

Nuuanu YMCA Karate:

We live in a time where the life span of an enterprise might be measured in months, and in such times a dojo that has been around for a year or two is considered a great success, and worthy of its students' respect owing to its established maturity. So what is one to make of a dojo which has existed under the tutelage of the same humble teacher for decades? Since 1958, when Sensei Tommy Morita began teaching the martial arts at Honolulu's Nuuanu YMCA, there has existed a karate school that both embraces tradition, yet is unafraid of change. Generations of students have practiced and trained in Morita's dojo, an active and lively place where the important aspects of discipline and respect for both self and others is cultivated, along with another aspect that is often missed at other schools; that hard work and sweat can be both rewarding and enjoyable.

The Nuuanu YMCA sits at the entrance to the famous Nuuanu valley on the island of Oahu, just blocks from downtown Honolulu. It was through this valley that the soldiers of the conquering Hawaiian king Kamehameha the First, with the assistance of US artillery and advisers, in 1795 drove the army of chief Kalanikupule up the valley and over the steep cliffs at the Pali lookout at the peak of the Koolau mountains. The battle brought him one step closer to securing his place in history as the man who established a united Hawaiian kingdom. Those jagged mountains form the backdrop against which the YMCA sits today, a sharp, stark knife-edge of green against the northeastern skyline.

The dojo has undergone many changes during its lifetime. The facilities of the YMCA have slowly modernized, but it is still an unadorned and utilitarian structure, in a working class neighborhood of closely built plantation-style houses and tall apartment buildings. Starting out many years ago in a poorly ventilated basement, classes now meet primarily in a well-lit room, glass walled on two sides to allow viewing by frequent spectators. Initially teaching Kenpo, in 1961 Morita began teaching the formal style of Chito-ryu, then in the 1970's shifted to Shorin-ryu, as the foundation on which students would build.

The secret to the remarkable longevity of this dojo is no secret at all; Tommy Morita has spent his entire adult life in an ongoing study of the fighting arts and knows that in order to grow, one must not be afraid to change. This does not however mean that Morita offers whatever is popular at the time, shifting with fashions. On the contrary, he has from the

beginning tried to incorporate all the best elements of what the world of martial arts has to offer, while at the same time maintaining a well-rooted foundation in the essential traditions of karate, recognizing the timeless truths of Budo, the warrior way.

Tommy Morita

Morita began his own training with the fencing art of Kendo in the rough plantation town of Wailea on Hawaii's rugged Hamakua coast, earning the rank of 2nd Dan. As a more practical method of self-defense he began to box and by 1941 had won several local titles. Serving as a boxing instructor in the military, he began training in Kenpo after WWII, and later in Chito-ryu under its founder, Tsuyoshi Chitose.

Attaining the rank of 7th Dan, Morita's YMCA dojo became the headquarters for Chito-ryu in the United States. Still, he wished to know more and in 1965 began to travel throughout China, Japan and Okinawa, studying under various masters and instructors. Through these travels he was exposed to Fut Ga Kung Fu and Tai Chi, while also spending time with the masters of various traditional weaponry, all the while trying to find the best elements of each.

It was on Okinawa that he was introduced to Nagamine Shoshin.



The Evolution of a Dojo

Story & Photos by Glenville Kedia

founder of the Matsubayashi branch of Shorin-Ryu. He began formal training under this well-respected master mainly because of Nagamine's honest and down-to-earth personality, and the formidable reputations of those masters under whom Nagamine himself had studied. Morita was also impressed by the naturalness of the training system - its stances measured to the student's own body without being overly extended or artificially posed, the absence of unhealthy and unnecessary stress or strain on the student's body, and the effectiveness of its techniques. Morita earned the rank of 8th Dan and in 1978 Nagamine named him the Hawaii representative of the World Shorin-ryu Karate Federation.

All the while, Morita was concurrently analyzing various aspects of all the formal, traditional styles he had studied, combining the most effective elements to create his own style, Shinden Kenpo, Shinden being the Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese characters forming his own name. Formulating, refining and choreographing realistic and devastating combinations of eye gouges, low kicks, blocks, parries and defensive strikes from the many different styles, Morita continually upgraded and improved the techniques of Shinden, to create a style of self-

