

<http://www.theshotokanway.com/aninterviewwithvelibordimitrijevicp2.html>

VELIBOR DIMITRIJEVIC

Part 2



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**.



(SB) What is your interpretation of Ki and does it exist do you think?

(VD) Of course I believe in Ki existence, otherwise I wouldn't be on this path. Ki is an inherent fundamental energy that is beyond mental (*intellectual*) comprehension. In seeing the world around us we are dependent on our senses. Due to the limitation of the human senses, what we experience around us is not an absolute but a limited reality. Though we cannot see or smell air we believe it exists, why? Because, our lives depend on it.

So, in that aspect why should the Ki existence be questioned at all?

We tend to think of our bodies as flesh and bones supplied by blood and directed by the brain and nervous system, but that description is very superficial. We are much more complex than that, with ultimate in complexity being our consciousness consisting of thoughts and emotions. Despite the advance in medicine, we still haven't figured out how human consciousness works. The human body functions through multiple layers of systems, some physical, some chemical, some energetic, and some might say spiritual, but all divinely aligned and integrated. As a mechanical engineer I know from physics that everything in the Universe is energy and for that reason, the energy that human beings possess should be no different.

I believe that one way to access Ki is through the body or through physical intelligence. Breathing cultivates this physical intelligence and transmits the Ki energy throughout the body. Because humans can control their breathing individually, they can develop physical intelligence. Cultivating Ki means, to intertwine two fields of the human existence, mental and physical. However, everything I mentioned above begins with the simple act of faith.

(SB) Emphasising the hara is of paramount importance to your karate am I correct? How should it be used as the source of power when delivering techniques?

(VD) I've mentioned earlier that outer, mechanical movement is basically the main source of power in all sports disciplines and many of martial arts. What concerns me is possibility to avoid inevitable loss of energy caused by any mechanical motion. This is possible when there is an effort to centralize mental and physical efforts to one point. The human body possesses 206 bones, 100 joints and around 650 muscles. Can you imagine how much energy is dispersed while we partially move or do any karate technique?

On the contrary, what will happen when we try to centralize all our efforts to one point in our body? Hara, or more specifically its centre Tanden, which is also the body's physical centre of gravity is that precise point. All our conscious efforts should be focused to this point in order to reach the level of aroused Ki energy. Once that ability is achieved it is like electric current. Even the slightest kime from Hara will be felt at the same moment on the periphery. When you block or punch it is important to make a sudden "*Tanden kime*" and you'll realize it on the contact surface of the hand or the fist. It's like a button, which instantly responds when you switch it on and off.

(SB) Why does this Tanden Kime have this affect do you think?

(VD) Tanden kime is not just a result of the abdominal muscles contraction. Tanden kime occurs when correct Ibuki, abdominal breathing is applied. The strain or the pressure which is exerted when the air is suppressed to the Hara affects the whole body reaction in a different way than when bare muscles are being contracted.

It is important to remember that the breathing initiates the movement and not vice versa. In other words, breathing is not to support the movements but to initiate the movements. Muscular contraction is of second importance.

The feeling is really something else. With practice, this way becomes an instinctive reaction, and it happens just at the moment you had thought about it.

(SB) Sensei Kase was very interested in the Samurai tradition. What did he teach you about this tradition and how it relates to Karate-Do?

(VD) I'll always remember Kase sensei as the last samurai. He was profoundly affected by the samurai's tradition and by the end of his life he lived deeply respecting Bushido code. That was obvious in his behaviour, in his determination to the way he has chosen to follow, and in his loyalty to his honest followers. He never broke his word and respecting the honour and dignity was his life ideal. His ideas about another level in karate based on the ancient samurai's principles, of the unification of mind and body through the rigorous Budo practice, were seldom understood even by his Japanese colleagues.

Today, since the most of the karate instructors from the first generation belong to history, it is obvious that Kase sensei left a heritage which is ahead of its time. Never cease fighting your own self; it is the most important ideal to bear in mind.

It is nicely explained in Budo progression, where from Bu-jutsu (*martial technique*) one should advance to Bu-do (*martial way*) in order to reach the final stage of Bu-shin (*martial spirit*). The techniques (*jutsu*) themselves are vehicles that allow the practitioner to approach the two higher levels of ethical behaviour and spiritual insight. Of course, the inseparable part of Budo practice is the philosophy of Zen which helps to set the proper frame of mind. From the dawn of the human history,

the grandest desire for human beings was to be strong and wise at the same time. I believe Budo Karate is one way to achieve it.

