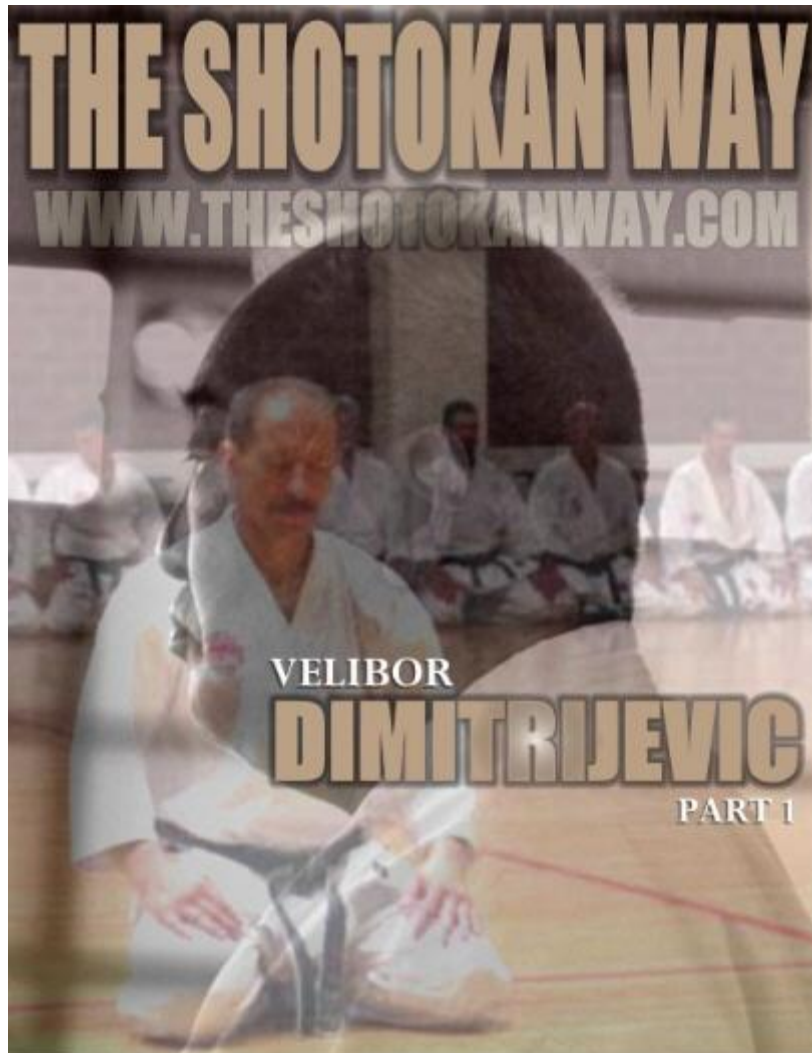


Velibor Dimitrijevic



Part 1

When a Master of the art passes on, the karate community loses a treasure, an essential link to the past. Their presence is gone, and students and observers alike mourn the terrible loss.

This does not always necessarily mean the energy of the Master has been lost however. Energy is intangible. You cannot always see it, but we know it's there, like the air we breathe. Inspiration is a manifestation of this energy, inspiration is energy.

When Sensei Taiji Kase died, the international karate community lost one of its guiding lights, its budo sat nav. When we think about all he did however, the lives he touched and inspiration he gave and continues to provide, we realise that he hasn't died at all. His physical presence is no longer here, but all he stood for and hoped to achieve remains and continues to prosper and develop.

Velibor Dimitrijevic is one such example of Sensei Kase's energy continuing to living on.

