

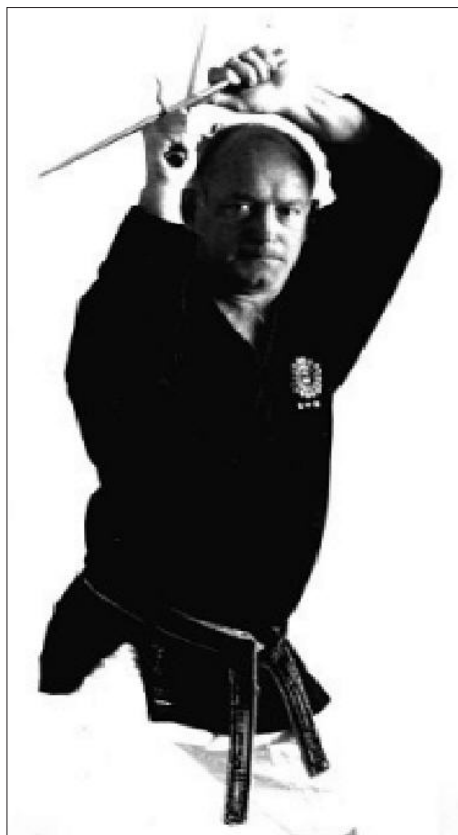
Interview with Fred Lohse

Fred Lohse is a practitioner of the Okinawan martial arts and chief instructor of the Kodokan dojo in Boston which is dedicated to training of Goju-ryu karate do and Matayoshi kobudo. A path in the martial arts that began with curiosity and evolved into discipline, overcoming obstacles and gaining insight. An introduction to a martial artist who embraces both armed and unarmed disciplines.

- By Lex Opdam -

Mr. Lohse, although we have met and trained with each other in the past in the USA and the Netherlands, would you be so kind as to introduce yourself to our readers?

Yes, I would be happy to. I was born in Massachusetts, and much to my surprise live there now. I have worked as a teacher and school administrator, and now work as a contractor in the Boston area. I started training Goju-ryu karate and Matayoshi kobudo in 1986, under Kimo Wall, while a student at the University of Massachusetts.



Kimo Wall.

Courtesy of Kimo Wall.

After college, I moved to Japan and took a job working for the Ministry of Education. I lived there for a little over two years, and practiced Higa lineage Goju-ryu and Matayoshi kobudo under Sakai

Ryugo (a student of sensei Higa and sensei Matayoshi in the 50s and early 60s), as well as made periodic visits to the Kodokan honbu dojo to train with

“life is for living, not just thinking about the possible future”

Matayoshi Shinpo. While living in Japan I also had the opportunity to practice Jigen Ryu Heiho in the dojo in Kagoshima, and Ufuchiku kobudo under Masada Kei'ichi. I then spent some time traveling, and returned to the states to do graduate work at Harvard University in Japanese Studies and International Education. Since then, I have been training with Kodokan Boston, and on occasion with Gakiya Yoshiaki. We run a small dojo here in Boston, practicing Goju-ryu and Matayoshi kobudo, and I consider myself lucky to have some great training partners and to have had such fantastic and generous teachers.

Sensei Kimo Wall formed his own organization in 1970 and called it Kodokan or ‘School of the Old Way’ to honor his teacher Matayoshi. In the years that followed, he founded several schools in and outside the United States and began teaching in 1981 for the Physical Education Department of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

You entered Sensei Kimo Wall’s Kodokan in 1986 while you were a student. Did you ever encounter the martial arts before this time and what was your attraction to the martial arts?

I had no martial arts training before that, except that in high school I used to “spar” with a friend who did Uechi-ryu. We played around, but there was no method to it. I knew nothing else about martial

arts except from movies and books. Probably due to popular images, I was interested in trying it out, but I’m not sure I would still be practicing if I did not happen onto a good teacher.

From the first day in the dojo I knew I was hooked. The practice was so different than the images in the movies, and so much more interesting.

I can imagine that your growing interest especially in this early stage of your real exposure towards martial arts when entering Sensei Kimo Wall’s dojo would change to a different kind of catalyst for further and deeper study and practice.

What did it mean to you when you started with the martial arts and what does it mean to you nowadays? Could you express in what way martial arts affected your life? When I started, it was just for curiosity, and to have a way to work out. It soon



Ryugo Sakai and partner, Toguchi dojo, late 1950s.

