

# SECRETS OF GOJURYU

by Glen Grabow

The secrets of Okinawa gojuryu. What are they? Are they secrets that are dispensed to only the very efficient students at infrequent intervals? Are they techniques that senior teachers reveal to highly trusted juniors at night, behind locked doors?

By its very history, karate seems to be surrounded by a cloak of secrecy and mystery. While this is not a treatise on the history of Okinawa gojuryu, it will be readily seen that its history and secrets are somewhat interrelated.

The first of these "secrets" has to do with *kaisai*. The word was coined by the late Chojun Miyagi (the originator of gojuryu) and is strictly an Okinawan word that deals *only* with gojuryu karate. It is not found in any other karate style vocabulary, nor in any Japanese or Okinawan dictionary with the same meaning.

The word *kaisai* means to examine or the examination of kata for the meaning of various movements incorporated therein. This whole situation came about because many senior students were performing movements in the different kata without really understanding their meaning. Also, some teachers were unsure of these movements.

Several factors caused this loss of knowledge to occur over the years—not the least of which was the traditional Oriental method of teaching known as "don't ask, train!" After being rebuked in such a manner, few students would again question their teacher. This can be further appreciated by the fact that in the Orient, particularly 50 to 300 years ago, age and knowledge were revered by all and usually went unquestioned. Teachers of any type were particularly held in high esteem.

Another factor which contributed to this situation was that prior to 1868, all karate training on Okinawa was conducted in secret, behind locked doors, late at night, or in

early morning hours, usually 4:00-6:00 a.m. This necessary secrecy prevented wide dissemination of knowledge. Further, each individual karate teacher at that time usually did not have more than three or four students, which again, prevented widespread knowledge.

Another point that should be brought forth is that some teachers were not as adept at teaching as others. This is not being derogatory in any way; it is just a fact of life—a fact that we are still faced with today. It goes without saying that if any teacher failed to communicate certain techniques and their meanings to his students, then these same students would be unable to pass on these techniques to their students at a later date.

Another factor possibly contributing to this loss of knowledge was that the literacy rate on Okinawa, up until recently, was never very high and in many cases, educational level and the ability to communicate (teach) went hand-in-hand.

Regardless, Miyagi detected this situation, took appropriate action (kata examination), and today we have a most complete arsenal of understandable techniques within karate kata. Since that time, gojuryu teachers periodically assemble and examine the kata movements for meaning. The resulting discussions and debates sometimes become quite lengthy. In many cases, no agreement is arrived at as to what meaning a particular movement illustrates. This is as it should be because, after all, karate kata is meant to stimulate thought, theory and technique among teachers and students alike.

