

## An Interview with Hirokazu Kanazawa 2012

### *Hirokazu Kanazawa 10th Dan*



*In the world of Shotokan Karate, even the entirety of the Japanese Martial Arts, there are only a few with paralleled fame and attached respect as Hirokazu Kanazawa. He is, perhaps, the most famous Japanese Shotokan Instructor in the world.*

*Since launching the website in 2006, we have already included a two part interview conducted by Graham Noble, and an interview we conducted with him in 2008. He has been the cover of martial art magazines throughout the world for the most part of his training career, been featured in the texts of H. Nishiyama and M. Nakayama, and released countless books and DVDs himself, yet there remains something enigmatic and fascinating about him.*

*He needs no introduction, he is the one of Shotokan's most treasured leaders. Here within this article, I pose questions regarding the apparent differences in SKIF kata, and the 'JKA Standard'. He also spends time speaking about the breathing in the martial arts, his research, and the importance of what he calls 'the energy centre' – **Shaun Banfield 2012***

**Questions by S. Banfield, THE SHOTOKAN WAY**

**Interview conducted by Satoru Iwai**

**Interpreted by Richard Berger**

**(Shaun Banfield)** Sensei Kanazawa, thank you so much for giving us your time to conduct this interview. This is the second interview we have conducted with you in recent years. Last time we spoke extensively about your history. Today, I would like to focus on the technical aspects. Is that ok with you?

*(Hirokazu Kanazawa)* Yes, please go ahead.

**(SB)** Last year you decided to slow down your heavy travelling schedule throughout the world, what prompted this decision after such a long time living this way?

*(HK)* Although I had decided to cut back on my travelling schedule, in practice, things have not worked out that way. But the reason I had decided to cut back (on international teaching commitments) was due to the injuries I suffered while skiing, especially to my hips\*. Also, considering my age, I think it might be better to assign my responsibilities to the next generation.

\* **Editor's Note** – In early 2009, Sensei Kanazawa was involved in a serious skiing accident where he fell badly, and was subsequently buried under a mound of snow. Consequentially, Sensei Kanazawa incurred serious injuries that have troubled him ever since.

**(SB)** So you are still travelling a lot, and regularly teaching at the SKIF Hombu Dojo?

*(HK)* I'm not travelling overseas quite as much as I used to, but in Japan, I still teach as usual.

**(SB)** Observing your Kata textbooks, it is evident that SKIF kata differ to the 'Standard' JKA kata in small, minor ways. What were your reasons for making this modifications ?

*(HK)* I'm afraid that's not correct. The kata I teach are the same as those I learnt during my time at the JKA. As for the differences that you point out with regard to the JKA standard, it is possible that the current JKA standard has changed somewhat from the time I was there.

*The kata that I practice and teach are the same kata that I learnt from Nakayama-sensei.*

*Of course it is possible and, I suppose, natural that, over time, some minor portions of the kata may have changed slightly.*

*The original kata should never undergo change by an individual. They should be the expression of history, tradition and spirit; they should remain the same, like a 'stamp'.*

**(SB)** And what kata do you think is the most important in the SKIF syllabus?

*(HK)* It is difficult to pick just one, but the Tekki and Kanku kata were favourites of Funakoshi-sensei. Kata should be the expression of offensive and defensive techniques, whilst also conveying athletic ability, training, beauty, artistic expression, spirit, philosophy and harmony.

**(SB)** With that in mind, what mental position should we be in when doing kata do you believe?

*(HK)* When performing kata, it is important to bear in mind such factors as the pace, or speed (fast vs. slow), of techniques; the application of power (strong vs. relaxed); the expansion and contraction of the body; kiai (spirit); the balance of the principles of Yin and Yang; harmony between the left and right sides, and between the upper body and lower body; the timing of breathing and movements; and the timing of power and techniques.

**(SB)** And for kumite? Is MU a favourable mindset?

*(HK)* For kumite, it is also harmony that is important. With harmony and respect for your opponent, you will not fear your opponent and you will be able to perform smooth techniques.

**(SB)** The hips are of huge focus in karate, what do you believe are the most important things to develop in order to have strong, powerful hip actions? Do you have any suggested activities readers could do make improvements?

*(HK)* In karate, there are more than 30, 40 ... 80, more than 100 unique techniques. All of these movements are performed from basic stances.