*Unknowing to Sensei Dimitrijevic, I have been in pursuit of this interview for a long while. I had read about him, and heard a great deal about him (all very positive) and was fascinated by this man's story. Here is a detailed exploration of Sensei Dimitrijevic's experiences, firstly discussing his beginnings in the art in the 1970s. He then goes on to speak, at length, about his study under Master Taiji Kase, sharing anecdotes, impressing upon us the impact Sensei Kase had on his understanding and dedication to Budo. I sincerely hope you love this interview as much as I do, as you get a real sense of this man's love for the art and his teacher; furthermore, I have no doubt that this interview will be a source of inspiration in itself for you all. **Shaun Banfield 2009***

Questions by **THE SHOTOKAN WAY**.



(Shaun Banfield) Thank you very much Sensei Dimitrijevic for giving us this interview. I am very much looking forward to putting my questions forward to you!

(Velibor Dimitrijevic) Thank you for giving me the chance to share my thoughts and experiences with you, I appreciate that.

(SB) You started karate in 1969, under Sensei Takashi Tokuhsa. Can you please tell us why you first decided to start karate?

(VD) Actually, I met Takashi Sensei a few years later, in 1974 to be exact. However, by that time I had several contacts with some of the senior karateka and teachers in Serbia. Therefore, by that time I was sort of self educated.

(SB) Sensei Tokuhsa was one of Sensei Taiji Kase's assistants. Can you please tell us a little about him as readers of *The Shotokan Way* may know only a little about him?

(VD) Takashi Tokuhsa sensei came to Europe in 1970. Primarily he was in Paris for a couple of months training with Kase sensei, and later on with Shirai sensei. He was finally invited to teach in Ljubljana, Slovenia, which is still his place of residence.

In my opinion, he was technically the most advanced young Japanese instructor at that time. For couple of years he was even involved in the preparation of the National Team of the Former Yugoslavia, as an assistant to Kase sensei, who at the time held the position of the Technical Advisor of the Karate Association of the Former Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, his karate level was considered a “*threat*” for the leaders of the Association and soon enough he was isolated to Slovenia. In 1980 the same people, also interrupted their cooperation with Kase sensei.



(SB) You mention that his level was considered a “threat”. Why do you think people responded in this way to him, and what were they threatened by?

(VD) The interest for karate during the 1970’s in Serbia and in all republics of the former Yugoslavia was incredibly huge. The Official Karate Association of Yugoslavia was run by the people who managed to actually create a real karate empire. They did everything possible to maintain absolute political control but above all they enunciated in being venerated as karate idols. The extraordinary karate style of Takashi sensei was a huge threat which could easily question and even ruin the image they had begun to create among their followers. Actually any potential “*opponent*” was isolated and even eliminated.

(SB) And what was the training like under Sensei Tokuhisa? Can you please give us an insight into the training you experienced under him?

(VD) Prior to 1974 I had followed a few of his courses, but in 1974 Takashi sensei was one of the instructors for the Yugoslav National Team preparations for the European Championships in London. I asked for his permission to come to his dojo in Ljubljana and train with him. He accepted, and I spent ten days there.

I think that the proper way to describe those ten days would be that I simply managed to survive. I just had come from the European Championship, where I was a member of the Kumite and Kata team as well as individual Kata. The reason that I mention this is mainly because I could not understand what had happened during those ten days where I barely touched Takashi sensei’s karategi. We had three hours training in the morning and I also joined two of the classes which he taught in the evening. We

did all aspects of practice, from Kihon and contact training on makiwara and sack, to Kata practice, as well as all kind of kumite, ranging from prearranged to free. His technical perfection was amazing. He could equally punch and kick with incredible sharpness and (*fortunately*) with perfect control. He had an amazing speed and fluency.

For me, it was really demanding and hard. After two days, the skin on my knuckles was gone. I even started bandaging my hands every day. We did a lot of prearranged forms of kumite, perfecting blocks, counter attacks. Even when I knew the attack he would deliver I could hardly manage to block or escape. But in free kumite, I was not so lucky. It was a real struggle. As you can imagine, during preparations with the National team, I fought with different opponents. That was difficult, but nothing in comparison with the hell I was going through during those ten days. I was really on the edge!

