

JERRY FIGGIANI

Transitions

By Rick Kaufman

Jerry Figgiani, 8th Dan Sensei, President and founder of Shorin Ryu Karate Do International, owner of East Coast Black Belt Academy, Long Island Budokan, published author of both books and videos, motivational speaker, seminar instructor and my Sensei for almost 30 yrs. Throughout the last 3 decades, I have watched as Figgiani Sensei transformed the usual and expected approach to martial arts training into a new and inclusive methodology that changes the once mysterious applications of Shorin Ryu's myriad techniques into a roadmap for understanding the key unlocking what was previously veiled. Transitions are the component roadmaps Sensei Figgiani has systematically decoded to add clarity to the way we execute our techniques, understand movement and incorporate our practice into daily life. I sat down with Sensei recently to explore his use and understanding of Transitions across the entire spectrum of martial arts, how he teaches it, how he uses it and most significantly how he lives it. We discussed kata, applications, the inclusive philosophy of Shorin Ryu Karate Do International and the importance of keeping true to the culture and traditions of Okinawan Karatedo. In this candid interview, Sensei explores his martial craft in a way that sheds a new perspective on much of what has generally been overlooked. This approach, through a lens of transition, answers many questions, and adds new ones that will keep the path interesting and exciting. Below are Sensei's ideas in his own words.



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You currently practice Matsubayashi Ryu, but you've trained in other styles also. Can you talk a bit about that?

JF. Although I trained a bit as a young child, I really started at 17 when my high school friend, Jeff Iorio invited me to train. However, formal training in Shorin Ryu began with Sensei Joe Fushi where some of my friends were training. Later on, a group of us left to try out Tae Kwon Do, which I stayed with through relocation to Florida and back to NYC where I earned my Black Belt with GM Richard Chun. After moving to Long Island, I briefly continued my TKD studies with Professor Arthur Cohn. Unfortunately, getting to class involved a long commute which was very difficult. I discussed going back to Shorin Ryu with Mr. Cohn who encouraged me to seek out Sensei Terry Maccarrone of Karate USA. That's when I decided to return to Shorin Ryu.

Sensei Maccarrone's lineage falls under Ansei Ueshiro and while Ueshiro Sensei was originally from the Nagamine dojo, eventually he started his own branch of Shorin Ryu. That said, you still consider your main lineage to be with Grand Master Nagamine. Is there a particular reason for this?

JF. Thinking back, I wasn't yet aware of all the varied types of karate. I knew about Korean, Chinese and Japanese martial arts but the nuances and divisions eluded me. At Sensei Maccarrone's dojo it was mandatory at each belt level to read certain texts. It was then that I began to learn about the various origins, types and styles of karate. As my knowledge grew, I was not only drawn to the history of Matsubayashi but more importantly, the movements of Matsubayashi seemed more natural and relaxed than anything I had done before. The stances were shorter, the techniques were more economical and the emphasis on kata was something that really interested me. I want to point out that at this juncture I still had a very limited understanding of bunkai as I was looking at kata through the lens of the way it was presented. It always struck me as coincidental that at that point in my life one of the things that I truly needed was structure and discipline. The classes in Matsubayashi gave me the self-control and discipline which I hadn't experienced in my previous training and sorely needed. I knew exactly what was expected and what would and would not be tolerated every time I entered the dojo. There was comfort in knowing exactly what we were going to do at each class; especially the sparring which was something I was very attracted to.

I think you're saying that the way martial arts have been presented might be somewhat different than what was originally intended or understood.

JF. Culturally speaking, especially in the United States, people are always trying to take knowledge to the next level. When you have so many diverse individuals looking at something and gathering information for study, each with their own perspective, there comes a point when you begin to understand the limitations that some of the instructors who first came over as a Nidans or Sandans had. After all, by current standards these Senseis didn't have all that much training. Although you are interviewing me,

