

Hirokazu Kanazawa-sôke (1931-2019) A personal obituary

On December the 8th 2019 Kanazawa Hirokazu passed away “peacefully”, according to the official announcement. I had the honour and pleasure to translate his autobiography into German. For this edition I conducted an interview with Sôke. I talked with him about death and dying. He stated: “If one engages in downright normal training and has a downright normal lifestyle, the opportunities of development will also be downright normal. If, however one trains in the way of going beyond, of transcending one’s natural powers, this in my opinion means to be present with deadly seriousness in everything, even the smallest kind of things! To exaggerate a bit, you do everything as though it were a matter of life and death. To be involved with deadly seriousness, indeed as if it were a matter of life and death, is, I think, the true and final meaning of *bushidô* (the ethical code of the warrior). If one does everything as though one’s life depended on it, there will be nothing to look back on with regret. When the time to die comes, one can die with utter peace of mind. I think the manner of dying is a barometer of how one has lead his life. This also constitutes the way of the warrior (*bushidô*).”

Kanazawa-sôke undoubtedly has lived and departed this life like a warrior. Kanazawa Hirokazu was born in 1931 in the Northeast of Japan, in the prefecture Iwate at a rough seashore with rocky cliffs and pine groves. He was the sixth child and had an older sister, four older and two younger brothers. The extended family, the fishery and trading company of his father and the care of his mother were a social context in which he absorbed consideration, cooperation and mutual benevolence as manners and a way to treat people. “Harmony” should later become one of the central pillars of his Karate philosophy. Besides playing in nature and on the beach, Hirokazu practiced sumô, jûdô, rugby and boxing in his youth. His body was thus aptly prepared when aged 18, he seriously started with Karate in the Karate department of the Takushoku University. After graduation he and Mikami Takayuki became the first graduates of the instructor course of the JKA (Japan Karate Association). 1957 he won the first JKA All Japan Championship. Subsequently, he twice repeated this triumph. 1960 he was sent to Hawai’i as a JKA Karate instructor. His unprecedented journey into the world had begun.

Presumably no other Japanese Karate teacher has travelled as much and often around the globe as Kanazawa Hirokazu. Most of the instructors who were delegated to foreign countries by the JKA settled down and built up their national organisations. Sôke stayed for a while in England and Germany, but he was the JKA International Section Chief and was often on the road. Particularly after the foundation of his own organisation (1978) he was virtually permanently visiting different countries all over the world. This made him one of the best known Karateka in the world.

The break-up with the JKA was neither initiated by Sôke nor wanted. In the end it can be seen as a blessing in disguise, since it gave him the chance to develop and promulgate his very own Karate-dô unencumbered. He placed the "International" (jap. *kokusai*) in the name of his organisation (Shotokan Karate-do International Federation SKIF) intentionally on top in the Japanese version (Kokusai Shôtôkan Karatedô renmei). This was to demonstrate that Karate-dô has become a global movement and cultural world heritage. Sôke's reputation was not solely based on his internationalism, but his extraordinary abilities, his technical brilliance and in particular his personality, charisma and charm. What also distinguished him was his capability to stage perfect and breathtaking demonstrations in Kumite and Kata on the spot at big events or clinics. Notable was not only his technical refinement and engaged and warm-hearted teaching style, but that he and his Karate-dô was there for everyone. That really meant no distinction in regard to sex, age, race, nationality, religious affiliation, social or economic status etc. Before Sôke went to Hawai'i he stated in an interview, that he wanted to help to develop and promote Karate in its three aspects: physical education, martial art and competitive sports. This also illustrates his broad approach to Karate-dô: it is meant for everybody, young and old, hobbyist and top athlete, even for those with special needs.

The width of his horizon was also obvious in his openness and lifelong willingness to learn from other Karate-styles and martial arts. He included old Kata (e.g. Koryû Gankaku, Nijû hachi ho), which enrich the spectrum of movements beyond orthodox Shôtôkan, into his syllabus. He was also known for his masterly command of the weapons staff (*bô*) and nunchaku. He integrated them into his tutoring. Sôke also cherished lifelong friendships and exchanges with teachers of other styles and also from the JKA.

