

# Karate Goju-Ryu: Interview with Sensei Spongia

## Magazine Newbushido

**Newbushido:** To whom would you recommend to practice Karate?

**Sensei Spongia:**

To anyone without limitation.

It might seem an obvious and “advertising” question but I think that it is a fundamental question.

However, I would like to advise at once that Karate-Do is for everybody and for no one.

That is to say that, definitely, the practice of Karate-Do offers, in its most complete sense, an infinite range of instruments and learning experiences, which, taught wisely by an experienced teacher, could allow any person at any age to reach the maximum of both their psychophysical and moral potential.

Yet, as any respectable art, Karate-Do requires sincere dedication, especially after a certain level of learning has been attained. It means that Karate-Do should become the foundation of one's life, with its principles transferred effectively into daily life.

With the word “dedication”, I do not mean a single-theme mania, on the contrary, those who know me are well aware that my “model” Karate-Do teacher is not only a specialist in kicks and punches but a complete person in any sphere of the life, who is able to grasp the principles of the art and to apply them to every moment of ordinary life.

And still, one must get deeply into the study of the Discipline offering it the necessary time, passion and commitment, otherwise the results will only be limited, as in any art.

Everybody likes to say that they practice “the art of Karate” but any respectable art requires enthusiasm, dedication and discipline, as well as creativity and intuition (which, ironically, are precisely the result of the discipline), or else Karate-Do may become, at best, a hobby like many others, with a much weaker effect indeed, in some cases, deleterious effects, due to the dangerous hobbistic and disengaged attitude, which is common these days, lies at the root of numerous diseases of our society.

To complete my answer: the sea is immense, but if you approach it with a spoon, you will get only a tablespoon of water...

Let me add a comment on the training of children, which for me is a separate chapter.

Training involving children must have a propedeutic approach.

Precisely, it is necessary to develop every locomotor and psychological characteristic of the child offering him/her the means for an adequate growth and, at the same time, making the best use of educational, mythical and symbolic tools, which are provided to us by our discipline and which speak deeply to a child's psyche.

I am against some “sport oriented” approach that has purged these precious elements off the Karate-Do for children, turning it into a dull sporting game deprived of all its mythical and symbolic potential.

**Newbushido:** When and why did you start practicing Karate-Do?

**Sensei Spongia:**

I started when I was 13.

I had played tennis since the age of seven and discovered Karate, as it often happens, because a friend, who had already been practicing and who led me to attend a lesson... it was like an electric shock, I still remember the smell of the Dojo, I felt like to be back home again.

For a couple of years more, I was training in the Dojo and still playing tennis at a competitive level, and then, by the age of 15, I had to decide which way my energy should be directed, and I had no doubts in choosing Karate-Do; I felt that it could offer me, as it further did, to become a man, well more than scoring a point by throwing a ball across the net.

I chose Karate-Do because I realized that I could take it with me into my everyday life instead of having an experience limited to the playing ground.

**Newbushido:** Among Karate styles, Goju-Ryu is maybe the most traditional one, rooted deeply in the island of Okinawa. Which are the main differences with the other Karate styles?

**Sensei Spongia:**

Honestly, I would refrain from comparing their qualities.

I believe, I know my style well enough but I do not have sufficient knowledge of other styles to be able to discuss them.

The Karate-Do, which was imported to and spread in Japan, has undoubtedly undergone significant changes, as compared to the original Okinawan Karate, both in terms of technique and style, as well as in terms of its goals.

Sportivisation then did the rest.

I think, it does not make sense any more to talk about styles in sport karate.

The same Goju-Ryu has undergone a dramatic transformation on its way from Okinawa to Japan, in so much that some training methods have been completely abandoned and the same kata have been modified significantly.

I think, that a style practiced with proper dedication and under a competent teacher should be able to ensure an effective system tested by the long-term experience that comes from a lineage of Masters.

A style must be "effective", and by this term I do not only mean its effectiveness in a fight, which is certainly an essential aspect, but also the efficiency of energetic and psychophysical development, which would ensure well being of the person practicing the style.

In short, one should reap the benefits and see the exact results of his/her training both in terms of combat performance and well being.

Otherwise, one's way will be fraught with all those aberrations that make one search for well being through lax and comfortable exercise to the satisfaction of public demand, and this, in my opinion, apart from bringing a temporary relief, appears utterly ineffective for deep and lasting training and benefits, or, in case one seeks the notorious combat "efficiency", may ensure in some, rare cases a certain short-term effectiveness, which will inevitably plummet with age leaving behind a broken body.

Too often do we see planting on of dubious products, a medley of techniques and exercises without any connection between them.