you've been training with me for over 28 years and then add to that the training that you had before you started with me. When you think about it some of the original pioneers who we recognize as the leaders of martial arts in the United States, came here after studying for as few as 2 to 4 years in Okinawa while they were in the service. How much information could they really have gathered? I truly believe that as martial arts grew in popularity, so many people were exposed to so many different styles and so many different techniques that as a deeper understanding of kata was achieved, people began to see certain movements that were related to or looked like movements from other types of martial arts like judo for example. I mean if you think about it culturally, in the east, particularly in the past, it wasn't really common to ask questions, let alone question the instructor. It was more common to just accept whatever the Sensei was saying. I think times have changed as has the methodology of teaching especially as it relates to how the instructor structures the class. In the past, there were often intense and excessive warm-ups and practices that served more to damage our bodies then strengthen them. It's easy to see how that impacted the longevity of those who trained in that methodology. Over the years my training and approach to teaching has changed so as to enhance the student's longevity. I have students in my class that are as young as 16 and others who range in age from 67 to 85 all doing the same things. Of course the level of agility, speed and power vary depending on the student's age, but everyone is able to execute the technique and learn to understand its place in their martial arts experience. Truthfully, that's why I'm so drawn and connected to Matsubayashi Ryu; I hear so many karateka who have crossed over from Japanese based styles say our stances work better for their bodies and that the movements are more comfortable and natural to execute. Honestly, I think that's a tremendous testimony to Grand Master Nagamine and the vision he had while developing the Matsubayashi system. If you study his book, the Essence of Okinawan Karate Do, it doesn't appear that he was so invested in bunkai or application, but more over he wanted to enhance an elevate the morale of the Okinawan people, especially the youth who were devastated after world war II. By creating an accessible and practical system of martial arts utilizing 18 kata and 7 Yakusoku Kumite, he was able to make a tremendous impact on the people of Okinawa. While I teach my students a curriculum that is somewhat more comprehensive, the Grand Master's original skillsets still make up the mandatory requirements for testing.



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Do you think that the Grand Master had the big picture in mind while developing Matsubayashi Ryu because his style is so much friendlier to the function of the way the human body moves?

JF. I think it was important not only to make the movements more functional, quick and effective but also the way he chose the katas and placed them in the system helps the student develop their understanding of movement and function. I really believe that the way Matsubayashi was taught in the Nagamine Dojo is a model for developing human potential which I follow pretty closely in my teaching.

You're talking about a transition in the way you think about martial arts from a focus on kicking and punching to a vehicle for taking ourselves to a higher level. It seems like the true battle is fought within, defending ourselves against for our pride and ego.



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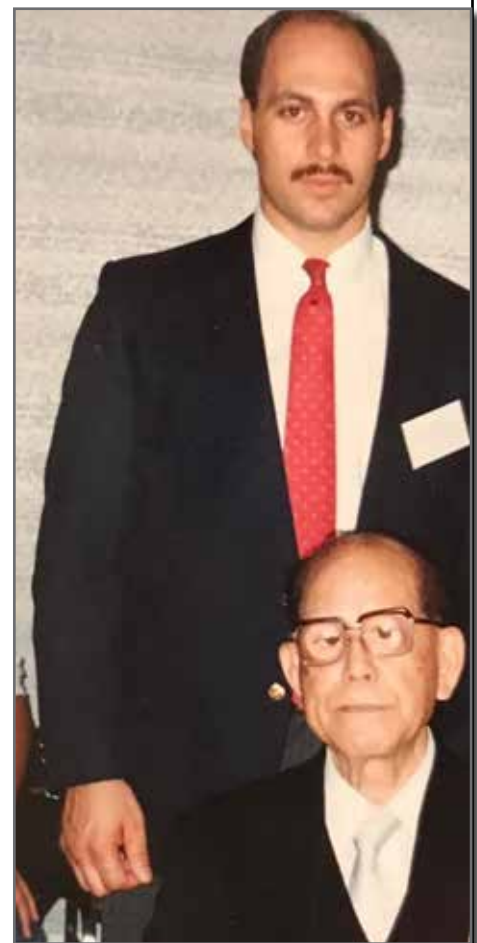
JF. What I first imagined karate being was something akin to being an invincible fighter and having karate super powers. What I discovered was that in order to really grow and develop as a martial artist I had to transition away from that idea and look more honestly at myself. I think that's the true secret of mastering the art; taking a long look inward, changing, adapting and persevering along your journey. There are many people who trained at some point in their lives and may even have earned a Black Belt, then quit yet still identify themselves by that achievement. It's interesting because there is clearly a difference between achieving a black belt and being a Black Belt. The true value of what you do in the dojo is to turn yourself into a better person, whether that means in your relationship, in your job or with your family and friends. It's more of a vehicle for upgrading the way you live your life by bringing the dojo values into your everyday experience. Martial arts teach us the life skills that help in dealing with the inevitable adversities we all face. What I'm saying is that it loses its true meaning if a person can't conduct themselves with courtesy, respect and compassion; doing their best to motivate and inspire people to be the best they can be. That's the message I strive to pass on to my students; if you can make a difference in someone else's life using your martial arts skills, it really elevates you to a different level. We will all make mistakes; I don't look at being a Sensei as lifting me above anybody else. It's just that I've been training longer than some others but believe me; I've made many mistakes and will continue to do so. However, knowing what becoming a Black Belt has done for me allows me to continually improve in areas where I have stumbled in the past.