In one of his English publications Kanazawa-sôke proposed an intriguing perspective. He postulates that Karate historically evolved as a hygienic program to boost physical fitness and was only later used as a means of self-defense: "Without going into the history of Karate I would like to explain a facet which is usually overlooked. Karate history starts some four thousand years ago as a series of movements for health. Later it was discovered that these could be applied for fighting. In the last few years it has been developed into a sport. All other combative sports started their life as fighting techniques. Therefore, Karate is the only one which started from natural movements to promote health."

There originates one of the characteristics of Sôke's Karate-dô: how he emphasized the importance of correct breathing. Via breathing the circulation of *ki* (chin. *Qi*, "universal energy") is regulated. He also deemed the mental and physical concentration on the centre of the body in the lower abdomen (*seika tanden*) as essential. There *ki* can be accumulated and from there *ki* can also be transmitted elsewhere. *Ki* is a central concept in Chinese cosmology and medicine. It is often translated as "inner energy" or "vital force". In the West, energy is primarily seen as

something physical and as a quantum. *Ki* is also a kind of quality (qualia) and linked to consciousness. It has material and immaterial aspects. In the human body *ki* is mobilized by willpower. If one concentrates *ki* will flow into the object being focussed on. If you thrust a punch with a sharp intention *ki* will surge and shoot into the fist and beyond. Sôke was able to split the very board that was indicated to him in a stack of boards without breaking the rest. His explanation was that he could consciously control and direct his *ki*. Although not many will ever reach this level, the regulation of *ki* was a central element of his Karate. And the positive health effects of Karate are based on it.

According to the Chinese view, health means an unblocked and balanced flow of *ki*. From time immemorial diverse methods have been developed in order to gain an unobstructed flow of *ki*: meditation, visualization, breathing techniques, therapeutic interventions (acupuncture, massages, moxibustion a.o.) and physical exercises (e.g. Quigong). Sôke has practiced Taijiquan all his life and understood the respective concepts very profoundly. A crucial goal of Taijiquan is to equilibrate and balance the *ki*-flow. This brings about harmony and well-being, worded slightly dramatically, a feeling of being at one with the universe. This was exactly what Sôke was aiming at. I know that from numerous conversations and interviews with him. It has become a guiding principle for my personal Karate practice. Sôke's Karate-dô was rooted in and based on Chinese philosophy and physiological conceptions, which made it one of a kind for me.

To me Sôke and his Karate-dô had a spiritual dimension, though it was totally unassuming. If you tuned your antennae into this direction you had ample reception. If you were not interested you were not bothered. Sôke always understood Karate as moving Zen. His ideal was to reach an egoless state of all-encompassing alertness and inner calm. To point this out, he used terms from Zen-Buddhism and the art of sword fighting which was influenced by it, such as *mushin* (no mind) or *muga* (non-self). If one witnessed Sôke, one had the impression that time and again he embodied these states of mind. He had an aura which enveloped everybody with peace and serenity. Again, I fear I sound dramatic, but being in his mere presence filled me with happiness. I have never noticed any negative emotions like anger or irritation. Many will remember his infinite patience when he signed books, T-shirts and the like with his mountain Fuji-emblem after training courses – sometimes in hour-long sessions.

By no way I want to give the impression that I had any kind of “special” relationship to Sôke. Everybody had his/her special connection to him and shared unique experiences with him. Sôke did not show particular preferences. He was here for everyone: the veteran black belt as well as for the beginner and the children. I met Kanazawa-sôke on many scattered, but pivotal occasions. His view of Karate and the world had an indelible impact on me. In this sense he was and is a constant mentor and guiding star for me. Let me therefore add some personal footnotes and anecdotes.

