# Karate by the book

## Revealing the long-lost secrets of karate

**America's Bruce Clayton Sensei, 6th Dan, is the author of *Shotokan's Secret*, a book exploring the art's Okinawan origins and the meaning of its kata. Perth, WA based Kyoshi Gary Simpson interviewed Clayton about his discoveries at his dojo in Mariposa, California.**

INTERVIEW BY GARY SIMPSON

**Firstly, can you tell us a bit about your organisation?**

Our organisation is called San Ten Karate, founded by Hanshi Vincent Cruz around 1978. Hanshi Cruz is a 9th Dan in San Ten, now in his 51st year of karate training. He was a combative measures instructor in the Strategic Air Command of the US Air Force. In that role he returned to Japan many times for training in multiple martial arts. He was instructed in a comprehensive program by Masters Kyuzo Mifune and H Kotani in judo; Masters Isao Obata and Hidetaka Nishiyama in karate-do; Master T Tomiki in Aikido; and Master M Hosakawa in Taijo-jutsu.

*San Ten* means 'Three Heavens'. It refers to Cruz's philosophy combining mind, body and spirit.

**What is your role in the San Ten organisation?**

My role in the organisation is that of consigliere. I act on behalf of the master to conduct his day-to-day business so he can concentrate on curriculum and ranking issues. The consigliere is the assistant who has 'the right to be wrong'. Without that right, a karate master simply can't have an assistant.

**I note on your website that the San Ten Organisation welcomes instructors from all over the world to join...**

Indeed it does. San Ten welcomes the *ronin* of karate: people who have lost their affiliation with their original teachers and don't know where to turn for affiliation and quality instruction.

**What got you interested in karate and who was your first instructor?**

It all began in New York in 1962. I was horrified by the story of Kitty Genovese, a young girl, who was brutally murdered when I was 12 years old. Kitty was stabbed repeatedly in full view of dozens of people, but no one tried to help her. She lay on

# HEIAN GODAN – BAYONET DISARM


**Heian Godan kata, step 16: the elbow strike applies an arm bar to the enemy's left elbow, effectively taking away his control over the weapon.**


**Heian Godan, step 17–18: Step in against the enemy and drive the butt of the rifle upward. He'll be desperate to retain his right-hand grip (if he doesn't, he's dead).**


**Heian Gondan, completing step 18: The bayonet disarming move ends with a hip-throw.**

**Note: the initial crescent kick to the enemy's leading elbow, which weakens his left arm and makes the technique easier, is not shown. Also not shown is the following technique (step 19–20) where you step over his body and drop down, pinning him to the ground with the bayonet. In Shotokan, this is a jump; other Shuri-based styles simply squat without jumping.**

the sidewalk for an hour before anyone even called the police. Nobody wanted to become involved. Thirty-four witnesses watched her bleed to death.

**I decided at that point in my life that I could not be that kind of person. I realised that I'd better learn how to fight.**

While I was an undergraduate at UCLA, I spent two years apprenticed to Briggs Hunt, the famous Olympic wrestling coach. Hunt taught a down-and-dirty self-defence class. I repeated that class six times. Even better, I received personal instruction from Hunt while ghostwriting a self-defence textbook for the course.

There was a Kodokan judo class next door, so I spent a lot of time in there, too. I broke my nose and my arm but it was worth it.

After college, I enrolled in a traditional Shotokan Karate school in Los Angeles, led by Ken Osborne, who was a student of Master Ohshima. These studies were interrupted by graduate school in Missoula, Montana, where I spent three years with the Big Sky Tae Kwan Do organisation.

During this period, I won first place trophies in both kata and kumite in the 7th Annual Big Sky Championships. That was another turning point in my life. I won by being more clever than my opponents, not by having greater skill. I made fools of them. I dealt out humiliation and some injuries. In return I received meaningless plastic trophies.

**Do I detect a little irony in your voice here?**

Yes, you do. You see, winning that tournament offended my conscience. I took up the martial arts because I hated violence, but tournament karate glorified violence. I thought that over and decided not to do any more tournament competition.

Over the years, I eventually realised how much I agree with Master Funakoshi's belief that a true master doesn't have to fight. His self-confidence disarms his opponents. That's the kind of master I want to be.

