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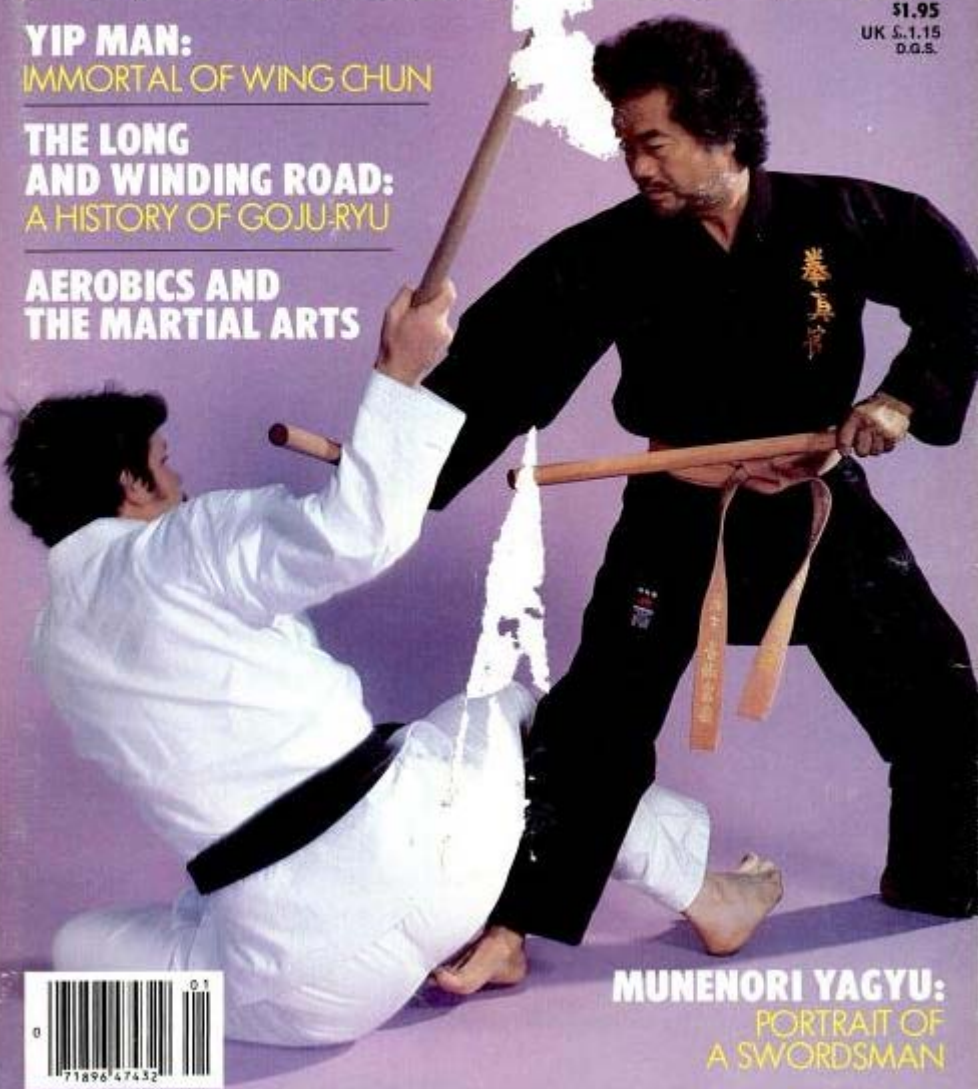
# BLACK BELT

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# SHORIN-RYU AND THE ART OF WEAPONRY

by Jim Nail

The quickness and flexibility of this age-old style of karate make it easily adaptable to weapons training.

*The hierarchy of the All-Okinawan Shorinryu Karate and Kobudo Federation: Fusae Kise (left), the organization's president with a kudan (ninth-degree) ranking; Chigoro Tamola (center), federation chairman and a judan (tenth-degree); and Urichi Kuda (right), also a kudan.*

"Get him down into a low stance," one of the photographers stage-whispered. "He won't do it," said the other. "He claims it's not part of their style." "Not part of their style? Well, is this karate or isn't it?"

Indeed it was. One of the oldest and most renowned of all forms of Okinawan karate—a style called *shorin-ryu*.

"Shorin" is the Japanese and Okinawan term for the temple we know better as "Shaolin." That ancient font of martial and spiritual wisdom: teaching place of Buddhism. This style, then, is the "Shaolin-school."

