

The New York Times

THE CITY WEEKLY DESK

MAKING IT WORK; The Master Teacher

By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN (NYT) 1076 words

Published: March 20, 1994

PAIR off with a partner and announce which body part you intend to assault. An opponent blocks your punch or kick and retaliates with an attack to your face or solar plexus. Afterward, you bow politely and thank each other.

The intricate etiquette that prevents karate from degenerating into mayhem is vigorously enforced by Masataka Mori. He has practiced karate for 44 years, achieving the exalted rank of an eighth dan, or eighth-degree black belt, one of only nine such masters recognized worldwide by the Japan Karate Association. His black belt is so frayed it resembles the white belt of a beginner. And while his students win tournaments, he espouses perfection of character first.

"Everybody who comes to karate in the beginning thinks they're learning how to defend themselves and be good at fighting," Mr. Mori said. "But I like to teach the moral aspect of it. If I teach this, the technique and spirit of my students join together."

For a quarter century, Mr. Mori, 61, has taught his fighting art in a complex of dance and gymnastic studios at 2121 Broadway near 74th Street. His dojo, or training hall, is a small but tidy room adorned by U.S. and Japanese flags flanking a portrait of Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of modern karate. Mirrors hang on one wall, a blackboard on another. At the back are two makiwara, or padded boards for developing lethal punches.

Mr. Mori's dojo, the local branch of the Japan Karate Association, is one of scores now established outside traditional Asian neighborhoods. Martial-arts studios have been proliferating around New York, as more and more people turn to karate for exercise, self-defense or the sheer zen of it. Styles range from the classic Japanese shotokan practiced by Mr. Mori to Okinawan shorin-ryu to Korean tae kwon do, Chinese kung fu and a profusion of other competing schools that cultivate different stances, blocks, kicks and punches. Some teachers push fighting and board-breaking; others, like Mr. Mori, place a priority on discipline suffused with tradition.

"A person who practices karate can contribute to society," Mr. Mori said. "It's a way of life, not just about kicking and punching."

Mr. Mori's classes are authentically Japanese, with ceremonial bows, meditation and communal floor-washing to wipe away the pools of sweat between classes. "It's the combination of mental, spiritual and physical, which you don't find in a lot of places," said Lisa Nakanishi, a New York lawyer and a first-degree black belt.

About 115 karateka, or students, a large number of them black belts, are enrolled at Mr. Mori's Broadway dojo. "If I choose to watch TV rather than come and learn from him, I need my head examined," said William Georgiadis, a sporting glove manufacturer and second-degree black belt who commutes nightly from Hoboken, N.J. Loyalty is strong. When Mr. Mori moved his dojo from the second to the fourth floor a decade ago, students pitched in to paint, fix the wiring, and sand and finish the floor.

"I started with him and can't imagine going anywhere else," said Susan Volchok, a Manhattan writer who came to Mr. Mori's dojo 13 years ago. She stayed, training through seven months of pregnancy, and now holds a second-degree black belt.

Tuition is about \$85 a month, \$230 for three months. Mr. Mori takes his karateka, 20 to 30 a class, through a rigorous drill of fundamentals (kihon), no-contact sparring (kumite) and balletlike maneuvers (kata) against imaginary opponents. Afterward, students kneel and recite a code of conduct that pledges them to respect others and refrain from violence. Every three months, they undergo a grading that can promote them up the ranks through two degrees of white belt, three of green belt and three of brown belt. They are ready to aim for black belt after three to five years.

"I want every beginner to make black belt," Mr. Mori said, "but usually the guy who has talent doesn't endeavor, and the guy who has no sports talent tries and tries. It's like the hare and the tortoise."

Mr. Mori, who was born in 1932 in Kyushu, in southern Japan, has lived the persevering life he preaches. He grew up in the bleak postwar years when, he recalled, "there wasn't much food, no rice in those days, only sweet potatoes." Even so, when it came to karate, he said, "I practiced very hard." After graduating from Takushoku University in Tokyo in 1955, he began teaching karate. In 1963, he was invited to Hawaii, where he built a local team that defeated visiting Japanese college champions.

"For him, failure means to quit," said Isami Shiroma, an Okinawan-born businessman and fifth-degree black belt who sometimes instructs when Mr. Mori is away. "He's always rooting for the Mets while they're losing," Mr. Shiroma said. "When they begin winning, he loses interest."

In 1968, Mr. Mori came to New York to teach on a two-year contract. He wound up staying. As chief instructor, or effective head, of the North Atlantic region of the Japan Karate Association, he visits dojos as far away as Scandinavia and judges tournaments around the world. But his base remains the Upper West Side, where he also supervises classes at Columbia University. He teaches in suburban New Jersey and Long Island, too,

and is an associate professor of physical education at the State University of New York in Stony Brook.

Mr. Mori often trains beginners himself, unusual for someone his rank. Children are his favorite students. "They can learn so many things," he said, "but you must teach manners to children." He likes them because "they are going to be our leaders."

He is less patient with the mistakes of more advanced black belts who fail to maintain his strict standards; Mr. Mori reinforces corrections with a bamboo stick.

