Art Technique of Karate).

**MF:** How much influence did Isaka Sensei's research on moving the body's centre of gravity have on KWF Karate?

**MY:** Isaka Sensei was a major influence. The Three Methods of Power are the very basis of KWF Karate, and a part of that involves using the elasticity of one's joints, in which one's centre of balance plays a big role. For example, one's centre of gravity is very important in fully using the Bending-Extension Power of your knee joints. The skills I acquired in my days at JKA were completely insufficient for me to accomplish what I now recognise as "Ichigeki Hittou". Back in my younger days, people often used to say that I must have "naturally coiled springs" in my body. At the

time, I probably left everything up to speed in my Karate.

Around 25 years ago, I visited the JKA Headquarters Dojo for the first time in a long time and happened to encounter Isaka Sensei teaching some young instructors about the movement of the centre of gravity while in slow motion. That training session was a first for me, and it connected the pieces of a puzzle in my mind. To be sure, I doubt that any of the young instructors there were able to comprehend the true meaning behind that training session. In fact, I would bet that it still eludes them today because they have all almost certainly abandoned "Bujutsu Karate". What I experienced that day shattered the wall impeding my Karate and helped me devise Three Methods of Power that KWF is known for today.

For Isaka Sensei's movement of the centre of gravity, he starts from a position where his joints are compressed to their limits and then moves his body using the elasticity of his knee and ankle joints all while maintaining his centre of gravity. Mastering this method opens the door to incredibly destructive power.

As the saying goes, seeing is believing. I hope that you find the opportunity to experience my Karate yourself one day.

**MF:** I have a question about compression. When I participated in a KWF Training Camp at Torino, Italy, it seemed as though you had the power to gather and store energy, but not just via the movements of your body. Rather, it seemed like you had the ability to attract the energy around you and then gradually or instantaneously shoot it back out. How does that work?

**MY:** Might this be because I am so handsome? No? Joking aside, as I have explained, my explosive movements all come from the proper application of the



*In an early JKA Championships Yahara sensei scores with a spectacular jodan punch.*

unique Three Methods of Power, which allow you to effectively and fully control the movement of your muscles and the elasticity of your joints. According to an advisor, each of my movements also makes use of the so-called closed end of the kinetic chain, which is to say when striking we use ground force resistance to generate power from the foot that is firmly planted on the ground. In this way you, must have almost certainly seen my correct utilization of the body's kinetic chain system via the Three Methods of Power as a truly explosive and masterful movement.

Through rigorous training, you can learn to sense the energy stored by this method and even understand it flowing through your muscles and joints as though you were watching it frame by frame, like with a high speed camera. Because you can feel the flow of energy in super slow motion, controlling it becomes child's play. Again according to an advisor, I understand one MIT professor has termed this experience Flow Psychology, or being in the zone.

**MF: What is your opinion on training with "Makiwara"?**

**MY:** Training with "Makiwara" is extremely important in "Budo Karate". However, for Karate as a sport where only points matter, "Makiwara" training is for all intents and purposes useless. In KWF Karate, the Single Overpowering Strike is everything, so using "Makiwara" is the most basic of basics and absolutely



A young Yahara makiwara training, he says, "Makiwara is extremely important in Budo karate." essential for training. The "Makiwara" is not only for creating calluses on your fists; it is a vital tool to help you learn to feel the kinetic chain system involved in the Three Methods of Power.

Three factors are needed to enhance devastating power. Any devastating weapon needs Mass (density), Weight, and Speed. All three can be concentrated and improved when training with a "Makiwara".

For Mass (density), you need to be hard as stone. If a weapon is soft, then it won't be able to withstand the impact resulting from hitting the target. To pierce through the target, you need to be hard (dense).

For Weight, you need to be sufficiently heavy. The material a weapon is made out of must be both heavy and solid. Japanese "Katana" (Swords) are known for their cutting ability because the blades are made out of special types of steel, and the swords themselves are heavy.

For Speed, even if a weapon is heavy and solid, it will only bounce off of the target unless it has sufficient speed. The harder a target is the more speed is needed in order to pierce through it.

Therefore, training with a "Makiwara" allows you to forge your body into a powerful weapon through the application



In KWF karate, the 'Single Overpowering Strike' is the core principle.

of the Three Methods of Power with the correct use of the kinetic chain system.