*Provided you are able to perform correct and stable stances and your upper body is perpendicular [to the floor], you should be able to fully rotate your hips. This principle applies to the more than 100 techniques I just referred to.*

**(SB)** Hip rotation and power come from the floor upward, am I right? Where should we push, or exert force in order to help better drive the hips?

*(HK)* According to the principles of body operation, power comes from the hara, or tanden (lower abdomen), while techniques come from the hips. The tanden is recognized as the centre, or core, of the body. This is in accordance with the laws of the universe and of physics. All movements originate in the hips; power originates in the tanden.



**(SB)** *Modern science has shed a lot of light on ways to protect the joints from damage, some advice contradicts many things karate tends to emphasise, and example being the inside squeeze in Hangetsu-dachi, which can damage the knees if the knees do not have a direct line above the feet. How important is it to protect the body from 'self-damage'?*

*(HK)* I'm not familiar with those findings, but each kata has its own specific meaning. Also, each stance has its own specific balance of gravity. For example, the weight distribution in stances like Shizentai, Kiba-dachi and Shiko-dachi are 50:50, Zenkutsu-dachi is 60:40, Fudo-dachi and Hangetsu-dachi are 55:45, Kokutsu-dachi is 30:70, Kyo-dachi is 20:80, and Nekoashi-dachi is 10:90. As long as these proper balances are maintained, there should be no knee problems. In my case, it wasn't practicing karate stances that caused damage to my knees, it was skiing.

**(SB)** *You have always promoted the study of weapon training. What are the physical, philosophical or mental benefits of weaponry training?*

*(HK)* Originally, in Okinawa, weapons were an integral part of te (hand). Farmers used their tools, and fishermen used their tools, and at home they used their household tools. When it was introduced to the Japanese mainland, however, only 'empty' hands and feet were approved and recognized as karate. Weapons are recognized in the field of kobudo.

**(SB)** *Breathing seems to be a significant feature of your karate. Why is the breath so important in the Martial Arts, and how SHOULD we breathe when delivering our techniques?*

*(HK)* Breathing is very important, both physically and mentally. For example, during kumite, it is possible to read your opponent's movements through his breathing. Breathing can also elevate the spirit, such as during tameshi-wari (board breaking). Additionally, breathing is important for Zen.

**(SB)** *When delivering an Uke with an immediate counter attack, some people instruct that we should inhale on the block and exhale on the counter attack. You however exhale on both the block and striking counter attack. What are your reasons for this?*

*(HK)* That's not always the case. I have analysed breathing, as you can see (in the grid below), and have broken up breathing into eight separate categories, each with four different combinations, which yields 32 different breathing patterns.

<b>1. Long Inhalation</b> a. Long inhalation–long exhalation b. Long inhalation–short exhalation c. Long inhalation–short split exhalation d. Long inhalation–long split exhalation	<b>2. Long exhalation</b> a. Long exhalation–long inhalation b. Long exhalation–short inhalation c. Long exhalation–short split inhalation d. Long inhalation–long split inhalation	<b>3. Short inhalation</b> a. Short inhalation–long exhalation b. Short inhalation–short exhalation c. Short inhalation–short split exhalation d. Short inhalation–long split exhalation	<b>4. Short exhalation</b> a. Short exhalation–long inhalation b. Short exhalation–short inhalation c. Short exhalation–short split inhalation d. Short exhalation–long split inhalation
<b>5. Short split inhalation</b> a. Short split inhalation–long exhalation	<b>6. Short split exhalation</b> a. Short split exhalation–long inhalation	<b>7. Long split inhalation</b> a. Long split inhalation–long exhalation	<b>8. Long split exhalation</b> a. Long split exhalation–long inhalation

b. Short split inhalation–long exhalation	b. Short split exhalation–short inhalation	b. Long split inhalation–short exhalation	b. Long split exhalation–short inhalation
c. Short split inhalation–short split exhalation	c. Short split exhalation–short split inhalation	c. Long split inhalation–short split exhalation	c. Long split exhalation–short split inhalation
d. Short split inhalation–long split exhalation	d. Short split exhalation–long split inhalation	d. Long split inhalation–long split exhalation	d. Long split exhalation–long split inhalation