Courtesy of Anthony Mirkian.



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Fred Lohse, David Nauss, Kimo Wall, Liu Chang'i, Mike Piscitello, Watertown 1996.

became an important part of my schedule, but I doubt I could have said why, except that it was fun. Difficult, painful, and exhausting, but fun. Nowadays it is still hard to explain, and the main reason is that it is still fun. I enjoy going to the dojo, and enjoy the practice. It has taken a very large place in my life, and I feel like there is still so

“One didn't practice to “stay in shape,” but stayed in shape to practice.”

much in it for me to learn. When I started, I needed the discipline (though I doubt I would have said that then!) and the discipline still adds a great deal to my life, as does the desire to be continually learning and growing. The process of pushing myself to learn, of overcoming obstacles like injuries, time constraints, and so on has taught me a great deal about what one can do if the desire is there. The Japanese terms seishin tanren and keiko sort of sum this up. They are difficult to explain, but in general refer to the ideal that the sometimes difficult or painful daily push to engage is more important than reaching any far-off goal. This reminder that life is for living, not just thinking about the possible future, is a good one.

On a more straightforward level, I have also made many great friends and done some very interesting things because of the practice, and I feel in general that training has made me a more connected and aware person. Because I have focused so much time over the years on training, and researching what we do, it would be easy to say I was too focused on one thing, and I have certainly sacrificed other things to do it. Nevertheless, I have found that this

process has introduced me to people I would otherwise not have met, taken me places I would never have gone, and helped me learn things about myself, others, and our world that have helped me grow as a person. In general, it has made my life more interesting, and fulfilling place. Besides, it's fun.

Could you describe the way you were instructed by Sensei Kimo Wall in the first few years while being a student at the University of Massachusetts? Were there separate lessons in Goju-ryu and Mata-yoshi kobudo and what focus did the lessons have concerning kata and kumite?

The training I started with would be familiar to most Okinawan Goju-ryu students. We trained 5 days a week, and sometimes informally on weekends. Sensei Kimo ran every training session, assisted by a few seniors who had more experience than us college students. In the last year I was there, classes were run by his senior student, Sensei Giles Hopkins. We did warm-ups, calisthenics, lots of basics and paired basics, lots of basic kata, and a lot of work with paired sets Sensei Kimo designed for Geki sai and a couple of the



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Fred Lohse, kama, Kagoshima 1991.

kata Sensei Seikichi Toguchi created- Geki ha dai ni and Kaku ha dai ichi. From there it was work on the classical kata and some work with applications of them. It was a university dojo, and so most of the dojo members had 4 years or less of training. Therefore there was less emphasis on classical applications and more on basic kata and application, basic skills like punching, blocking and throwing, and so on. The connection between kata and application was made very clear, from the first day.



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Fred Lohse, tonfa, Amami Oshima, NHK television demo, 1990.

Also, like the Higa dojo on Okinawa, we did essentially no jiyu kumite, and we never did any sport application. In fact, my first exposure to sport karate was in Japan- I had never really seen it before, and was very disappointed.

The kobudo was less formal. Not everyone was interested, and training was either done during regular classes, after class, on weekends, or on our own. Again, the focus was on kata and paired sets, much like the karate.

You have lived in Japan for two years and trained in different dojo's while being there. Were there big differences in instruction on a social/cultural level when comparing the martial arts training you were exposed to in the USA and Japan?

This is a huge question. The short answer was that in the dojo, there were few differences. Sensei Kimo taught in a traditional manner, and his instruction was very similar to what I had in Japan. There were some differences, of course. Since I was training with adults in Japan (many with 20 or more years experience), not college students, and since Sensei Sakai did not use Sensei Toguchi's kata, we focused almost entirely on supplementary training, body conditioning, basics, sanchin, classical kata, and application of the classical kata. Like many dojo in Okinawa, there was



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Mr. Higo, unknown, Matayoshi Shinpo, Fred Lohse, Okinawa 1990.

also very little emphasis on calisthenics during class training- we were expected to keep fit and use supplementary equipment outside class time. One didn't practice to "stay in shape," but stayed in shape to practice.

Of course training was very challenging physically, but through karate technique, not simple exercises. The instruction was very detailed, and I also noticed that as my language skills improved, my ability to receive instruction did as well.