The harsh training made me wonder whether I was actually capable of doing karate. Physical pain was not the biggest problem, but my personal struggle to reconsider everything I had in mind about practising karate generally. Upon my return home I even stopped training for a month. I needed time to deal with dilemmas in my karate attitude.

Six months later I went again, and everything changed to the right direction. Taka san was an extraordinary master, but what impressed me even more was his character. He was an honest and good person, and above all, a real friend who stood for me during many difficult years I had later in my career.

(SB) Can you please elaborate on how he stood for you during the difficult years in your karate career?

(VD) Somehow, from my first steps in karate, I did not follow the "*official association style*". I was kind of a rebel. My connection with Takashi sensei just helped to create even greater distance. Though I had won 22 medals from the Yugoslavian Championships and even more from the Championships in Serbia, I had to struggle for my position in the national team.

Since I was in disfavour from the official karate line in the country, my karate style and even my competition results were often disputed. The paradox was that although, for a decade I was winning medals at the European level, and those who were proclaimed as the "*untouchables*" within the country did not even manage to pass the preliminary rounds.

Besides my friend Dragoslav Bozovic, who was one of the best karateka we had in the National team, I trusted only Takashi sensei's advice. I did not have many opportunities to train with him on the regular basis since we lived almost 800km apart, but just the thought that someone you trust is always on your side was enough.



(SB) In what year did you first meet Sensei Kase?

(VD) Like thousands of young karateka in Serbia and in former Yugoslavia I heard the name of Kase sensei beginning with my first steps in karate. In the beginning of the 1970's he was coming to teach, mainly in the Adriatic coast, and there were hundreds of karateka attending. But in 1974 at the European Championship in London it was Kase sensei who selected me for the National kumite squad. The next year he attended the Yugoslav kumite championship in Sarajevo. I took second place in the middle category, but his comment was that I was the best at the whole tournament. You can imagine what that means to someone when they are 22 or 23 years old.

(SB) Prior to meeting him and training under him in person, what had you heard about Sensei Kase?

(VD) Everything concerning karate was a mystery in those days, and he was already a legend. My first course was at the Adriatic coast in 1970, I was only 17. After two weeks of hard training on the sea shore I asked the teacher to tell us something about Kase sensei. He said that Kase sensei is so great that he has no right to speak about him.

(SB) And upon meeting him, what was your first impression of the man?

(VD) I have to tell you that he changed over the years. I remember him when he was 45-50 years old, and I knew him during the last 15 years of his life. For many years, an aura of a samurai was a picture I had in my mind, and still I do. When you saw him in the dojo you could sense the danger, but you could not tell where it was coming from. On the contrary, out of the dojo, he was a person you could easily approach, which was not a case with other Japanese instructors. Kase sensei had a smile which could disarm anyone.



(SB) Sensei Kase was very different from the other JKA instructors you trained with, am I correct? Can you please explain in what ways he was different?

(VD) Even though I had seen various Japanese instructors during the course of my European and World Championships, Kase Sensei was the only Japanese instructor who visited the former Yugoslavia. What you notice immediately in Kase sensei's appearance is his spirit. Though he was also member of the JKA, it was obvious that his style and training method were different. You could be impressed with technique and power of course, but his kime and spirit were something else. While teaching he was completely devoted to pass the message to his students.

(SB) Would you describe his karate as Shotokan or is it more in line with Shotokai do you think?

(VD) He always expressed his gratitude to his teachers from the Shotokan Dojo prior and just after WWII, but Yoshitaka Gichin actually sealed his karate approach. He said he followed the Shotokan line. I think that his style is unique. Basic concept comes from Shotokan which includes technical curriculum and Kata but the most distinguished difference which makes his approach unique is where the power is derived from.

(SB) In what year did you get onto the National team?

(VD) In 1974.

(SB) How did your relationship with Sensei Kase change when you got onto the National team?

