An Interview with the 3rd Grandmaster of Wado-Ryu Otsuka Hironori III Sensei

By Domenico Capilongo

What is your most powerful memory of your grandfather?
I didn't see too much of his karate but on weekends I went to see his demonstrations and that was really amazing. And once he shared with me his experiences of the Tokyo Earthquake of 1923. He saw many terrible things and so much death. He told me these things when I was about 6 or 7 years old.

What do you think your father's biggest contribution to Wado-Ryu was during his time as grandmaster?
In Japan there is a word many martial artists use, Shu Ha Ri. Shu, is to protect, Ha, is to break from Shu and Ri is to leave from the original. So I think my grandfather did not belong to any of these categories. He was the creator. Then my father, I think, was the protector of Wado Ryu. And for me, I think I have to break from what my father protected. But break meaning in a good way, not meaning to completely destroy. It is like a peeling away but it must keep the goodness of its origins. So I think that my father did really well protecting Wado Ryu. He kept what we have to do exactly in the movements and in everything. He taught me and I studied and will try to get out from that study what my father missed and teach it and develop that part. That is my breaking away from the protection.

What is the emphasis of your teaching?
I have to add a little bit of my ideas in order to create a little different view and to see Wado Ryu differently than before but I'm going to keep exactly the same way as my grandfather and father taught.

Some people say Wado Ryu karate is not really karate. What is Wado ryu?
Karate is originally from Okinawa but Wado Ryu is the only karate not originally from Okinawa. My grandfather studied from Funakoshi sensei and my grandfather's background was jujitsu so that is the reason why Wado Ryu is a little bit different from the other styles of karate. But for me, what all martial arts are trying to find is the same. However, nowadays karate is becoming a sport and no longer Okinawan karate and it's the same thing in Wado Ryu. Wado Ryu kept karate but mixed with the idea of Japanese traditional martial arts. It is still karate but it went in a little different direction. Karate, sports karate and traditional karate all go in the same direction. The goal should be the same.

Is there a connection between sports karate and traditional karate?
Yes, sport karate is just separate from traditional karate. Sports karate extracts some good parts of traditional karate but nowadays too many people are only practicing with sports rules and these rules are killing a lot of good technique. I hope someday with the Olympic games if they want to develop karate they will begin to accept more techniques than today.

This year at the Wado Ryu International Championships in Japan you introduced two new categories of kumite. Why?
Modern karate has mixed sports with tradition and we don't know where the sports part is and where the traditional part is. That's why I wanted to make sure to completely separate the sports from the traditional. If someone wants to compete in sports karate they can access that kind of competition at the Wado Championships. And some others, especially those who are 40 years old and over, can come back to access the traditional way. Because after the 1960s sports karate became popular and since that time original Wado Ryu technique is little-by-little disappearing. I am sad about that.

What is your hope in these new categories?
The first thing I hope is that people should not be eager to just win. I want everyone to help each other develop and give each other a chance. Plus I want them to show the good techniques of Wado Ryu. Not just physically good but mentally as well and also how to use their body not just for speed. If everyone could just see some real technique it could be nice. That is why I tried to separate completely the sports and the traditional.

Modern society is changing so much with technology. Do you think karate can still help people in their lives?
It is not only karate. I think every sport is the same. If each sport can accept a good way it can help society. But nowadays so many sports concentrate on being a champion. Like the Olympics, everything is now like a business and not anymore about good sports spirit. It is lucky karate is still not in the Olympics and we can still practice with good spirit. For me, it is how the people take or practice karate; just to be a champion or to develop themselves. For example, in kumite to fight against someone they have to know each other, just not technique by technique or who won or lost. If you don't think about points and have to fight someone else you have to know about the person. That is a kind of connection between you and the other person which makes a good experience for your life. Humans do not just live by themselves. We have to always communicate with other. Karate can tell us a lot about these experiences.

In the Wado Ryu international Championship's Tournament Program you explained the that the meaning of the "Wa" of Wado Ryu goes beyond just "peace" or "harmony". What does it mean?
In Japanese kanji one small letter has many different meanings, especially "wa". The main meaning of "wa" is peace but it's part of a greater whole or associated with something else to make a good complete circle. All those meanings are included into "wa". So the Wado-Ryu idea is exactly the same as the kanji of "wa"; to be unified with everything. I think it is a really nice kanji for the name of a martial arts style. My grandfather really chose a good word especially for the Japanese idea of our character from 2000 years ago. In Japan a prime minister long ago said, if you have "wa" in everything it will be a good and harmonious society.

Do you have any advice for karate students?
I think they have to think while they are training, not just follow the counting or else they can't develop themselves. They should think about why they have to move this way or that way or the reason behind each kind of movement. If they start to think about this little-by-little they will find out the answer of each movement. This is a faster way of improving.

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