If you are having difficulty understanding my Karate, think of the relationship between the Three Methods of Power and Mass, Weight, and Speed as the same type of relationship as between a high power gun and a high power bullet, where the closely compressed gun powder (here, Three Methods of Power) delivers the needed energy to propel the bullet (here, Mass, Weight, and Speed).

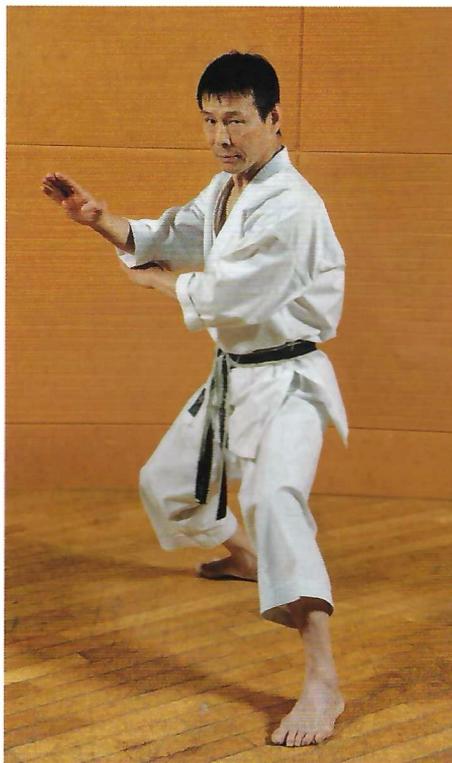
**MF:** Even though the core principle of KWF Karate is the Single Overpowering Strike, you still hold competitive tournaments. Why is this?

**MY:** That is an excellent question. In short, yes, KWF holds competitive matches, or "Kumite". However, by sparring matches, I do not mean the same kind of matches seen in mainstream competitive sport Karate. That is, because KWF's focus is the Single Overpowering Strike, our matches cannot in effect be about taking turns to score points. Each match has to be decided with a Single Overpowering Strike. KWF's Three Methods of Power are used to instantly charge the body's energy and launch it at your target as a strike of maximum power. The energy will, in effect, then either explode inside of your opponent's body, or, so as to avoid injury, just outside of it. In this way, two martial artists who can control their output can spar with each other. One must not hit rapidly, and, therefore, lightly in KWF Karate. You earnestly face your opponent with the intent to deliver a Single Overpowering Strike, knowing that you have a single chance to attack and failing will result in your own devastation. Because you only have one chance, it must be "Ichigeki Hittou". The state of mind is vital for the spirit and technique used in KWF's "Ippon Kumite", and this is how matches we hold are meant to be.

I hope that you now understand how different competitive sport Karate and KWF Budo Karate matches are even if they may seem similar at a passing glance.

We who train in martial arts cannot be ignorant of the rest of the world or else our Karate will end in mere self-satisfaction. We must be confident in our ability and use the techniques we have acquired by participating in public matches. In doing so, we can measure our ability against our opponents and also develop the spirit of battle. Obviously, because duelling is no longer permitted in modern society, competition is one way for KWF members to improve their techniques.

**MF:** There is a saying that goes, "There's no first strike in Karate." Does this not contradict the nature of the



*"I was always bloody by bedtime during my two years of instructor training at the JKA."*

#### **"Ippon Shobu" (Overpowering with One Strike)?**

**MY:** That is another key question. There does seem to be a contradiction, but only from that particular point of view.

Points are everything in so-called sports Karate today. As such, a greater value is placed on speed, timing, and preemptive strikes than proper Karate technique and power. So, naturally, the saying does not make sense under this context.

However, the saying does not contradict the ideals of KWF Karate at all, because KWF Karate is "Budo Karate". It is simple to wander off the path of "Bujutsu" and become in effect a walking, talking dangerous weapon; accordingly, we rely on reason and ethics to control the ferocity that lurks within. Actually, since ancient times Karate has been considered the martial art of sophisticated individuals who would never utilize it to assault others. In this sense, "There's no first strike in Karate" is actually a word of warning. When a fight is unavoidable, however, we are obligated to end it in a Single Overpowering Strike, which is the quintessence of a traditional martial art.

In "Budo Karate", via the concept of "Gishin Ichinyo" (Unity of Technique and Mind), we learn to train and discipline both our mental outlook and physical skills, knowing that if we fail to do so we would be left only with what we might call our instincts.