(SB) How did Sensei Kase's passing affect you?

(VD) Kase sensei and I often had discussions about the human mind, as well as life and death. That helped me understand the importance of Zen mind, or everyday mind. His life journey is an example of how a warrior is dealing with death. He had faced death twice in his life and he spoke about that as inevitable part of the life. First, during the end of the WWII in the kamikaze camp, and again four years before he died when he suffered a heart attack.

Everybody was shocked when he appeared in the dojo not even a year later. He was defying death. Knowing him I could not imagine other behaviour of a samurai. Just a month before his death we talked almost half an hour. He was ill and I had called to ask how he was. I tried to be supportive but eventually it was him giving me advice on how to continue practice. He was at the end of the life but still he spoke about life. He reminded me not to forget that physical practice is important, but as he used to say it is just a tad bit above zero.

He insisted that breathing is the most important aspect. I tried to convince him by saying that I was doing just that, but he persisted that I have to do it even more, because above all, it is the mental development which is the ultimate goal. As usual we were laughing. I feel honoured that I had chance to share a part of his life. We all have to die. Understanding that and accepting as a part of the life journey will help you enjoy life fully.



(SB) You mention that you spoke with him about the time(s) he faced death at the Kamikaze camp. Would it be possible for you to share what he told you about this?

(VD) Please allow me not to go into very deep details however; everything had to do with austere discipline to which body and mind were imposed.

He also told me some of his impressions from the time he had suffered a heart attack. His almost miraculous recovery also has to do with mind activity. He mentioned the concentration and the way of directing the train of thoughts. He also said that he never stopped having faith in the Budo approach he followed and that was helping body to respond to such mental and spiritual stimulations.

(SB) Sensei Shirai was very close to Sensei Kase. Did you have much contact with Sensei Shirai, can you please tell us about him?

(VD) I remember Shirai sensei from the days I trained with Takashi sensei because he had a great respect for him. I knew him from the Championships when he was leading the Italian team, and I liked his style. Later when he was actively involved in the WKSA we had a much closer relationship, but I didn't actually have many courses with him.

After Kase sensei's funeral some of his closest students, friends and family had a memorial gathering where some of us recalled some events from the past referring to the great teacher. I appreciated Shirai sensei saying that Kase sensei was an enigma even for them, the Japanese. It really shows the great respect and appreciation which he cherished for Kase sensei.

(SB) What role does kata have to you?

(VD) It is of the paramount importance not to see Kata as it appears at the competitions! When you perceive just the outer form of the Kata, paying attention to the aesthetic then it is nothing more than bare gymnastic exercise. Repeating kata over and over again without higher goal but to keep fit or not to forget it, has no meaning to me.

Kata is the core in Budo practice. You do Kata alone, so you have the opportunity to practice all important aspects in continuous effort to harmonize outer and inner body potentials. Once the techniques of Kata become automatic, like acquired reflexes - almost like second nature - all your attention should be focused to the inner's body and mind potentials.

Visualization is very important. First to imagine opponent's attacks and reactions, but also to imagine kime, movement and distance before the technique is done. In this way, the mind is leading all bodily functions like breathing, stance rooting and Tanden centralization.

Kata must be a reflection of the inner state. Kata must be a message from the soul, emotional and spiritual, not a mechanical exercise. When approaching Kata practice, I think like an artist who is facing his blank canvas. You won't be impressed from the shape of the canvas, but from the scene which has been depicted on it. It is similar when you approach Kata practice. Doing Heian shodan, Bassai Dai or Unsu is just like choosing the size of canvas, what matters is the message that is coming from it.



(SB) What is your favourite kata and why?

(VD) If you had asked me this question 25 years earlier I would probably mention that during my seven year period in Europe, I won ten medals in Kata competition, seven individually and three with a team kata. It is really hard to say which kata was a favourite one. I did Unsu, Sochin, Kanku Sho, Gojushiho Sho and Gojushiho Dai, but also Bassai Sho, Chinte, Nijushiho, Enpi, Hangetsu.

I always believed, and I still do, that extreme, explosive kime is the most important quality in practice. While I was competing, my style was describe as a wild one. I remember that Takashi sensei told me once I should try not to lose it. I believe I did not. After all these years I really have no preference among all Kata. However, there are periods when I like doing some more than others; and probably it has to do with my mental and emotional state. Like sometimes you are in the mood for Bach, other time for Vivaldi, while sometimes you could be in the mood for U2.

