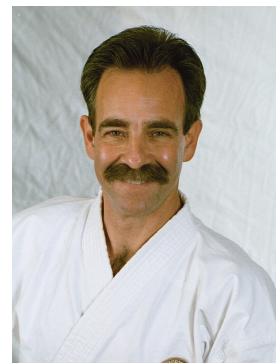


## EDMOND OTIS 7<sup>th</sup> Dan

Interview by UCR Martial Arts Studies Dept.

First published in  
SHOTOKAN KARATE MAGAZINE ISSUE 70 FEBRUARY 2002  
Revised march 2005

**Interviewer:** This interview with Shotokan Karate instructor, Edmond Otis took place on the campus of the University of California, Riverside (UCR), where Otis is director of a unique program in Karate and Martial Arts Studies. Sensei Otis, 7<sup>th</sup> Dan is Chairman of the American JKA Karate Association - International (AJKA - I). He is 50 years old and has been training since 1967. Sensei Otis has recently co-written with Randall G. Hassell "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Karate" published in 2000 by Macmillan, USA. He is featured in the recently released outstanding DVD series, 'Essential Shotokan', from Perfect Form, Inc. Mr. Otis began his training at the age of 12 with the Japan Karate Association under the leadership of Hidetaka Nishiyama of Los Angeles. At the age of 17 he moved to Riverside, CA, to become a full-time student of former AJKA Chief Instructor, Sensei Ray Dalke - 8th dan, then, one of only 3 non-Japanese graduates of the prestigious (USA) JKA instructor's program. In addition to his duties at UCR, Sensei Otis travels extensively for the AJKA throughout North America and Europe conducting seminars and clinics on all aspects of Shotokan Karate. He also directs a community youth and adult program near his home in Oceanside, California. Sensei Otis teaches karate as a safe and highly effective means of self-defense, a rigorous form of exercise, a philosophy of life, and an exciting competitive sport. He is internationally known as a referee, instructor and judge and has coached numerous youth and adult competitors to national and international championships.



**Q: Sensei Otis, in every seminar we've seen you lead, you always say that, "There is nothing better than good Shotokan Karate and nothing worse than bad Shotokan Karate." Could you explain that statement?**

A: All the traditional martial arts approach both the "Do" and "jutsu" of their art from a specific, philosophical, and physical perspective. As we progress, we develop more depth, greater skills, greater fluidity, and greater fluency in our ability to understand and use the art. But the essential principles that are unique to that art remain the same. Sometimes I think karate-ka, and especially Shotokan stylists lack an appreciation for what is special about our art. For example, most judo practitioners can tell you that the underlying maxim of judo is "minimum effort - maximum results." In the same way, most aikido practitioners know that their art is about harmonizing with, and redirecting their opponent's force. What's shocking to me is that many, many, karate-ka lack an essential understanding of what karate's underlying principle, or goal, is.

**Q: And that is?**

A: Although we use throwing and restraints, karate is fundamentally a percussive, or an impact art. First and last, we strike our opponent. But the art isn't simply about hitting things, any more than playing a drum is just about using sticks to make a lot of noise. Karate is always about timing and distance. It is always about our relationship to our opponent. My view is that ultimately karate is about striving to be at our best, our most focused, our most balanced, our most dynamic - precisely at the moment our opponent is at their weakest. We seek to find and attack the momentary lapses in the opponent's physical and mental attention. Now of all karate styles, JKA style Shotokan seems to focus on this principle almost to the exclusion of anything else. When we compare one Karate style to another, usually what you will see is that the Shotokan stylist is the least flamboyant stylist, our kata are relatively simple, our strategies are fairly straight forward, and our training depends heavily on the endless repetition of very basic techniques - in a sense our style has no style. There's a great scene in the first Indiana Jones movie where a huge warrior swinging a big sword in an elaborate pattern confronts the hero. Without missing a beat, Indiana Jones pulls out a 45, shoots the guy, puts his gun away, and goes on with his business. I see that as a very Shotokan moment. Basically, we really seem to focus on just three things: first, the quality of our technique - our ability to make shock and focus with our techniques, second, our sense of timing, and third our use of distance. That's it. The trouble is, if we don't do our homework, if we don't study the dynamics of our techniques and stances adequately, we really have nothing fancy to hide behind. Shotokan Karate can then become very stiff and very awkward and not very effective. Although it is stereotyped as a "hard style" the best Shotokan stylists understand the fundamental principles of the system in a way that lets them be fluid and soft whenever they are not hitting their target.

