

Martín Fernández [ES] – Shôtôkan Ryu Kase Ha

Interview by Jose Alberto Pinheiro [PT]

Martín Fernández Sensei has been a follower of Master Taiji Kase for 21 years. A natural of the city of Albacete in Spain he began a long term relationship with the art of Karate-Do in 1980. He was graduated Yodan by Kase Sensei in 1994 and Godan by the Spanish Federation of Karate in 2000. He is a primary (school) teacher Specialty of Physical Education for the University of Castilla-La Mancha and Superior Technician in Physical and Sport Activities (TAFAD). He currently teaches at the Fuji-Yama gym in his hometown and he's a contributor of several martial arts publications as well as the responsible for the great on-line resource www.Shôtôkanryukaseha.com dedicated to master Kase's work.

How was your introduction to Karate-Do?

In the year of 1977 when I was 12 years old, a small book of Karate arrived in my hands. This book didn't have any pictures only some drawings where the positions, blocks and techniques were shown. The writing had very detailed descriptions. I was captured by the content that exposed the philosophy and history of Karate-Do. The form it was written and the ignorance that existed regarding Karate in my city, Albacete [Spain], contributed to make me form a mysterious image of Karate and not very common one of their practitioners. I was attracted by the idea of being strong, of feeling sure and in a certain way to be special. But it was later that a friend began training with the book Dynamic Karate by master Nakayama. He, together with me and another partner have joined in a local dojo to practice. Although this book had many pictures, without a sensei we could not make "great things" and were limited to copy the movements, never really knowing what we were making.

Later, when I was near to 14 years of age I found out that the brother of a school companion of mine practiced Karate and one day I accompanied him to the Dôjô. I watched the class and I liked it. I was only able to watch the classes for three months because my father wasn't willing to give me the money to actually enrol on the classes. So, during three months I saved money to buy a Karate gi, to pay for the registration and first instalment. Finally I began practicing Karate in March of 1980 at the Samurai gym. When my father saw the effort that I had made in order to be able to learn Karate I obtained his support and from then on he paid for my classes. The professor at that gym was called Hugo, a Peruvian who had a very aesthetic but not very profound Karate for my taste; his way of being did not match my expectations and image of a master that I waited to see. Then again, it is also true that in my city there was not a lot to choose from, once only two gyms existed. I trained with this professor from 1980 until around 1984, and in 1983 I obtained the Shodan [1st Dan] with 18 years of age, being the first black belt of the Dôjô together with my friend Alfonso Iniesta, that obtained the infantile Black Belt. Regrettably this friend died very young, he stopped with the training and started again under my direction after his marriage. I will never forget him! In a very summarized way, I

began this way, but my true initiation in the way of Budo began when I meet master Taiji Kase.

What was your first impression of Taiji Kase Sensei when you first met him back in 1983?

My first impression was double. In the first place I was maybe somewhat confused by its physical appearance. Although his physique was imposing, it looked like a sumotori when compared with the occidental athletic model or with other more stylized instructors that appeared in the books of Nakayama sensei. But when he began to move in Fudo-Dachi and cutting the air with his sharp techniques, I was fascinated by the incredible thing I have saw. With that body and span, displacement speed, direction changes, power and combat spirit. When he spoke of his experiences, his face was illuminated reflecting his love to his art and instructors. Later he took on the most expert Karatekas and made demonstrations. He beat them like if they were puppets but always with a great care to prevent harming them and with tremendous courtesy. I was really impressed and very happy because I had finally found my ideal Karate-Do in the person of Kase sensei. From that moment on [1983] I attended to almost all courses by master Kase in Spain, about 70 in total, several in Andorra and one in Paris.

What are the characteristics that set Taiji Kase's Shôtôkan Karate-Do interpretation apart from others?

Master Kase's Karate is not Kyokai [JKA] neither Shotokai, it is simply "Kase Ha", that is to say, it's particular interpretation and development of Shôtôkan Ryu, although I don't like to put labels to classify it. Well, the words are not good to express the sensations that are experienced in it's practice. For example, to say that this form of practicing Karate is very natural, strong and effective would not be correct. Well, we would fall in the topics that people use to "rise" their style above the other ones. However, we can say that the development of sensei Kase's marks the difference between reality and formality, and the sensation and internal energy development in front of the external aesthetics or mere plasticity; although it's movements are beautiful. It is a Karate that integrates Budo on a wider sense, that is to say it is very influenced by the concepts of the Jigen-Ryu [old art of the sword of Okinawa]. And also by the impression that master Yoshitaka and other instructors of the time left in master Kase. Also, the situation that Japan had been subjected to after losing the World War II and fall into American control.