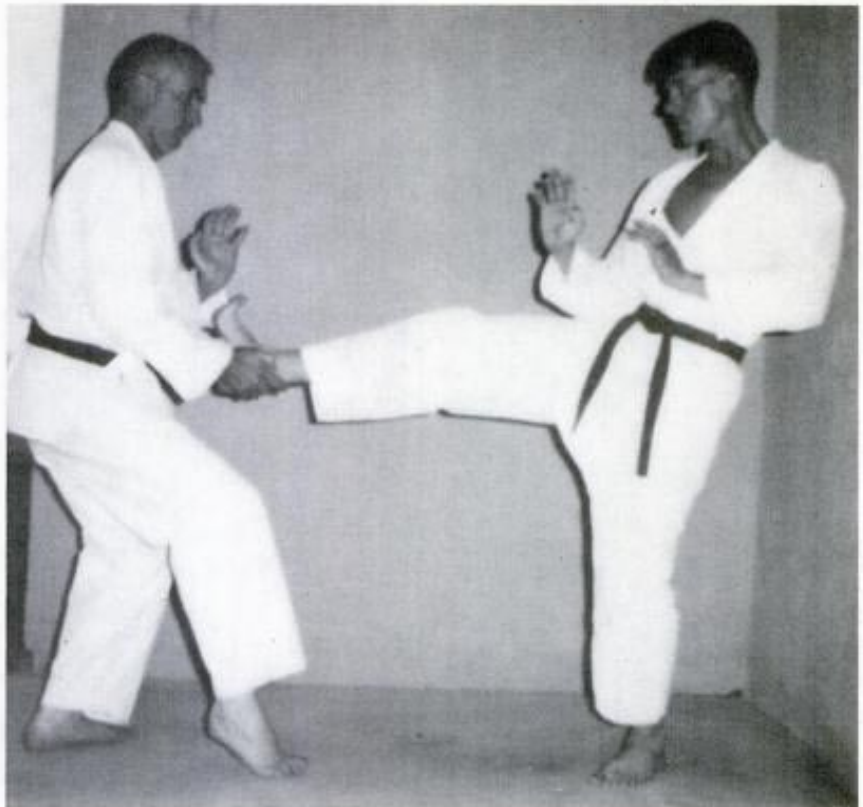
Partly because of this "open for discussion" attitude, some movements have more than one meaning. Indeed, some movements can have as many as three different meanings and all these different meanings may or may not be taught by the same teacher. A student who doesn't realize this can be overheard saying something like, "Last year I was taught this meaning, now I am being taught another, and I don't know which is correct." The obvious answer is that both are correct. Actually, this student is fortunate having such a knowledgeable teacher.

The student may also be heard to say, "My teacher taught me one meaning, but the teacher in another school teaches a different meaning. Who is right?" Again, the answer is obvious—both teachers are right. A student is unusually fortunate if he has two, or perhaps even three, different teachers of the same style in his lifetime. This will certainly give him ample opportunity to learn the different meanings attached to various movements. However, such a situation is not always the blessing that it might appear to be. A point that should be very obvious by this time is that a serious student of karate (regardless of his rank) should have an open mind about techniques and movements, and should not belittle another teacher's or school's ideas because they do not coincide with his own or because they are either new or old fashioned.

There is another "secret" that really can be described as a secret. *Kakushi waza*, translated to English, means "hidden technique." In gojuryu, hidden techniques were developed and incorporated into kata for several reasons. One reason was that many teachers were protective of their special techniques and did not want anyone to discover their real meaning. Other teachers were afraid that "bad people" would misuse their techniques (some of the hidden techniques are very dangerous). "Bad people" does not necessarily refer to a belligerent or trouble-making type of person. It could also be applied to a person who is normally sensible and easy going, but who loses his temper easily, or



*This technique, from the gojuryu kata saifa, looks like a strike to the chest. But see the photo below for the meaning.*



*This movement is part of the kata bunkai gekisai two. While it is a technique that might appear to be somewhat awkward in a kata, the actual meaning—a leg catch—is quite apparent when illustrated in this way.*



*The real target is not the chest (as it would appear from the photo above) but the throat. This "hidden technique" is also to be found in the gojuryu kata seisan.*

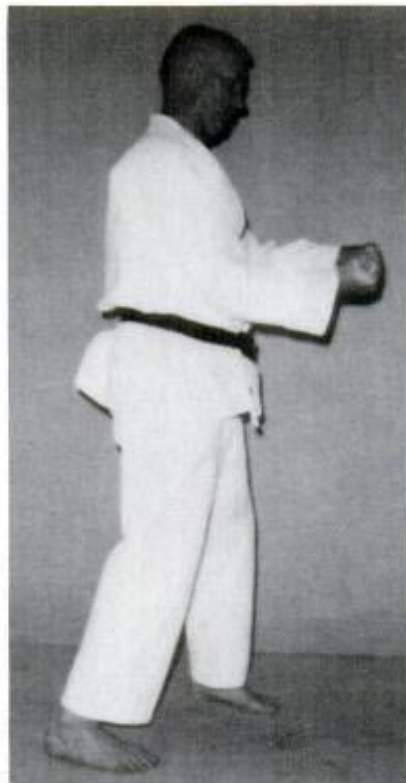
who becomes violent when drinking. It should be noted that many Okinawans were and are fond of strong drink. This "bad people" syndrome has been taken to the point where a teacher will reveal his hidden techniques to some black belt students but not to others. It goes without saying that a student to whom these hidden techniques are revealed should be very careful in dispensing them to others, not only for the reasons noted, but also out of respect to the teacher who revealed them to begin with. It also goes without saying that a teacher would not reveal any of these hidden techniques to a student whose physical expertise was not ready to accept them. Further, one should not expect these techniques to be revealed all at once, but rather over a lengthy period of time.