**Q: The AJKA was one of the first groups to break off from what was then a worldwide centralized karate organization. How do you see the JKA Shotokan world changing at the present?**

A: In the last 5/10 years we have seen an increasingly rapid decentralization of JKA karate throughout the world. I think this is both positive and negative. On the positive side, we are seeing more openness and the greater exchange of techniques and training ideas from one Shotokan group to another. As the boundaries break down, we are starting to see, in my view, a return to what Karate originally was supposed to be about. Separate Shotokan families and dojos who develop their own skills, have their own loyalties and affinities, and then go out to compare and exchange techniques with other similar groups on an equal basis. However, on the other hand there seems to be a negative side to the loss of centralization. Much of the karate itself seems to be suffering. The fact that there is no central administrative standard seems to have translated in to a loss of a technical standard as well. It often seems that without the late Nakayama Sensei traveling around, cracking the whip of correctness, many of the newer independent Shotokan groups are less concerned about mastering the fundamentals of the art. They seem to have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

**Q: Someone who attended two days of your seminars in Michigan told us that at the beginning of your kata sessions, you boasted about being the "antibunkai." What does that mean?**

A: (Laughing) Actually that was said half in jest - but only half. Obviously, understanding the application of a kite's techniques is crucial to the correct performance of our forms. It enhances our skills, our ability to defend ourselves, and our appreciation of the art. However, my personal philosophy and, to a great extent, the official stated philosophy of the AJKA is that really bunkai is not the main reason that we practice kata. First of all - while practicing bunkai is easy, practicing Kata is difficult. As I said earlier the JKA style of Shotokan Karate invests a lot of energy in understanding, practicing, and improving the dynamics of the individual and combined techniques. Ultimately the goal of karate training is a marriage of physical mastery, emotional stability, and intellectual focus. Kata develops all three of those in a synchronized and congruent fashion. Nothing is more personally challenging than that. Kata teaches us to develop intense moment-by-moment focus while at the same time maintaining an overall awareness of ourselves in relation to the world around us - the whole. Kind of an ongoing, simultaneous, appreciation of both "the trees" and "the forest". On the other hand, bunkai is simply basic sparring. Nothing more, nothing less. Don't get me wrong, I value basic sparring. I practice it and I teach it. It's an important part of learning to use a variety of techniques in a controlled setting. It serves an important role. But it is not the heart of karate training. Here's my bunkai example for the year. My eight year-old son is studying music. He really loves it. Somewhere along the line he has picked up playing the first 4 notes to Beethoven's 5th symphony - the really famous one: "bom, bom, bom, booom!" So now he can sit down at the piano, with his back straight, his head up, and he can knock out those four notes. When people hear it, they are surprised, they are stunned at how brilliant it sounds, and they expect him to continue the rest of the amazingly complex musical piece. Well, he can't. He is only eight. He has only been practicing the piano for about a year and a half. When he sits down, and plays those four notes - he isn't playing Beethoven - he is playing Beethovenbunkai.

**Q: The new WKF kumite rules are significantly different from the current sanbon and ippon rules. Any thoughts on how the changes will impact karate? Is the AJKA planning on going in that direction?**

A: No, not really. We wish our friends in the WKF well, but we intend to continue practicing karate. My personal feeling is many of us are selling our karate souls for Olympic recognition and Olympic affiliation. The new rules have nothing to do with what we think of as karate. Also, they aren't really very new. For the most part they are versions of the Taekwondo Olympic rules, and really while there is nothing wrong with that, philosophically, it's not karate. I appreciate sports. I appreciate the Olympics. But the two are not necessarily the same. My sense and my information is that as the WKF goes further and further towards this goal and Olympic affiliation, they are going to go further and further away from karate. The truth is, or at least my understanding of it is, if karate gets to the Olympics, it will no longer be karate. First of all, the Olympics already have a kick-punch sport, Taekwando, and it is very unlikely that the Olympics are going to host two very similar sports, especially now, when the rules are so close. So what we are going to be seeing is one Olympic kick punch sport, perhaps Taekwan Karate, Karate Kwan Do, or just Olympic kick punch art. As far as increasing our popularity, I think that, unless we are careful, karate being in the Olympics will do as much for karate's general popularity as it has done for judo. On the other hand, I am very pleased that the AJKA is actively moving in the opposite direction. We promote and participate in national and international ippon competition through a variety of shotokan groups and through the AJKA organization here and in Europe. It's

