

ICHIKAWA:

Goju Karate's 'Unknown' Master

By CHRIS CLIFFORD

Sosui Ichikawa Sensei is a 10th Dan teacher of *Goju-ryu Karate-Do*. In his mid-seventies, he is relatively unknown here in the West. In Japan and Okinawa it is the exact opposite. He is *extremely* well-known and very highly-respected. Many venerated masters, **Yagi Sensei**, **Kanazawa Sensei** and **Hatsumi Sensei** for example, visit him in his home *dojo*; they are one and the same.

Here I will attempt to explain a little about this 'unknown' master, and some of the times I have spent with him.

Without prior knowledge, you would never know there was a *dojo* there. The outside resembles a greenhouse, as **Mrs. Ichikawa** is big on plants. Perhaps that is why few Westerners have ever been there. In fact, to my knowledge, only three Europeans have ever practiced there. Nowadays there is only myself.

When you open the door from the street, you step into the *dojo*. This is his front room. It is almost like walking into a time warp – very old and very worn. Sensei Ichikawa sits to the middle of one wall, on what I can only describe as a small platform. To his back is a kitchen, to his side sits his dog. His wife is usually there, working in the kitchen or watering the plants. On the left-hand wall is his shrine, which houses various things he has collected over the years. To each side of the shrine there are karate *dogi* (uniforms), which are rolled up and slid on to poles. It is said that when this is done, part of your spirit remains in the *dojo*.

There are many kinds of weapons and many different kinds of *makiwara* (striking posts). These are extremely varied, not only in size and depth, but also in texture, each resembling different body parts. There is a gas bottle with a cloth tied around it, and a belt which you hold on to, so that when you strike, it does not move. There are padded ones and some that are filled with water. One of them is made of two skis – this one is extremely spongy.

The changing room is the *dojo*. After practice, a screen is placed in the street and a hosepipe, connected from the kitchen tap, is dangled over the top – this is the shower. There are people walking by and cars and lorries driving past. Needless to say, the first shower was a little embarrassing.

You couldn't really describe Ichikawa Sensei as the friendliest of souls: in fact he prefers dogs to most people. Many years ago he made the choice to



Mastr Sosui Ichikawa, a 10th Dan of Goju-ryu Karate-Do

dedicate his life to the study of *Budo Karate-Do Goju-ryu*; he has never deviated from this course. He knew this was not going to be easy: firstly you must eat and by teaching for a living, he knew he would never become rich . . . at least not in terms of money. However, the man is priceless! He is real. He talks no nonsense and yet *ki* (energy) runs through him like a river. He is a hard man but not spiteful, in fact, inwardly, he is quite kind.

If Ichikawa Sensei is teaching a technique and it is performed a mere fraction out, he will not let you rest until you fully understand the importance of this slight error, whether it be in mind, body or spirit. He constantly emphasises that the minutest error can mean the difference between life and death.

I questioned Sensei as to why, when we reach the grade of 3rd Dan, we wear a black *dogi*. He said that when you reach this grade you should be

practicing your chosen art daily. Therefore you can spend more time practicing in it than washing it.

On my first visit to Japan some years ago, I arrived at the *dojo* an hour before the class started, and Sensei Ichikawa was practicing himself. I was told to come in and get changed. After bowing, I was told to kneel down in front of the gas bottle *makiwara*, hold on to the belt and punch the padding, which is strapped around the middle. This was the first time I had seen, or punched, a steel *makiwara*. By then he had stopped practicing and his eyes never left me, although he still managed to continue eating his breakfast. Fifty minutes later

“You couldn’t really describe Ichikawa Sensei as the friendliest of souls: in fact, he prefers dogs to most people”

I was allowed to stop, when another student arrived. By then my hands did not look or feel so good, to say the least. There was no sympathy in his eyes.

I was the first foreign student to practice in the *dojo*. I am sure that he was watching my spirit that day. I have rarely arrived early since then.

On a subsequent visit to Japan, the second day at the *dojo* I bowed, went over to Sensei and his wife and presented them with some gifts. I paid the *dojo* fees, got changed, knelt down and bowed, and proceeded to start my karate practice. He said to **Sensei Kyoshi Yonemoto**, who speaks great English and has been like a father since my first visit: “Tell Chris san to get changed and go home, and to come back tomorrow.” I was more than bewildered, but did as he told me. When I returned the next day he told me to never enter the *dojo* without spirit. “Your spirit must be with you at all times!” To me this was a great lesson – one I have never forgotten.