The man being photographed invited his partner to attack him with a long, oaken bo. Meanwhile he, Kise, (that was his name) stood waiting in a comfortable, nearly erect stance. At the instant of attack, he angled to one side and inserted his own weapon—a kama—into the space between his opponent's weapon and arm. The bo stopped, its attack neutralized.

Had Kise's blades not been covered with thick leather for safety, his practice opponent could have lost an arm. The kama was wedged in in such a way that the bo's own momentum forced the leather-covered blade against flesh.

"The kama, or sickle, is the first advanced weapon we learn," explains Joel Schlichter, a regional director for Kise's Ken-shinkan Association. "If you know what you're doing with it, there's no way an opponent with just a bo can defeat you." Kise had just illustrated that rather graphically. And after blocking the attack, theoretically injuring the attacker's arm in the process, he still had one kama free. He had made it all look very easy.

But making things look too easy is no advantage; it's one of *shorin-ryu's* problem in the United States, according to Schlichter. "Here in the U.S.," he says, "you really want to look flashy, especially if you're going to compete in tournament kata. It's ironic, because you're just showing off for judges who don't know what they're judging.

"Take the kama, for instance: in tournaments, the kind of kama you usually see is a light, practice weapon with a long blade. I was on a judging committee once where the other judges wanted to mark a guy down for competing with a real Okinawan combat kama—made of the heavy rosewood, with a thick steel blade. The blade is shorter, so they weren't as impressed. It doesn't look as flashy. But the difference is, that one could cut your head right off."

Schlichter says the empty-handed art of *shorin-ryu* sometimes faces the same problem. The Ken-shinkan Association teaches methods that often don't look as awe-inspiring or powerful as those some other styles prefer. For example, there's the idea of "body-change." Based on a simple angling of the body away from an opponent's line of force, this just isn't as scary as a flying kick or a fully committed linear attack. In the same way the matador, with his constant sidestepping, angling and retreating, isn't as frightening as the bull.

*Shorin-ryu*, though, was one of the two main styles which Gichin Funakoshi combined and streamlined into *shotokan*, the first Japanese form of karate. As Funakoshi put it, all styles of karate at that time could be broadly divided into two types—*shorin* and *shorei*. While

Shorin-ryu's stances are high and erect, as Fusei Kise illustrates against a bo-wielding assailant (1). As his attacker commits, Kise shifts his body slightly to the side (body-change) away from his opponent's angle of attack, and inserts his kama into the space between his foe's arm and the bo (2). This neutralizes the bo's attack and Kise can now theoretically injure his opponent's arm (3). The same process will work if his foe attempts a lower attack (4). And with a two-to-one advantage in weapons, Kise has another kama free to strike elsewhere (5).



In an unorthodox, but effective, method of utilizing tonfa (1), Kise first neutralizes the bo's advance (2). Once again with a two-to-one edge in weapons, Kise drops his second tonfa down behind his opponent's knee while his attacker is still attempting to regain the use of the bo (3). Kise lifts his attacker's leg while simultaneously releasing his grip on the bo (4) to utilize his other tonfa to hasten his opponent's fall (5).



the shori style emphasized low stances, muscular development and forceful movements, shorin, he said, could be performed "with motions as quick as those of a bird in flight ... with techniques of blinding swiftness, which are the elegant result of intensive training." (*Karate-do Kyohan*.) Funakoshi stressed very strongly that neither of these systems was superior to the other. It is from shorin-ryu, in fact, that shotokan derives most of its kata, though

the two arts today differ greatly from one another. Shorin-ryu's stances are high and relaxed, not unnatural at all even for the beginner. Rather than an awesome funneling of energy into every single strike or block, the practitioner hopes to achieve quickness, maneuverability and flexibility. Much of the style's power is actually "borrowed" from an opponent, using the oncoming mass of his attack to contribute to one's own pinpoint counterattack.

Shorin-ryu's kicks are not necessarily designed to bring the entire weight of the body and power of the hips into play either; instead, they tend to be short, perfectly-aimed snap kicks to vulnerable targets—sometimes in sequences of five or more in a single burst. But what the Kenshinkan system lacks in empty-hand glamor, it makes up in weapons. Fusei Kise (who is also president of the All-Okinawan Shorinryu Karate and

Kobudo Federation) and his Kenshinkan schools teach a combination of karate and kobudo. The karate they teach is indeed shorin-ryu, of the Matsumura Seito (Orthodox) variety—a system which Kise inherited more-or-less intact from Hohan Soken, one of the most revered karateka on the Okinawan Islands. But Kise himself has always had a certain fascination with kobudo, the Okinawan weapons art; so, naturally, since he's head of the system,

In his comfortable, upright stance (1), Kise awaits his attacker. As the assailant commits his punch (2), Kise again angles his body away from his opponent's line of force. He "borrows" the power of his foe's oncoming attack, pulling the arm down and with it, his attacker's head into a punch (3). Still bringing his assailant forward, Kise applies a knee smash with his foot (4), then doubles his helpless foe over by pressuring the back of his extended arm (5).







weapons get taught.