At one of his many sojourns in the 1980's in my home town Bregenz in the West of Austria we talked about the winter. He was amazed, when he heard that in this cold alpine region a *haramaki* ("bellyband", a kind of woollen kidney belt) was not customary. In Japan, *haramaki* are well-liked by workers, who toil in the open or artisans in chilly workshops. Sôke commented: "If the stomach (*hara*) is kept warm, the whole body will get warm!" For a martial artist like Sôke *hara* of course had a much broader meaning. It is the pivot of every technique and the locus of *ki*-concentration. "*Hara* warm/well, all's warm/well!" one could venture to say. Anyway, I had two *haramaki* sent from Japan, which I still wear, particularly during winter in the unheated Dôjô. I owe the discovery of the *haramaki* to Sôke. Everytime I put one on I think of him and his teachings concerning the *hara* and *seika tanden*! As a sidenote, *haramaki* which were seen as hopelessly old-fashioned and proletarian now enjoy a renaissance in Japan as a fashion item and protection against the cold.

As a young athlete I was very health conscious. Therefore I wanted to know from Sôke what he deemed to be a wholesome and balanced diet. The gist of what he said was: "I am travelling a lot and I am confronted with a lot of different national cuisines. Most of the time I am treated by the host, thus I can not refuse the dishes coming to the table. It is like that: while I eat the dishes, I inwardly tell myself, 'This is good for my body, it supplies me with subtle energy and makes me strong!' Then every food is well absorbed and purposefully utilized. With this positive attitude even fast food can be ingested with salubrious results. Generally speaking, it is best to consume local products and whatever is seasonal." This again revealed to me that for Sôke it was mind over matter, the spirit which reigns the body! As an aside: with regard to beverages, Sôke in Austria professed a marked fondness of Pilsener.

Since there was a hiatus in my Karate practice I had the cutzpah to ask Sôke if he had ever thought to desist from doing Karate. Without hesitation he replied that there were several critical periods in his life in which he had seriously considered to quit. However, every time he retreated to contemplate the possibility, inevitably some Kata sequences appeared before his mind's eye. He saw himself performing e.g. Kankû dai and indubitably he knew with every fibre of his being that this was his "destiny", his mission and his life task. Sôke has always paid close attention to "imagery training". Lately it seems to come into vogue. For Sôke it obviously had positive effects. He pursued his path unperturbed by ups and downs.

When I started with training again after my break from Karate I went to the Honbu dôjô in Tokyo for instruction several times on Wednesdays. On this day Sôke taught in person and all the instructors who were not abroad also assembled. While greeting formally, I moved the wrong foot into the closed V stance. Sôke pointed out my "misstep" in his benevolent way. For a second I was irritated and thought, "why insist on such a trifle!" In a sudden intuition I

understood the message. It was exactly these little gestures which should manifest the intent behind them.

Sôke was a keen observer. I had participated in the national championships (Kata Individual Masters II 50-59 yrs.) for the umpteenth time. Sôke was already rather fragile at the time. After the championship there was a party in the evening with a stand-up buffet and drinks. The SKIF All-Japan Championship is a yearly event with over more than 600 participants. It is split up into school years for children and age classes for the adults. There are also several disciplines and the competition lasts for two whole days. On the evening in question Sôke went back home early due to his frail condition. All the party guests formed a lane and made a deep bow when Sôke passed by. He walked with his cane and when he came close to me he stopped, looked at me, smiled and said: "Today you won a medal. Congratulations!" I was moved. Among all the bustle of the contest he did not miss to notice this – or, very likely, anything else for that matter.

Sôke cared deeply for people and had an extraordinary memory for them. In the 1980's (my most active time in Karate) the first thing he invariably asked me when we met, was, if Fujinaga Yasuyuki (1944-1995) was doing well. I found that very considerate and acted as a messenger between the two. Fujinaga-sensei headed a JKA-Dôjô in Vienna, where I was allowed to train twice a week. When Kanazawa-sôke was still in the JKA, Fujinaga-sensei had studied under him in Japan for an extended period. Even after Fujinaga-sensei's demise, he repeatedly told me how sorry he felt about his passing on in the prime of his life. Sôke knew well, how much I had adored and appreciated Fujinaga-sensei.