**As a very senior karateka now, who would you say has been the greatest influence in your development?**

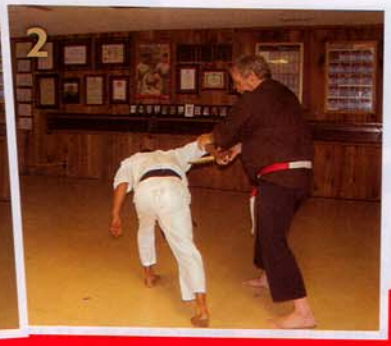
The fact that I studied self-defence and judo before coming to karate has had an enormous impact on my development. I could see vicious self-defense and grappling techniques in the Shotokan katas. However, it was apparent from the first day that my hard-style teachers were not prepared to explore this side of their art. All they understood was punching, kicking and blocking. As my experience grew, I realised that their grasp of punching, kicking and blocking wasn't that good, either. They had a powerful weapon in their hands, and didn't know how to use it. I felt that part of the answer fell into place when I encountered Hanshi Cruz and the San Ten Shihans.

**How so?**

Well, compared to other organisations, this group emphasises powerful basics through detailed study of the basic principles of technique, mainly as presented by Cruz's teacher, Master Hidetaka Nishiyama. To summarise, impact is the sum of body momentum plus delivery: stepping, shifting, raising, lowering, expanding, contracting, whipping action, pressure reaction, hip vibration and multiple types of rotation to generate momentum; then posture, internal and external focus, timing, pendulum action, and spirit to direct and transmit it. Even a petite beginner can hit hard enough to jack-knife a grown man and send him flying by using these skills properly. In my experience, most senseis don't understand this and don't teach it. The power of my personal karate has grown tremendously under Cruz's direction.

# HEIAN GODAN – KNIFE DISARM


**Heian Godan kata, step 10: Following the wrist-lock disarming techniques in steps 4–9 of Heian Godan, the enemy switches the knife from his left hand to his right and attacks with an overhand stab.**




**Heian Godan, step 12: Steps 11 and of the kata 12 twist the enemy around to make him stab himself in the kidney. (Note: This is an application originally suggested by UK instructor Steve Chriscole)**

In my opinion, most sensei are just forging the weapon, rather than swinging it. Sword-makers are not sword-fighters. Practically nothing in the Shotokan arsenal applies in a real fight.

**That's an interesting comment. I'm sure that many instructors of Shotokan who read this will be provoked by what you just said. Do you want to explain it?**

Well, let's put it this way. I have a friend who is a judoka. Someone once asked us who would win if we had a fight – karate against judo. My friend's answer was perfect. "Bruce gets one free hit as I move in," my friend said. "He'd better make it count, because I'm going to choke him to death one second later."

Real fights quickly move into hug-and-grunt range where you have your teeth sunk into the opponent's ear. You can't see his face, hands or feet, and the range is so intimate that even elbows and knees are hard to use effectively. You are too close for a reverse-punch, you can't block at all, and kicks are out of the question. How do you fight in that situation?

Fortunately, the answers lie in the katas. The problem is that hard-style sensei cannot interpret the katas. The block/punch/kick applications they see there are stunningly inappropriate, both to the katas and to real life. The challenge ahead of us is to reopen the katas and put the knowledge back into them.

**"Hard-style sensei cannot interpret the katas. The block/punch/kick applications they see there are stunningly inappropriate to real life."**

**And I understand that in your forthcoming seminar, you will reveal this?**

We all have to learn how to do it. The seminar will show how it is done.

**To preface my next question, you are a Ph.D. with a degree in zoology and botany. You are also the author of many technical books including *Life After Terrorism – What You Need to Know to Survive in Today's World* and *Shotokan's Secret – the Hidden Truth Behind Karate's Fighting Origins*. What prompted you to write *Shotokan's Secret*?**

I wanted to know more about the men who trained Funakoshi, thinking that this might shed some light on the applications of the katas. I found photos or sketches of all of the mentors except for Azato, who was not only Funakoshi's first instructor but the greatest martial artist Funakoshi ever met (to quote from Funakoshi's writings). I made a two-year hobby of searching for a picture of Azato, during which I dug into the history of Okinawa as only a trained researcher can do. In doing this, I discovered a whole new perspective on Shotokan.