But if the question also refers to the type of works that are characteristic in our line; Kase-Ha these are the terms we use: Very specialized use of the positions Fudo_dachi, Hanmi Dachi. Very special works of the Kamae with open hands, closed hands and combined. A very subtle use of the breathing-hara-positions deeply ingrained, O-Waza, Chu-Waza, Ko-Waza [works very developed for the long, medium and shorts distances in the execution of the techniques]. Atobaya [the defenses taken to it's maximum expression with attack intention]. Hente and Seite. Hente when we defend and we counterattack with the same arm.

And Seite when an arm defends and the other one attacks. Use of the leg techniques with previous displacements of the legs, taking advantage of the energy generated by the displacements. Use of the Nidan or sandan zuki etc [technical series with the same arm in the same or combined three distances mentioned before]. Emphasis in the Kakae Komi Ashi [rising and compression of the leg to the maximum]. Use of the fumi-komi [stamp] to generate an extra contribution of energy to the techniques.

You have trained and talked with master Kase several times during the years. How was your relationship to him outside the Dôjô? How would you describe him as a person?

Sensei Kase was the same inside and outside the Dôjô, he had the similar kind of cordiality, a person of a very simple and humble easy treatment who had an exquisite sense of humor. You could easily see that he worried for the people and that their form of life roused him. With him, we learned so much or more, speaking during the lunches and dinners as we did listening to him in courses. Any moment was good for him to train us, to tell us things about the History of Karate or to give us advice.

When he was having a meal with a group of people with which he had pleasure with, he could be hours and hours speaking. When Kase sensei spoke, his face was illuminated and his eyes shined. This was his way to fulfil his Gi – the due obligation that he had to his instructors for the development and extension of Karate-Do. This Gi is present in our emblem: Gi of Giko Funakoshi [Yoshitaka], Gi of Gichin Funakoshi and Gi of duty and obligation.

Is there any story that you remember about the Sensei that can illustrate his nature?

Someone could write an extensive book to illustrate his nature, full with anecdotes, events and experiences with the master, but of course that there are more appropriate people to do this than me because they have spent more years with him. But I will tell one of this anecdotes that happened in Ibiza, Balearic Islands [Spain] in May of 1992.

On Sunday, after finishing the morning class that ended by twelve o'clock, I went to eat with a group of 15 karateka who were training at the course. My friend Facundo was there and among other important karate-ka there was sensei Jean Pierre Lavorato, one of the master Kase's older students in France. In the course of the conversation, the sensei began to ask us our age [to me and my friend Facundo] and also requested that we give him our names and addresses written in a paper. He told sensei Lavorato that we were very brave practicing. You can imagine how surprised we were. Then master Lavorato told us, with a smile on his face, that we had an immense luck that the master have noticed us. We understood that he was very receptive to the affection of people and he knew when they were sincere in their practice and in their acts. The lunch began at twelve and we ended up speaking until six in the afternoon. His wife Chieko was also there and the master didn't stopped answering our questions, speaking and speaking, gesticulating with his arms and making all

types of expressions when he spoke about Karate. The glasses and bottles were in danger near him, and in one of those “expressions” he shot a refreshment and spilled it, wetting his wife a little. We all stayed containing our laughter until the master and his lady exploded into laughter and we accompanied them. His wife made jokes referring to the fact that he didn’t stopped speaking. There was a moment when his wife rotated her hands in sensei’s back as if it was the mechanism of a clock, we all laughed; sensei was the first one. Already at six o’clock in the afternoon, we were leaving and setting foot outside the door of the restaurant the master didn’t stopped speaking to us and his wife pulled his arm as if she was telling him to allow us to leave, but he told his wife that we were enjoying it as much as he did.

Can you please tell us about the work that is presently being made by Taiji Kase Sensei followers in order to maintain his teachings faithful and alive?

We continue with the same activities that were carried out when Sensei was alive. Is evident that now the seniors of the academy took charge of directing the courses, gassukus and rank passes with the authorization and support of the Kase family. It is necessary to remark that the followers of Sensei Kase have been disseminated across all Europe and rest of the world. Although we can say that three main “nucleus” exist and not all are inside our academy. On one hand, the karatekas of the environment of the French Federation where there are many students of master’s first times. On the other hand, there is a group of very old students in Italy many of them of Hiroshi Shirai, that also continued and had a great affection to master Kase. Then there is the Shôtôkan Ryu Kase Ha Instructor Academy. Our academy keeps the same organizational outline that sensei Kase [the coordinating head] used, master Dirk Heene of Belgium. The Shihankai is formed by sensei Dirk Heene [Belgium], Pascal Lecourt [France], Pascal Petrella [Germany], Velibor Dimitrijevic [Greece], Jim Martin [Scotland], the secretary Spiros Drosoulakis [Greece] and the treasurer Alan Armstrong [England].

