he 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 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 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 1958, but his English is still careful, as he conceives. 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.

“Where 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 easy walk. According to Logan, the 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 “jellify your legs. I hobbled back to my dorm,” Yet, for some reason known 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 talks, letting 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.
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. After the time, much less what martial arts were about.

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

Stupak had heard about Osshima's arrival in America even before Osshima left Japan. The Japanese community grape- vined the news that one of the pupils of the Shotokan school of karate master Chichin Funakoshi was coming to Los Angeles. But, according to Osshima, 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 Osshima to teach a class at the school. Osshima politely refused. The second time, after learning more about Caltech and its reputation, Osshima 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. It was free, but Stupak recalls about 10 people showing up for the early Caltech meetings, when Osshima, 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 point.

"It was a very idealistic situation for me," Osshima 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 12 students, increasing in popularity. By the way, Caltech is the only place Osshima 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 Osshima is, 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 Osshima was definitely among the pioneers moving it forward.

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

"I was bothered when I was young," says Osshima, 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 was that much of the time and teaching involves how and when to not be free. How to remain in control.

"I saw them do those things in the movies," says Manfred Chiu, a Caltech alum who worked in the entertainment field 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.

Osshima teaches the intent behind the action. Logan calls it "speaking from a position of strength. Stupak recalls being "comfortable and knowledgeable" that it was 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. Osshima does not degrade those people who commercialize or exploit the discipline he cherishes. Chiu says that Osshima shows how karate is magic, above and beyond breaking boards. But, for all his practical wisdom, Osshima 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. Osshima includes in his vocabulary:

- Osshima 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.

- Osshima has faced one of them. For six months in 1984, Osshima was at the side of a 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, Kyoko and Tomoko, both who are in college now. His wife died, and part of Osshima 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 am so thankful for my wife helped.

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

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

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

Osshima delved back into his associations 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 daughter to karate, but did not push them into the discipline. In high school, they played basketball and volleyball, he says.