(SB) Studying kata under Sensei Kase must have been an extraordinary experience. Do you remember any sessions in particular where you studied kata under Sensei Kase? Could you share your memories and what did you learn?

(VD) In my opinion, Kase Ha Shotokan Ryu style has the most methodical approach to the Kata practice. Apart from the common Omote way of performing Kata, Kase sensei introduced Ura or opposite and Go, and Go no ura (*backwards to the left and right*). Apart from the obvious benefit in achieving equilibrium of both, left and right body sides, it improves strategic approaches in Bunkai analysis. Just try to do any Kata to the opposite direction and you'll realize how confusing and difficult it is, mainly because you are trying to coordinate the movements in backwards order.

It was in the course in Germany when I was his assistant. I never did any of the Kata Ura or Go. First, we all tried and with some confusion completed Heian Nidan Ura, and also the Go direction. Then all participants made a circle and he wanted to explain why doing Kata backwards (*Go, or Go no ura*) is closer to the real fighting circumstances, since it is normal to retreat when you are attacked.

Without previous notice he asked me to come forward and do Bassai Dai Go but in Bunkai form. One hundred people were expecting to see what he said. I was taken by surprise. I did not have time to ask anything since the other instructor was in front of me ready to attack. The strange thing was that with some slight mistakes I managed to demonstrate the whole Kata backwards in Bunaki form with the opponent. The fact that I did it from the first attempt just proved how deeply Kase sensei studied and analysed this new concept before presenting to the students. It was conceived for the real improvement of the martial abilities, and now after almost 20 years of such experience I can say it is really a great concept.



(SB) Today in 2009, sport karate is very popular. How are you, and the rest of the Shihankai working to ensure the continued development of Sensei Kase's karate?

(VD) During 50 years in Europe, karate has changed. More athletic approach is the result of the competition. It is logical that the rules of competition determine the training method. In order to win in competition, you have to score points by punching, striking or kicking. You don't get points for blocking, so there is no need to study them. The most effective techniques for scoring are straight punches. If you use kicks, then those circular or semicircular are the most appropriate. Those and other restrictions on the other hand directly determine the training requirements. No need to spend years practicing all stances, variety of defensive techniques, Kata, etc. The power resulting from the kinetic energy of the hand or leg movement is enough to hit and score. If you become the champion then that is all, that is the ultimate. Why would anyone strive to search for what is beyond?

I had such an experience. I believe that Budo practice is for those who have urge to create and search over and over again. Japanese say "*DOKAN*" or, "*the way is a circle*", so the way never ends. I believe I had to try to improve my knowledge and experience in the neglected aspects of Budo in order to achieve deeper understanding of the mind and body potentials.

I had Kase sensei as living proof of that. I can't afford or choose to afford doing anything less.

My colleagues from the Shihanki share the same opinion, and we are doing our best to protect and to further promote Kase sensei's teaching.

(SB) What are the most important aspects of Budo do you think and how should we incorporate Budo into our karate study?

(VD) Without accepting the principles of centralization it is impossible to speak of advanced karate practice. Try not to emphasize what you see with eyes, anyone can do that. Try to grasp the meaning of things which are beyond our senses' reach. Ones we can turn towards our inside world, I think we are entering into the Budo practice.

(SB) Sensei Kase often spoke about going from Zero to Maximum energy in the shortest amount of time possible. What are the most important factors that you should concentrate on in order to achieve this?

(VD) I often refer to his approach as "*The way beyond the limits*" and I'm trying to stick to this idea too. At the more superficial level he used to say: "*never cease looking for more kime and more speed ...*"

Actually it is based on the Yin-Yang concept of harmony between two opposites. So, we have to try to go beyond our own limits.

In the beginning it is how to withstand pain from physical exercise and how to overcome the fear of the contact and injury and later how to overcome our desires, egoism, and negligence. When speaking about real practice then it is crucial to find the equilibrium between the hard way and soft way.

The hard way is manifested in the outer form of kime in karate technique. Soft way, or inner form is expressed in the softness of the body. Both conditions can be achieved through the different forms of abdominal breathing.

I have mentioned earlier when I spoke about "*Tanden Kime*" that the feeling is like switching an on/off button. Extreme kime is achieved during the air exhalation, when the suppressed air is released suddenly with extreme abdominal contraction. It is important prior to that to visualize that the body becomes intact, as one solid piece, like a huge stone for example. Such breathing is called Haku, which means to throw out or to vomit because it happens so suddenly.