(VD) Not much actually. As I mentioned earlier, he was invited to teach seminars a couple of times a year in former Yugoslavia.



(SB) You had a very long and successful competitive career. What competitions stand out in your mind as particularly important?

(VD) From 1974 up until 1987 I took part in 3 World and 11 European Championships. It is difficult to say which stand out, but maybe the World Championship in Bremen in 1980, and the European Championship in Manchester in 1981. The first one was important because I got a chance to compare my level among the best from all over the world. The second one stands out because I won my first Championship title in Kata.

(SB) Throughout your long competitive career, you must have some wonderful memories. Would you please share some stories from your competitive years with our readers?

(VD) There were many but maybe one from the Championship in Manchester in 1981. The previous year I missed the Championship because I served my Army duty, and it was just two months since I had returned. I trained while I was in the Army but I was not feeling as fit as I used to be.

The preliminary rounds both in Kata and Kumite were as usually held in the morning, in a sports hall. But the finals which were held in the evening, for the first and only time, I believe, were held in the theatre! I have to admit that it was nice environment, but it was an unusual atmosphere for an athletic event. Though there was not much space, I tried to warm up behind the theatre curtain. I did my best not to make much noise, when a man appeared warning me to stop immediately. He said no one is allowed to do anything but wait for its turn. He said he was in charge of "*his show*" and we were just a part of it. He was really serious about that, but I told him that I came to compete at the European Championship and not to be a part of his show.

I had to face the unexpected circumstances. Of course I was upset, I tried to concentrate since there was not much time left. I just stood completely motionless for a couple of minutes trying to suppress my emotions. And it actually worked; I did my final kata like never before which led me to my first title. I doubt anyone expected such an outcome. Everyone was betting on Frank Brennan who was the previous year's champion and he had the home court advantage since it was taking place in Manchester.



Individual Kata: Brennan (2), Dimitrijevic (1), Osterkamp (3)

(SB) And who would you describe as your toughest opponent?

(VD) It is difficult for me to answer that question, however, since it is asked at this time I must say that for five consecutive years only Frank Brennan and I were taking first and second place. In that respect Frank Brennan was the toughest opponent.

Allow me to mention that during the seven year period from 1977 until 1984 I was first twice, second three times and third two times.

However, I must insist on stating that I have always considered Kata as a core in Budo practice. It is a great concept, first to face and fight all your weaknesses and also to improve endlessly all your physical and mental potentials. Of course, when you compete then you try to compare with the best ones.

(SB) Prior to the war, you travelled and attended many courses held by Sensei Kase. How different was the karate you experienced at these seminars to the more personal tuition you shared with him?

(VD) As I said earlier, Kase sensei was coming to former Yugoslavia a couple of times a year, when he was invited. I was a young karateka, and like many others at that time I was just dreaming of having more personal opportunity to meet and train with him. By 1979 I passed my Shodan, Nidan and Sandan examination to Kase sensei. My next examination was 15 years later in the WKSA when I met him again.

Unfortunately, people who were in power in the Karate Association of the former Yugoslavia interrupted cooperation with Kase sensei in 1980. These same people had me in disfavour from the beginning of my practice and even more when I established connection with Takashi sensei. Those were not easy years to survive in the world of karate, in the country where it was believed that almost 300.000 people practiced karate. But that is history now.

My relation with Kase sensei from the time he established WKSA is something completely different. He was not just teaching me; he was reliving and sharing the smallest details and secrets of his karate approach and his life philosophy.

(SB) How did the war hinder your karate training if you don't mind me asking as I know it meant that you were not able to train under Sensei Kase as regularly as you had been?

(VD) I had my last European Championship in Glasgow in 1987. After that I was invited to teach in Athens. In 1988 I moved there. The collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the war started four years later. Therefore, travelling was not easy since I had to apply for the visa anytime I wanted to go for a course in another country.