On another occasion, I visited Japan with my wife-to-be. We visited the *dojo* and were welcomed in. My wife was invited to sit on the dog’s cushion – this was an honour. The dog was not quite so happy to move, but I knew that Sensei approved of my choice of wife, as he wouldn’t disturb his canine for somebody he didn’t care for! As we sat and drank, he asked if there was anything I’d like to ask or see. I was momentarily taken by surprise – there was an infinite amount that I’d love to ask him. Somewhat lost for words, I panicked in case he changed his mind, and asked him please to show me *Sanchin* stance. The edge of the big toe and the edge of the foot was placed on the floor, each toe thereafter followed one by one, as if they were searching for

some purchase. He then lifted his groin and twisted his feet. It looked like his feet were webbed, like a duck. I felt that if he now lifted his feet he would have lifted the floor. It wasn’t that they were gripping the floor, but stuck to it by sheer suction. It appeared as if he could have walked floor to ceiling!



The gas bottle ‘makiwara’ in the Master’s dojo/home

I looked at my fiancée, she looked at me, and we both looked at him. Our mouths must have been open, because he just laughed, something he often does when he sees someone a little shocked. I realised I had just seen *Sanchin* stance. Since that time I have been sleeping with matchboxes between my toes and quacking like a duck . . . but with no luck yet! On the same afternoon, I also asked Ichikawa Sensei why he demonstrated karate with a sword sometimes. He complimented me by saying: “You are now beginning to understand; weapons are only an extension of one’s body and mind. Practice *Seienchin* kata with a long and short sword, and you will see for yourself.” To my surprise it was no different. He went on to say that “. . . if you open your mind you will see all ways are the same. It is only the way your mind sees them.”

He then gave Sensei Yonemoto a *katana* (long sword), and told him to attack him. As he proceeded to do this, Sensei Ichikawa disarmed him at varying stages; as he went to draw it, as he drew it, when he had drawn it, and when he was just about to cut. At all stages it was ‘captured’ and thrust back toward Yonemoto’s throat. It looked effortless and I looked on in total amazement. Sensei Ichikawa said: “The weapon is an extension of oneself. You must know the weapon”.

Once, after a long discussion with

Sensei Ichikawa – with the intention of complimenting him – I said: “Your mind is like a computer”, meaning you have stored up so much knowledge. His face immediately changed to that of disgust. He raised his arms and looked down. I realised then that I had insulted him. How could this man possibly be compared to a computer?

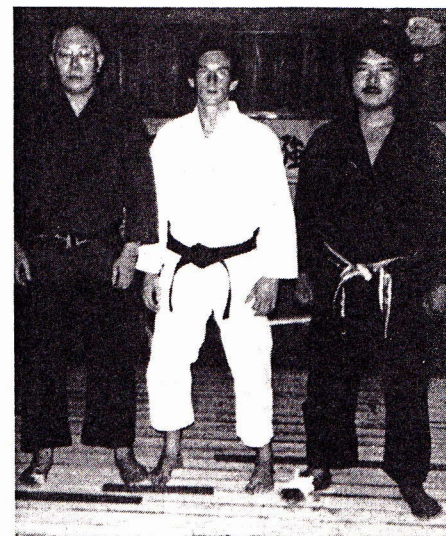
A saying of Sensei Ichikawa is: “Close your eyes and you will see. Cover your ears and you will hear. Close your mouth and you can speak.”

At one time in the *dojo* I told Ichikawa Sensei that, in England, whilst practicing in my garden each morning, I often feel that I’m in his *dojo* in Japan. He said simply: “You are.” I was confused and this obviously showed in my face, for he continued: “before your visit this time, when were you last here?” I told him it was eight months previous. He said: “That’s strange, some of the students were asking after you last week.” I just looked at him, not really knowing what to say next. He finished with: “You can be wherever you desire if you so wish. This technique you will learn in *kumite* (sparring) one day, if you haven’t already.”

On another occasion during *kumite* practice, I was told to stop and face the wall and squat. He expects no change of facial expression when he calls for physical effort. Thirty-five minutes later I was told to stop. I was then asked if my legs ached. “Yes, Sensei.” “So you have legs – why do you not use them in *kumite* to control your opponent’s legs?” “Sorry, Sensei,” I said. “No, I am” he replied, and laughed.

