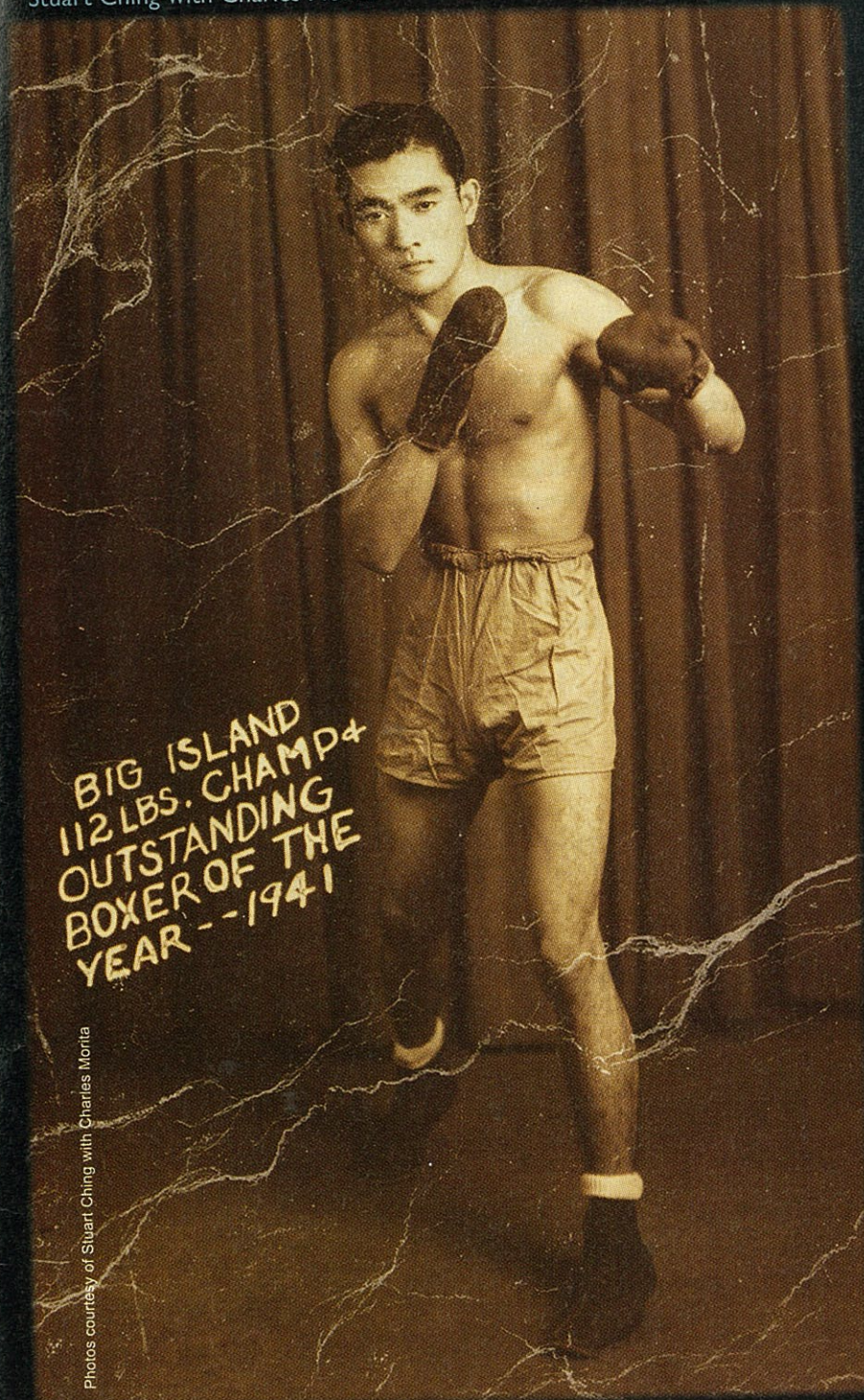


# Shinden: CULMINATING 50 YEARS

Stuart Ching with Charles Morita



BIG ISLAND  
112 LBS. CHAMP &  
OUTSTANDING  
BOXER OF THE  
YEAR -- 1941

Photos courtesy of Stuart Ching with Charles Morita

“I was set on  
bringing back to  
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there is”

**S**hinden, in Japanese Kanji, signifies Morita—and Tommy Morita's original art form, Shinden Kenpo, is the culmination of more than fifty years of training in Asian art forms and Western self-defense.