interesting to me that since Shotokan is so popular throughout the world, this very intense and dynamic type of competition is once again greatly increasing in popularity. We, along with a large portion of traditional martial artists are moving back to our traditions. Back towards recognizing the unique value and relevance of karate as a human art of personal development combat, and self defense. Additionally, we are very interested in seeing and promoting the individual arts as distinct and separate from each other. One of the things that surprised me when I was still involved with the AAU and that made the intelligent decision the move to awarding national kata championships for different styles (for example the AAU has a national Shotokan Kata Champion, National Goju Champion, National Shito Champion, and so on) was how homogenized and similar the performances of the various kata had become over the last several years. Gradually we have been moving away from the distinctive characteristics that make each style unique, to a general standardized kata. While the WKF seems to think this is a good thing, I think it is an abomination.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit about your current projects.**

A: Sure, gladly. Several things have been happening in the last couple of years that involves the AJKA and myself. A while ago, karate instructor and writer, Randall Hassell and I were contacted by Macmillan-USA, Inc., to write "The Complete Idiot's Guide To Karate", as a part of their international series of instructional books. It's been on the market a couple of years, doing very well, and I know from the mail and calls I have received, it is being used widely as a text for numerous traditional karate schools and programs. Second, I have just released a karate DVD teaching series called Essential Shotokan, from Perfect Form, Inc. Basically, the production gives an in-depth overview of Shotokan's techniques, principles, concepts and foundations. It then goes on to demonstrate key points, common errors, and provide beginning, intermediate, and advanced applications and training methods for each technique. The early response and reviews have been very, very good. I will say right here, right now, that to be very honest, the strength of this series is not the intricate and fancy graphics or effects, but rather the content and the clarity of the presentation. My hope is that it helps students of all levels to learn something new about basic Shotokan techniques and basic methodology. I think it's going to be very useful to instructors who want a little bit of added perspective and perhaps some different ideas in how to develop classes and training schedules. Finally, and most exciting, because of our growth, and people's interest in our approach to traditional shotokan, combined with our view that a karate organization should HELP its members develop – not ignore, tax, or torment them, we are in the process of growing into the American JKA Karate Association – International (AJKA-I). The organization is growing dramatically in Europe, under the leadership of my instructor, Safar Sensei, 8<sup>th</sup> dan, and we are gaining members in Canada, and Central and South America. We quietly made the decision a while ago to actively help our members grow as well rounded karateka, AND as successful dojos, and through word of mouth that approach is bringing clubs to us at a pretty good clip.

**J.C: Why do many Shotokan groups frown on punches, when they cause knockouts at tournaments?**

A: I think this question can be answered in several ways. Here are three ways I might look at it: One answer might be that it is much easier to knock out someone who is fighting you with the

expectation that you are going to make control, than it is, someone who is trying to stomp your head into the side walk and fully expects to take a few good shots from you while he is doing it. Another answer might be that I don't really think it is a matter of snapping techniques versus locking techniques, but rather focused techniques versus non-focused. The thing that sets Shotokan apart from the rest of the world is its almost pathological, philosophical and technical, insistence that we always strive to create a fluid synergy between our breathing, our body actions, and our techniques. It all - always - is supposed to work together. In these terms I think of focus as the ability to transfer as much overall force as possible, in the shortest amount of time, and to the smallest impact area. We don't, however, apply this principle in the same way in different situations. For example, the sharp, back fist strike we deliver to someone's temple, will not work in the same way to someone's torso. For that we may change to a locking type of strike because different target density absorbs and disperses shock differently. In the same way, a punch to the jaw may require a different "type" of focus (snapping?) than one to the body. The other factor to consider is the ability of the individual. The advanced (trained) person can (hopefully) create this synergy in a shorter amount of time, and by virtue of that, create more shock - not less, in less time - not more.

