

MAXIMUM

An Interview with Pascal Lecourt Sensei

Pascal Lecourt Sensei, 5th Dan and direct student of renowned Shotokan Master Taiji Kase Sensei for over 30 years, recently visited Australia and New Zealand to introduce Australian karate students to the Kase-Ha method of Shotokan. The 46-year-old Frenchman is sought-after throughout Europe for his knowledge and abilities in Kase-Ha karate, and has also practised *kyudo* (Japanese archery) for 10 years. In this comprehensive interview, Lecourt talks about his life in karate and his commitment to carrying on Kase's legacy.

When did you start practising karate and who was your first teacher?

When I was 16 years old, in 1975, I started practising karate with Sensei Gerald Dumont.

When did you first get acquainted with Sensei Taiji Kase?

In those days, Sensei Kase was mostly active in France and there he gave approximately two training sessions each month. I attended every one of them. Usually I travelled there by scooter or, when it was very far, I used to hitch-hike. I attended his training sessions from the moment I was White-belt. In those days it was also very normal to wear your white belt until your brown belt. I still work with this system in my school.

What first attracted you to Sensei Kase's Karate and what was he like as an instructor in those days?

Kase's Karate was based on reality. These outlines were practical and very applicable in all kinds of situations. Sensei Kase was strict and training with him was hard work. At the time, my life was not very organised and Sensei Kase's Karate training structured my life.

What were the defining moments in your karate career — the events or achievements that have had the most impact on you?

In my early days, I had a bad reputation for fighting at school and in the street. When I started karate, discipline was important and the structure was good for me. I met sensei at 17 years of age, which stabilised my life and I focused on my future. He was a perfect man — he had defined rules and was friendly, but strong and hard. There were no concessions for anyone.

If someone was looking for a martial art for reasons of self-defence, would you recommend Shotokan, and why?

It depends on what they want and how much they want to develop. If they are after short-term, boxing is simple and you can develop a punch quickly. Karate has so much more to learn: kicks, punches, open-hand, etc. Sensei Kase once told me: "If you want to be efficient now, buy a weapon; if you want to be efficient for your life, you can start karate." It's important to understand that Shotokan is a tradition, and many years of hard physical training and understanding is important to achieve a minimum level. Once you achieve this level, self-defence

will come naturally. Most self-defence courses are short-term programs designed to give you a basic knowledge.

I've heard that Kase Sensei said the 'big movements' of Shotokan are a way to eventually be able to use small movements with the same amount of power — can you explain how this works?

Yoshitaka improved the inner power and he also developed the large movements. This enabled the co-operation between several muscles. Here lies the Shotokan origin, which was further improved by Sensei Kase. Large movements and deep stances; at first they seem absolutely impracticable, but after ten or twenty years of practice they prove their strength. Sensei Kase has dedicated his life to this profound concept. During training we do not think about tomorrow, but about the distant future. After many years of hard and dedicated training, we can go everywhere in balance and stability. This way of training gives you the power and balance to be effective.

Most people that practise, use only one part of the body, e.g. boxing uses arm/shoulder and weight. For us, we use 100 per cent of our body's potential, especially the hip. Sensei Kase says, "Take the power from the universe and from the ground, mix inside yourself and expel this energy." *Ten* (universe), *chi* (planet), *jin* (our body); we must try to keep this energy

ENERGY



for strength. This is why it's different and we can exert maximum energy from any short technique. You can see the similarities between other forms such as kyudo and kendo.

What sets Kase Sensei's karate apart from the other streams of Shotokan around today?

His karate is traditional and it's from Yoshitaka Sensei and Funakoshi Sensei. During the war, many seniors, such as Nakayama, went to China to fight, but Kase stayed in Japan and continued training with Yoshitaka. During this time, Yoshitaka developed his style from his father and after the war was over, the seniors returned to Japan, but there was a significant difference between the senior instructors that had left Japan [and] the modern teachings of Yoshitaka.

Much later the JKA was founded – an organisation based on Gichin Funakoshi's principles. Sensei Kase joined the JKA because he wanted to become a professional karate teacher. After Sensei Masatoshi Nakayama, the leader of JKA, died, Sensei Kase founded the WKSA, in order to realise his path of life: spreading and further developing Yoshitaka's concept. During many years, Kase did his own research and also had inspiration from the Samurai and developed many different open-hand techniques such as *shuto* and *haito*; different breathing – quick and slow;

www.sportzblitz.net

and different application for kata ... During 50 years after the war, he continued to teach his way, Kase-Ha, especially in Paris where he lived.

So where lie the differences between Sensei Kase's karate style and the Shotokan style, as spread by the JKA?

In fact, there are no big differences in appearance. The depth of Sensei Kase's Shotokan lies within the right timing, combined with the right repositions and the right use of force. All this is co-ordinated with the corresponding breathing.

As I have mentioned before; this way of practicing Karate is much healthier and leads you to maturity. Sensei Kase has made some small alterations to some kata, which are based on realistic fighting situations. This

bunkai [applied] form should be dynamic and the *kumite* element should be visible.

