


# An Interview With a Karate Legend

*by José Alberto Pinheiro*

# Hidetaka Nishiyama



*A founding member of the Japan Karate Association and one of the most influential personalities in the history of modern karate, Hidetaka Nishiyama serves as chairman of the International Traditional Karate Federation. The ninth-degree black belt has dedicated himself to building an ideal definition for traditional karate competition, as well as to preserving and expanding the spirit and technique of the art he helped spread around the globe.*

Although he's revered by tens of thousands of karateka from all over the world, he's far from being a consensual figure. However, his knowledge, skills and commitment are unquestionable, and his life's work speaks for itself.

The following interview offers a glimpse of the thoughts, opinions and accounts of this determined martial artist, who, besides being a modern budo master and karate pioneer, is also a living piece of history.

—JAP

**Black Belt:** Please tell us a little about how and why you started practicing karate.

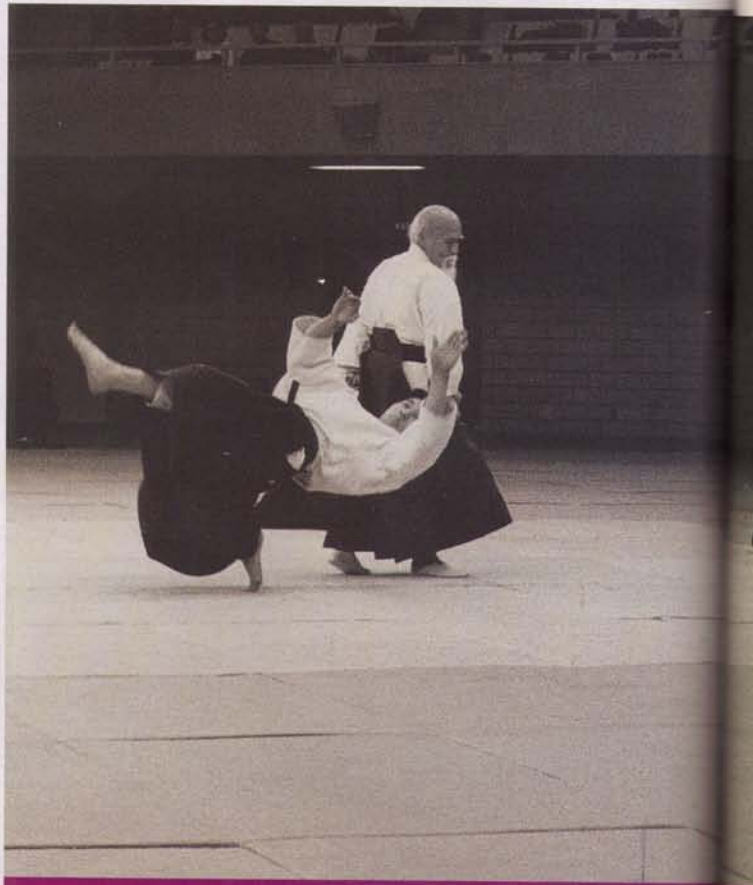
**Hidetaka Nishiyama:** My budo history began when I was 5 years old and started with *kendo*. Until I was 16, it was always kendo, kendo, kendo ... terrible time. (laughs) Then, one day I was reading a very old book, maybe 400 years old, written by a very famous sword master, and he talked about *mutodori*. In Japanese, *mutodori* means "without a sword." Having the same feeling but without a sword. I found the concept great.

Around the same time, I saw a movie called *Zoku Sugata Sanshiro* (1945, Akira Kurosawa). The story is about the development of Master Jigoro Kano's judo, and at a certain point in the film, a challenger from Okinawan karate appears. In the end, karate loses, of course, because the hero of the film was a *judoka*. I found it interesting, but in those days, nobody knew about karate in Japan.