Maybe it is not relevant but for better understanding let me explain also that in my native Serbia, in town Nis, I had a club with around 400-500 members, and I was working as a Mechanical Engineer in the company which I had designed. It was destiny that in 1988 I left all this and went to Athens to start everything from the beginning. I quit my job, and I devoted myself only to the study of the Kase's approach to Budo Karate.

It was from Athens that I got in touch with Kase sensei again. I became a member of the WKSA and very soon one of his closest assistants. Until the end of his life I had many seminars all over the Europe including some personal courses.



(SB) Not necessarily a karate issue, but could you please tell us a little about life during the war?

(VD) I was not directly affected by the unpleasant developments during the break up of the former Yugoslavia since I was living in Athens at the time, but I was very closely involved in what was going on in Serbia during that awful time. And then later during the NATO airstrikes which took place in 1999.

It is a very thin line that separates everyday life from the horror of war. It is unbelievable how many of the usual values lose any meaning in the presence of fear that someone close to you might be killed. Besides my relatives, some of my students and friends were at the areas where the war operations were held and I tried to be in touch with them. Regardless of the circumstances during those troubled years I was regularly going to Serbia.

It is a fact that I held courses for the Academy of Serbia during the proclaimed wartime and almost all of the members participated for every held course. Since you are asking questions from the past, let me tell you that the first event to break embargo imposed on Serbia was a course with Kase sensei, which I had organized in my town Nis, in 1993.

We were having one of the WKSA courses in Italy at the end of 1992 when I asked him to come with me to Serbia. Of course he was reluctant at first, saying that there was a war going on over there. I told him that it was the propaganda and media exaggeration, and that things were far from what the western media claimed. Since he was still not convinced I told him that it was very important for me if he could come under such circumstances, after all it was him who had war experiences, not myself.

It was not an easy atmosphere and not an easy choice for him to make, so in the end I had to use the last argument at my disposal. I reminded him that it was he who chose the GI ideogram as our Academy's symbol. Gi is a moral obligation and it is the highest honour to help and support a fellow Academy member during difficult times.

His reply was short and resolute: "*Ok Vebo, we go*".

On June 12th, 1993 we came to Nis in the afternoon, just before the training was scheduled. When we entered the town hall, there were over 200 karateka in line and almost 3000 people, all standing and applauding for ten minutes.

They patiently observed a two day course showing respect to the teacher who returned after 13 years and who had taught the first letters of the karate alphabet almost 30 years earlier.

Even a samurai like Kase sensei was moved by this event. He did not expect such a warm welcome and admitted that he was truly emotionally moved by such an event. We returned two years later to both Nis and Belgrade proceeding with the courses.

After that, Kase Ha Academy of Serbia was formed.



(SB) In 1991 Sensei Kase formed the WKSA. Why did he form this group?

(VD) It was his way to express his disagreement with the modern development of the Japanese karate. He said that separating from Budo, karate lost its soul. He deeply believed that it is possible to reach the level beyond technique and physical power, which was his life goal. By establishing WKSA he wanted to share his achievements with all those who shared the same vision.

WKSA was supposed to be a school for the highest education in Budo approach to karate. Competition in karate must be considered just as a phase in development. It is happening in artificial reality with many restrictions, from the rules to the referee's objectivity. Budo emphasises freedom of mind, so it is a natural step in development after the competition level. He was so much affected by samurai's tradition and I believe he was dreaming of creating a concept which will be a modern resemblance of those ancient times. Most of the Budo aspects were neglected, distorted or had been entirely lost as karate took a completely athletic form. Establishing WKSA Kase sensei managed to teach and preserve those valuable aspects showing with his personal example incredible potentials of the human mind and body when led by faith and devotion.

(SB) And did you immediately join Sensei's group, and why did you decide to do so?

(VD) Yes, I did. For me there was no other alternative.

(SB) You are a part of the Shihankai, and were a very close assistant to Sensei Kase for a long time. Can you please tell us a few stories of your time with him?