"It stings," said Mr. Georgiadis, one of those who have felt corrective taps. "But it's controlled and done for the specific reason of letting the nerves in the offending area tell you that you should be doing it right."

Mr. Mori and his wife, who live in Closter, N.J., remain Japanese citizens; their daughters are American-born. One went to Yale and studies eye diseases as a physician at Mount Sinai Hospital. The other works for the Consumer News/Business Channel, a cable station in Fort Lee, N.J.

Mr. Mori talks of retiring to Japan, but not yet. "I haven't finished my task here," he said. "When all of my students have become good citizens, then I can go home."

Photo: Masataka Mori, an eighth-degree black belt, demonstrating a move at his Upper West Side karate studio. (Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times) Chart: "MARTIAL ARTS: Fighting Forms"

In Japanese, "karate" means empty hand. Kung fu expresses the same concept in Chinese. Here are some popular schools of unharmed fighting. SHOTOKAN: Low stance, powerful blows generated through stomach muscles and hips, developed in Japan from Okinawan basics. SHORIN-RYU: Circular sweeping style, from Okinawa. TAI KWON DO: High-kicking aggressive fighting from Korea. KUNG FU: Originated many centuries ago with the monks of Shaolin Temple in central China.

The New York Times

LEISURE/WEEKEND DESK

WEEKEND WARRIOR; Learning That Karate's Blows Go Hand in Hand With Manners

By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN (NYT) 1737 words

Published: June 11, 1999

I admit to having aimed a premeditated kick at the head of a lawyer named Brent Stevens. He promptly hit me three times.

Afterward, we bowed politely to each other.

Our fight took place under the critical stare of Masataka Mori, a director of the Japan Karate Association and its chief instructor in North America. At the Shotokan Karate-do of New York, his modest dojo, or training hall, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Mr. Mori teaches a karate as classically Japanese as anything found east of Okinawa.

Sweating for an hour or so under the tutelage of Mr. Mori, who holds a stratospheric eighth-degree black belt rank, is like visiting Japan without having to buy an airline ticket.

Before each class, lawyers, police officers and teachers fall to their knees to mop the floor with damp rags. The commands are given in Japanese. Classes begin and end with meditation and ceremonial bows. A late arrival must kneel, awaiting Mr. Mori's eventual invitation to join the class. And black belts who perform sloppily may feel the chastening sting of Mr. Mori's shinai -- a swordlike bamboo stick -- on the offending foot or arm.

For Mr. Mori, karate is not about mayhem, but about balance, focus and proper breathing. Karate's roots, he said, lie in the same Japanese traditions as kendo, the art of sword fighting, or ikebana, the art of flower arranging.

"This is the philosophy of karate," Mr. Mori said. "It stresses manners, sincerity, modesty and courage, truthfulness and respect. I do not believe you will find these in all other sports."

Yasunobu Ohama, a lightning-fast young black belt who learned his karate techniques at his father's dojo in Osaka, said traditional masters like Mr. Mori were getting harder to find, even in Japan. "He is a Japanese samurai," Mr. Ohama said respectfully.

Every karate dojo assumes the personality of its sensei, or teacher. Mr. Mori preaches perseverance, arguing that in defeat lie the seeds of future victory. "There are people who become trapped in their daily tasks, who do not strive beyond their routine," he said. "If they were to train in the rigors of karate, I believe they would be able to overcome this situation."

His gospel of constant striving attracts serious black belts along with white-belted novices. "I think the idea of trying to make yourself better with every technique and every move makes you realize your continuing imperfections," said David Eng-Wong, a teachers' union representative who was promoted recently to san-dan, or third-degree black belt. "And Sensei Mori is always good for keeping you humble."

For the likes of Brent Stevens and me, karate becomes our way of sweating away tension and cleansing the mind of the week's accumulated frustrations. "It's a stress reliever for me," said Mr. Stevens, who drives in from Montclair, N.J., to train under Mr. Mori on weeknights and Saturdays. "If I go three days without training, I get uptight."

I took up karate to improve my coordination for rock climbing and skiing, two sports that I try to keep up when I escape the city. On evenings or weekends when I can't get away, karate has become a satisfying solution for cross-training.

Even before I earned my black belt, I became engrossed in a martial art whose shadowy roots extend back at least eight centuries to the fighting monks of the Shaolin temple in central China. Their self-defense techniques migrated to other parts of Asia, notably Okinawa. According to tradition, after the island's overlords banned the carrying of weapons, Okinawans refined their unarmed combat.

Gichin Funikoshi, an Okinawan expert born in 1869, exported karate to the rest of Japan in the early 20th century. Before his death in 1957 at the age of 88, he helped found the Japan Karate Association and promulgated shotokan karate as a sport and a way of life. Shotokan means "Shoto's dojo." Shoto was the pen name Mr. Funikoshi used for his calligraphy, said Isami Shiroma, a fifth-degree degree black belt from Okinawa who helps teach when Mr. Mori is away in Japan.

Mr. Funikoshi's portrait hangs reverentially in the dojo, flanked by faded Japanese and American flags.