Before meeting the Goju-Ryu of Higaonna Sensei, even though I was training very hard just as I do now, I had been plagued by many doubts because I had not been able to reap the promised benefits to see the concrete results corresponding to my efforts, and so I had kept on searching and searching until I met my Master, Higaonna sensei, who dispelled my every doubt.

The Goju-Ryu that I practice, I believe it is a complete style in the fullest sense of the word. All forms of exercise we employ, from Junbi Undo to Hojo Undo, from Kakie to Irikumi, from Kata to Bunkai, etc., lead us at the final result: the complete development of the practitioner both from the point of view of martial or fighting skills, as well as psychophysical training and well being.

If you neglect even one aspect of the training, the final result will be far different.

**Newbushido:** Sensei Higaonna is a living legend of Karate, could you describe what kind of Teacher he is?

**Sensei Spongia:**

Higaonna Sensei is a living example of dedication to training.

He is a person of great gentleness and great willingness to help, but in the Dojo, on the training floor, he can be really scary.

He is a severe and demanding Teacher who does not make discounts, in terms of hard training, to those he considers to be his own students, as it should be.

When I am in Okinawa, often we leave with Higaonna Sensei at dawn for Kozenji, the Zen temple in Shuri, where Sakiyama Sogen Roshi teaches and lives — a ninety-year old Grand Master of Zen Rinzai who, in his young days, was a student of Chojun Miyagi Sensei. We practice Zazen under the direction of Sakiyama Sogen Roshi and then return to the dojo to practice Goju-Ryu. Sometimes, Higaonna Sensei is still there at 11 p.m. to incite us to the umpteenth repetition with his “Mo ichi do” (“one more time”).

When Higaonna Sensei was my guest in Rome for the first time, I remember I had to resort to a trick to be able to take him one evening to see at least the Roman Forum, in front of which, fascinated and inspired, he began to speak to me about tradition.

Over the previous days, we had never stepped out of my Dojo and my every attempt to invite him for a brief tour around the Eternal City used to meet his curt answer: “Ima keiko” (“Training time now”)...

He was there for me to allow me to maximize the opportunity of his presence and he offered himself totally without allowing himself any pause or distraction.

At the end of his stay, we were sitting at a table in my house and He answering to my dedication said: “Ask me to teach you whatever you want...”

I will never forget those words that are the seal to me of an invaluable relationship.

A personal relationship with a teacher who bears a tradition is essential for passing on an Art.

**Newbushido:** Could you tell us another story about Sensei Higaonna?

**Sensei Spongia:**

I am happy to share with you other interesting and not widely known episodes to give you an idea of my Master's character and kindness.

We were in Florence for a short and well-deserved rest after the tough work at the XIX European Gasshuku that we had organized in Italy, and every day at lunch and dinner at the restaurant Higaonna Sensei lost no opportunity to compliment each course and to thank the waiter for the delicious dishes.

On the same occasion, after seeing and appreciating Michelangelo's David (of which Higaonna Sensei appreciated the balance and posture) he decided that it was enough for him and that it was time to return to the hotel to train together...

Or when he let my son, who was 4 years old then, chase him around the sitting room table. I treasure this video.

**Newbushido:** You often go to Okinawa to practice, are there any differences between training in an Italian Dojo and a Japanese one?

**Sensei Spongia:**

In Okinawa, a Dojo is considered to be one's second home and not a gym where one goes to buy a product.

Students take care of their Dojo and come for their lessons a little earlier to ensure its cleaning and maintenance.

I think, it is the main point, which is difficult to implant in the West.

It makes a great difference between living your Dojo as a host or as a client.

My Zen Master once said: "A place where someone is paid to clean is not a Dojo", and then: "Students are those who open the door from the inside, clients are those whom it is opened to..."

I have adhered to this philosophy from the very foundation of the ToraKan Dojo (Italian IOGKF Honbu Dojo) 25 years ago, and have always provided the cleaning personally, today joined by some students staying after their dawn Zazen to perform Samu (manual work in the Zen spirit).

When I clean the Dojo, I purify my spirit and prepare myself for training and teaching.

The tatami I cleaned in the morning rubbing it on my knees, in the evening brings me back all the energy I am able to express when I walk on it while teaching and training.

At the end of each lesson, every student wipes the tatami with a cloth to leave it clean for those who come after.

In a Dojo, you learn to take care of everything, of any object as well as of yourself as well as of the others.

Just a few days ago, one of my students about 60 years old, a famous medical doctor, after having wiped the tatami on his knees together with his companions, has told me how moved he was by the feeling of solidarity he was experiencing when sharing this simple gesture with his fellow trainees irrespective of their social background or age.

