

AMBASSADOR OF KARATE

The founder of the Caltech Karate Club, Tsutomu Ohshima, takes a fond look back

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LESSONS THAT ARE NEVER OVER

Tsutomu Ohshima is a teacher as engaging as his discipline

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The change happens slowly, almost imperceptibly.

The casual conversation becomes, without forethought, a lesson.

The small dinner group is gathered for the 30th anniversary of the Caltech Karate Club, the first of its kind in the United States. The guest of honor is Tsutomu Ohshima, the man around whom the club is built.

His quiet demeanor immediately puts you at ease. His face draws you in. His eyes welcome you. All this, and all he has said is: "Good to meet you."

Most of the guests are his former Caltech pupils, so understandably the conversation starts in a

of intellectual inferiority.

Soon, however, the conversation stops rotating about the round table and focuses on Ohshima. Memories give way to inquiries ranging from another classmate's whereabouts to the history and nature of the discipline. Ohshima takes in each question, granting it equal attention. He cradles it and hands it back to the student, fuller and more complete. Just the way he looks you in the eye, not as a challenge but as an offer of trust, you know the answer is from the heart as well as the head.

Handling with care the numerous questions, Ohshima, 57, maintains a quiet confidence. He moved from Japan to America in 1955, but his English is still careful, as he concedes. He knows the importance of precise communication, so you hear "What is the word?" often as he explains what he knows to you. There is a mutual respect at work: You respect and admire his depth of knowledge and concern; he appreciates and accepts your desire to learn.

"When I came to Caltech, I expected to have a mentor — at least one professor that I would look to," says Steven Bankes, now a computer scientist. "I did not expect it to be the karate teacher."

By the end of the evening, every person at the table can count themselves among Ohshima's students, whether or not they have ever tied on a *gi*, the loose clothes worn by karate practitioners.

Lesson No. 1: Being a student does not necessarily involve knowing the correct answers, but rather the ability to ask the correct questions.

"It is like trying to teach hot and cold. You have to experience it, feel it yourself."

— Mr. Ohshima on the spiritual aspect of karate.

Pam Logan had heard about these classes at Caltech. She says that she expected rugged exercises that first day and she got it. The first karate session involved walking across the Caltech gym, but it was no cakewalk. According to Logan, the

nostalgic mood. Ohshima mostly listens to the reminiscence — a good teacher never loses that sense of curiosity — with his face showing a spectrum from fascination to amusement. However, he does propel the conversation without talking the most. He fills in the blanks and delivers long-forgotten punchlines stored in his limitless memory.

There is no air of omniscience around him, although you soon think he just might know everything. His sense of humor defuses any feeling

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first time down and back was done in a flat squat, hips at knee height, moving in wide, sweeping steps. The second lap is done with the *derriere* resting on upraised heels, hopping on the toes. The third round involves knee bends. In Logan's words, the first day will "jelly your legs. I hobbled back to my dorm." Yet, for some reason unknown to her at the time, "Giving in or up was not an option."

Something else Logan was looking for, knowing about the disciplinary nature of the martial art, she did not find.

"I expected him (Ohshima) to be distant, stern," says Logan, who attended Caltech in the late 1970s and early '80s and now teaches aeronautical engineering at UCLA.

Bankes, like Logan a black belt in karate, recalls expecting "some Japanese guy" on his first day. What he found was, indeed, a Japanese instructor, but also "someone very striking. He was clearly something special."

Charisma, empathy and concern are words used by Ohshima's students to describe his teaching style — to which he replies, "I learned that way." For someone who can be so serene, Ohshima can be riveting within that calm. The eyes catch you; the words hold you.

It is a Sunday morning at the central Los Angeles *dojo*. Ohshima is holding a class for the black belts. The format basically is for Ohshima to demonstrate a move — every few minutes interjecting a trademark "Understand?" — and the students to practice it. Even black belts have to practice. Ohshima steps to the side to watch as the students attempt to recreate the move.

"The old man just talk, let them do everything," he tells an observer, laughing. He returns his watch to the class. His stance indicates the concentration. The legs are shoulder-width apart; his arms hang loosely at his sides; his torso leaning slightly forward; his *gi* open enough to provide evidence that he is in good shape, no matter the age.