(VD) From the first courses we had in the WKS Academy I realized Kase sensei was not the same person I knew ten years ago. His style was remarkably different. I sensed that "*something*" was completely different but I could not tell what that was. Of course there was not a doubt about the efficiency of his techniques but I could not realize where the power was coming from. Soon after joining the WKSA I asked Kase sensei to come to Athens for a course. He accepted and in the beginning of 1992 he came. At that time he was 63 and I was 39.

There were participants from all Shotokan schools since that was the first time that Kase was in Greece. Everybody in the world of Martial arts knew his name but that was the first time to see him in the flesh. I was supposed to help him with the language translation, but with demonstrations too. Though I really did my best to offer a decent resistance, with each contact he would toss me left or right with unbelievable easiness and often I found myself on the floor. All participants were adults and many of them experienced karateka. They could not believe what they were witnessing. Their sensei was like a kid in front of "*an old man*". They thought that everything was show and simply acted by Kase Sensei and myself. Only I knew that it was exactly the opposite.

I was shocked much more than the first time I met Takashi sensei. I could not believe what was happening. I was 24 years younger, I was really fit, but still I could not withstand any of his blocks. He tossed me left and right with such ease. Every contact caused extreme pain, and he did everything with no visible effort. I tried to stay calm, I did not say anything but sensei understood everything and at the end of the course he touched my shoulder saying: "*Vebo, you were champion, you have very good technique and excellent kime, and it is now time for you to start practising karate*"! I was almost 40 years old. Like history was repeating itself again, just this time it was much harder. I was simply devastated. Twenty years ago I was young and my experience with Takashi sensei was actually the driving force to enter the world of Karate-do. Now, after all those years of competitions, after 15 medals from the European and World Championships, he was telling me that it is now the best time to start practicing karate. Like it was in vain what I have done in my karate career by then.

What actually amazed me was the fact that it is possible to extend human potential much higher than it is logically comprehended. That was exactly what had attracted me to start practicing karate when I was 16, and now I could feel on my body and see with my own eyes.

I could not resist a challenge; the only choice was to start again from the beginning. However, I believe the following story you'll find more interesting. In June 1992 WKSA had Gasshuku in Sweden. The Official program finished on Sunday, but we asked Kase sensei to stay a couple of days longer and he accepted. There were four of us. We stayed for two days in a cottage near the lake in the South of Sweden. The first day we practiced a bit outdoors and he would simply correct our mistakes. Since it was in the beginning of the WKSA Academy we were very keen to learn about the future plans and

further development in practice. I was a bit reluctant at first, but as time passed by I asked more questions about forgotten and neglected aspects of Budo and how to deal with matters concerning the mind development.



The next day we went on a short boat ride on the lake. Due to the rapid change in weather we had to return to the shore. The path leading to the cottage was with a mild ascent and went through the forest. Kase Sensei and I were walking and did not find the need to talk while doing so. He was going slowly, as if he was counting his own footsteps. For me, the pace that he was going at was far too slow. After a while a thought crossed my mind. I thought to myself, that Kase Sensei may be great in karate but if I start running I will leave him behind 50 meters.

However, I decided not to run and leave Kase Sensei behind and therefore our silence persisted for next couple of minutes. That's when I heard Kase sensei speak and say, "*Vebo, I do not run, but I can and very fast for a matter of fact.*"

The silence lasted until we came to the cottage. I thought that this was happening to someone else. Such things only happen in the movies. But I was wrong, it was happening to me right then and there. That was proof that the level beyond exists.

Kase sensei used to speak very often about another dimension in karate development, and I was convinced about that fact. I tried to give some answers but these answers did not make any sense.