Morita's beginnings in self-defense go back to Wailea, a rural plantation town on the Hamakua Coast of Hawaii, where he labored as a young man, repairing the irrigation ditches that channeled water from the mountains to the sugarcane fields. There on the plantation, he watched the Filipino fighters practicing escrima, the art of wielding rattan sticks, and he undertook the formal study of kendo, his native art of defending with the sword. By the late 1930s, he began to box. His ring generalship brought attention from the press, and by 1940 he was a regular headliner

in the amateur smokers who attracted crowds to the Hilo Center Gymnasium. Agile and quick, a hard-hitting pugilist known for his ability to make opponents miss, he won the island's 1940 amateur bantam-weight title and in 1941 became the amateur flyweight champion and was named the Outstanding Fighter of the Year. He later moved to Honolulu and aspired to fight professionally, but with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, his fighting career ended unexpectedly, a turn in Morita's life which he attributes to fate. "Some of my boxing friends are gone or are invalids," says Morita, "My life continued to expand. I assume I'm still being protected by those invisible forces that stood between me and harm."

In the military, Morita did not see combat. Based in Minnesota, he was trained as an interpreter and also became a boxing coach. Upon his return to Honolulu after the war ended, he devoted himself completely to the study of martial arts. He earned a black belt in Shorinji Kenpo under Masaichi



Oshiro, one of Hawaii's early kenpo practitioners. Later, he was able to open his own kenpo school. Then under the tutelage of Tsuyoshi Chitose, founder of Chito-ryu Karate, Morita earned the rank of seventh dan. Still, Morita was not satisfied.

### The Journey East

In 1965, driven by his desire for more knowledge, Morita embarked on a journey that included martial arts study in China, Okinawa, and Japan. "I was set on bringing back to Hawaii the best there is," he says. In China, he practiced the Fut Ga style of Buddhist Kung Fu under Chan Dow, and in Okinawa he studied the Matsubayashi style of Shorin-ryu Karate under the art's founder.

Shoshin Nagamine, who later awarded Morita the rank of eighth dan and in 1978 named him the Hawaii representative of the World Shorin-ryu Karate-do Federation.



Shinden's Soken Gama.

His study under Nagamine enabled Morita in the late 1970s to open Shorin-ryu schools in Hawaii and thereafter to gain affiliates in Canada and in the states of California, Kansas, and Washington.

During his Eastern travel, Morita also studied the arts of weaponry, or kobudo, under some of the world's masters. In Okinawa, he studied the nunchaku under Matayoshi, the kama under Soken, and the sai under Ahagon. In Japan, he studied the jo under Akagawa.

Morita learned how to strike, block, break, and lock with the different weapons, but the techniques and movements were not arranged in kata. Morita, then, began the ambitious task. Providing a framework for his kata, he created the Shinden Directional Chart, which, in addition to establishing a philosophical foundation, positions eight imaginary attackers around the practitioner: at north, south, east, and west; and at northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. Within this framework, Morita's choreography enables the martial artist to defend and counter in all eight directions and to begin

and end in the same spot.

Morita stresses in his kata a combination of precision, strength, and fluidity.



"I believe in a balance between hard and soft," he says figuratively, referring to physical performance and mental preparation. "If you're only hard inside, the outside will break. If you're only hard outside, the inside will break." Thus, Shinden weapons kata simultaneously display power and grace, hard and soft, and exhibit broad, sweeping preparatory movements as well as narrowly-angled and direct strikes, breaks, and blocks.

Most influential to Morita's weapons technique is the knowledge he gained in Asia; yet some movements also suggest influence from Morita's prior exposure to escrima and his study of kendo. Special features of Shinden's weaponry include the double nunchaku kata, which incorporates the simultaneous use of two nunchaku; and two kumite kata, the kumibo and the sai versus tonfa, in which performers engage in choreographed combat. The movements in the kumite kata may also be adapted to fit other weapons in the Shinden arsenal. Completing Shinden's weaponry system are prearranged blocking and striking sequences for the hanbo, and solo kata for the ho, jo, tsue, konbo, nunchaku, sai, tonfa, and kama.

The symbol for Hawaii Karate-Do Federation, Okinawa Shorin Ryu-Matsubayshi Karate.



Shinden's Tonfa Omime.



Shinden's Sai Ahagon.

Continued from page 13

## Empty Hand

Blending styles of karate, kung fu, and boxing, Morita emphasizes natural motion and the most direct path in his empty hand technique. Maximizing speed by striking with the appendage closest to the target, he teaches his students to use the hands and elbows when striking areas on or above the torso and to direct kicks and knee strikes at points on or below an opponent's mid-section. High kicks are not practiced. "Why struggle to reach the head with a kick when there are just as many vital points below the waist?" Morita asks. According to Morita, real situations do not allow defenders to stretch before kicking, and only select martial artists master the high kicks well enough to use them without opening themselves to unnecessary risks. Morita advises his students, "Do the most with the least effort. Defend and strike from the most comfortable stance and position."