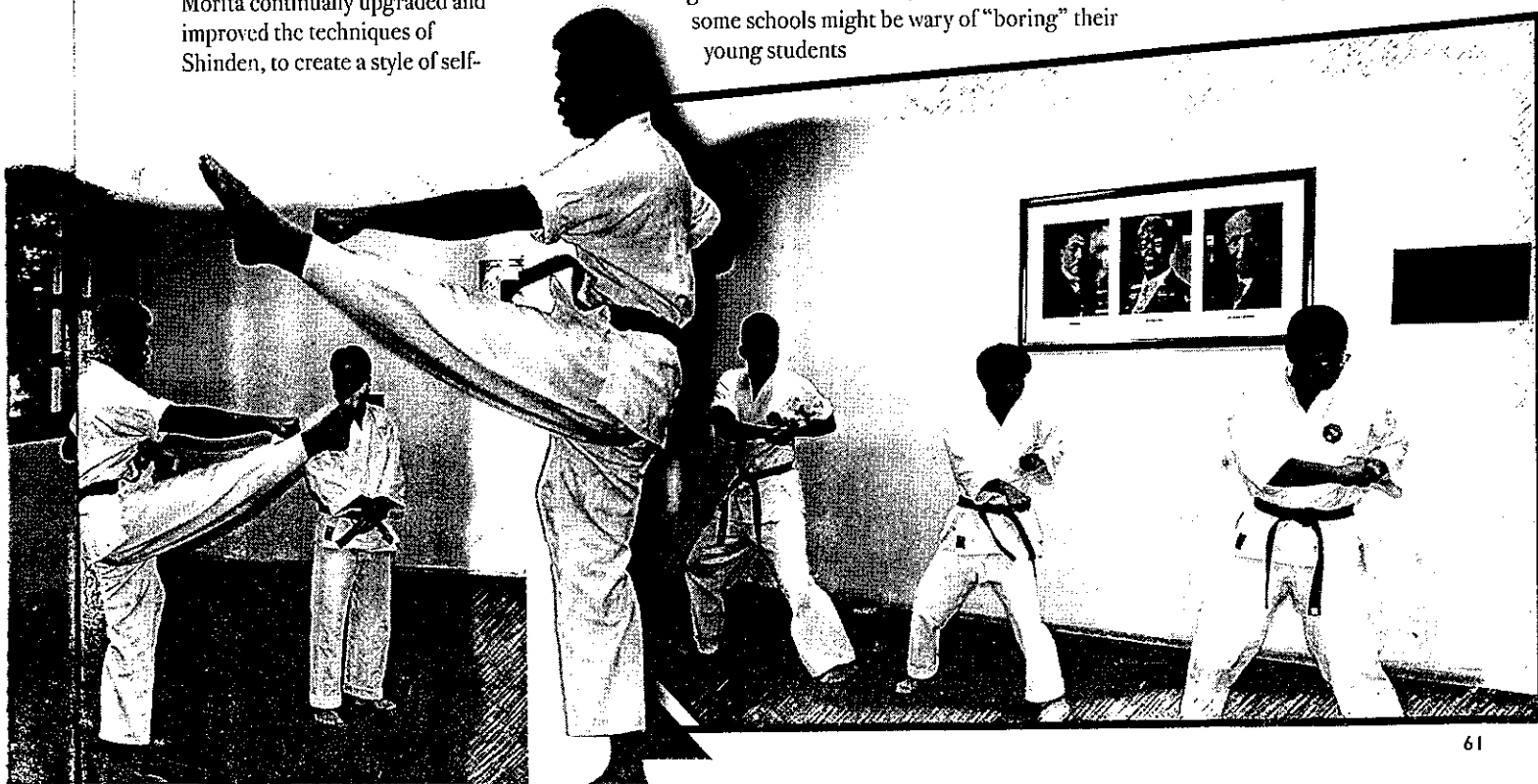
defense that relies on responding quickly to physical attack from a neutral, natural, non-threatening (and thereby legally defensible) posture. It is not, unlike some supposed defensive styles, intended to be used in a tournament environment: Shinden open-hand and weapon techniques are taught with the intention of preserving one's own life, and to offer a viable means of escape should the need arise. (For a more detailed history of Tommy Morita and Shinden Kenpo, see *World of Martial Arts Magazine*, Nov/Dec 1996 and Oct 1998 issues.)

Today, while maintaining an active advisory role in the dojo, Morita has turned over day-to-day teaching responsibilities to his son Charles, 7th Dan Teacher, assisted by Mitchel Shimamura, 6th Dan Chief Instructor, themselves both lifetime student of Morita's. But the essence of Morita's philosophy remains unchanged: simply to teach his students the best karate possible. And while the Nuuanu YMCA remains Morita's headquarters dojo, his Hawaii Karate Federation provides certification and instruction to schools across the country, including California, Oregon, Kansas and Pennsylvania.

The School

As with any school, the future lies in its children, and it is this large and varied group of students that make Morita's dojo what it is today. In fact, some of the school's students are children of parents who themselves studied under Morita when they were young, and both Morita and the youthful Shimamura are well known at the YMCA by other adult members who were themselves students while in grade school. The dojo primarily teaches Nagamine's method of Shorinryu, unaltered from the time it was taught to Morita. All questions as to technique are referred to Nagamine's definitive text on the subject, "The Essence of Okinawan Karatedo" (1976, Charles Tuttle Publishing.) Students, upon beginning their training, focus on the basic techniques and Kata as taught to Morita by master Nagamine. As Shimamura sensei often points out, "It is important to first develop the basics. If your basics aren't good, everything will be no good."