The forms are stricter with the JKA and there is less room for freer forms. I also feel that you should not shape yourself to the karate, but that you should shape the karate to yourself. You cannot reach maturity by merely training a lot. You should also put your techniques to the test of reality. My opinion is that the *oyo-bunkai* is a very good way to come close to reality.

Apart from training the classical forms of the Shotokan kata, we also practised special forms of those same kata. The existing kata are performed differently, such as *ura-kata*, performing the kata in mirror image; *go-kata*, where all steps are made backwards instead of forwards. They are very well recognisable

as Shotokan kata. The *Tenno* kata, the three *Taikyoku* kata, the *Heian-oyo* and the *Tekki-oyo* are also typical for Shotokan Ryu Kase-Ha. These forms are not being trained with the JKA. From experience, I know now that Sensei Kase's karate — or better, *budo* karate — is healthier and that it is a good path to follow your entire life.

It's been said that many of the bunkai (technical applications) of Okinawan kata were lost in the process of karate's transference to Japan, and it's true that kata and their bunkai are generally given much higher importance in Okinawan systems. Is kata bunkai a focus of Kase's Shotokan, and did Funakoshi pass this on originally?

Yoshitaka Sensei passed on this bunkai and kata applications to Sensei Kase and he expanded on bunkai kumite and its applications. He specialised in these various interpretations of kata: *oyo*, *omete*, *ura*, *go* and *go-ura*.

Oyo kata is one's interpretation of many kata. Sensei Kase blended all five *Heian* katas to make one kata — this is called *Oyo* kata. Sensei Pascal also has his own interpretation of *Oyo* kata. *Omete* kata refers to the normal or traditional way you would perform kata. *Ura* kata is the reverse, or mirror reflection. For example, if you would normally start moving to the left, blocking with the left arm, you would move to the right with the right arm. *Go* indicates that you're moving backward through the kata. This is a very difficult understanding of any kata and shows Sensei Kase's meaning of 'kumite kata'. For example, for *Heian Shodan* kata, you would normally move forward to your left with your left leg and block *gedan-barai* (lower block). In *Heian Shodan Ura*, we would move backward with our right leg, yet blocking as we normally would, with our left arm, looking in the left direction. The entire kata is done as if you are walking backwards. *Go-ura* is *go* and *ura* simultaneously. Therefore, the kata is performed in reverse as you move backward through each step.

— Paul Fenech Sensei

Sensei Kase continued the teachings of kata bunkai, because he believed it was important to one's knowledge to understand and develop the real meaning of a kata's content. When kata is broken down into the various forms as above and then applied with an opponent, you will start to see kata as

it's meant to be. This can then be applied to kumite training and will enhance all aspects of one's training.

There are several kata taught in Kase Sensei's system that aren't taught in other Shotokan schools. Why is this, and what makes these kata important?

Sensei Kase wanted us to see every possibility of kata, left and right side (*omote* and *ura*). *Go* and *go-ura* is a much more complex way of doing kata. If you want to study *oyo* and *oyo kumite*, we have to look at all the possibilities for kata. Otherwise we can learn *oyo-bunkai kumite*, then *oyo* and finally *oyo kumite*. This way, you will have a maximum effect of the kata in a real fight situation. As for other styles not doing these kata, maybe we should ask them why they don't do them.

What is the future for traditional karate? Is change inevitable?

I hope the people will understand that martial arts and life is the same idea, and with one we can improve the other. Nobody knows the future, but since Wednesday 24 November [2004], at 5.25pm, my life has changed. Three days before this time, I was at Sensei's side, to take him to his final destination. On Wednesday, I held his hand 'til he passed away. I was with his family. It was a terrible moment and I made him a promise to continue his way, his research and his expression, for the rest of my life. If I can't, I will stop teaching. This is my future and it's important to pass on to another generation, and one day to discover a very beautiful way.

What was the most difficult point in your life in karate?

In 1985, when I had many physical problems, I went to Japan with Sensei Kase, to his home. I had many problems with my knees and my back. I was 26 years old at the time and trained karate [for] many hours every day, convinced that this would help me improve and that it was good for my life. At [one time], Sensei Kase said that, if I continued training like that, my karate life would soon come to an end. I was very surprised, because I trained hard and in an explosive manner and I was convinced that this was the only right way.

At this time, I had to make a decision: to go by a doctor's opinion and have knee-surgery, or to continue suffering. I asked Sensei Kase's opinion and he strictly told me to continue training and avoid the operation. It was a crucial decision in my life as it could literally determine the future of my karate. My choice was as sensei suggested, to continue training and change my ways to correct my injuries. In the time ahead, I spent much time watching Sensei Shirai and observed his flowing motions and subtle movements. It was perfect for me and today all my injuries have vanished without surgery.

Sensei Kase advised me to start training in Sensei Shirai's style, but with Sensei Kase's training intensity. Sensei Shirai did not only train *kime*, but also flexibility. He allowed his body to rest and relax. Karate is good for your body and your life, but can also destroy it. Many JKA karate instructors



Lecourt (left) with Fenech at a recent seminar