**In what way?**

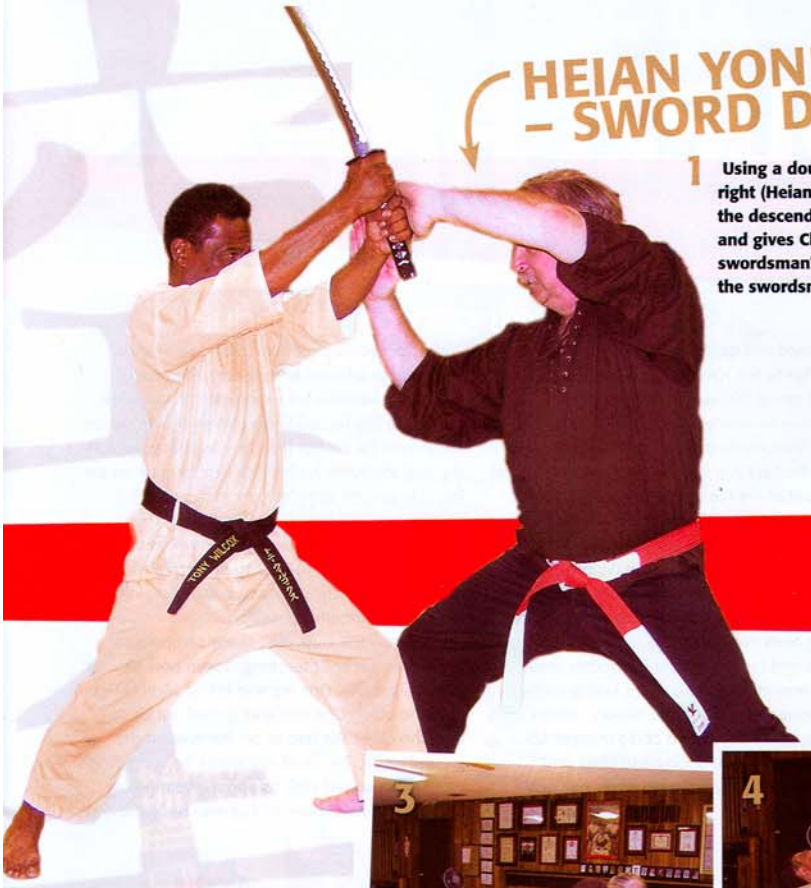
For me, the research brought Funakoshi's teachers dramatically to life. It cast a bright new light on both the past and future of karate. The information was so compelling that I just had to share it with others who were interested. If anybody wants to know more then it's all in the foreword of the book, so I won't bother to repeat it here.

**You have also written a four volume best-selling series under a pseudonym. Since that was way back in 1979 and it has been such a well-kept secret now for almost 30 years, would you like to reveal that secret here?**

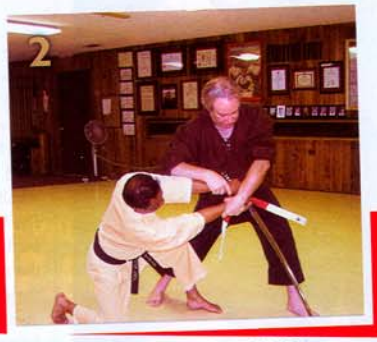
Okay. It seems appropriate now. In 1978 I submitted a manuscript on *jintai kyusho* (vital points) to Paladin Press. They said they would publish it, but they felt my style suffered from "an over exposure to textbooks." They wanted me to liven it up for their readers.

That's where the *Black Medicine* series came from. I rewrote the manuscript using a macabre sense

# HEIAN YONDAN – SWORD DISARM



1 **Using a double-block to the upper right (Heian Yondan, step two) swats the descending sword off target and gives Clayton control of the swordsman's hands. Clayton secures the swordsman's wrists...**



**...and leans into an arm bar. This forces the blade to rotate down and the pommel up. His right hand is about to grasp the pommel for the next step.**

**Clayton uses the downward power of the X-block to rotate the katana up between the swordsman's legs. The swordsman's instinctive attempt to avoid the blade sets him up for the finish.**

**The reinforced block: Clayton turns to the right, toward the swordsman, taking complete control of the weapon. In the first half of the rotation, Clayton's hands drive the pommel of the sword toward the opponent's face. This photo shows the follow-through when the katana blade whips around and across the swordsman's throat. (Note: This is an application originally suggested by UK instructor Steve Chriscole)**

of humour that was a bit over the top. This made a great book, but the author came across as a crazed vigilante. I decided to use a pseudonym for those books, and asked a Japanese friend to recommend an oriental-sounding name. He suggested 'Mashiro', and I used it. The infamous Dr Mashiro went on to publish a total of four volumes with the trademark *Black Medicine* skull on the front covers.