Shinden's basic kicks consist of front thrust and front snap kicks to the groin; instep, slant, and side kicks to the knee; and knee strikes to the abdomen, ribs, and groin. Shinden also incorporates stomps and sweeps. When the defender is wearing shoes, sweeps may be executed as heel strikes to the ankle or shin.

**"Planning your defense in advance or predicting your assailant's attack will only make you nervous or scared. Your mind may cloud"**

The Shinden practitioner may also use various combinations of hand strikes: chops, palm thrusts, beak and knuckle strikes, traditional karate punches, and the conventional boxing offense: jab, straight right hand, hook, and uppercut. For infighting, Morita teaches elbow strikes as well as locking techniques used in dislocating joints and breaking bones.

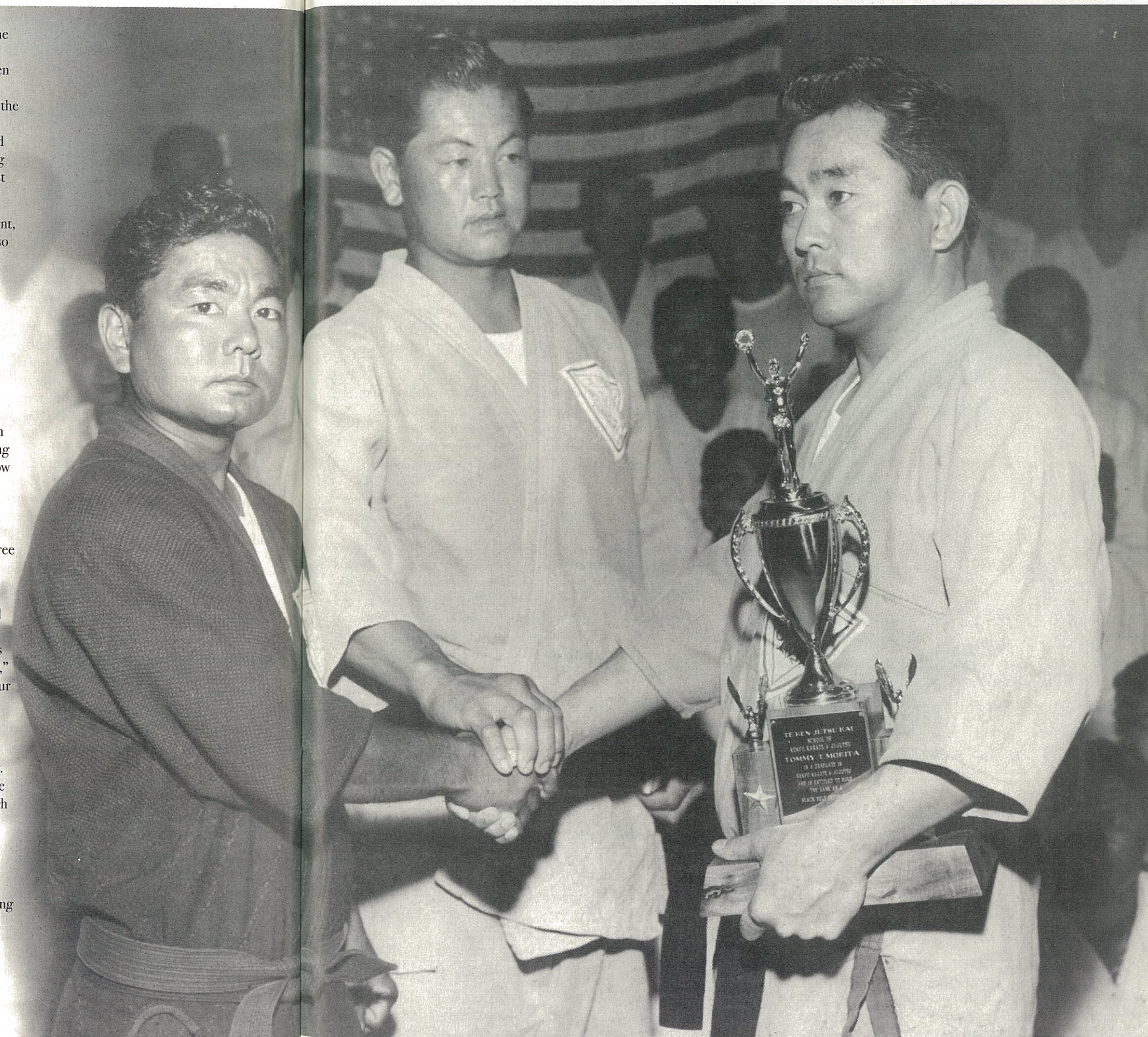
Although Morita acknowledges that sometimes it appears safer to step outside before countering, he encourages advanced students to remain inside because of the increased number of targets. "When defending against an attack, I like stepping at a forty-five degree angle," he explains. "In most cases, I prefer not to move backwards or beyond ninety degrees because increasing the distance lessens the chance to counter."