If a person comes to the *dojo* to watch,

“He constantly emphasises that the minutest error can mean the difference between life and death”



Japan 1977. Left to right: Master Ichikawa, Chris Clifford and Yonemoto Sensei

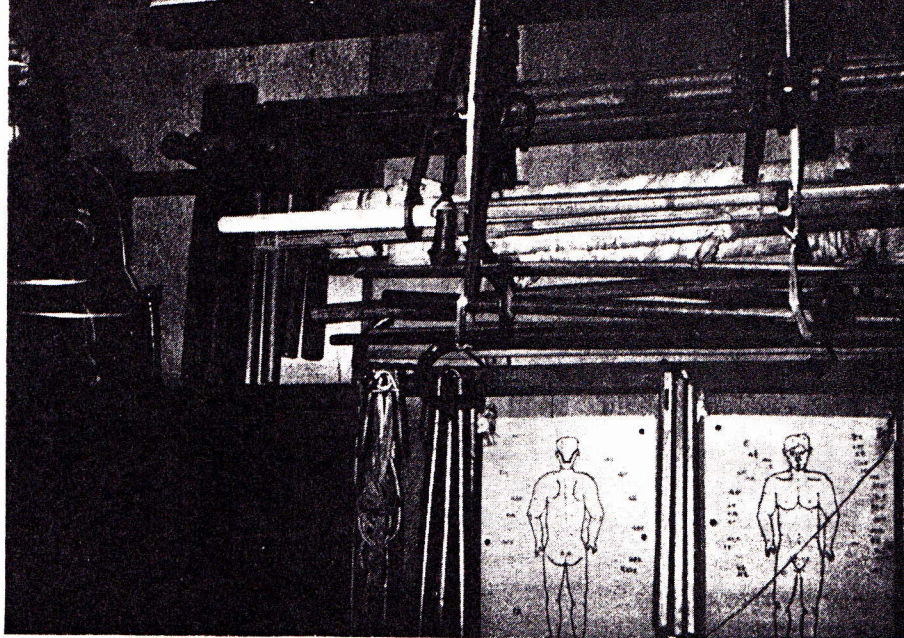
"He told me to never enter the dojo without spirit . . . 'Your spirit must be with you at all times!' "

he will see very little. Usually we are sent to the park. If Sensei Ichikawa wants visitors to see anything, perhaps *kata*, it is left to his understudy, Sensei Yonemoto, whose karate is very fine. I feel it is second only to Sensei Ichikawa. The master is very hard on him and constantly pushes him, even after thirty-four years.

Sensei Yonemoto is a doctor of acupuncture, and has his own *dojo* in Tokyo. Sensei Ichikawa is always stressing that acupuncture is important to learn and be practised, especially in the understanding of karate.

I now have a clinic and a *dojo* in my house in Bromley, and I have been studying acupuncture since I first began my karate practice with Yonemoto Sensei. I have found it to be as beneficial as I was told it would be.

I was given permission to open a *dojo* when I reached 4th *Dan* level in May, '89. It is only at this stage that it's felt we have a good enough understanding of Sensei Ichikawa's karate to begin to teach to others. We are expected to attend a



A section of the weapons, equipment and anatomical charts in Master Ichikawa's dojo/home

teachers' class each month in order to maintain the standards. In my case this is a little difficult. However, once or twice a year is possible.

The *Goju Karate* of Ichikawa Sensei has not been seen in this country before. There is a quite definite difference to other *Goju Karate* systems, both here in England, and in Japan.

Yonemoto Sensei who, in addition to his karate *dojo*, runs an Acupuncture and Shiatsu clinic in Tokyo, has visited England on only three occasions, yet his command of the language, whilst self-

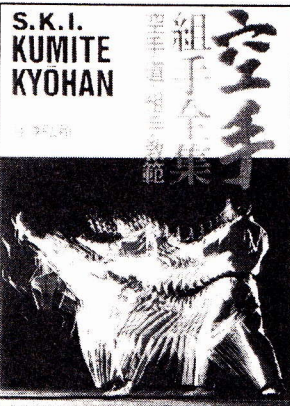
taught, is excellent. His karate is very impressive and he passes knowledge on in a very friendly atmosphere.

He will be visiting these shores in August 1993, and holding classes in the Southampton area.

Enquiries about the *Federation of Goju-ryu Karate* can be made to Dave Morris on 0703 473628.

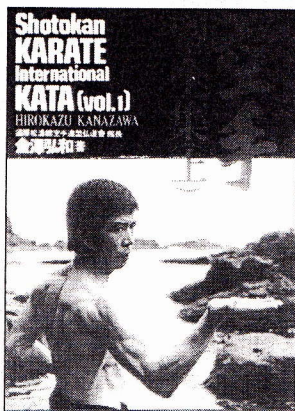
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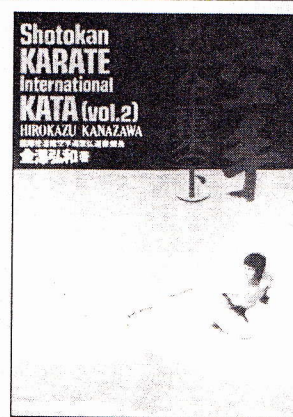


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