While just about everyone claims to know what karate is, not many have seen it done correctly. Karate, meaning "empty hand" in Japanese, employs a devastating combination of punches, kicks and elbow or knee strikes. It generates dynamic power by contracting and expanding the body, adding torque by rotating the hips. Its kime, or focus, unleashes maximum force against areas like the solar plexus where an opponent is most vulnerable.

"It requires explosive power at the moment of focus," Mr. Mori explained.

He made us maintain shotokan's distinctively low stance, which strengthens the leg muscles. Constant kicking and punching work the cardiovascular system as thoroughly as any aerobics class. Extensive stretching beforehand minimizes injury.

"Karate involves training the entire body, not just one part," Mr. Mori said. Sometimes his classes end with situps or pushups, but he frowns upon lifting weights. "The movement of your body and the kicking or blocking techniques become slower," Mr. Mori said. "Because your muscles are tight, you will not be able to move as quickly."

He led us through the typical Japanese curriculum of kihon, or fundamentals; kata, or balletlike drills, and kumite, or sparring.

Kihon involves learning to make weapons of the body's hard surfaces. A leg, for example, can be employed quite differently to deliver a snap kick, a thrust kick, a roundhouse kick or a back kick.

Kata is a vigorous sequence of blocks and counterattacks against imaginary opponents from all directions. Each kata must be memorized and may number as many as 65 moves, some so subtle that even experts debate what they mean.

Kumite is the fighting itself, taught in stages to prevent students from hurting each other or themselves. Mr. Mori does not let anyone progress to free-fighting without grasping the basics. Even here, punches or kicks must be controlled, stopping just short of an opponent's face or stomach. In the heat of a tournament, of course, kumite can turn rough.

The belt grading creates an incentive to improve. The Japan Karate Association recognizes two grades of white, three grades of green and three grades of brown belt. It takes three to five years of constant training to reach basic black belt.

Unlike some other styles of karate, the Japan Karate Association has the advantage of accrediting dojos around the world. This gives the belts earned international status and lets you train on business trips and vacations at dojos in other cities or countries.

Because it is potentially lethal, karate is controlled by strict etiquette. Even on a dojo floor glistening with sweat, Mr. Mori demands that courtesy prevail, and his glare is enough to chastise anyone stepping out of line.

He exhorted us to concentrate on our opponents, release the tension from shoulders and arms and breathe lightly. "Breathe through your navel," he said. The celebrated kiai, or explosive yell that accompanies a punch or kick, has the purpose of focusing power as well as startling the opponent.

"If fear makes your breathing erratic, if you tense your shoulders or open your mouth while breathing, you give away your breathing to your opponent and you are no longer in the dominating position," Mr. Mori said. "Breathing has to be natural, like weeping willow branches in the wind."

Under Mr. Mori's persistent tutelage, we practiced maximizing the power of our punches by pulling back one arm as the other shot forward, and our kicks by snapping back the leg like a whip. He had us slide forward without stomping by pushing off with the back foot. He tolerated no timid or indecisive moves, insisting that each blow be focused before proceeding to the next block or punch. He even nagged us about keeping our fists clenched tightly to avoid fracturing knuckles or fingers.

Mr. Mori is no easy taskmaster, but his insistence on perfection has earned scores of trophies for his students in tournament competition. Most other karate teachers give prominent display to their tournament trophies. At Mr. Mori's dojo, they sit crammed on a back shelf of the men's dressing room, stored under plastic sheeting to keep from gathering dust.

Winning, Mr. Mori told us, should be apparent in his students' demeanor. We concluded every class by kneeling to recite after him the dojo kun, or traditional rules of the Japan Karate Association: "Seek perfection of character. Be faithful. Endeavor. Respect others, and refrain from violent behavior."

The quality of a dojo is reflected in its attention to beginners. Every black belt, after all, started out as a white belt. Mr. Mori has achieved one of the highest ranks in the Japan Karate Association, but is unusual in liking to teach beginners himself. About one-third of them sign up for self-defense; the others, he said, seek karate to improve themselves.

Mr. Mori, who moves with a grace belying his 66 years, saw no reason why anyone should quit. "In Japan and other countries, the elderly will not stop training," he said. "They will concentrate their heart and soul on the spiritual aspect of karate."

Clearly, karate has another advantage. Richard Roach, a retired Wall Street stockbroker in his 60's, has been training with Mr. Mori for years. Leaving a bar one night last year, Mr. Roach was accosted by four muggers. He fought back until his assailants fled, leaving him with his watch and wallet -- and a broken hand.

"For years Sensei Mori kept telling me to keep my fists closed," he confessed with chagrin. "Now I know why."

Getting a Start

Masataka Mori's dojo, the Shotokan Karate-do of New York, is on the fourth floor at 2121 Broadway, between 74th and 75th Streets, in Manhattan, (212) 799-5500. In Brooklyn, Shu Takahashi, a sixth-degree black belt instructor for the Japan Karate Association, teaches at 565 Fifth Avenue, between 15th and 16th Streets, Park Slope, (718) 768-9345.

Photos: Mr. Mori demonstrates blocking with his assistant Isami Shiroma. Masataka Mori, a karate master with eighth-degree black belt ranking, leading his students in Manhattan. (Photographs by Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)