Those actions have an extraordinary symbolic and educational value. Oftentimes in western culture we do not have the courage to propose them to our students for fear of losing the 'customer' consent.... but education is a risk and you are not a true teacher if you are not able to run this risk.

Think about the high educational value this approach might have in the schools if, starting from the primary schools, you allowed children and young people to take care of the cleanliness of their classroom for half an hour. But who would dare to propose this nowadays?

An Okinawan Dojo has a more family oriented atmosphere than a Japanese Dojo, it is more Chinese style.

Students open the Dojo and, as we said above, clean it and start training.

In Higaonna Sensei's Dojo there are official classes at certain hours, but it often happens, while you are training on your own, that Higaonna Sensei, who lives upstairs, might come down, see you in the Dojo and start giving you an extemporaneous as well as precious lesson.

Training in the Okinawan Dojo is to me to come back to the source to renew the spirit and refine the technique.

It is like polishing and sharpening a sword, should be a daily task, otherwise, the blade becomes dull and blunt.

Training on your own, without guidance or reference, may easily lead to significant deviations, even if you have a good foundation.

"No one can see his own eyebrows", —Higaonna Sensei likes to say to emphasize the importance of this feedback ensured by confrontation with one's teacher and other trainees.

In the Dojo of Higaonna Sensei, I had an invaluable opportunity to practice under the direction of my Master's teachers: An'ichi Miyagi Sensei (who died last year) and Shuichi Aragaki Sensei, both disciples of the Goju-Ryu founder.

Moreover, another essential aspect of the Dojo is that you can see your own Sensei during his training.

Watching the practice of Higaonna Sensei and these Masters, who are already past seventy, is a clear evidence of the effectiveness of a proper daily practice of the traditional Goju-Ryu Karate-Do and it serves as an incessant source of inspiration to me.

**Newbushido:** You also practice Zen, what relationship is there between the martial art and spirituality?

**Sensei Spongia:**

If we really talk about martial arts, then the spiritual side emerges powerfully.

Deshimaru Roshi (the European Patriarch of Zen), my Master's Master, used to say:

"... Obviously, in tournaments you fight not for your life but for a score: thus, the powers of the body and of the technique are sufficient. However, it was completely different in ancient times, since it was life that to come into play: it was intuition then to decide everything, as the last resource.. Today one should reinvent it: to perform every action in the Dojo as if one's life depended on it. In this case, martial arts would retrieve their true meaning: the practice of the Way. Otherwise, it is just a game..."

The power of the body, of the technique and of the spirit is, in fact, more or less the same, but it is always Shin the Spirit that makes all the difference in a battle."

The practice of martial arts, such as Zen, should lead to face the fundamental question of birth and death.

I could also quote Dōgen Zenji, the Patriarch of Zen Sōtō, who lived in Japan in 1200, said:

"To practice is to know oneself, to know oneself is to abandon oneself, to abandon oneself is to recognize oneself in all existences."

A religious experience is an aesthetic experience (engaging all senses) triggered by rites.

The practice of a traditional martial art is impregnated with rites and aesthetic experiences and, upon attaining a certain depth, comes close to a religious experience.

In my case, the Zen teaching, and especially what is called "Zen education", has helped me to understand aspects of Karate-Do practice, which would have escaped me otherwise, and has enabled my practice to reach a depth that, perhaps, I would have never experienced otherwise.

The encounter with Zen has determined my life.

I think that it is impossible to reach the depths of an Art with only a technical learning. The educational approach (and one can be educated at any age), which has always been a key point of the teaching of martial arts and passing on of their true spirit, is now totally forgotten.

At the beginning of my Karate-Do training, at the age of 13, I instinctively understood that beyond the technical learning would reside an essence, which should cover every sphere of human life, and I have asked myself since then, how the principles of Karate-Do can be transposed to my daily life. Zen has given me the key to solve this dilemma.

To my mind come the words of another Great Zen and Budo Master, Omori Sogen Roshi: "Zen without the accompanying physical experience (realization of the body) is nothing but empty discussion. Martial Ways without truly realizing Mind is nothing but beastly behavior."

Tomorrow I'll conduct a special 3 days training that I have started more than 13 years ago. It is called Ken Zen Ichinyo Gasshuku (Karate and Zen are just one and the same). It will be in a Dōjō in Rome, where the practice of Zen meditation and education, and Goju-Ryu Karate-Do will alternate with the study and communion of life during this 3 days retreat.