How were these techniques hidden? Usually by disguising or making a movement look like something other than what it really was. In practice, this is sometimes not as difficult as it may seem. Sometimes these "disguised movements" would lead an onlooker to a rather obvious but altogether erroneous conclusion! Other styles of karate may have hidden techniques, but, in all of the literature presently available, any reference to such techniques is not offered. Hidden techniques are incorporated into all of the eight classical kata (koryu kata) of Okinawa gojuryu.

Many movements in kata vary from school to school. Some students may ask, "Why is this? Why can't all the schools be the same?" The answer is quite simple. People vary in weight, height, strength, speed—indeed, their overall physical makeup. The teachers who developed these kata realized this and allowed for it. It should be remembered, however, that these differences did not change the overall pattern or sequence of the kata. Really, this is an aspect of gojuryu that makes it somewhat more flexible than some of



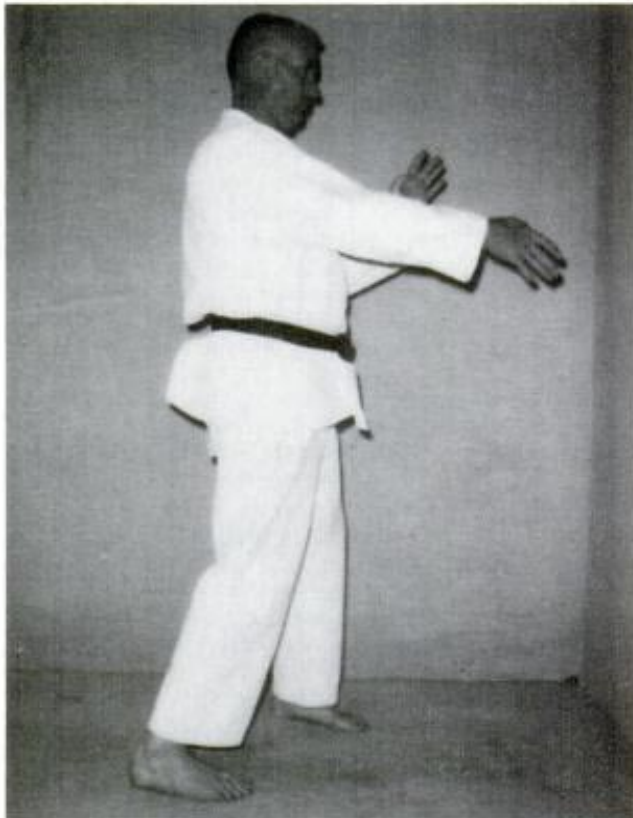
*Compare this photo with the one directly below—this is a “bird head punch” that shows the real meaning of the technique.*



*A morote tsuki, or double punch from the kata sanseiru. Fists are nearly side-by-side.*



*A variation of the double punch shown at left. Note the vertical distance between the fists.*



*This technique appears to be a thrust to the stomach with the open hand, but as mentioned above, in reality has another meaning altogether. This movement appears in the kata shisochin.*

the other karate styles. A student, if he is fortunate enough to attend different schools, will at some point in his study be able to select the movements that are best suited to his own physical makeup.