It is this focus on basic repetitive drilling, both through stationary combinations and Nagamine's collected kata, that set the foundation on which the dojo builds. While some schools might be wary of "boring" their young students



with kata (through fear of losing students if every day isn't different and every class doesn't teach something "new" and "exciting") Morita's experience has shown that true proficiency can only come via such continued repetitive training. The school's philosophy teaches that true martial art study is a lifelong effort in self improvement, not a series of flashy techniques used as a status symbol or to display physical superiority.

It is this aspect of humility, embodied in the statement Karate ni sente nashi, "There is no first attack in karate," that forms another detail of the school which sets the Nuuanu dojo apart: the aspect of competition. While yakusoku kumite, prearranged partner sparring drills performed at full speed and power, are practiced to give students the experience of facing an opponent, the school does not compete internally nor does it participate in public tournaments. Students are taught from the very beginning that karate is a tool to help each individual better themselves, a weapon that must be treated with care and respect. While competition and tournament fighting do have their place, they should be reserved for older, more mature practitioners. The desire to win at all costs and the type of aggressive attitude necessary to do so can cause the young student to suffer negatively from the experience. Therefore Morita eschews that aspect which might superficially be a draw to new students, and focuses on the primary and fundamental basic tenet of the martial arts: Discipline.

Students in the school are, from their first day, given very clear instructions and expectations, from tying their belts and performing kata to lining up shoes carefully outside the door, making their beds and performing other chores at home. These junior students, girls and boys ranging in age from 4 to 17 years, learn quickly that to try one's best at all times is more important than to excel. The judicious use of pushups as both a disciplinary tool and an incentive is an accepted part of class time; both students and instructors make a game of it, each knowing that while doing pushups for giving a feeble kiai might not seem like fun at the time, in the long run they will only serve to benefit the student to whom they have been assigned.

Morita's philosophy in regard to rank promotions also sets him apart from the mainstream. While most schools, even small ones, rely on pre-set, formal testing (with accompanying fees and charges) it has

always been Morita's belief that a student should perform to the best of their abilities each and every time. Regardless as to whether it is basic stationary techniques, kata, kumite or simply courteous conduct inside and outside of class, students are always encouraged to try their hardest. "We don't just want you to try hard on test day," says Shimamura, addressing the assembled students, "We want you to try your best every time." Kyu-rank promotions are handled very simply and informally; after consulting with his assistant instructors for their opinion, Shimamura will ask the student to remove their belt and, smiling, will hand them the next color they have earned.

Dan grade promotions are certified by Morita through the Hawaii Karate Federation, though here again, no formal testing is required. Once Morita, Shimamura and other senior-rank instructors are satisfied that a student is ready, certification is issued and they are invited to wear the black belt (in the case of junior students, however, only the most exceptional are entitled to this symbol of rank, and full certification is not issued until age 18.) At each stage, students are also told that with rank comes responsibility; requirements are stricter and standards higher for the more senior students, and more is expected, both in terms of performance and personal conduct, both inside and outside the dojo. In this way, the other students are also inspired to try their best, knowing that promotion is based on diligent practice and individual merit only and not on regular payment of testing or belt fees. Learning the best karate possible should not be about money, and in keeping with this spirit, all instructors, including Shimamura, volunteer their time at no charge and have always done so.

Making Better People

The true payoff in the lives of Morita's students comes not by means of making them better fighters (though there is little doubt that those who apply themselves are formidable indeed) but by making them better people, in ways that they themselves might not even notice. To see what would normally be a surly, aggressive teenager helping a young white belt to reach the water fountain while the students take a break. To hear young men address one other with respect, because they have learned that this is a better way to earn the respect of others. To see the confidence developing in a young

woman, knowing that she could, if needed, prevent herself from becoming the victim of a crime. To see young children join the class as shy, tearful introverts, and within weeks, become active participants, known and appreciated both by their peers and by youngsters of high-school age. Tommy Morita has made it his life's work to bring the best that he could to his students, and those students are his legacy; generations of them who grew up repeating, and believing, his six rules:

I will always obey my parents

Listen to my teachers

Respect my elders

Carry out my responsibilities

Think before I act, and

Never hurt myself, physically or mentally.

Style, whether Chito-ryu, Shorin-ryu or any one of a dozen others, are all simply the stone on which an individual student may sharpen, or dull, the blade of personal character. Tommy Morita's ability to use and maintain each style, intact, while at the same time developing a distinct style of his own, is evolution at its finest. For the students of the Nuuanu YMCA, and those parents who were once students themselves, Tommy Morita has accomplished a great deal.

Glenville Kedie has trained under Morita Sensei for over five years and holds the rank of 2nd Dan. He previously studied Tang Soo Do and Shotokan before beginning Shinden Shorin-ryu. Both he and his wife Lori Dutch are active assistants in the dojo's youth program.