I have conducted these kinds of retreats for 12 years in the Fudenji Zen Soto monastery, for 4 times in Holland and now we have the seventeenth edition in my own town.

I am convinced that this kind of experiences allows us to enjoy a depth of practice that permits us to properly direct our practice and our lives.

**Newbushido:** Your Dojo is not just a “gym” but is organised like a real Dojo, how important are the right environment and the right atmosphere for training?

**Sensei Spongia:**

The environment is very important.

It speaks directly to our unconscious and compels us to a certain quality of behaviour and presence.

At the same time, however, it is not only a matter of arranging some furniture in a room.

A Dojo is built through the spirit of the practice, which takes place in it and which, little by little, gives shape to the space itself and vice versa.

My little Dojo has been undergoing transformations over these past 25 years constantly reflecting the practice that has inhabited it.

The practice in the Dōjō should lead to improve the sensitivity to recognize the Dōjō in every place.

**Newbushido:** Will you describe your typical training session?

**Sensei Spongia:**

I would begin by saying that Dojo training is only one aspect of the practice that I seek to deepen in every moment of my daily life.

So I would not distinguish a special time for my training.

If you mean a specific routine of Goju-Ryu training then I can tell you that I practice it every day.

In the evening, while teaching in my Dōjō I train with my students. But this is not enough and in the morning or in specially dedicated moments in the afternoon I dedicate hours to my personal training and research.

During the lessons with my students, I mostly practice the Junbi Undo and Hojo Undo (preparatory and supplementary exercises aimed at conditioning and power enhancement), Kakie, IriKumi (free fighting) and Bunkai (kata applications).

When alone, I especially train Kata and practice with heavy bag and makiwara.

I also believe that the Gasshuku experience has been and continues to be fundamental for my practice.

Dojo training and participation in Gasshuku are complementary in my practice.

Apart from going to Okinawa, I have been following my Master around the world for many years to learn from him at the Gasshukus he has conducted.

Beside learning from the Master and his most accomplished students, the Gasshuku experience allows oneself to enjoy productive confrontation with other teachers from all around the world.

It allows you not to fall into the dangerous habit, so common in the martial arts world, to isolate yourself, without accepting comparisons. It is not a way to compete with others but an intense practice of communion.

Those who start teaching, frequently becomes isolated creating a small island of peace in their own Dojo and escape any occasion for comparison and verification hiding behind an image, which is too often built on nothing, on the propaganda.

Participation in Gasshuku allows to cultivate that key inclination to continuous learning that the Japanese call Shoshin, a beginner's mind.

Another issue of particular educational value consists in the opportunity for students at Gasshuku sessions to see their own teacher in the role of a student.

There is no better way for a student to learn how to relate to a teacher and his teachings, than seeing his own teacher in the relationship with his Master (which is quite difficult for our cultural and educational training). This is a central point and is dramatically absent, except for rare exceptions, in the world of Italian Karate.

**Newbushido:** Like many Japanese styles, Goju-Ryu also has its beginning in China, how does the Kakie exercise correlate with other similar training methods, such as the Taijiquan Tui Shou? Could you clarify how this training method works and what its purpose is?

**Sensei Spongia:**

It is interesting that just recently Master Higaonna's Goju-Ryu Teachings has been introduced into the Fuzhou Schools in South China, where Goju-Ryu originally is from.

I believe that it is the first time a similar thing has happened in China involving a "Japanese" Karate style.

In one of their many visits to China in search of the origins of Goju-Ryu in the footsteps of Kanryo Higaonna Sensei, Master Morio Higaonna and his students have given demonstration of our katas. The Chinese Masters were moved and stated that the old forms that had been lost in China are still preserved in Okinawan Goju-Ryu...

Kakie is a fundamental exercise in Okinawan Goju-Ryu.

I believe that it bears many similarities to the Taijiquan Tui Shou exercise and to the Chisao of Wing Chun.

The influence of the White Crane style is evident in this exercise.

Kakie trains sensitivity at contact with the opponent's arms and body in order to anticipate his/her intentions and to apply close-range levers, throws and impacts.

Even though this exercise is certainly fundamental, it should be, as mentioned before, integrated with and complemented by other exercises of the Goju-Ryu system.

**Newbushido:** What is your opinion of Karate as a sport?

**Sensei Spongia:**

Karate-Dō is not a sport.

We must be honest.

Sport is one thing and the martial art is something completely different.

What will remain to competitors at the end of their careers, what will remain to them besides some medals which will rust?

The experience of the competition could be a good experience for young people. I myself have participated in tournaments and competitions for many years in my youth (also because at that time there was not much choice in Italy). But this experience must be proposed with great care and attention, proposed with honesty and integrity and thinking to rules that should not push the practitioner to distort his practice in order to achieve success in a competition.