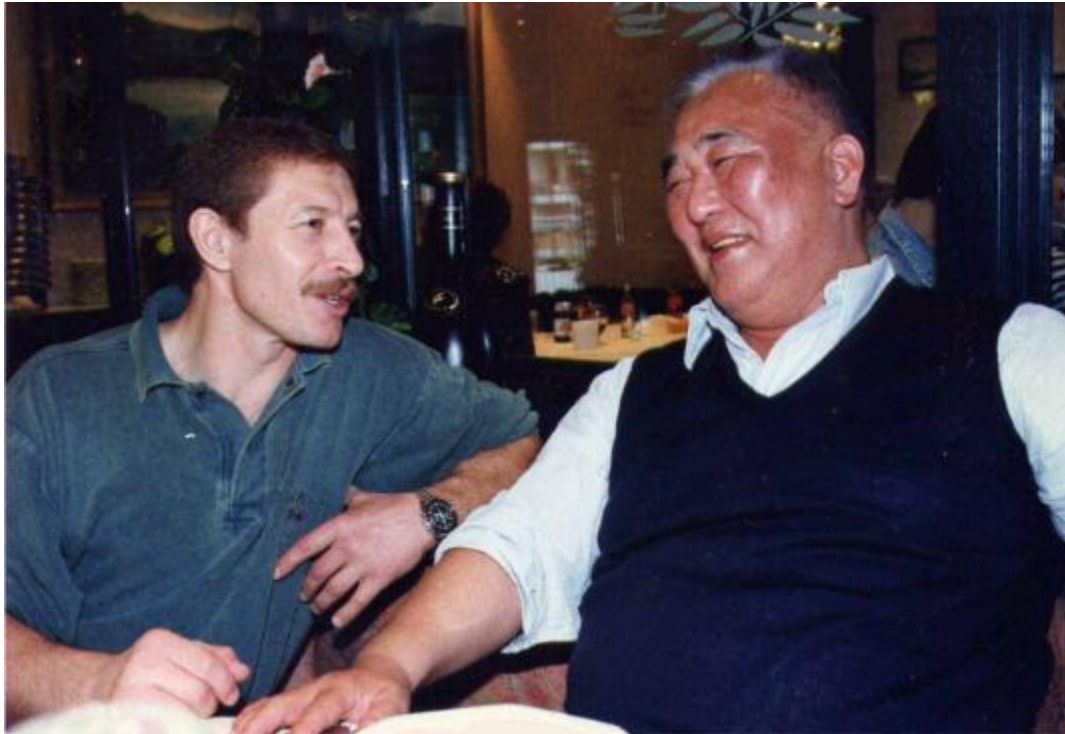
I think in Serbian - which he doesn't understand, and he thinks in Japanese - which I don't understand. We spoke English with each other; therefore it was yet another language which he "*spoke.*" In the years to come, I had experienced a few more similar moments with him but that event in Sweden sealed my destiny. Today, seventeen years later I'm still trying really hard to learn the language which he didn't speak orally but mentally.

I honestly do not care whether I'll ever reach the level of another dimension but it's something I'll never stop searching for.

(SB) How would you describe his personality?

(VD) What do you say about a man who always smiled, like he had no problems in life? His profound affection with samurai's Bushido code was deeply embodied in his character. Integrity of his character was reflected in his devotion, loyalty and in his deep sense for honour and justice. He was easy to approach and always extremely patient when teaching regardless the students' level and age.

On the other hand it was amazing how, in a split of a second, he was able to convert himself into another being, almost like an alien being. His demonstration of absolute energy control, manifested through incredibly explosive kime could only be considered as metaphysical phenomenon. In the next moment he would be again just like everyone else. It was difficult to understand those changes. But this is what great personalities are distinguished by; they look and behave like ordinary people.



(SB) Can you please talk me through the finer points and details of his karate? I know this is a very broad question, but I would like to gain an idea as to the main points of his karate?

(VD) The main issue in all Martial Arts is where the power is generated from. The ultimate goal in Kase Ha Shotokan Ryu Karate-Do is to reach the level beyond technique and physical power.