He does not stare at one person, but seems to catch the entire spectrum of 32 students, both men and women of varying ages and physiques, with one straight-ahead gaze.

He begins to walk about the room, stopping here to pinpoint where an elbow should be when the hand is raised; going over there to correct the angle of a knee during the lead-in step. At this level, Ohshima finds no flaw too small. Some students critique each other as they practice the moves on one another.

Two claps from Ohshima end one portion of the workout and begin the next. His method of correction is matter-of-fact, based on a sometimes forgotten principle: The teacher is here to teach, the student to learn. Originating in culture that maintains a tight grip on tradition, karate holds dear another comfortably worn cliché: Practice makes perfect, mentally as well as physically.

"If you do it enough times, the human ability goes to another level," Ohshima says, adding that "Caltech people understand this right away."

Not everyone in this Sunday morning class attended Caltech. Word about Ohshima has spread through the years. One student is a boxer. Another a lawyer.

"He understands what's going on in a wide variety of folks," Bankes says of Ohshima, adding an example. "If he senses that you're upset, he'll tell you 'Here is what you're thinking.' I don't know if he can read minds, but..."

According to Ohshima, reading your own mind is at the heart of karate, and not coincidentally, at the heart of success in whatever form it may take.

"Our own opponent is ourselves," he says. "We have to cut out our ego first."

That's not easy to do, but maybe that is why Ohshima has first-time students contort their way across the gym a few times.

Lesson No. 2: You have to experience it before you can know it. You have to know it before you can do it.

"If you participate; if you try together — those are common words. An international language."

— Mr. Ohshima, who has *dojos* in America, Canada, France, Switzerland, Israel, Morocco, Gabon and Spain.

Joe Stupak, citing youthful curiosity, was studying judo in the Rosemead Japanese Community Center in the mid-1950s, one of the few Caucasians who knew what martial arts were at the time, much less what martial arts were about.

"It was completely unknown," says Stupak, a Caltech alumnus who now lives in Portland, Ore. There was not even the Bruce Lee/Chuck Norris stereotype of any of martial arts. In the aftermath of World War II, the Orient was opening up in the West, but it was still an alien activity.

Stupak had heard about Ohshima's arrival in America even before Ohshima left Japan. The Japanese community grapevined the news that one of the pupils of the Shotokan school of karate master Gichin Funakoshi was coming to Los Angeles. But, according to Ohshima, his journey was not to spread the word. He was enrolled at USC as a graduate student in economics, having completed his undergraduate work in Japan.

Soon, however, he was teaching karate in a small *dojo* in east Los Angeles and at the Japanese community center in Pasadena. Stupak, then a freshman at Caltech, tried it. Something clicked.

First, Stupak asked Ohshima to teach a class at the school. Ohshima politely refused. The second time, after learning more about Caltech and its reputation, Ohshima accepted.

Today, he admits that he had his doubts back then.

"I am sure they would quit right away," he says. "It is difficult for a beginner to keep up."

It was not a course for credit, as it is now, but Stupak recalls about 10 people showing up for the early Caltech meetings, when Ohshima, now a faculty member, was reimbursed directly from the students. It wasn't enough to live off of, Stupak says. Profit, however, was not the goal.

"It was a very idealistic situation for me," Ohshima says. "I was spoiled, not materialistically, but mentally by my followers."

The club grew, and was eventually offered by Caltech as a physical education course for credit. It has remained a popular one. By the way, Caltech is the only place Ohshima works directly with beginners, admitting that he often overbooks his schedule watching over the

other *dojos* and teaching advanced students. Many of those *dojos* were started by Caltech alumni.

Word has spread about what Ohshima, one of the highest ranked karate experts in the world, has to say. "This was for me my luck," he says of the growth.

It is impossible to pin an exact date on when karate arrived in America, but Ohshima was definitely among the pioneers moving eastward.

A by-product of that spread, however, was the stereotype of martial arts: the Chuck Norrises and Karate Kids.

"I was bothered when I was young," says Ohshima, shaking his head when reminded of what he calls "shopping center karate."

Karate was designed as a method of self-defense, the kicks and punches and shouts, and that attracted the attention. What was overlooked is that much of the time and teaching involves how and when not to use force. How to remain in control.

"I saw them do those things in the movies," says Manfred Chiu, a Caltech alumnus, engineering consultant and black belt, of his initial interest. "That isn't what I took away from it."