Through the disciplined practise of KWF Karate techniques, we become familiar with the spirit necessary to prevail, and we ultimately come to appreciate the significance of the Zen expression that the "Ordinary Mind is the Way". As a lifelong undertaking, the goal of Karatenomichi is for it to become a truly transformative "Way of Life."

**MF:** In KWF Karate, "Oi Zuki" (Lunge Punch) and "Oi Geri" (Lunge Kick) can both be used as the decisive strike. Could you explain a bit more about this?

**MY:** Both moves can be used as "Ippon Waza" because they possess the



*Yahara sensei demonstrates using kakiwake uke in kokutsu dachi (as in kata Heian Yondan).....*

most potential for destructive power. Having a greater distance between yourself and your opponent allows you to amplify acceleration. Speed and weight are needed to create destructive power, and the two moves put you in the prime position to utilise them.

**MF:** I have heard that your defensive movement training was influenced by Asai Sensei. Would you care to comment?

**MY:** I believe I have already covered Asai Sensei, so let me tell you the story of my failures involving him instead. Asai Sensei referred to his circular defensive motion as "Tenshin" (Body Transfer). I decided to do some personal research on this technique, thinking that it would be highly effective against Shotokan's (JKA) linear attacks.

There was a senior instructor back at JKA who was four classes above me, and he was the stuff of legends. He had trained his body to peak performance, breaking countless "Makiwara" in the process. The calluses on his monstrous fists were not normal either; they were scarred with what seemed to be bite marks, which suggested how many of his students' teeth he had broken over the years. In fact, he was such a loose cannon that the Karate Master Nakayama once as a punishment banned him from training at the dojo for a couple of months. He is the only one to ever receive a ban like that in the history of JKA.

As luck would have it, this raging bull had grown up in my hometown, so he gave me "preferential treatment." Thanks to him, I was always bloody by bedtime



*Yahara sensei's famous incredible jump in his speciality kata UNSU.*

during my two years of instructor training. Once, I even woke up strapped to a bed in an ambulance that was rushing me to the emergency room.

I looked back at what I had been through and figured that the "Tenshin" (Body Transfer) technique was just what I needed to stop the raging bull in his tracks. After practising the technique in secret until I was confident enough to use it, I executed the manoeuvre to redirect the bull's charge...or so I had originally planned. In reality, his charge was a lot more than I could handle. I hate to say it, but he hit me dead in the chest and sent both me and

the dojo's sliding doors flying. To this day, my chest is still caved in. I could not help but blame Asai Sensei for this.

**MF:** When practising Kata, do you always have to envision your opponent? What specific meaning does doing so have? Do we envision a Kata to its completion?

**MY:** Karate is "Bujutsu" (Martial Art Technique), not a sport. A Kata takes the offensive and defence techniques used in a given situation, such as being in close-quarters combat or right up next to your opponent, and links them together for maximum efficiency. All techniques need to have practical use in "Bujutsu", which is why you must always picture yourself in battle and be conscious that each of your movements can decide whether or not you will walk away alive. The diverse free Kumite we do today did not even exist back when Karate first came into existence. It may sound rather simple from a modern perspective, but the Karate of the time was basic self-defence techniques, such as how to react to your hair or collar being grabbed, and that was what they would practise. Over time, the techniques became more and more complex and local practitioners of the day trained themselves for bare-handed combat while also looking towards everyday objects (like farm tools) as makeshift weapons. Over time, we came to the advanced empty-handed martial art we know today. During my time training to be a JKA instructor, JKA Karate Master Nakayama would often tell us that "Karate begins with Kata and ends with Kata." Master Nakayama taught us that it takes a full three years of constant repetitive practise in order to master the movements of a single Kata. Speaking



*....and using kakiwake uke (wedge block) as in kata Jion, when in zenkutsu dachi.*



*Yahara sensei says, "From my time as a bodyguard, if I am up against someone with a weapon, I can sense on an unconscious level whether they are serious or are they just bluffing."*

from experience, it took me over 10 years to become able to use my signature Kata, "Unsu" (Cloud Hands), in an actual Kumite. Everything from lying flat on the ground to flying through the air has made me capable of being able to use most techniques in actual sparring, which is the ideal. To get to this level, I had to envision myself in the midst of deadly battle and repeat the Kata over and over again until my body absorbed it. Whenever I had a match coming up at JKA, I would spend the month leading up to it practising "Unsu" 50 times in a single training session without resting in-between.