Slightly off topic, but relevant; in recent years the practitioners who have become more and more fascinated by the vulnerability of nerve centers and secret, or hidden techniques are gradually finding that knowing where the nerve centre is and effectively attacking it are two different things. "Nerve attacks" work by interrupting the nerve impulse to and from the brain for a prolonged and intense period of time. This requires a longer, deeper, contact time - not shorter. We can think of the round leg kick typically associated with Thai boxing. There the impact sticks, as opposed to snaps, because the contact needs to be longer to accomplish its goal of "killing" the nerve. Nerve attacks that work, look an awful lot like the old "heavy" focus we see in the basic kata. If we just needed to lightly touch certain nerve centers to incapacitate our opponent, most of us wouldn't survive the accidental, random, physical contact of daily life. A ride in a crowded subway would be dangerous, a Saturday afternoon football game in the park would be crippling, and no one would survive their honeymoon! A third answer might be to look at the "do" aspect of our art. I imagine if you were to ask this same question to a student of tea ceremony, or bonsai, you would have asked, "Hey, what's the fuss? Just pour the tea! Doesn't drinking from a styrofoam cup in your car work as well?" or, "Hmmm, cute tree, but why is it so small? Wouldn't you get more shade from a bigger one? What about firewood?"

What actual benefit does traditional karate practice bring to our daily life? Where do we as students, teachers, and practitioners, actually "walk the talk" about character and courage? Well to be honest, I'm never sure about how all this character stuff shakes out in the real karate world. We all know that there are the full range of personalities involved in our art - some you could trust in all circumstances and some not. Really, though I don't think that matters. Karate is an individual activity. However, there do seem to be certain characteristics or approaches to life that are shared, to greater or lesser degrees, by those who practice seriously. One seems to be the acceptance that if you want to get good at something, YOU need to work hard, because no one is going to do it for you. Another seems to be the ability to control our emotions and remain poised and focused at times of great danger or personal challenge. I think we develop this through our daily training focus of striving for the perfect technique, one that is totally finished, and creates a personal unity of our physical, mental and emotional energy, at the exact time that the stakes are the greatest.

**J.C: Keeping the tailbone tucked in is paramount in traditional Shotokan. Why is this so important when other dynamic sports/arts don't do this?**

A: I like this question, and to be honest I totally disagree with its premise. All dynamic sports and arts do this, and those that don't - aren't very dynamic. Perhaps the confusion is in the translation

of the word "tucked" which sounds awfully unnatural. Think of batting and throwing in baseball, the strength events in weight lifting, hitting a golf ball, bowling, judo, sumo, boxing (western and Thai), just chopping down a tree with an axe. Basically, in order for us to generate any force or movement, the hips and torso need to be engaged in the action. If we think just about our karate techniques (but this rule also applies to most of the other examples I gave), the body centre (the hips) can only be engaged when they are between the driving point of the stance (far leg) and target or impact area. A simple way to say this is to tuck your hips. One of the gifts that the traditional martial arts provide us with is that they methodically teach us to move, and use our bodies, the way that natural athletes do (granted, for some of us this is a much longer and more arduous journey than for others). Basically this means developing a natural relationship between the angle of the head and neck, the alignment of the shoulders, the natural curve of the spine, the position of the hips, along with the distribution of the weight in relation to knees and soles of the feet. Since the laws of physics and human physiology govern karate, we function best and our karate works best, when we follow those principles. When we begin our practice as students, by far, the most common mistake that beginners make is tensing the body inappropriately, and also compensating for a lack of power and coordination by over-using the shoulder and arm muscles and under-using the legs and hips, which in turn kicks the hip out and disrupts our balance. Now, even though this is common, it is not natural. As I said previously, I think that much of the controversy about 'hip-tuck' is more a problem of translation stemming from some instructors; a very abrupt and simplistic way of getting their students to compensate for this initial tendency. However, to overcompensate by distorting the natural and efficient working of the body in some other way (the hip tucked to the point that the pelvis rolls up unnaturally, for example) is just as nonproductive and limiting.

*Interviewer: Mr. Otis, thank you very much for your karate insights and time. (The last two questions were asked by SKM Editor, Mr. John Cheetham).*