In 1982, the first SKI-organisation in Austria was established. I had become one of its first members and was in the managing committee until the end of the 1980's. I also ran a SKI-Dôjô in Vienna. We intentionally put the name of the founder first in the name of the federation: Kanazawa Shotokan Kokusai Karate-do Österreich (KSKKÖ). Thanks to the selfless commitment and efforts of the pedagogue Rosemarie Osirnigg, Sôke came to Vorarlberg/West Austria on a yearly basis to hold training courses lasting a couple of days. We also shot videos, which were meant to become instructional material. They show Sôke at the height of his powers. The then national trainer Norio Kawasoe (1951-2013) can also be seen demonstrating his excellent techniques. The videos are now sold and distributed by VP-Masberg. I frequently served as an interpreter for Sôke. This offered me superb insights into his didactic ingenuity and systematic approach to Karate. At the beginning of the 1990's the KSKKÖ was dissolved due to various disputes. The majority of its members joined the organisation of Hidetaka Nishiyama. Although invited, I did not follow suit. Barely anything connected me with Nishiyama-sensei and everything that was Karate to me connected me with Sôke. I stayed loyal to him, but due to their rampant political narrow-mindedness, I stayed away from Karate organisations for a long time.

It was almost two decades later when I visited and met Sôke again in the Honbu-dôjô. There was an instant rapport and bond. It was as if no time had passed since our last meeting. He could recall amazing details of the moments we had spent together. Sôke encouraged me to open a Dôjô for him in Tokushima. There was no SKI-Dôjô at the time on the island Shikoku, where Tokushima is located and where I teach at university. Without this encouragement, I would never have been as presumptuous as to teach Karate to the Japanese. When I was in my twenties I learned some Taijiquan from Sôke. I recollected this and began to take lessons again. Now Yang-style Taijiquan is part of my daily exercises. When I related that to Sôke he was overjoyed: "Taijiquan and Karate are like Yin and Yang, soft and hard, fluid and rapid, circular and straight! They are complementary and synergetic. It is good to practice both. Especially when one grows old it is commendable to move to the softer side. It is not about muscular strength anymore, but the cultivation of the *ki* that should become central. Carry on!"

Sôke said this at a time, when he was no longer able to practice himself. Now I have to address something that filled me with outright admiration: his dignity in being able to let go of everything! Sôke loved to ski and even had a licence as an instructor from a skiing school in Davos. When he was in his late-seventies he had an accident while skiing in Northern Italy. He broke several vertebrae and required an extended period of rehabilitation. But he returned to the Dôjô nevertheless. However, his physical condition deteriorated thereafter. When he got into his eighties an illness broke out, which was medicinally subdued until his passing on: Parkinson. This incomparable grand master of the martial arts, who could control every single cell of his body had to watch how he lost command over it. And here again Sôke's spiritual greatness revealed itself: no struggle, no bitterness, no lament. He endured his advancing frailty with stoic composure. Without clinging to anything, he just let things go. To be able to observe the process of ageing and the way of the world with such calmness and non-attachment will forever be etched into my memory as an ideal. It was daoist unity with the cosmos personified.

Sôke once remarked, that with getting older he became convinced, that he was protected by some higher power. December the 8th is Bodhi-day, the day on which the awakening of the historic Buddha Shakyamuni is commemorated and celebrated. It is the last day and climax of an eight-day-long intensive period of meditation (*rôhatsu*) in Zen monasteries. Kanazawa Hirokazu crossed to the other shore in the light of the Buddha. He is now united with the higher powers and as a guardian and protector of Karate-dô, his lifework will continue to have effects and radiate forever. Eternal thanks, Sôke! Ossu!

Wolfgang Herbert