Many people have told me that my "Unsu" has soul, and I believe that this is because I always envision myself in battle when executing it. If you fail to follow the principles of offense and defence and just focus on looking beautiful, then you are not doing "Bujutsu", you are simply dancing.

**MF: When do you think is the right time to start deconstructing the applications of a Kata, and can a beginner do it, too?**

**MY:** Whenever I am teaching, I always deconstruct the movements within a Kata after my students learn it. This is, again, because Karate is "Bujutsu". If you fail to understand how the parts of a Kata work together, then there is no way that you can properly execute "Bujutsu" offensive and defence techniques. Learning the movements properly is the way to learn the Kata properly. It is of little consequence whether you are a beginner or not.

**MF: Do you think it is better to focus on a single Kata over a long period of**

**time, or practise many Kata at once?**

**MY:** If you want a serious answer, then you have to consider the historical background. Though we can practise "Bujutsu" in modern society, it is really not so that we can be ready to enter combat at a moment's notice. Even though envisioning oneself in a real fight when executing Kata is important when studying traditional Karate, you need to be able to separate fiction from reality. You can remain conscious of "Bujutsu" while enjoying it at the same time. So, I think you can work on a number of Kata at once for the sake of making Karate a lifelong undertaking.

**MF: Have you practised any martial arts other than Karate?**

**MY:** I have studied both Judo and Iaido (Martial Art of the Sword), and found the latter to be especially interesting. Iaido is about as close to the essence of "Bujutsu" as you can get. Each swing of cold steel is executed with maximum efficiency for the sole purpose of cutting down one's opponent. You could even say that Iaido is literally the same as my "Ichigeki Hittou" Karate.

**MF: During a training camp, you touched upon the concept of "Sen no Sen" (Attack Before Being Attacked). For those of us lacking in actual fighting experience, how do you become able to sense your opponent's feelings?**

**MY:** Everything is based on experience. Over time, you will become able to read your opponent's movements. From my time as a bodyguard, if I am up against someone with a weapon, I can sense on

an unconscious level whether they are serious or are just bluffing. I can also sense their reactions to my intense spirit in the distance separating us. There are three tempos in the rhythm of battle: "Sen no Sen" (Attack Before Being Attacked), "Go no Sen" (Attack While Being Attacked), and "Go no Go" (Defend and Counterattack).

**MF: Have your teaching methods changed over the years?**

**MY:** Speaking metaphorically, I taught like a lion back in my younger days, dropping my cubs into a valley and offering my teachings only to those who managed to climb back up.

The guiding principles I used were the same, but the nurturing method was entirely different. Let us say that I had three apprentices. I would essentially knock them around; only the ones who kept coming back would be kept on. Basically, I had my apprentices experience the same pain and fear that I did when I was studying at JKA.

I am still a strict instructor today, but now I strive to teach my students via modern methods and providing motivation, while also preserving the best traditions of "Budo Karate".

**MF: Final question. What advice do you have for people studying traditional Karate?**

**MY:** Perhaps it is simply a cultural difference, but from my experience teaching abroad, I have noticed that students dislike practising Karate fundamentals and prefer Kumite. However, if they have yet to have mastered the fundamentals of "Budo Karate", their Kumite is all over the place. It makes me wonder what they are trying to do in Karate in the first place. In Karate Kumite, you utilise bona fide Karate techniques.

My Karate is all about the fundamentals. You must study proper form and the use of the kinetic chain system to amplify power by means of "Santen Rikiho" (Three Methods of Power). It is the same as folding steel, where the metal is heated and hammered, heated and hammered, countless times before the finished product is complete.

Proper form and full utilization of the kinetic chain system that comes with it are absolutely essential to concentrate the energy of one's body into one's target with maximum efficiency. The ideal – the Martial Art of Karate requires you to forge your weapons one at a time before bringing them with you into battle.

**MF: Yahara Sensei, thank you very much for sharing your insights with us.**

*The third KWF Paris Master Camp will be held on 27th and 28th May 2017. More information on [www.yahara-paris.com](http://www.yahara-paris.com)*