In the very next instant, just after being exerted to such extreme strain, the whole body should be "*switched off*", released instantly from any tension. Imagine something soft, as soft as cotton.

This completely opposite body condition is possible because, during Haku breathing the body's diaphragm is pushed downwards. This as a result has a creation of the under pressure in the lungs, so after the exhalation, the air is immediately sucked in the lungs again.

In that way, when we do anything with extreme/explosive kime, we should control only exhalation; inhalation follows automatically because of the created vacuum in the lungs.

Before we attempt doing it in practice, we have to imagine such a condition in our minds first. That is why visualization is very important. Creating a picture in the mind is essential before attempting to harmonize other potentials and materialize them through the form of the karate techniques. Finally, it is the consciously controlled breathing which enables to achieve Zero or Maximum body conditions.



(SB) What are the differences do you believe in long range and short range fighting?

(VD) Generally war is about deceiving the opponent. Think not how to win but rather, how not to lose.

In that way you'll never underestimate the opponent and you'll avoid silly mistakes which in real war may cost a life. Of course, in the war, there is no victory without infantry, which at some point must enter the battlefield and prevail at the end.

In karate practice it is primarily important to develop an effective arsenal of weapons as well as ways for short range fighting. This must be done in order to learn how to deal with emotions and the mental tension caused by the opponent's presence in your vicinity.

After that you can analyze the changes and differences caused by the change of the distance and develop the most appropriate weapons and ways respectively. We all first secure our home door with locks and alarms and then the yard around the house.

(SB) And what was Sensei Kase's approach to jiyu-ippun kumite and jiyu-kumite, and what methods did he use to instil the samurai mentality in his students?

(VD) Doing jiyu-ippun kumite is very important. The fact that attacks, blocks and counter attacks are mostly prearranged doesn't make the exercise easier.

On the contrary, it helps to improve the stance, the rooting and it sharpens timing and distance. It also helps to create the mind and breathing posture as well as the attitude.

Kase sensei insisted that during hard but controlled kumite sessions it is of great importance for reality to prevail. Instant release of the focused Ki energy was the ultimate goal.

First is important to develop the most distractive defensive techniques and ways to neutralize opponent attacks. Then, later, to develop more sophisticated ways to disarm the opponent using less power, or even using opponents' impact of power to defeat him.

Good and correct techniques and physical strength are just the basic conditions before starting to search for more advanced abilities.



(SB) Do you now consider yourself a samurai?

(VD) Does the fact that I do respect the code of honour and I believe that dignity and loyalty should be life ideals make me a samurai?

My cultural and historical backgrounds are different from Kase sensei. I find a lot of inspiration in the history of Serbia. Some things are even very similar with those of the samurai in Japan. There are so many examples of the dignity, honour and sacrifice during the vast Serbian history which is alike to those of the greatest samurai. In the medieval Serbia in the beginning of the XV century Despot Stefan Lazarevic, was one of the most educated monarchs in that time in Europe. He had established a school for knights and those who successfully completed martial and often literature studies received official certificates. Those "holy warriors" were even depicted on the Manasija monastery's icons, which is very rare to see.

In today's world being different from the social norms will make you strange in the eyes of society, however, if you are determined to pursue the way beyond the limits in any field of the human endeavour, being that science, medicine, technology or Budo you have to accept the fact that at the very end you might be alone.

I think some of the ancient Greek philosophers said that, one that can be alone is either a wild animal or a god.

(SB) And what mindset did he ask you to adopt?

(VD) He never asked me to do or to adopt anything.

He was an open minded person and insisted that everybody must find his own way. He even said it himself, *"I've taught you everything I know. Please set your own direction and try to discover with your mind and feel with your body the things I did."*

I was not surprised at all by his words since in my karate life I was pretty much a loner. After all he generously shared his experience with me and helped me to stand firmly on the ground. It was time for me to mature with my own discoveries of the body and the mind.

(SB) How important is the concept of 'Mu' and 'Zanshin'? in karate and how do they work together do you believe?

(VD) There is no advanced level in karate practice without centralization. Focusing all our conscious mental and physical effort to the Tanden, is the way. Conscious and controlled breathing is the bridge that connects physical and mental aspect of the body.

When this is achieved the mind is being cleared up from our everyday thoughts. Then, everything we consider as ourselves, physical body, as well as our mental and spiritual being must be merged, must become one entity.