The opportunity to train Judo with Sensei Joe Turchiano and Koryu Uchinandi with Hanshi Patrick McCarthy helped you unlock the bunkai within the kata. Getting back to the idea of other Senseis that had an important impact on the development of your Martial arts journey, you also had a relationship with Hanshi Frank Grant even though you didn't formally train with him for very long.

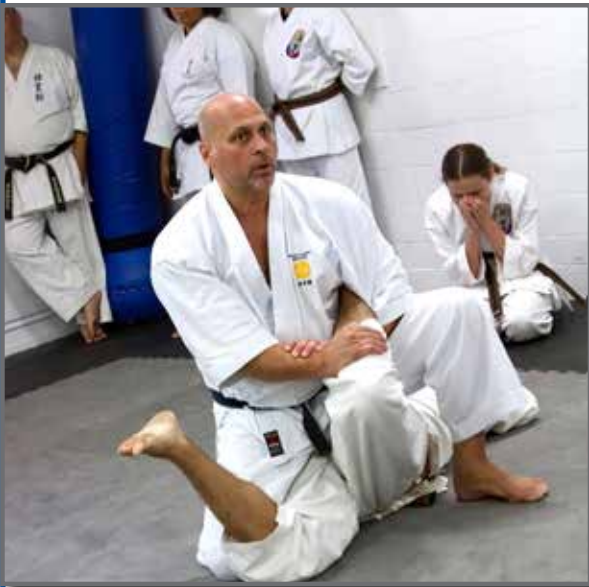
JF. Interestingly, martial arts relationships are like any other relationship, there will likely be disagreements and difficulties along the way. Once, while I was training with Sensei Maccarrone there were some disagreements in the dojo and some of us left. Regrettably, I found myself on my own for a while and that's when I went to Sensei Carbonara. I wanted to see if I could train at his dojo since Maccarrone Sensei introduced us. However, because of his friendship with Sensei Maccarrone he wouldn't take me on as a student. Shortly thereafter, around 1988 I was Ikkyu and attended a tournament in Tipp City, Ohio run by Hanshi Frank Grant. After I won my division in sparring and placed well in kata, Hanshi Grant asked me when I was going to test for black belt. I explained to him that due to the politics in New York karate, I wasn't actually confident that I would be testing. Following that discussion I was invited to become a member of his group, the World Shorin Ryu Karate Federation and he told me that he would do everything he could to help me along my path. I became a member of Hanshi Grant's group and through his encouragement I opened up my first dojo in Center Moriches New York. Hanshi Grant eventually promoted me to Shodan and with karate politics being what it was; shortly thereafter I got a phone call from Sensei Carbonara telling me that he was coming to my dojo with the Grandmaster's son, Takayoshi Nagamine. Once they got to the dojo Nagamine Sensei told me that from then on I should train with Sensei Carbonara which of course completed the circle of my connection back to Sensei.

In 2013 Sensei Carbonara passed and aside from the overwhelming loss of such an important individual in your life, it also instigated a giant change in the way you looked at your role and position in Matsubayashi Ryu.

JF. Sensei was aware that I was always looking to improve both myself and my skillsets but still wanted to keep Matsubayashi as my primary style and focus in training. That said there was a brief period of time that I studied a version of American Kempo and trained a bit in Kyokushinkai. At times when I cross-trained in these various systems, then came back to my roots, I noticed that I was seeing things that I never previously saw, like I was seeing with new eyes. This always served to motivate me to search deeper into my Matsubayashi practice. Around this time I was approached by Hanshi Ernie Ferrarer, the first American Black Belt of Ansei Ueshiro Sensei, asking if I would be interested in running an organization for him. I discussed this with Carbonara Sensei who instead encouraged me to stay with him and start up an organization that he backed. Regardless of whose organization it was, I really wasn't interested in starting, running or heading any organization, which I told Carbonara Sensei. I wasn't at all attracted to the politics but Sensei encouraged me to ignore the nonsense and focus on keeping the connection with Okinawa. He knew of my friendship and personal relationship with Soke Nagamine and how important that was to me. At that point, I hadn't yet made a decision and we really didn't speak much about this again. Sadly, soon after, Sensei became seriously ill and ultimately passed away from pancreatic cancer. In my final conversations with him he made it really clear how important it was for me to maintain the spirit and essence of the teachings and culture of our Okinawan roots. He asked me to start my own organization, Shorin Ryu Karatedo International