**(SB) So in such a blocking, immediate counter-attacking situation, how SHOULD we breathe?**

*(HK) That would be either a short inhalation–short exhalation combination (3-b, as indicated in the breathing grid above) or, depending on the counter-attack, a short inhalation–short split exhalation combination (3-c).*

**(SB) Examining this issue further, you teach we should exhale on the snap OUT of a mae-geri and inhale on the return of the foot to the floor, am I correct? What are your reasons for this?**

*(HK) This breathing is in accordance with the basic standard.*

**(SB) You have previously said that we should breathe through the mouth, rather than through the nose, enabling concentration in the lower abdomen, am I correct? Can you please explain why this is important?**

*(HK) That depends on the martial art. With karate, the breathing principle calls for inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth.*

**(SB) So coming back to an earlier point, why is the Hara so important to the Martial Arts?**

*(HK) The hara is positioned at the tanden, the centre. By focusing on this area, it is possible to generate maximum power. This is in accordance with the laws of the universe.*

*\* Editor's Note – The 'centre' Sensei Kanazawa refers to is an important concept in the Budo arts. It is firmly believed that this is the 'energy' centre of the body, and concentration in this area is vital for karate power, but also for health.*

**(SB) Mokuso is a traditional practice that seems to have diminished from many dojos these days. Why is Mokuso so important do you believe?**

*(HK) Mokuso (silent meditation) has a calming effect following the excitement of training and also provides us with the opportunity for self-reflection and to feel gratitude for the lesson we have just taken part in.*

**(SB) Relaxation is a key feature of your karate. What is the secret to your relaxation?**

*(HK) Karate has been called 'moving Zen'. I can utilize Tai Chi as 'standing Zen' for relaxation.*

**(SB) SKIF has amassed an impressive line up of senior instructors that collaborate to promote SKIF karate, including your sons and the likes of Murakami Sensei. How do you feel when you watch their karate?**

*(HK) Yes, I think they're all doing a fine job.*

**(SB) What direction do you think SKIF will take in future decades, how will it change, develop or further transform?**

*(HK) I do not know.*

**(SB) Your karate has always been 'forward thinking' and innovative. Are you still studying and researching?**

*(HK) The michi (path, the 'do' in karate-do) is endless. Studying is a lifelong endeavour. Those who came before us provide us with goals to aspire to regarding the development of this path. Each single step is part of the path. It can be summed up by three Chinese characters. The first character (**defend, protect**), refers to reaching, or attaining, the teachings of our predecessors. The second character (**destroy, break, demolish**) refers to surpassing [those teachings]; and the third character (**separate, leave**) refers to surpassing and making forward progress.*

**(SB) What are you currently researching or looking to deeper understand?**

*(HK) Because of my age, I no longer research karate's physical aspects, but rather its spiritual aspects. For example, seeking to better understand Kanku-Dai, I've been exploring the way in which the kata unites heaven and earth, and the technical expression of ki (energy, spirit).*

**(SB) In recent years, you have made appearances at Sensei Okazaki's ISKF Camp. What prompted your attendance in recent years?**

*(HK) Friendship [is what prompted my attendance].*

**(SB)** *How important is Okazaki Sensei to you, as he was very influential in your early training am I correct?*

*(HK)* He was my senior all throughout my college life. I have learnt many things from him.

**(SB)** *Other groups in recent years have steadily splintered and split, yet SKIF seems united still. Is this a correct assumption – if so, how do you ‘unite’ your affiliates throughout the world?*

*(HK)* Yes, I believe that they are all following our organization’s system and my philosophy.

**(SB)** *Looking back at an immensely productive training and teaching career, is there anything you would change, or anything you wish you had done?*

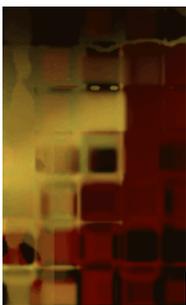
*(HK)* That’s not something I’ve given much thought to.

**(SB)** *Are there any points that I have neglected to ask you about, that you would like to talk about?*

*(HK)* Your questions about kata are very precise and detailed, but I noticed that there were no questions about the ‘ceremony and manner’ contained within kata.

**(SB)** *Can I please say a sincere thank you for your time, and may I wish you and SKIF further luck and development.*

*(HK)* Thank you, it was my pleasure.



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