One thing I did notice is that, perhaps again because it was an adult dojo, there was little military-style discipline, like I have seen in many American dojo. We would each start when we got to the dojo, and there would only be a short group warm up when Sensei formally bowed in and started class. Then Sensei Sakai would have different people work on different things, instead of training us as one group. Sensei Matayoshi often taught the same way. You would spend a good deal of time working alone, with one partner, or just a couple of people. Instruction was very detailed, and very personal. There was also less attention to class time. Training started when the first student arrived, sometime between 6:30 and 7:30 PM, and finished with senior kata, application, or a lecture, sometimes as late as 11 PM. I feel that, in general, in Japan the discipline is expected to come from the students, so instead of pushing students who are going soft, the teacher will let them do as they will and focus on the students who are trying hard. Interestingly enough, you might say it is more individualistic.

There was also less questioning. In Japan the concept of respect is very clear. The students might ask questions if given the opportunity, but even when people are close

in rank, juniors don't usually question their seniors.

This is normal in many work and social environments, where the senpai-kohai concept is very clearly understood. This means that students will work on what they are taught instead of constantly looking to what is next.

It also means that one does not ask questions unless given the opportunity, though Sensei Sakai was somewhat unusual in that he would occasionally encourage questions, usually after a long training session.

While there are other differences, mostly due to differences in culture, the final thing that struck me was the reason most people had for training. While our training was very hard, sometimes painful, and focused on application, I never met anyone in Okinawa or Japan who said they had started training for self-defense purposes. The martial arts are one element of a larger set of social constructs in Japan. These "ways," like chado or shodo, are pursued for discipline, self-development, and connection to traditional values, as much or more than for their content. This attitude was central to practice, in that a certain significance was attached to ritual and form of practice. Personally, I believe that these forms often lead to better under-

standing of and ability with the content, though this methodology is more similar to an old-fashioned apprenticeship than most modern pedagogical theories.

'One didn't practice to "stay in shape," but stayed in shape to practice.' This concept is very unfamiliar in most Western martial arts dojo's. What is your own opinion on this matter and what expectations do you have when teaching martial arts to others in connection to this concept?

Yes, it is a different concept. The idea is that karate is martial arts, not a health club. The training is very physically demanding, but in practice one does pretty much only karate or kobudo. This can, at different times, be more or less aerobic, emphasize strength more or less, and so on. It certainly helps

"students will work on what they are taught instead of constantly looking to what is next."

keep one in shape, but three sessions a week is not enough to keep one in really good shape. A student is expected to maintain physical form. For strength training, aerobic training, flexibility training, and so on, the student is expected to see his or her weaknesses and improve on them in their own time. The dojo is there to practice the art, and the student has to be physically prepared for this. If they are not, they can participate, but they will be limited in how well they can learn, how they progress, and what they can do in



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Fred Lohse and Masada Keiichi, Kama Uchionbo kumi waza, Kagoshima 1992.

the dojo. This is pretty much how we train here. Training is demanding, and some activity outside the dojo is pretty much essential to improving, so that each training session does not just break you down. I try to keep in shape outside class, and in a good week will train or work out 2-3 times

and want to see other people enjoy what you do- you need to teach others to have people to train with, and to maintain your art. I wound up teaching classes on occasion in my dojo in Japan, when none of the senior teachers were present, and I have been asked to do an occasional se-

requires additional insurance and liability coverage, and we have decided not to pay for that, and not to assume those liabilities.

You mentioned the sempai-kohai relationship. What do you expect from the students in the Boston Kodokan dojo where you instruct and what kind of obligations in a spiritual sense do you have/feel towards your students and/or fellow martial artists as human beings and as part of society?

Well, another big question. As for what I expect of the students, that's simple. I expect them to respect and listen to their seniors and treat their juniors well. I also expect them to train hard, and take charge of their own progress. As for my obligations, that is more difficult to say. I feel I have a responsibility to understand what I am teaching as best I can before teaching it, to be honest with my students and training partners, and to push myself to keep improving. I also believe it is necessary to teach responsibly. This means not to do anything that will damage a student, to treat each student as a person not just a face in the dojo, and to have a plan for imparting what we do, not to be random with the students. We don't live in Japan, so some of the social structures around the sempai/kohai relationship would be dysfunctional here. However, one element in that ideal that does carry easily is that the teacher has much more responsibility than the student: the student just has to show up, do what he or she is told, and work on their own to try to understand it. The teacher has to keep improving him or her self, guide the student responsibly through the material,



Tsuken Akachu no eku di, Kagoshima 1991.

besides our classes. At other times, with various demands from work and family, I won't do anything outside of class, if I even make all our classes. I have the same expectations for myself that I have for the students, and feel a need (for many reasons) to try to keep my general physical level up. I certainly feel I need to be in better shape!

