

Q & A

Seizan interviews Toru Shimoji,
President-elect of AAKF



photo

Seizan: Toru-san, congratulations on your elected position as President-elect of the AAKF. Could you share with us your visions, and the long and short-term objectives of the restructured AAKF?

Shimoji: Thank you so much Alex. I would like to say to the readers that it is with great sense of honor and responsibility to have such an opportunity to serve as a representative to all the members of the Board of Directors and each individual members of our AAKF family.

I think our initial goal is to sustain the positive energy that was ignited in January during our BOD meetings, which now appears to be catching fire across the country. To this end we have already enacted streamlined administrative processes, such as prompt issuance of club certificates and individual membership cards, and regular conference meetings for all the regional and national leaders. Our newly restructured Technical Board is busy setting up new guidelines for training, testing, and competing. Let me mention that we have scheduled three training seminars to showcase our talented instructors, just to name a few.

It is an understatement to say that the first installment hosted by you at University of Texas in late March was a resounding success! Without a doubt, the diversity of our teachers, with such depth and quality is second to none.

We now have a functional democratic system, where we encourage participation from the entire membership population. Like any organization, we must continually breathe life into it through sustainable effort. As far as for our long-term vision, I personally like to see the AAKF continue on this path, where in the near future all our programs are developed and operated efficiently, accommodating the needs of all members. If we all work hard, rest assured the future is bright, and the brand of Traditional Karate taught to us by our late teacher Sensei Nishiyama will continue to evolve in a positive direction.

Seizan: Most of our members who interacted with Nishiyama Sensei over the years have felt a profound sense of loss for his passing. Could you briefly describe your relationship with Nishiyama Sensei and what you felt was his strongest influence on you?

Shimoji: Like you, I was one of many students that he taught and of course, deeply influenced. I was very fortunate to be in his dojo directly training under him from '82 to '91. After returning from Japan in '96, I stayed close to Sensei receiving valuable guidance in developing and coordinating the technical growth here in the South Atlantic

Region.

Sensei helped me to understand the process of teaching myself in order to sustain my own personal development in Traditional Karate. He taught me that there is no limit in life, and anything can be accomplished through proper perspective, persistent effort and a positive attitude. However, I often catch myself asking how he would solve this or that problem, and once in a while I can still hear him screaming at me across the dojo floor yelling, “tail bone in!”.

***Seizan:** You took a sabbatical some time ago to Okinawa to seek the roots of traditional karate. What is your overall impression of the similarities and differences between Okinawa and Japanese karate-do and how does this experience, if at all, influence your teaching and your role as the leader of AAKF?*

Shimoji: I get asked this question a lot, and I’m always tickled that my time in Okinawa arouses so much curiosity. Yes, it was an amazing experience to go back to Okinawa where I was born, and study Karate in an old-fashion way. I studied under Kuba Yoshio Sensei of Goju-ryu. Like the days of Master Funakoshi, I would show up to his house/dojo and perform my Kata over and over in front of his watchful eyes. It was informal and casual as compared to how we train. Eventually, he started showing me the applications of the Katas, which he would call “kaishaku” instead of “bunkai” as we know them. It means, “interpretation”, which he thought was more correct way to dissect a Kata.

Coming from Nishiyama Sensei’s style of learning, I was more interested in figuring out how Kuba Sensei studied Kata. I wanted to capture the “how” instead of “what”, so that I could apply the principle to our Shotokan Katas.

Another thing I learned was the concept of “muri ni shinai”, which is a common Japanese colloquial expression, “don’t push too hard”. It took a while for me to understand this but I realized that you have to incorporate the softer aspect of moving and thinking in order to balance our overall Karate experience, and life for that matter.

***Seizan:** Like the “graying” of overall US population, more and more of our AAKF membership is comprised of the over 40 crowd. Given your expertise in both traditional karate as well as the various Asian healing arts, what are some of the recommendations that would you give to members in terms of maintaining their physical (and mental) health after hard workouts?*

Shimoji: I noticed that Okinawan martial artists incorporated soft movements and some type of energy (Ki or Chi) development. As I started seeing many of my colleagues and seniors going under the knife to fix or even replace their joints, I felt that something was missing from the overall curriculum.

Instead of adding a Yoga or Tai Chi classes to your karate training, I think it’s better to integrate the concepts of these softer arts into our training. For example, you can perform a Kata slowly and methodically, emphasizing the synchronicity of breathing with each

technique. If you have a hard workout, be sure to rest, eat and hydrate adequately so that your body can recover and improve properly. In essence, this is just a common sense in practice but we have to make it a part of our overall training lifestyle.

Lastly, the old-timers in Okinawa used to tell me to develop “ki sense”, especially during Kata training. When I finally figured out what they meant, I adapted into my teaching so that students don’t have to suffer the way I did with injuries. Basically, it is using your breath in a concentrated way to circulate your energy smoothly, throughout your entire body.

Seizan: What do you anticipate as the greatest gratification and challenge during your tenure as President of AAKF ?

Shimoji: To be a part of this great organization at such a critical junction is my utmost joy. It took us about a year after Sensei’s passing to sort out our differences and priorities, but now we are all working together for a common cause. Of course there are challenges, especially in this first stage of reformation where we have to explain to many regional leaders and members the benefits to AAKF involvement and the possibility of bright future through our renewed efforts.

Additionally, we have started either restructuring or creating new programs to improve our organization. Even though these changes can be difficult for some, especially considering our long history under Sensei Nishiyama, I believe they are necessary to forge us to the future where all members can feel passionately that our brand of Traditional Karate serves the greater good of humanity.

Lastly, I would like to encourage each member to become an active participant in our wonderful AAKF family. Involvement can be in varying degrees, but it is through such an activism that you can have a voice in the system, and believe me, what you say will count. Please continue to stay in touch with your emails, phone calls and conversations. We are here to serve you.