But what about the thrill, the booster shot of ego of driving your fist through a stack of 2x4s?

"Boards don't fight back," Chiu says simply.

Ohshima teaches the intent behind the action. Logan calls it "speaking from a position of strength." Stupak cites the "confidence and knowledge that it is there, even if you have not practiced for a long time."

It is that ability to maintain control, not just physically, but mentally. It is not just warding off attackers who use weapons, but attackers who use words and threats.

The dividing line is the bottom line. Ohshima does not

begrudge those people who commercialize or exploit the discipline he cherishes. Chiu says that Ohshima shows how karate is magic, above and beyond breaking boards. But, for all his practical wisdom, Ohshima looks for and finds magic in many things, including the movies.

"Tarzan was terrific," he says. "Everybody is Superman."

Lesson No. 3: Strength is relative, and can be measured in many ways.

"I do not know why."
— Five words that Mr. Ohshima includes in his vocabulary

For all his charisma, Ohshima is not a salesman. He is not seeking converts to karate. That is a choice you have to make. Students have left his class after the first session; he did not chase after them.

"They have to understand with their hearts," he says. He has the air and humility of a holy man, but that is not his role. He does not speak in *haikus*.

Ohshima does not offer karate, or any martial art, as a panacea. These arts do not provide answers, but direction. The sternest tests do not occur in the *dojo*, but in the outside world.

Ohshima has faced one of them. For six months in 1984, Ohshima was at the side of his wife of 22 years, Yoko, who had been stricken with a serious illness. During that time, he did not practice, or conduct classes, but stayed with his wife and two daughters, Kyo and Tomo, both who are in college now. His wife died, and part of Ohshima went with her.

"I am still saddened," he says, his voice lowering with every word. "It has taken three years to get used to it."

"I realize how much my wife helped."

As for his knowledge and strength gained in his discipline, "It cannot make it any different. It didn't help too much."

When he was at his wife's side, Ohshima asked several of his black belts — there are now 52 Caltech club black belts — to handle the classes and the program in his absence, maintaining continuity.

One student says of the time, "It hurt a lot to see." Ohshima says that he lost much of his conditioning during the vigil, and only now is getting back to shape.

Ohshima delved back into his avocations to occupy his time. Outside of karate, his interests include reading, history being one favored subject, and listening to classical music. He also continues his duties as a father, though he jokes about his paternal skills. He says that introduced his daughters to karate, but did not push them into the discipline. In high school, they played basketball and volleyball, he says.

Things seemed to be getting back to as normal as could be expected. Then fate struck again. A former Ohshima pupil, Lt. Fred House, a Utah peace officer, was shot and killed during the recent siege at the Swapp homestead. Ohshima attended the memorial service for House, who was not a Caltech student, saying that he "cried for three days."

Lesson No. 4: Don't be resigned to fate — sometimes you will lose when you are not playing, but be ready to accept what happens.

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"I think they say, 'He's a normal guy.'"

— Mr. Ohshima on his students' image of him.

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Ohshima's ways with the beginners at Caltech is the same as with the black belts at the *dojo*. His corrections are more general, where to look and how to stand, but he shows the same calm intensity and concern.

"You must always go back to the basics," he says of teaching, whether it be white belts, black belts, or even himself. Ohshima holds a black belt, fifth *dan*, the highest given in the Shotokon school in which Ohshima studied. According to Ohshima, 10 of his pupils have reached that level. In the school's theory, a teacher cannot award a degree higher than the teacher holds.

But the basics may go deeper than the moves and philosophies of karate. What makes Ohshima so effective is his ability to get those ideas across to his students. Bankes suggests that it is Ohshima's personal consistency that makes him so accessible and trustworthy. Bankes started at Caltech in the late 1960s, a time for free thinking and "do your own thing." Not in the karate practices.

"He believed in rigid standards, and he didn't waiver one bit," Bankes says of Ohshima. "You understood him right away."

"He has a great understanding of what he is trying to do," Stupak says.

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In talking with his students, one small habit becomes evident. They all call him *Mr. Ohshima* in all references.

There is supposedly a saying at Caltech that you take physics with Feynman and karate from Mr. Ohshima.

Lesson No. 5: The lesson never ends.