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and while I didn't know why he wanted me to use the word International he told me not to worry and just insure that it would be on the patch. Of course I was confused because I didn't have an organization let alone a patch. However he felt very strongly that in order for me to grow I needed to do this, develop a new patch, and give up my original patch. I had my dear friend Sensei Thomas Casale, President of the Japan Shotokan Karate Association help me with the design. As this was so important to Sensei, I promised to move ahead with his idea. I thought possibly it would only be a few dojos that got involved but now, 12 years later, I never imagined it would bring me to Europe, China, back and forth to Okinawa many times and take me all over the United States. I never dreamed it would have such a tremendous influence on my life; I guess that's why he was the Sensei; he had the foresight to see the benefits. I get great joy realizing that I was able to keep Sensei Carbonara's wish alive and I will continue to do so whether it's with 30 affiliate dojos or just a few student members; it remains a promise I am committed to keeping. Interestingly, because I was able to follow through with the organization, I had the opportunity to teach a seminar at the Omine Dojo in California. Teaching at the dojo of my Sensei's Sensei was such a special moment and gave me the feeling that Sensei has a hand in guiding my growth even now.

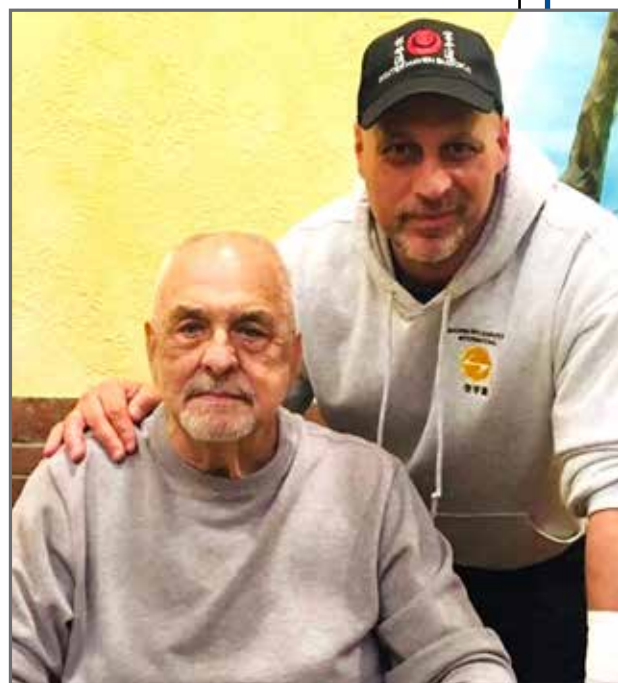
As you realized the truer meaning in your studies you started to focus much more on bunkai. Then in 2012 you put out a 4 DVD set, Simplicity in Bunkai, specifically on kata application and while these instructional videos use the kata of Matsubayashi illustratively, the message is more about how the movement in any kata relates to the concept of application.

JF. Just going through kata without the analysis of movement is really more like dancing. Carbonara Sensei was very involved in the practice of fundamentals, and to be fair, I don't think there is anything more significant than having strong basics. Being able to execute the physical application of the technique for its intended purpose and developing proper body mechanics is the key to leveling the field for all individuals. The most important thing for anyone on the path to learning karate is to work to perfect the basics as these are the foundation of our practice. Once there is a solid foundation it becomes possible to look into the kata in a different way. There is a purpose to every movement and I work hard to help my students understand that the best way to decode the movement in the kata is to get into that position and then feel, fit or conform to that actual movement. This DVD set may be the first time this approach was actually used with Matsubayashi kata and in truth by pulling back the curtain a bit practitioners of our style started looking at the kata a little differently.