Could you tell us something about the small Kodokan dojo in Boston that you run together with some other students of Sensei Kimo Wall and tell us your motivation to start teaching martial arts?

The dojo was started by a few friends from college, who wanted a place to train. They started it while I was living in Japan, and I joined when I moved back to the area. I wound up doing some of the karate and most of the kobudo teaching over time.

"The idea is that karate is martial arts, not a health club."

There was no real motivation for this other than wanting to have a place to train, and to share. As my friends and I kept training, we wound up teaching new students. I think it just happens if you keep training

minar by people who are interested in what we do. Over time, I have found I enjoy the process of opening our art to someone who is interested, and motivated.

I'm not interested, however, in teaching professionally. I think it makes keeping an open mind about your training and keeping your focus on your training, not how to keep the bills paid, difficult. Besides, I don't really want my avocation to also be my vocation. Now, we run classes 3 times a week, for 2 hours, and the dojo is run as a non-profit: no one gets paid anything to teach (actually, the teachers pay dues as well) and is open to adults who are interested. We don't have children's classes.

Is there a reason for not having children's classes?

Yes, actually a couple. First, children's classes require a special skill set and require that somewhat different material be taught. The goals of the class are different. Since none of us have taught children, we don't really have the skills involved. At the same time, children's classes require time, and a great deal of effort. We all have full time jobs, and rent training space by the hour. Therefore, we prefer to train with adults, and be able to train and push ourselves physically. Finally, in the US teaching children



David Nauss, Rich Cassidy, Cambridge 2001.



Kimo Wall, Chuck Brotman, bo versus sai.

have a plan, and in general keep each student's best interests in mind.

On a different level, I don't think that the martial arts impart any special responsibilities outside the dojo except perhaps an extra need to control one's temper, and not to be violent. Well, perhaps also a responsibility to preserve and keep alive the arts we practice. But while it may not create a set of new obligations, martial arts training does not take away any of the obligations one has as a member of society. Being honest, honorable, and responsible for your actions, among other things, are part of what any human being should do, and any disciplined practice should reinforce those ideals, not pretend to put someone above them.

Sensei Kimo Wall (William James) started his Goju-ryu karate in 1949 in Hawaii when he was six years old and continued his study of Goju-ryu on Okinawa in 1962. Did he ever mention to you who his first Goju-ryu teacher was and in what way he was taught until he moved to Okinawa in the service of the Marine Corps?

He studied under Walter Higa and his son Sam Higa, who ran a store and the dojo in his town. On Oahu there was also Mitsugi Kobayashi. He said that the classes were identical to those in Okinawa- junbi and hojo undo, kihon, kata, and kumite. In the Higa lineage there is no jiyu kumite, and that was also the same. That dojo is no longer open, I believe.

As I recall Mitsugi Kobayashi trained under Yukiso Yamoto (a Judo and Aikido teacher) and while he was on Okinawa in the 1950's also studied Goju-ryu under Seiko Higa, one of the most senior students of Chojun Miyagi. What connection did both Walter Higa and his son Sam have? Were they connected to Seiko Higa?

Walter Higa (no relation to Higa Seiko- the name is common in Okinawa), the father, was a contemporary of Higa Seiko under Miyagi Sensei. He immigrated to Hawaii around 1930 with his family, as contract worker in the sugar cane and pineapple industry. Sam Higa learned from his father.

"The teacher has to keep improving him or her self, guide the student responsibly through the material, have a plan, and in general keep each student's best interests in mind."

On Okinawa Sensei Kimo Wall started studying under the well known masters Seiko Higa and Seiko Kina and later on after the death of Master Seiko Higa in 1966, he would receive instruction from Master Seiko Higa's son Seikichi. In the dojo of Master Seiko Higa not only Goju-ryu was taught, but also kobudo by the famous Master Matayoshi Shinpo. It was in this dojo that Sensei Kimo Wall received his main Goju-ryu and kobudo practice. Could you tell us something of the experiences and practices of Sensei Kimo Wall on Okinawa in the 60's?