**So, finally, after 30 years we now know that N Mashiro PhD is in fact Professor Bruce D Clayton!**

Yes, I am Mashiro. Or, more correctly, I am the person who created Mashiro. Twenty-five years later, after I had learned a lot more Japanese, I suddenly realised that my friend had played a subtle joke on me. He had actually said *ashiro*, meaning white. The *Black Medicine* books were written by "A White Guy." I was stunned to realise how subtle he had been. (The Black Medicine web site is *http://mariposa.yosemite.net/mashiro/*.)

**What is your favourite kata, and can you share a couple of your favourite applications from that kata?**

I've always been frustrated by how little we know about the hard-style katas. Soft stylists seem to understand their forms pretty well, but hard stylists typically can't explain their katas beyond saying "this is a block" and "this is a punch." About the time I was a sandan I rebelled against this. For example, I thought it was insane for a person to study Nijushiho [kata] when he couldn't explain Heian Nidan. At that point I abandoned all the 'advanced' katas and returned to the Heians. I decided to start over from the first move.

In my opinion, the Heians are the richest katas in karate. They are not ancient. As of today, they are only 102 years old. We know their author, Funakoshi's second teacher, Master Itosu. We know the life Itosu led as an unarmed bodyguard to the unarmed kings of Okinawa. We know the enemies he faced and how they

were armed and deployed. When you apply that knowledge to the Heians, significant insights begin to reveal themselves.

**So, your favourite kata is...?**

My favourite kata is Heian Godan. The first third of the kata is a step-by-step lesson in taking a knife out of the hand of a struggling attacker. The first kiai is the point where you twist his arm behind him and run the knife into his kidney. In the next move you drop him on his back – on the hilt of the knife. The knife twists violently inside the body – which is the most brutal finishing blow I've ever seen.

The middle of the kata is another step-by-step lesson. This time we're taking a rifle and bayonet from a soldier. History reveals that Itosu once faced two companies of US Marines armed with Springfield rifles and fixed bayonets. Heian Godan plays out just like a lesson in the current US Marine Corps bayonet combatives manual. The lesson ends with putting your foot on the man's chest and using both hands to pull the bayonet free from his ribs. That's an essential point in bayonet combat because the blade gets stuck in the enemy's body.

The final cluster can be interpreted as a very elegant katana-stealing technique. Itosu shows us how to mug a samurai to steal his weapons. This was a critical technique for the Shuri bodyguards, who often faced sword-carrying Samurai barehanded.

That in itself brings up an interesting point. Many karateka admire the Samurai and try to follow budo, the way of the warrior. In Okinawa where hard-style karate was invented – the Samurai were the bad guys. Karate was the art used by the enslaved Okinawans to fight back against Samurai atrocities. As karateka, we should not admire the Samurai. The Samurai were, in fact, the enemy.

**That certainly was another interesting revelation. Who are some of the more interesting karateka that you have met and what has attracted you to these identities?**

I've met some great masters and some great teachers. I've admired some great performers. Overall, the karateka who impressed me the most was a little boy named Shawn. When Shawn put on his uniform for the first time he was skinny, painfully shy, and absolutely terrified. He kept his gaze on the floor. He couldn't even look me in the eye.

When we did basics, I was amazed to find that Shawn did not know how to walk in a straight line. Every time we started across the room doing punches, Shawn would curve off to the left and run into the wall.

I turned the class over to my sempai and spent the next hour teaching Shawn how to walk in a straight line. One leg was taking bigger steps than the other. One foot was turned out more than the other. We had to pry his eyes off the ground just so he could see where he was going.

Shawn stayed with us about a year before his family moved away. In that year he learned to stand up straight, to look you in the eye, to shake hands firmly and to stride confidently across the room. Shawn traveled farther in a few months than most of us go in a lifetime.

**"In the next move you drop him on his back – on the hilt of the knife... which is the most brutal finishing blow I've ever seen."**

One of the great truths of karate is that every single student can teach you something if you just let them.

**Every karateka has a favourite technique – one that they would use instinctively if backed into a corner. What would yours be?**

In America we have a saying: "A Smith-and-Wesson beats four aces." With that in mind, and in a life or death ordeal, I will not resort to using my karate until I've run out of bullets. On the other hand, a shuto makes you just as dead for just as long.