Hidetaka Nishiyama



Morihei Uyeshiba



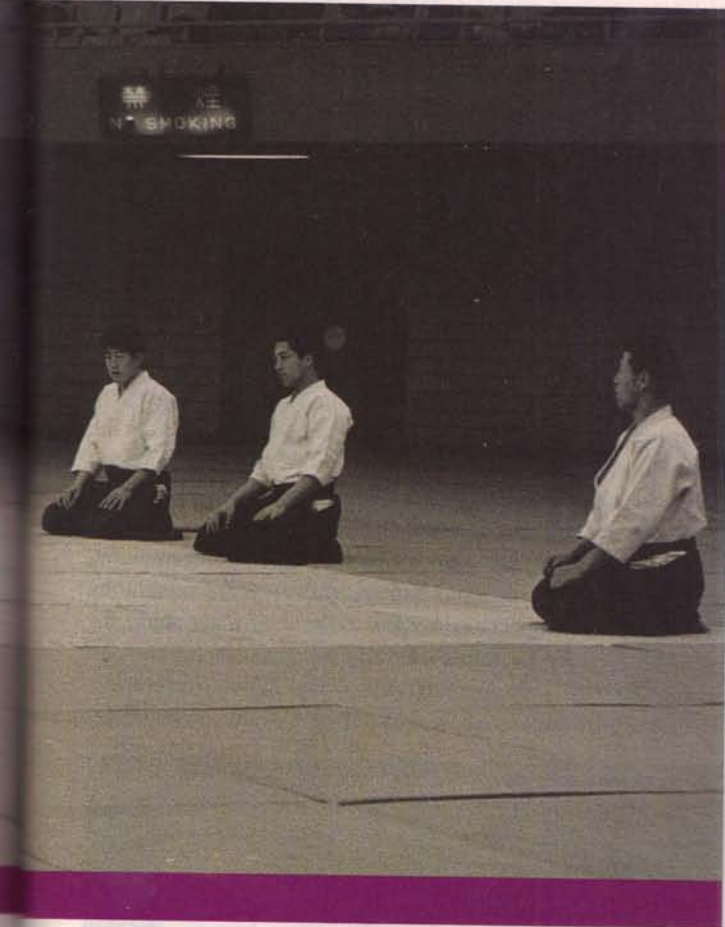
I also found a movie called *Karate Instruction*, by Gichin Funakoshi, and continued to ask everyone I could think of about karate. Nobody knew anything. Finally, I found Master Funakoshi's *dojo*. I had been asking all around Tokyo, but there were only a few places where karate was taught. There was the *shotokan* dojo and some college teams, maybe six or seven, and that was all the karate in Tokyo. I started training in Master Funakoshi's dojo when we were almost at the end of the war.

In my first two sessions, I trained only in the stances. I wanted to quit, but I had already paid the money so I had to continue. (laughs)

**BB:** How did your martial arts education develop from there?

**Nishiyama:** Sometime after that, there was a bombing raid, and the *shotokan* dojo was destroyed. One year later, I entered Takushoku University and joined its very famous karate team, but after a short time, I was called to the navy. I hated the army (laughs); that's why I volunteered for the navy. When I returned, the whole of Tokyo was flat due to the bombings. Everything was destroyed. I searched and [finally] found a dojo. I looked there, and the people had already started training again, so I started, too.

Then Master Funakoshi's son, Yoshitaka, died. He was sick and very unlucky. College training had also restarted, but there were not so many good people because a large number



spirit. If you are training for your self-development, the spirit will come out naturally from the inside. There is no need for dramatic screams or strange expressions. That is why I know that if someone is a long time without training, the spirit will go down. Then if they exercise again, it will come out. The energy will come out naturally.

**BB: You have been deeply influenced by your kendo sensei, Mochida Moorio. Can you tell us about your relationship with him?**

**Nishiyama:** He was a very nice gentleman, very gentle but very strong when facing you. When I started training with him [as a schoolboy], I trained for three months until the technique was OK before I progressed to sparring. I had to have a very strong finishing blow. It was hard training, and I was in pain during all the middle-school period. Every day I had a concussion ... terrible time. (laughs)

Because I liked this sensei, when I decided that I wanted to start practicing karate, I asked for his approval. I told him, "Sensei, I like karate and I'm interested in it." He said, "OK, go."

I admired his skill and speed in kendo, and I felt that some day I would like to pass on the same feelings he did—but through karate.

Sometime later, I invited him to come to a karate demonstration. In the end, I asked him, "What is your opinion?"

He answered, "Good, but you must remember: No class, no budo."

I asked, "Do you think that karate has no class?"

He replied: "Not enough. Budo is about humans having class ... no class, no budo."

From that time, I decided I would work to put more class into karate because there was not so much of it.

**BB: Who else influenced you during this time?**

**Nishiyama:** I was also inspired a little bit by Mr. Morihei Ueshiba, [the founder of *aikido*]. He was a religious man, whose house was beautiful, being built in the Shinto temple style. One day, we were visiting him, and my sensei said, "Nishiyama, try to punch him."