I can relate some of what I know. Training under Sensei Higa was done much as it was years later. There were two classes- the regular class that ended at around 9 PM and a seniors class that started then. Kata, application, kihon, etc. were the bulk



David Nauss, Fred Lohse, Cambridge 2002.

of training, with more application and advanced concepts in the seniors class. Perhaps the biggest difference was that the dojo was open every day, and training ran from early evening till late in the night. Training under Sensei Matayoshi was different in those days. Sensei Matayoshi had recently returned to Okinawa, and was reconnecting with many former training partners and students of his father. Sensei Kimo used to drive him around the island (since he had a car) to meet people. He had not yet started his dojo, or finalized a formal syllabus. Training was sometimes in the dojo of Sensei Higa (though Taira Shinken also taught there) where Sensei Matayoshi was living, sometime outside



Fred Lohse, Cambridge 2002.

the dojo, and sometime outside in other places. Sensei Kimo would often train during the day, when he was not at work on base, and so often trained one on one. Sensei Matayoshi would at times focus on one weapon for a month or more at a time, training every day. I also know that in kumi-waza Sensei Matayoshi would cover many techniques that are not in the kata.

What do you exactly mean with techniques that are not in the kata?

I mean that there are many techniques with each weapon that are not in the kata-counters, throws, etc.. Particularly for the less common weapons like the tinbe or sansetsukon, the kata form a base, but would have to be much, much longer to

“one thing I think is often difficult for Japanese or Okinawan instructors is that it is sometimes very hard to communicate with their Western students.”

contain all the information. Also, some weapons like the kyushaku bo or tekko did not have kata.

You mentioned that kobudo master Taira Shinken also taught in the dojo of master Higa. Did he teach especially to the karate students of master Higa and in what way did he interact with master Matayoshi's kobudo instruction and visa versa since both were teaching at the same dojo but also both taught differently?



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Fred Lohse, David Nauss, bo versus sai, Cambridge 2003.

He did teach Sensei Higa's students, but I don't know for how long, or exactly how. I don't really know how the two teachers interacted, except that Sensei Matayoshi was living in the dojo when he came back from Japan, and Sensei Taira had been teaching there before that. They were both friends of Sensei Higa. I believe that in those days there was much more sharing between different teachers than now, but I was not there and so cannot really say.

What kind of relationship did Sensei Kimo have with masters Matayoshi and Higa? Although he was a foreigner, he seemed

to already have access to the inner circles of Okinawan karate society in the 1960's. I can relate some of what Sensei Kimo has shared with me. He came to Okinawa with a number of years of Goju-ryu training and a written recommendation to Sensei Higa, as well as experience in the Okinawan culture from his home dojo and the town in which he lived in Hawaii. This gave him a number of advantages that not every serviceman training in Okinawa in those days had. He was very active in the dojo, helped with things like rebuilding it after a typhoon and such, and with his work schedule was able to spend a lot of time in the dojo and with Sensei Matayoshi. He became close to both the Higa and Matayoshi families, and I know these personal relationships were, and are, very important to him. Other than that, I can't really say much about his personal relationships.