I must ruefully admit that I have accidentally injured practise partners with my *teisho* to the chin. When we close to elbow range, that palm-heel strike just comes out of nowhere. Lightning doesn't ask my permission to strike and neither does that teisho. I wish I had it under better control, actually. I don't like to hurt people.

Three times in my life I've been in dangerous situations that were about to erupt into


Interviewer Gary Simpson with Clayton in his dojo

violence. Each time I made a plan and set a mental trigger. I didn't do anything or say anything, but somehow the aggressors knew. They lost their nerve and backed away. I don't know what you call that technique, but it has to be my favourite.

**Bruce, knowing your love for karate history who, in your opinion, was the most influential karate pioneer and why?**

Sokon Matsumura seems to be the Okinawan pioneer who first realised that strong legs can beat strong arms. I believe, from my research, that he pioneered the style departure from traditional soft-style karate. Up to that time, novice pugilists spent three years doing Sanchin kata while carrying heavy weights. These isometric exercises built up huge arm, chest and shoulder muscles. Matsumura abandoned Sanchin completely, substituting katas with deep stances to build up leg power.

Funakoshi, for instance, spent his first three years squatting in Tekki Shodan's insanely low horse-stance. From those hard and muscular legs, a hard stylist can leap forward and strike like a battering ram. That was the technical revolution that led to Shotokan and the other hard styles.

That said, we would not know about Matsumura's revolution except for his remarkable student, Yasutsune Itosu. Itosu was very interested in taking Matsumura's lessons and making them available to a wider audience. Itosu created (or extensively modified) half the katas in Shotokan and led the first public karate classes in 1901. He unveiled the Heian katas in public classes in 1905. Without him, Matsumura's revolution might still be a secret on Okinawa.

These two masters paved the way for all of the hard styles. If you are on the hard path, you owe them your allegiance.

**What is your prediction is for the future of karate, both in the States and worldwide?**

Okinawan karate flowed and moved like a stream. The Japanese took this flowing stream and tried to lock it in a box. They embalmed a living art and almost succeeded in killing it, but there is new hope.

Today some people are still trying to preserve 'traditional' karate within the locked box of Japanese teaching. The problem is that your box can never be as large as your teacher's. Your students live within smaller boxes still. After a few generations the boxes are too small to hold anything of value. This is why Japanese karate styles have withered.

In the last few years, the hard karate styles have undergone a cultural revolution – bursting out of the locked box – all over the world. The original Japanese sensei are passing out of the picture, and control has shifted to thousands of Western senseis who have built up half a century of experience in the meantime. That's more experience than Funakoshi had when he founded the Shotokan style! Most karate organisations are now run by Western teachers who play by western rules. Karate is coming to life again.

Suddenly we are free, like the old Okinawans, to study multiple arts with multiple masters. We can ask questions without being punished merely for being inquisitive. We can experiment, research, and share our findings. Karate's hundred-year sleep is ending. I think this is a very exciting time for all of us. Nowhere is this more exciting than in kata interpretation, where a former vacuum is suddenly erupting with new knowledge.

**Finally, is there anything that you would like to add for our readers, any comments or advice for those embarking on a karate future?**

I have a parting thought, not for the beginners but for experienced karateka. It consists of a question and an answer. The question is: Why are Japanese karate words so hard to pronounce?

Think about that for a moment. The example is *shuto-uke*, the knife-hand block. It isn't pronounced 'shooto-ookie' (American) or 'shoo-tookey' (British). This term is pronounced 'stokay'. People around the world mispronounce their karate words every day. Why is that?

The answer: Japanese words are difficult to pronounce because they are spelled wrong.

Japan's Ministry of Education dictates how Japanese words will be spelled using the Roman alphabet. They don't understand Western phonics, so the official spellings are phonic gibberish. When we stumble over these miswritten words, are we just being stupid *gaijin*? It's our alphabet, not theirs. How can they expect us to read the words correctly when they write them down so badly?

This is an example of something the Japanese do very badly, and then insist that the problem is ours.

Be very careful with that thought. If it gets loose in your mind, it may rearrange your most cherished beliefs. It could unlock your box.

*About the interviewer: Kyoshi Gary Simpson, 7th Dan, is a master of Zanshin Kai Karate Do. He is a member of the Australian Martial Arts Association Inc (SA) and the International San Ten Karate Association. He is also a member of the International Society of Okinawan-Japanese Karate Do. He lives in Perth, Western Australia. His website is www.selfprotection101.com.*

BLITZ