For example, the rank examinations should be requested by a member from the academy to the Shihankai and a panel/tribunal will be formed by at least one member of the Shihankai and members of the academy of the area where the exam is accomplished. The diplomas also take the stamp of the family Kase and the signature of Sachiko, master Kase’s daughter.

I also forgot to mention that there are very old followers that don’t belong to none of the three groups that were mentioned and that carry out their work in an isolated way or with their own organizations.

As a teacher, what are your main preoccupations and goals?

I fulfilled one of my main goals some years ago, it is not to live off my work teaching Karate. Well, I’m also a teacher of Primary Education and having a stable work allows me to see everything from another perspective. Since, to live alone of the Karate is very hard and even more when you have to maintain a family. Another of my main goals is to honour my master, the sensei Kase and to accept my Gi – and that is what I make with my personal practice, teaching my students all that I have learned from him without reservations and also with

my writing to martial arts magazines and making a web site dedicated to him that has been going for some years, the www.Shôtôkanryukaseha.com. As for my concerns, they are intimately related to my goals. That is to say, that master's Karate lasts in the time, to expand and develop it. And that it receives those that have not had direct teaching from him. Well, for example, master Gichin Funakoshi that the current generations only know by reference of others and books, however all have his picture in the Dôjô and honour it properly. But, we have known sensei Kase! And before passing to the history he was already a legend. We should honour him, and the best way to do it and as I believe he would have liked us to do, is to maintain our practice, don't stagnate and that we develop the potential that he left us. And definitely, to evolve into better karatekas and mainly better persons. This is really the most important thing [rather than physique], the technical and spiritual things and the values and virtues that define us as human beings are developed in harmony.

Do you presently study any kata outside the standard Shôtôkan syllabus?

If for standard Shôtôkan you understand that it is that of Kyokai [JKA] known for their books, etc. The answer is yes. The followers of Kase sensei work the three Taikyoku No Kata, the Ten No Kata and the Heian Oyô. The Taikyoku has 20 movements of those denominated in form of " I ". In the first of them, denominated Taikyoku Shodan zenkutsu-dachi is studied, chudan-Oi zuki and gedan-barai. In the second, Taikyoku Nidan; the only variation with regard to the previous one is that the first blow is: Jôdan Oi zuki. ". In the third and last, Taikyoku Sandan is studied zenkutsu-dachi and Kôkutsu-dachi, Chûdan Oi zuki and Jôdan Oi zuki, as well as Uchi-uke and gedan-barai. These three Taikyokus are those practiced according to the tradition of some lines of Shôtôkan-Ryu and Shôtôkai. The Ten No Kata it is composed of two complementary parts the first " Omote " where the first techniques are accomplished Oi zuki and Gyaku zuki and the second part " Ura ", dedicated to the defence techniques and counterattack. The first part can be individual or collective. While the second were devised for the training in kihon-kumite couple with many possibilities. The Heian Oyô was created in 1985 by the masters Taiji Kase and Hiroshi Shirai. And it is formed by the basic elements of the Heian. Although, it has been devised in such a way that became more of a superior Kata, far from being a basic one. Therefore, the word " Oyô " can be translated for different or modified.

What are your future plans as a karate-ka and writer?

The truth is that I don't think too much about the future or at least I don't make plans to very long term. So I only try to take advantage of the time to the maximum because I give it much value. I would like to give fewer classes. I give 12 classes of Karate a week, between children and adults and my future plans are to impart fewer classes and to be able to dedicate more time to my personal practice and the one of my highest level students. Well, it is indispensable that the professors dedicate some time to their personal formation and not to train only in their classes with the students. I also have to focus on my exam to 6th Dan that I will surely make in the summer of 2006. Although the most important is to work day by day, and this way when the exam is near it is only necessary to define clearly what one wants to show to the panel/tribunal. To continue with the

periodic practices that we have fixed with the partners of the SRKHIA and our students and to organize at least once a year courses with good instructors open to everybody.

As a writer I have some ideas but little time to develop them. The last project I was involved was accomplished together with my good friend and partner Frank Shubert. It was the translation and edition in Spanish of the book "Shôtôkan Karate Dictionary" of the German author's Schlatt (version in English). A magnify and beautiful book that we dedicate to the sensei Kase, this book also contains its biography and his pictures. Apart from this to continue collaborating in magazines of martial arts and to go enlarging the Web site dedicated the master Kase that I already indicated.