One of Shinden's most practiced inside counters is the quick strike to the eyes. The hand moves in a clawing or slashing motion—not penetrating because of the lethality of such a delivery—momentarily stunning the attacker and giving the defender the second he needs to follow up with leg and hand technique. "Without eyesight the attacker cannot find you," Morita says. "Without leg support, he cannot advance. Hit for the eyes first, then find your targets below the waist. This is Shinden Kenpo."

Another important aspect of Shinden is its blocking technique. The six closed-handed blocks in the high, middle, and low regions follow traditional karate technique. However, the range of motion is narrower, keeping the arms and hands close to the defender's body. The nine open-handed blocks consist of various scoop blocks and parries which guard the face and midsection. Unlike some martial art forms in which blocks are delivered with such force that they also become strikes, Shinden's blocks mainly redirect the force of an oncoming attack, setting up for the defender the opportunity to counter. Integrated with these blocking techniques are the conventional boxing skills of slipping and parrying punches and absorbing strikes on the arms.

The empty hand techniques are practiced in the Heion No Kata and in the tricks composing the stationary defense. Yet Morita insists that physical proficiency alone is not enough. In addition, the kenpo student must be prepared mentally. Thus, he teaches his students to strive for a level of complete awareness which he refers to as the "lucid mind." In this mental state, the practitioner does not predict an attacker's next move, but instead reacts instinctively to stimuli. "Planning your defense in advance or predicting your assailant's attack will only make you nervous or scared. Your mind may cloud," says Morita. "When you sense an attack, look at your attacker and see only the image confronting you." As

The symbol of Morita's own Shinden Ryu Kenpo is shown above.



Morita's black belt and trophy were awarded to him by Oshiro Sensei (left) and Takamatsu Bingo (center).



Shinden Kenpo as seen at the Nuuanu Y.M.C.A. circa 1949.

Shinden Kenpo culminates the evolution of Tommy Morita's self-defense theories from the late 1930s to the present day. Shinden's first public appearance came in 1978 at an exhibition celebrating Master Shoshin Nagamine's visit to the state of Hawaii. Morita's performances of four original Shinden hand and weapons kata brought praise and approval from the larger community.

Today, the Shinden Kenpo system is firmly in place, yet Morita's search for knowledge continues. Open and receptive to the strengths that different styles offer, the way of Shinden remains an open path. "When we acknowledge that we don't have all the answers," Morita says, "we won't be closed off from new ideas and experiences in the world that may benefit ourselves and others. The egoist says, 'I teach.' I merely point the way." *W*

*The symbol for Chito Ryu Karate-Do.*

Morita explains, self-defense in a real confrontation can never be prearranged or predicted because real situations differ greatly from the controlled environment inside the dojo. In a real confrontation, the kenpo practitioner must empty his or her mind of all preconceived notions, allowing the subconscious to perceive instinctively what the conscious mind does not and to signal the appropriate defensive response.

### Perfect Defense

The bylaw karate *ni sente nashi*, "there is no first attack," is firmly adopted into the Shinden system. Eschewing arrogance, Morita cultivates humility, self-control, discipline, peace, respect, and mental awareness. "Martial arts study is a lifelong effort of self-improvement," he says, "and should never be thought of as a status symbol or a display of physical superiority. Our kenpo is a method of training that will direct the practitioner toward self-reliance and a sincere respect for others."

In addition, he believes that physical proficiency and mental development are inseparable, each being the fruition and outgrowth of the other. He points, for example, to the kata. "More important than showing physical strength," says Morita, "the kata joins the physical and mental selves into one cohesive unit." As further reinforcement, he advocates practicing the Yang system of tai chi at the end of every class.

As is true with any art form of integrity, physical confrontation remains an absolute last resort. For Morita, there is only one perfect defense: the avoidance of all violence. In the ideal defensive state, the defender senses the thoughts of his adversary, and then, by reacting appropriately, he opens the pathway through which he may depart peaceably and unharmed. "If you sense an aggressive action before it happens, you can diffuse it," he says. "Aggression is parried easily by a mind capable of making the right decision at the right time. Our ultimate aim is to apply this conduct in our lives outside the dojo."

### The Eternal Search

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Stuart Ching and Charles Morita are both students of Sensai Tom Morita and free-lance writers based in Honolulu, Hawaii.