Another little known “secret” is the gojuryu axiom that with a hard weapon (forefist or elbow) attack a soft target (stomach or throat), with a soft weapon (bottom of fist or ridge hand) attack hard targets (head or joints). The idea behind this is to prevent injury to the different parts of the body that are used as weapons. While it is granted that a strong punch with the forefist to an attacker’s head will usually incapacitate him (or at least stun him and set him up for another technique), it can also wreak havoc with the defender’s fist, sometimes breaking knuckles or fingers. With a hand in this condition, how can an attacker’s accomplice be dealt with? If we are unfortunate enough to be the victim of a mugging, we should expect at least two attackers. Further, there are so many soft targets on the human body that it is really silly to attack the hard ones, particularly with a hard weapon. Of course, there may be occasions when the soft targets do not present themselves, and we are left with only the hard ones. But this does not present any real problem to a well-rounded karateka because he can attack these hard targets with soft weapons.

A few examples that come to mind are a hammerfist to the head, a knee strike to the groin area, and open hands clapped swiftly and simultaneously over an opponent’s ears. Regardless of the style, all students of karate should give much more thought to this “hard-soft” axiom.

While it is certainly not any earth-shaking revelation, bunkai kumite is rare enough today to warrant more than a passing remark. *Bunkai kumite* (two-man tandem sparring) is not necessarily a gojuryu development, although it is



**This block of an elbow strike is found in the kata bunkai gekisai two.**

used primarily by the gojuryu. Bunkai kumite is a method that teaches timing, coordination and distance appreciation. It is always practiced with a partner. Because it duplicates the movements of certain kata, it actually takes over where kata leaves off. The bunkai exercises that a student first encounters is bunkai, gekisai one and bunkai, gekisai two. Remember, all Okinawa goju schools use gekisai one and two as their common or beginning kata. Some schools, such as Seikichi Toguchi's school in Nakanomachi, Okinawa, utilize bunkai kumite for several additional kata. As a matter of fact, Toguchi has possibly developed bunkai kumite more than any of the other gojuryu teachers.

As a kata has various punches, strikes, kicks, blocks and stances incorporated within its structure, bunkai also utilizes these very same techniques but with a partner. By its nature, bunkai is slow to learn and somewhat difficult to teach. But the benefits that are reaped by the persevering student must be seen to be appreciated. The value that bunkai training gives to the trainee for timing, coordination and distance is unlimited.

Bunkai training is not utilized by all gojuryu schools. It is difficult to teach and learn, and is also quite time consuming. It is the individual teacher's prerogative to teach bunkai or not.

There is one final secret that, along with kakushi waza, should truly be considered a secret. This is the custom of training with karate in front of a tomb, as is practiced on Okinawa. To understand this, several aspects of Okinawan culture must be understood: Three of the tenets of Okinawan religion are ancestor worship, the belief in spirits and ghosts, and the secrecy that has traditionally cloaked karate training on Okinawa.

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Karate training in front of a tomb is still practiced by some Okinawans. They believe that the spirits of the departed will come out of the tomb and enter their bodies, thereby making them stronger. This belief is reinforced by the fact that many Okinawans practice an ancestor-worship-type religion. This training is usually performed at night. The structure of the typical Okinawan tombs permit this. Many of the larger tombs have courtyards five or six yards square at their entrance. Contrary to many other parts of the world, most spirits and ghosts on Okinawa are considered friendly—some of course, are not. Regardless, spirits and ghosts on Okinawa are an everyday thing. Indeed, Kamahara Street in Koza City is referred to as *seishin no michi* or "street of the spirits." At night, it is a particularly dark and unlighted street and is lined by many tombs of all sizes. Many Okinawans, particularly women, refuse to walk along it at night and even shy away from it in the daytime.

Prior to 1868, all karate training was illegal and had to be conducted in secret. What better place to do this than in a cemetery at night? Nowadays, it seems to be a custom carried over from the past and is practiced only occasionally.

Before any Western readers scoff, it should be remembered that acceptance of religion or beliefs or culture are not the subject. Whether we accept these secrets or not is really up to the individual; but it should be remembered that karate reached its apex of development on Okinawa. ❧