You're not only speaking about a transition in the way you think about kata, but you're also looking at a transition in the way you identify the application. You often use the term Transition to describe your approach to kata. What is it about transitions that make them so unique to your approach?

JF. Sometimes the application of particular kata movements don't appear until it's seen from a combative viewpoint. If we look at Master Nagamine's book, specifically the chapter on Uke Waza, we can see that all those techniques are not necessarily blocking techniques but can be seen as grappling, receiving and also releasing techniques.

It seems like it's the transition into the technique that illuminates the possible applications and this idea represents your approach to Bunkai.





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JF. Yes, but it also represents transition in one's life especially when facing obstacles and daily adversities. In truth that's where I believe karate becomes most useful. There are very few times that we get approached by someone trying to mug us, yet every day we leave the house and face the obstacles that life puts in our path. Therein lays the true spirit of karate, how we face these stressors and persevere, demonstrating an indomitable spirit and moving on. Being a teacher, I feel blessed because I'm also being taught by those I have the opportunity to teach watching as they not only think about what we practice but take action, that's when the real success comes in. One of my students was the victim of a hit and run accident and was left for dead, suffering traumatic brain injury. The medical community told his family that he would never walk again but through the physical and mental benefits that karate embodies he was not only able to relearn to get up on his feet, but now he walks independently, cares for himself and in 2017 he earned his Shodan. For students who face the emotional rollercoaster of anxieties, learning to apply some of these principles to overcome fear is key. A great example of this is the way students are taught to deal with bullying. Watching kids learn to take a stand against the abuse by using the principles of situational awareness, boundaries, courage and communication are a collateral benefit of the training. These simple skills can easily be lifesaving in dangerous and scary situations. As my awareness of the truth in martial arts training has expanded I've pivoted into seeing the bigger picture of karate. A shining example would be Sensei Nick Raccinelli Sr., who, even while awaiting a heart transplant and right up until the end put his gi on and stepped onto the deck. In truth, he wasn't thinking about defending himself against a predator, but rather against his own challenges. We all experience these, be they self-doubt, fear, collapsing under peer pressure or standing for correct choices, these are the things that are most impressive about people, not how hard they can kick and punch. To be sure this is a mindset transition that is not easy for everyone make.

Finding positivity even in the face of adversity is your message. What you describe is an incorporation of all experiences together, not a turning away but rather deriving strength out of misfortune. With regard to this, especially during these trying times, how can the average student find meaning and confidence in themselves when everything is so confusing?

JF. My teachings are really focused on developing the human spirit in the face of adversity and impediments. I think that tends to help the student become more relaxed regarding some of the difficulties they may be facing. It's easier said than done, but positively reinforcing what it means to have self-control and perseverance



can really make a difference. It doesn't matter how old we are, we all seem to think we have the answers but do we really stop to take the time to look inside and strive to better ourselves? That's what a majority of my teachings are focused on, even for myself, if I become angry or agitated, just the way I would look at the movement in kata, I look into myself and do my best to analyze my feelings and emotions and iron them out as best as I can. I stay positive, but that doesn't mean there can't be a bad day or negative feelings. It's easy to get up and complain or forget how much there is to be grateful for, but again if you sit down and analyze your thinking, it becomes easier to take control of your feelings rather than let them control you.

Recently you added meditation to all your classes including those with the youngest students so as to help them experience quiet and calmness. Interestingly, in some way this is a connection to the Grand Master and his transition when he started to sit and look inward.

JF. I really have to thank Sensei Turchiano for putting me on the path of meditation. While it always intrigued me, it also always confused me. I couldn't really understand how to stop my mind's chatter. Of course with practice things became clearer, but just like with the pause in a kata, that pause in daily life is very important, so as to reflect and slow things down. I help my students understand just how important that pause and reset is in life. Some parents don't understand meditation and think it's about religion, but I'm trying to get them to quiet the mind, focus on the breath and just like in self-defense situations, find a way to remain calm and relaxed so a true assessment of what is going on can be made. Getting children to take just a minute or 2 out of their chaotic lives to escape all the negativity is one of the most important tools that can be used whether someone studies karate or not. There is just too much information to weed through and we can't really know or trust exactly what is right or wrong. Meditating and remaining calm can be a great help in making the choices that are right for each of us in our own lives and isn't making the right life choices what it's all about?

If there is one statement or phrase that could sum up your philosophy, what would that be?

JF. Just stay the course and good things will happen. 🐉