It is based on the ancient Budo approach to martial arts and spirits. Unlike orthodox Shotokan line where the kinetic energy of the hand or leg movement is the only source of power, in the Kase Ha approach, the ultimate level of development is achieved when power is derived from the flow of Ki throughout the body. I can mention some of the basic mental and technical principles of the style:

- *Specific breathing, concentration and visualization are crucial means in mind's development. Different forms of Ibuki breathing lead to a higher spiritual level and to the finest energy control.*
- *Kase's approach is based on extremely strong and effective defensive system. A variety of closed and open hand blocks are practiced from respective kamae positions.*
- *The use of Fudo dachi stance gradually developed from the basic stances, to satisfy equally defensive and offensive requirements, as well as to insure ultimate stability and body control, is one of the style's distinguished characteristics.*
- *Unique use of offensive and defensive open hand techniques developed from the use of Japanese katana.*
- *Timing principles of Sei-te and Hen-te are clearly and effectively implemented.*
- *Developed moving system to straight, diagonal, semicircular and circular directions.*

- *Unique concept of Kata practice, including four execution directions (Omote, Ura, Go, Go-no-ura) and respective application system based on the reality and not formality.*



(SB) You mention Sei-te and Hen-te and their timings. Can you please elaborate on this, and explain what these are, as many readers may be unfamiliar with these concepts?

(VD) **Sei-te** is when we block with one arm and deliver a counter attack with the other. This is the usual way of connecting defensive and offensive techniques and also the way of developing basic body coordination while turning the trunk and pelvis. This is of fundamental importance in order to create stability, stance rooting and develop distractive kime, equally for blocks and for punches.

Hen-te is when both the block and the counter attack are done with the same hand. It can be developed after the Sei-te concept is mastered. Hen-te requires much more kime. The counter attack follows the block with almost no interruption, so the body must be extremely rooted in order to offer required support for the hand. This can be managed with proper abdominal breathing which helps to keep the body intact.

While in Sei-te timing there are two exhalations, one for each kime; in Hen-te there are two kimes with one exhalation. This is not very easy to achieve and it's the main reason why this timing concept is practiced at the higher level.

(SB) Fudo-dachi is a stance clearly favoured by Sensei Kase. Why did he favour it and what does Fudo-dachi offer that the other stances do not offer?

(VD) In classical Shotokan style there are two grave mistakes in regard to the leg position in stances, particularly in Zenkutsu dachi.

Simple biomechanical analysis confirms that the front leg position is wrong. The front foot is turned to the inside of the stance, the knee is also bending over the foot and such position creates excessive pressure on the knee joint. At the same time, the back leg is straightened, which causes continuous pressure and impact on the back of the pelvis, more specifically, in the lumbar area of the spinal column.

At first sight, it seems like the locked position offers great stability, but the truth is that it is a deceiving feeling. Basically, the stance must have an ability to absorb the body's shocks caused by many movements, as well as, muscular contractions and to transfer them to the ground.

Such a stance is rigid with no flexibility and with a lot of latent but dangerous threats for the entire body structure. The catastrophic consequences are unfortunately very well known. Examples range from minor frequent knee injuries to the more radical meniscus removal and crucial ligament operations which unfortunately often occur. The back leg knee joint suffers similar problems as well as the back of the body. Discomfort and severe back pain often are a result of the lumbar vertebrae dislocation and can cause even severe discus hernia.

In most of the cases further karate practice had to be abandoned due to the distorted body stability, permanent structure distortion or unbearable pain. Let me stress again by saying that the Fudo dachi stance is well balanced biomechanically.

The straight forward position of the front foot and front knee bending in the foot's direction in connection with the bended back knee, create a kind of frame. Such a frame is able to absorb and transfer all of the body's impacts and oscillations to the ground.

Shifting the body's centre of gravity in any direction is easy in Fudo dachi, that's why it satisfies equally the offensive and defensive requirements.