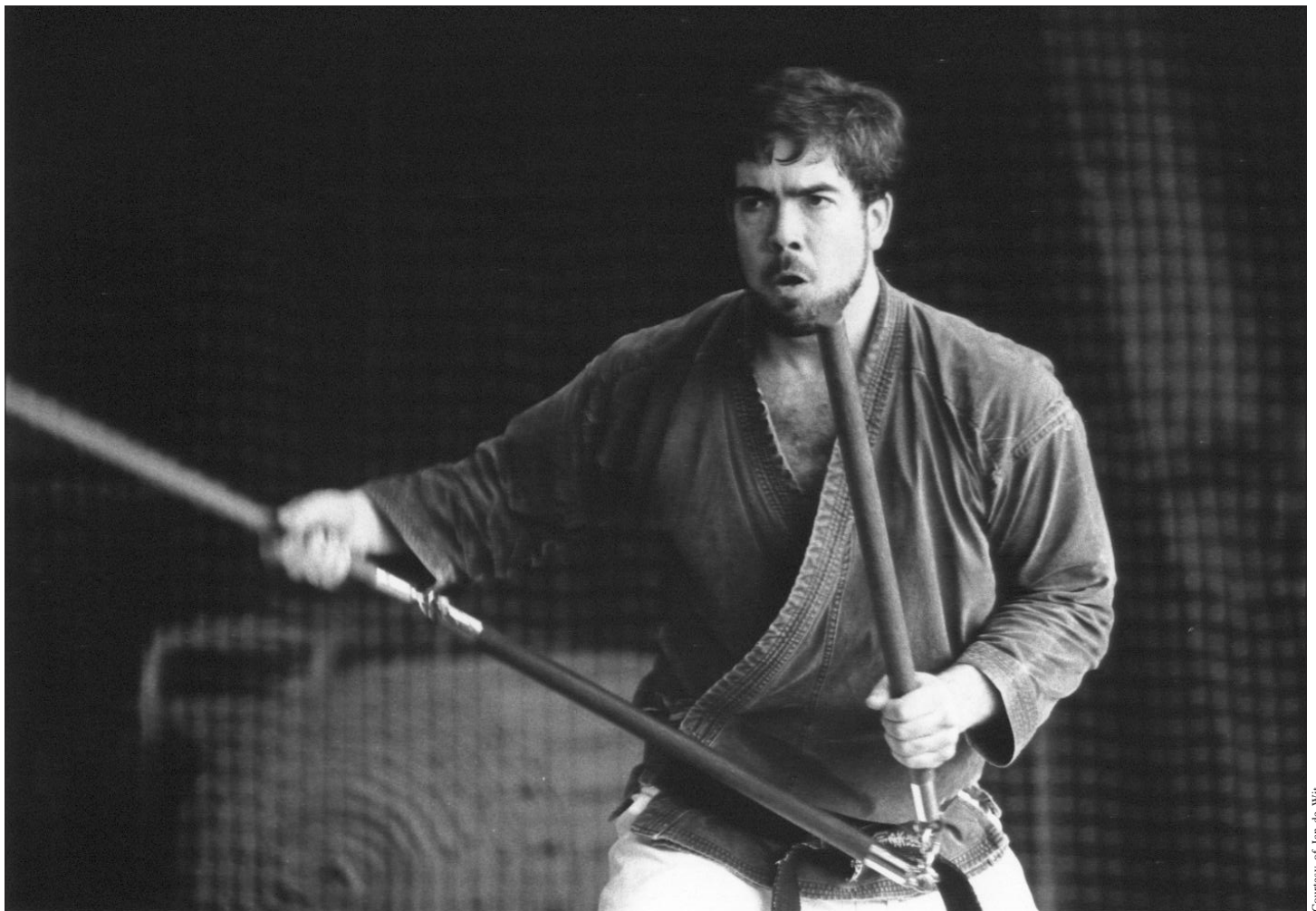
I can imagine, since you are a practicing Matayoshi kobudo artist, that it was an honor and pleasure to train under Grandmaster Matayoshi himself?

It certainly was. Sensei Matayoshi and his students were very generous to me, and the dojo in those days, with so many seniors concentrated in one place, was an amazing place to visit as a student. I consider myself lucky to have been able to train under Sensei Matayoshi, and the senior members of the dojo when I visited there. Lest I be mis-interpreted, I have



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Kenichi Yamashiro, Shinpo Matayoshi, Fred Lohse, Kodokan dojo, Okinawa 1995.



Courtesy of Jan de Wit.

Sansetsukon kata, The Netherlands 1997.

never been a “top student” of his- most of my training has been under Sensei Kimo, Sensei Sakai, and Sensei Gakiya - but due to my introductions, instruction, and experience in the system, I was able to train in the Kodokan when I visited Okinawa, and receive more than just basic instruction in the system from Sensei Matayoshi. Of course, language ability helped here as well- one thing I think is often difficult for Japanese or Okinawan instructors is that it is sometimes very hard to communicate with their Western students. While the base of training is pretty physical, there is a great deal of instruction that is verbal- imagine trying to learn soccer or how to swim from a coach you could not understand, for

instance.

In any case, Sensei Matayoshi was a fantastic teacher, with an amazing depth and breadth of knowledge about the Okinawan martial arts. He was very generous with what he taught, and was always willing to take time to explain something, and to take questions from a sometimes impertinent gaijin. He seemed to encourage similar behavior in his seniors, and I was treated very well in those days by Sensei Gakiya, Sensei Yamashiro, Sensei Itokazu, Sensei Komura, and Sensei Nagai in particular. He was also a very nice guy. Very funny, very quick, and a gentleman. Again, I didn’t know him that well, but well enough to wish I had had more time to spend in Okinawa in those days.