***"We found an old kendo dojo and rented it, and every day all the karate teams would go there to train for one hour. It was a difficult time for training, but there was a very strong spirit."***

was outside training. It was an interesting time, a hard time. Finally, we found an old kendo dojo and rented it, and every day all the karate teams would go there to train for one hour. It was a difficult time for training, but there was a very strong spirit.

**BB: How do you define the spirit of traditional karate?**

**Nishiyama:** It is very difficult to speak about the spirit. Anyway, spirit is not only related to the mental side. If you have a very strong technique, the technique will come out of the

I said: "Sorry, I cannot do that. It would be of very bad manners."

But inside, I tried. (smiles) In the beginning, I did not believe in *ki* power. He was just standing there smiling at me. After a while, I went for it, and he immediately caught my hand. He had a very powerful personality.

**BB: Can you share some memories about your teacher, Gichin Funakoshi?**



Gichin Funakoshi

**Nishiyama:** Master Funakoshi was a very gentle man, and he liked *kata* very much. We invited him to visit our university once a week to teach us *kata*. I remember that one day he was demonstrating *heian nidan*. His initial block was very high. In the end, I said to him, "But Sensei, you taught me that in a different way."

He started laughing and said: "I'm very small. Every attack comes from taller people. That's why I have to block this way." (laughs)

This story then spread throughout our college and reminded us that we must always adapt the techniques to our own bodies.

**BB: Which kata interested you most?**

**Nishiyama:** I hate *kata*, every one. (laughs) I remember what some of my college training [sessions] were like: OK, today is *kata* training, 100 times with no rest. I was being taught by one of the oldest college students of Gichin Funakoshi, a very big man. He liked *kanku-dai* very much. When the training finished, he would come and say: "Stop! One more *kata*, 100 times, *kanku-dai*!" When he was looking away, we would relax, but when he looked again. ... (laughs) We had to do it 100 times. It was hard, but I thanked him after that.

The *kata* I like most are *kanku-dai*, *nijushiho* and *hangetsu*.

**BB: What are the main objectives of the International Traditional Karate Federation?**

**Nishiyama:** The International Traditional Karate Federation

is not an institute; it's a governing body. It governs traditional karate competition, like the International Judo Federation governs judo competition. How? They are setting rules, and the participants must fight by those rules. It is this way with all sports: First, the rules are written, and then the people play by those rules. But with traditional karate, we already had budo, and only afterward did we start with competition.

So we're writing the competition rules at the ITKF, and we spend a lot of time doing it. We organize the San Diego Seminar every year and invite masters from *goju-ryu*, *shito-ryu* [and so on] to discuss the fundamental principles of all traditional karate styles. Then, based on these principles, we continue writing the competition rules. It's still not complete, but we try our best to cover traditional karate as it is. This is why our rules define the technique. We are writing the definition of total body actions that generate power: body dynamics, rotation, vibration, shifting and so on.

Competition is just one way of training for our art. First, people practice traditional karate, and only then can they participate in competition. By this time, they must study the competition rules for future training.

On the other side, we have the World Karate Federation. They are completely different. They are the general ka-

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Hidetaka Nishiyama appeared on the cover of the December 1986 issue of Black

rate governing body. They have rules but not any definition. This means that by their rules, anyone can participate—even boxers, wrestlers and traditional karate

people. It doesn't matter as long as they can kick and punch. It's more oriented to a wider participation. Big [advertising], thousands of dollars, 2,000 participants in a single day—it is a good business, but our side is completely different. Our competition is for traditional karate people.

**BB:** What advice can you give people who stick with traditional karate?

**Nishiyama:** First, understand that our karate is very valuable. For hundreds of years, many people have been seeking perfection of technique, and this continues today. However, please study not the wide but the deep. Even if it is only one technique, study it very deeply. The point is to generate a lot of power with less movement. Then learn to destroy the opponent with little or no movement. At the next level, there is no physical movement, only mental. Just like Uyeshiba, you can destroy the opponent.

In the final stage, there is no need to destroy the opponent. When the movement is about to start, stop it. Finally, it will look like there is no movement. This is our approach: winning without fighting. This is the budo ideal. In a normal fight, the strong side wins and the weak loses. But in budo, to lose means to die. You can't lose. How? Don't fight.

We also have a benefit: Other sports all have a peak, and after that peak, you will start to go down. In karate, we have no peak, no limit. Just like my sensei, Mochida Moorio—he was 85 years old, and no one could beat him. We can grow very old and show little activity, but with all the training that we carry with us, if someone comes, we can easily protect ourselves. ✕

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*About the interviewer: José Alberto Pinheiro is a freelance writer and karate practitioner.*