Only then it is possible to speak about Zanshin or prolonged alertness and Mushin, or no mind, or absence of the conscious mind.

In the process of learning, we use our conscious mind in order to remember the sequence or movement and then with countless repetitions we try to store this information in our subconscious mind.

The main idea in Budo practice is to reach the level of the instinctive, intuitive response under any dangerous or unexpected circumstances. That can be possible only if martial techniques were completely acquired and absorbed becoming almost like inborn reflexes.

Years of hard conscious training leads to the level when everything becomes like ones second nature. Such a condition is depicted as Mushin state, or No mind condition. As if there is no presence of the conscious mind, almost like the mind is absent.

When such a level has been achieved the reactions are completely instinctive. We can be amazed by the perfection of a performance and the impression that will be gotten would be that it had occurred by chance.

That's why the highest level in Budo development is void or emptiness. Physical drill is not enough to reach such depths in the mind development, higher sense of spirituality is required.



(SB) You obviously are promoting Sensei Kase's karate. Do you also incorporate your own ideas and developments in the karate you teach?

(VD) Yes, I do. You could not go to the Kase's course and expect to simply use the "copy-paste" way of learning. It just doesn't work that way. Only when you consciously try to process the information you've got through your own software (mind), and then further apply to your own hardware (body), it makes sense.

Kase sensei was a unique karate expert in the world of Martial Arts and his contribution in the area of the mind and body development based on the ancient Budo concept is a great heritage much ahead of his time.

For me Kase sensei is a great example of what a human can achieve when devotion and vision are stronger than time and people. Trying to imitate him is ridiculous. Following his principles is the right approach, but also following your own way. Though we had some common characteristics, I consider myself a different personality and I have my way of expressing the ideas and the vision of Kase Ha style based on my education, tradition, and my level in karatedo as well as my life experience.

In my opinion Karate-Do must have a more profound impact on the participant's lives. It must be presented and practiced like life philosophy and not just as a superficial sport mainly based on bare physical power.

I do follow traditional approach but I do not neglect biomechanical, medical and scientific knowledge. Science and medicine today can explain some of the mind and body phenomenon which, some decades ago were considered supernatural. It is possible today to give explanations why abdominal breathing is beneficial for the human body, as well as to prove that emitting Ki energy is one of the latent human potentials.

To reach approximately the level of 3rd dan, what is required is mostly of the technical and physical nature. Of course it is demanding but more or less almost anyone with strong determination can achieve it. Such karate practice, which is actually based on the examination curriculum, does not lead to Budo dimension!

In my teaching I'm trying to systematize the method which leads from the technical development to the sensitive area beyond. I find it far more important to lead the student to the point when his intuition and his very personal inventive vision will become his objectives in practice.

(SB) How important was/is etiquette in the dojo to Sensei and to you also?

(VD) He did not insist on the artificial etiquette. Many times he explained that real etiquette is in the heart of the karateka, which must behave in such manner everywhere, not only in dojo.

I absolutely agree.

A real person stands upon his word. I myself appreciate discipline much like the Japanese however discipline is not very much part of western culture. Without discipline it is very easy to lose the strings during the training session. Discipline is important, however not to scare people but to create the atmosphere which helps to concentrate on the mental movements. Though, it doesn't mean that we have to be gravely serious at all times.

If we truly believe in the Yin-Yang concept then we need the opposite from seriousness, and that is laughter. It is of the vital importance to laugh, which is a source of the positive energy we all need.

Great human ability is to distinguish when and how the mind should be directed. Humans are emotional and energetic beings. In order to be able fully and truly to enjoy the life they can and should try to find harmony between serious and happy moments.

(SB) How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

(VD) Someone who is a step ahead is also the meaning of the word Sensei. It is different from the usual meaning we have for a teacher. In Budo approach it is not enough just to explain theoretically what is the task or the purpose of the exercise.

The Sensei must demonstrate. Some aspects of the advanced practice, like breathing, centralization, Ki control most of the times could be completely understood only when seen in practice. One picture is like a thousand words, so you have to show what you mean by saying or explaining something.

I think I'm kind of strict and demanding in my teaching approach. Though I must say that instead of giving orders, like do this or do that, most of the times I prefer saying, **follow me**.

(SB) Can we please say thank you for all of your time and willingness to be interviewed for our magazine. I hope you have enjoyed being interviewed and may I wish you continued success in the future?

(VD) Allow me to express my gratitude for offering me this opportunity. The pleasure was all mine.

