

Historical Introduction to Traditional Okinawan Shorin Ryu Karate of Grandmaster Eizo Shimabukuro

By Sheree Adams ¹

The indigenous fighting art of Okinawa dates back hundreds of years. It evolved from Gengkosu, or Okinawa fist, that is believed to be 900 years old. The evolvment continued with the influence from China into Todi, China Hand, then to Bushi no Ti, the fighting art of the warrior class. Ti developed into what we commonly know today as Karate. Two main ryuha have developed. Shorin Ryu from Shuri and Tomari and Shorei Ryu from Naha. Shorin Ryu is characterized by its quick movements and fast kicks while Shorei Ryu is known for its strength and soft flowing techniques. This series of DVDs contain the traditional kata of these two ryuha, or schools, as taught to Grandmaster Eizo Shimabukuro, Hanshi, of Shorin Ryu Karate Do Rendokan, as well as some traditional Okinawan Kobudo.

Born in the village of Gushikawa on April 19, 1925, Grandmaster Eizo Shimabukuro had the good fortune to have been taught by the legendary teachers of both Shorin and Shorei Ryu.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro began his studies in 1937 under Chotoku Kyan, an expert of Tomari te. It was Kyan sensei whose effect on Grandmaster Shimabukuro has been most profound. Kyan sensei's constant drilling on morals and conduct instilled in his students the humility and gentleness you see today in Grandmaster Shimabukuro. Under Kyan sensei's tutelage, Grandmaster Shimabukuro excelled at kicking and tai sabaki. He is also one of the few people to learn the secret technique of defense against multiple attackers, which consists of fighting inverted while in the safety of a tree. The kata shown in these DVDs from Kyan sensei are Seisan, Ananku, Wanshu, Gojushiho and Chinto.

In 1938, Grandmaster Shimabukuro began training in Shorei Ryu under Goju Ryu's founder Chogun Miyagi. He trained simultaneously in Shorin Ryu and Goju Ryu under both Kyan and Miyagi sensei and continued to practice and teach both systems until 1950. Since then he has concentrated primarily on preserving and teaching Shorin Ryu. From Miyagi sensei he acquired the strength and practiced the diaphragmatic breathing know to Goju Ryu. He still retains and teaches the kata Seuinchin and Sanchin from his training with Miyagi sensei.

In 1943, Grandmaster Shimabukuro left Okinawa for Osaka. Living next door to his cousin in Osaka was Choki Motobu. Grandmaster Shimabukuro was able to avail himself of Motobu sensei's expertise in regards to his legendary and powerful punches. Makiwara were plentiful around Motobu sensei's residence and marathon makiwara training was not uncommon.

In May of 1948, Grandmaster Shimabukuro opened his first dojo. This was the beginning of what came to be 61 years of continuously teaching traditional karate. For 20 years the U.S. Marine Corp contracted Grandmaster Shimabukuro to teach their troops at several different dojo. To date, Grandmaster Shimabukuro estimates he has personally trained as many as 35,000 U.S. military personnel.

In 1955, Grandmaster Shimabukuro trained with Zenryo Shimabukuro, a long time student of Chotoku Kyan. They were good friends and Grandmaster Shimabukuro credits Zenryo Shimabukuro as one of his teachers.

In 1960, Grandmaster Shimabukuro was recognized as an expert in Okinawan karate and was awarded his 10th Dan by Kanken Toyama. Also, Grandmaster Shimabukuro was appointed to the position of Chairman of the Okinawa, General Headquarters, All Japan Shorin Ryu Karate Do International League.

In 1961, Shimabukuro, concerned with the changes he began to see in Shorin Ryu Karate, went to see the oldest Shorin Ryu Grandmaster alive at that time. His name was Chosen Chibana, a Grandmaster of Shuri Te. Wanting to preserve the old "Castle Karate" of Shuri, Grandmaster Shimabukuro humbly received instruction from Chibana sensei in the correct form of those traditional kata. They are Naihanchi Shodan, Nidan and Sandan, Pinan Shodan, Nidan, Sandan, Yondan and Godan, Passai Sho and Passai Dai and Kusanku Sho and Kusanku Dai.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro also preserves and teaches traditional Okinawan Kobudo. From Kyan sensei he learned Tokumine no Kun and Sakagawa no Kun. These kata were devised by "Tode" Sakagawa and passed on via "Bushi" Matsumura.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro's sai kata consist of Tawata no Sai as taught by Tawata via Taira Shinken to Grandmaster Shimabukuro and Toyei no Sai, a kata Grandmaster Shimabukuro originated in 1948.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro also teaches his own kama kata that he devised in 1946 called Toyei no Kama.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro has developed a comprehensive self-defense system called Toyei no Jujutsu. Toyei no Jujutsu is a collection of over 400 techniques that include defenses against attacks by knife, club, sword, spear or bo.

Grand Master Shimabukuro considers himself fortunate to have had five great teachers. They are Chotoku Kyan, Chogun Miyagi, Tatsuo Shimabukuro (his older brother and founder of Isshin Ryu), Choki Motobu and Zenryo Shimabukuro.

Grandmaster Shimabukuro, at 84 years of age, actively teaches 3 nights a week at his honbu dojo in Ginoza. He also travels to instruct at his various dojo in North America.

These DVDs are aimed at preserving and showing you the traditional kata of Okinawa. They attempt to show the 6 aspects of kata, namely, form, breathing, focus (tight/loose), sequence (combination and timing which also includes bunkai), eyes and kiai. Grandmaster Shimabukuro states that you must understand all these aspects to understand kata. Without this understanding kata is only a dance, not Budo.

We hope you enjoy these DVDs and learn something from them. DVDs are not the ideal medium for learning and to truly understand and progress in your training, one on one with a teacher is always the best. Grandmaster Shimabukuro's dedication is to teaching and preserving traditional Okinawan Karate Do and to help those that sincerely wish to learn, Grandmaster Shimabukuro has made himself available to his students for "special training". Special training in Okinawa consists of staying with Grandmaster Shimabukuro, in his home, and training twice a day for two weeks. Kata, kumite and jujutsu are covered in detail and "special training" is an experience of a lifetime. Grandmaster Shimabukuro also visits his North American dojos for "special training". If you are interested in learning more about "special training" view the News/Info link.

¹ This historical introduction was compiled from an interview with Grandmaster Shimabukuro during his 1999 visit to Sheree Adams' dojo in Powell River, BC, Canada. Relevant updates were added in 2009.