To be awarded a black belt in the Kenshinkan organization, one must have learned two kata with the bo, two with the sai, and one with the kama. This in addition to the proficiency expected in ordinary kata and techniques of empty-hand shorin-ryu. From there, one learns more and more kata, and more and more weapons. It is, in a sense, a hybrid style.

But is it a style that works? Apparently. At

least there are some well-established people who think so. There's Tony Sandoval, one of the first Americans ever to reach black belt status . . . with Robert Trias, back in the earliest days of American karate. Sandoval studied five or six systems in Okinawa before joining Kise. (He also happens, by the way, to be the second-most highly decorated enlisted man in the U.S. Marine Corps. During the Vietnam War, he was a member of a tiny, elite

force which operated north of the Demilitarized Zone for months at a time, totally without support.) Sandoval swears by the Kenshinkan system. But he's only one of a number of Marines who do, since Kise has sewn up the contract giving exclusive rights to teach U.S. forces in Okinawa. Another of his students is a certain General Hagan, currently commander of the new Rapid Deployment Force. Kise took over teaching the Marines in 1975 from

none other than Tatsuo Shimabuku, founder of the *isshin-ryu* style.

But aside from Kise's own personal preferences, he claims that shorin-ryu, with its quick, light motions, is an ideal system to be adapted to weapons training. Kobudo is a faster art in general than karate, as Schlichter explains: "Because of the added range of techniques, and the added importance of avoiding even an indirect hit, you end up in a whole new dimension





**1** Holding his tonfa in the less-customary "backward" grip, Kise encounters an opponent armed with the bo (1). The advantage of two weapons over one is evident as Kise blocks with one tonfa while beginning an attack with the other (2). Pulling down on his opponent's neck (3) enables him to throw the attacker (4&5) with relatively little effort.



with weapons. Kobudo training is an incredibly good experience." Clearly, generating one's maximum in terms of pure power is not all that critical when armed with a pair of long, sharp blades; and with an opponent equally well armed, you wouldn't want to risk a head-on clash.

The question remains, naturally, of how much use can kobudo actually be? Is it really important to know how to use these ancient, mostly obsolete weapons? "Yes," answers Schlichter without reservation. "First of all, we think kobudo is valuable just for the sake of tradition, even if you never use it. It's great to be familiar with these ancient weapons and the way they were used. There's a kata with the *oko*, or boat-oar, for example, where the blade of the oar is whipped forward

at ground level. Well, that used to be a move to spray sand in the opponent's face and eyes. The oar would most likely be used as a weapon somewhere near the water, probably on the beach, where there would be sand on the ground to make a move like that. You get an idea of what the combat in those days was like."

In fact, according to Schlichter, modern-day Okinawa still hosts contests with the weapons of kobudo—full-contact. In *kobudo kumite*, they wear a heavy armor, headgear and gloves like the equipment used in kendo. The only major restriction is that no bladed weapons be used. Actually, this

Wedging the *sai* in between the bo and the arm produces a fulcrum effect (1-3). Kise can bring his opponent down by trapping the forward foot and pushing (3&4).

represents an amelioration of old Okinawan custom, which was to hold matches to the death between practitioners of different styles. Today, though such death-contests may still occasionally take place, they are outlawed and generally frowned upon; but schools that are loosely affiliated will still exchange students for educational purposes.

"But the real advantage of training with weapons," continues Schlichter, "is that violence in modern life pretty much always implies weapons. If some guy jumps you out in a parking lot, he's not going to come at you with just his fists. He's going to grab a tire-iron or something. And training with weapons teaches you a lot about defending yourself against weapons. If you've

ever used a couple of *nit-tanbo* (short bo, usually used two at a time) you'll have a good idea of how a man can fight using that tire-iron. If you've fought against that kind of weapon before, in training, you're much less likely to make a fatal mistake."

Training in kobudo will teach you to take advantage of the weapons around you, too, the weapons that just happen to be a part of your environment at any given moment, he argues. A tire-iron can work like a *nitanbo*, a broomstick can be a bo, a set of keys can work like a version of the old Okinawan brass knuckles, *te-tsu*. Schlichter explains: "There are a lot of things people really don't know about using simple, everyday weapons. How many people realize that there is

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