There are a number of things that would be important, at least to me. The most important thing in any dojo is the atmosphere. A dojo must be welcoming, the people kind, and the expectations of the students

“A dojo must be welcoming, the people kind, and the expectations of the students high.”

high. People should enjoy being there. Of course the training must be hard, but if the teacher or seniors are domineering, mean or surly, or the “feeling” of the dojo seems bad, then it does not matter how good they are- it is not a good place to train. Karate and kobudo are about life long practice, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to dedicate yourself to an unhealthy environment.

After that, as far as training goes, there are a number of things I would suggest one look for. Credentials are a mixed bag. Some very skilled practitioners in the West no longer have a direct connection to a specific dojo in Okinawa, while some highly ranked and well connected people have



Courtesy of Jim Baab.

Sansetsukon bo kumi waza, Green StreetStudios 2003.

In the article ‘Karate and Kobudo’ you have written for this edition of the Meibukan Magazine, you clearly show the connection between karate and kobudo. What would you personally advise people in our Western society who are looking for an Okinawan martial arts school in which to practice and study?



Courtesy of Fred Lohse.

Ryuichiro Sakai, Fred Lohse, Ryugo Sakai, Ryudo Nagata, Kagoshima 1992.

very poor skills. Therefore, I would look for a connection to Okinawa on the part of the dojo, one with many years of history, not just a couple of years as part of a large

“Some very skilled practitioners in the West no longer have a direct connection to a specific dojo in Okinawa, while some highly ranked and well connected people have very poor skills.”

organization. However, I would also make sure both the teacher and the senior students demonstrate good skills, and attitude. The seniors in some ways are more important, because if the teacher is good but cannot teach, there is limited opportunity in the dojo for a student. I would also look for a well-rounded dojo. Not



Courtesy of Jim Baab.

Fred Lohse, David Nauss, bo vs sai, Cambridge 2003.

surprisingly for me that means both armed and unarmed techniques are taught, both include a full range of kihon, kata, and paired work, and the seniors are skilled in both.

One of the difficult things in the West is that there is something of a lack of good kobudo instruction. However, there are some teachers who learned in the 60s and 70s still teaching, and a number of younger teachers studying with good kobudo instructors now who are passing on the art. Particularly with the kobudo instruction, I would be sure to check on the teacher's connection to his martial lineage, and length of study. Finally, I would look at how the dojo is run. If it is an Okinawan art, the customs and language should be part of training. The classes should be organized but not overly rigid, the students should know how the dojo works, they should demonstrate proper reigi, or etiquette, and the dojo should be proud of its connection to their teachers, and to Okinawa and its martial heritage.

Lex Opdam, Editor-in-chief of Meibukan Magazine interviewed Fred Lohse in September 2006.

For more information on the Kodokan dojo please visit:
www.kodokanboston.org/index.html



Meibukan Magazine

is searching for serious and reliable submissions for their **SPECIAL EDITIONS**

Please do not send full articles with the first contact. Send an email with a synopsis of what you are proposing! If it is of interest, we will contact you to send the actual material. Include in your email a short summary of your background and credentials.



MEIBUKANMAGAZINE

P.O. Box 8, 6663 ZG, Lent, Netherlands

Email:

submissions2007@meibukanmagazine.org

Meibukan Magazine wants to present articles related to a main subject in every Special Edition. We are looking out for submissions which have a diversity in articles that vary from history, leading people, masters, philosophy, science, interviews etc. which should give the reader insight and information on the main subject and are applicable to our mission statement.

The author(s)/organisation(s) who provide the submission for a special subject are also welcome to promote their organisation/school and are welcome to submit an article about their organisation. Such an article must be strongly related to the main subject. After submitting the articles as described above, and after an agreement with Meibukan Magazine for possible publication in a Special Edition, the author(s)/organisation(s) are welcome to submit promotional material like book/DVD reviews (from the publisher or an independent known writer). In principle there is no limit towards the number of book/DVD reviews, but depending on the amount of articles and author(s)/organisation(s), Meibukan Magazine will decide the exact amount of promotional material that will be placed.

For more details go to
www.meibukanmagazine.org

At the moment we are looking for in-depth articles about Uechi-ryu, Shorin-ryu, Goju-ryu and others.