The ethical, moral and technical values expressed in the practice in the Dōjō should also be reflected in the competitive performance. We call it Shiai: a test for some technical and psychological skills acquired through a confrontation with an opponent whom is just an help for the confrontation with oneself.

You are not competing against other than yourself, against your physical and psychological limitations.

On the contrary, I think most people went very far from this approach, in a totally different direction, with a total neglect not only of the technical skills and effectiveness of the Martial art but also of its



educational and ethical aspects.

Our organization, IOGKF, has no competitive purpose.

When we dared to propose a 'competitive experience' to our youth we were very, very careful about the formula to be adopted.

We designed it and perfected it so that it could allow a healthy and effective opportunity to verify the psychophysical qualities and techniques with tests that require the practitioner to have a complete and non-specialistic preparation. This formula was faithful to the curriculum and educational setting of IOGKF and the Dōjō practice.

Our students, teenagers and adults, practice hard and with great enthusiasm and do not need to be motivated in their training by a possibility to get a medal.

Not to mention the attitude of the world of sports karate towards so-called “amateurs” or “non-agonists” who seem to be considered exclusively as “affiliations meat” and who in the traditional school, on the contrary, constitute the pillars of the Dojo and of the School.

Paradoxically, the GrandMasters of Budo, including Higaonna Sensei, who have never been champions of the sport, would be considered “amateurs” by Karate sportspeople.

And these amateur trainees assigned to a second-division are “consoled” by Dan grades that replaces the medal.

Otherwise, what is the sense of those pathetic exams for various black belt dan grades, in which I have unfortunately participated in sports federations, if not to provide a consolation for those who prefer hanging their little diplomas on the walls instead of practicing for real?

Even in a purely sports world, if you want to play tennis with someone you must know how to throw the ball beyond the net. Similarly, if you come to take a swimming certificate exam and sink miserably in the middle of the swimming pool, no instructor will ever dream of acknowledging your certificate.

Yet, this has happened in the world of sports karate with devastating effects for the reputation of Karate not only as a martial art but also as a simple sport.

Today, there seems to be a reverse tendency, given the failure of the sports approach, and illusive teachers of the traditional Karate-Do begin to “resurface” nearly everywhere...

However, speaking about the traditional Karate-Do, we do not, as it is commonly and conveniently interpreted, use Japanese terms or ape obsessively the gestures that are considered “ancient” without understanding their meaning.

The tradition consists only in passing on the spirit and the deepest meaning of the art “ishin den shin” (“from heart to heart”, as they say in the Zen), in an uninterrupted lineage of people who have been able to dedicate their lives to study and research. And it is through this passage that the art becomes enriched with new insights by virtue of unity, of undisclosed alchemy, of any teacher-student relationship, which, if authentic, results in maturation of the student who will not be his/her Master's clone but who will, in turn, be able to propose a fresh interpretation to enrich the art.

Instead, we have been and still remain deluded by those who want to get things cheap that one can reach understanding of Budo only by taking federal courses and exams.

As a result, Italy is full of masters with altisonant dans who often have never had a true teacher and have never really stepped onto an authentic educational path guided by a demanding human relationship with a Teacher who bears a tradition.

However all the while, both in the Way of Budo and in the Zen, it is exclusively through this personal relationship, which embraces every aspect of one's life, that the knowledge is passed on.

It is not just a matter of technique, it is the spirit that must be translated.

Without it, at best, it is just a sport.



**Newbushido:** Does the IOGKF have any programme of activities in Italy for the near future?

**Sensei Spongia:**

Our organization has a very heavy calendar of practical events.

For more than 15 years by now, our yearly schedule has covered three workshops, one annual demonstration uniting all the schools, two advanced training and education Gasshuku sessions for Italian IOGKF teachers, one Ken Zen Ichinyo Gasshuku and one national practical training seminar conducted by a Grand Master from a foreign IOGKF (over the last years, we have brought to Italy Higaonna Sensei, Nakamura Sensei, Bakkies, Kuramoto, Sudo, Molineux, Nunes, Leijenhorst...). We are thinking whom to invite for the next season, considering that the Italian school has already reached the level requiring participation of the greatest Senior Instructors of the IOGKF.

Besides, we are already looking into 2013, when we will host the prestigious European IOGKF Gasshuku in Italy bringing together participants from all around the world for a week of intense training under the guidance of Higaonna Sensei and his most experienced students.

Finally, let me thank you for having invited me to express my observations so freely for your new Martial Arts magazine, to which I wish every success.