

# The Future with a Human Face

By Annie Gottlieb with photos by Sylvia Plachy

Open a recent *Newsweek* and you see a picture of "Cantonese tots wearing 'I Love New York' buttons"; open *New Times* and read about a Jewish Zen master from Brooklyn running a meditation center in the middle of Los Angeles. Almost everyone who survived the cultural apocalypse of the '60s is trying to marry the East in some way—be it Buddhist economics, Zen politics, antinuclear compassion-for-all-beings, or just Transcendental Meditation—at the same time as the East, having evidently reached a dead end of its own, is ardently courting the West. The same ideas that have exhausted their energy for us—material ease, technological activism, individual freedom—come to Japan and now China with the fresh force of life itself: Like male and female, West and East each seem to have what the other needs, and it's from their marriage that some sort of world culture is going to be born. The only question is what the child will look like: whether it will be a million-legged mechanized mass monster or have a human face.

We've already seen a weird parade of trial hybrids. Some of them are colorful but trivial: Eastern spirituality + Western self-absorption = the costume mysticism and karmic blather of so much of the New Age. Some show an unnerving vigor: Eastern hierarchical discipline + Western industrial production = Sony, Sanyo, and Subaru; or Eastern metaphysics + Western hucksterism = est. And some of them are downright scary, as when a Korean multimillionaire's megalomania connects with the Western craving for self-surrender and clones an army of identical-minded Moonies. There will be more of these mongrel offspring, strong ones and weak ones, hopeful and malignant. I want to tell you about one I have been involved in for five years now, one I think offers quiet hope of the future with a human face. It's a karate school.

If you come to Mas Oyama's Karate at 149 Wooster Street, the most important face you will see is Japanese: our teacher, Sensei Kishi, whom the strange currents of these times have whirled from a tiny farming village in Yamagata Prefecture, North Japan, to Manhattan and SoHo, where he seems oddly at home. Maybe it's because he is an artist by nature, whose chosen means of expression is martial: the most gifted art student in his high school, he hesitated briefly between painting and karate before deciding that the body and not the brush was going to be his medium. That settled, he left home for Tokyo with nothing but his rolled-up gi, or training uniform. He was determined to become a student of Mas Oyama, a living legend in Japan for his barehanded conquest of fighting bulls, and, as the originator of the strong and graceful Kyokushinkai style, at once the most innovative and most spiritually traditional figure in the modern martial arts.

At Mas Oyama's Tokyo dojo, Sensei Kishi lived, breathed, ate, and dreamed karate for over six years. He slept in the school's crowded dormitory and trained at an intensity only the most driven athlete or dancer can begin to imagine: a minimum six hours of strenuous practice a day, thousands of repetitions of each basic block, thrust, and kick, winter training conducted uphill and barefoot in snow, and full-contact, freestyle sparring with strong, fast senior black belts. It is a regimen that equips a man with fists like pile drivers, feet like wings, a deceptively svelte physique, the reflexes of a hungry young cat, and a special masculine gentleness that is as unmistakable as it is indescribable. The man so equipped is both an awesome fighter and an instinctive teacher, who can touch and guide a five-year-old child with the same rough-knuckled hand that decks a barroom bully.



In Tokyo, Sensei Kishi practiced six hours a day for six years, a regimen that equips one with fists like pile drivers and feet like wings.

Potential students sense these qualities in Sensei Kishi almost immediately. Actor Thomas Waites (Chilly in *On the Yard*) watched one class, nodded decisively, and said, "There's a good feeling about this place." Guitarist and songwriter Sharon Stone said, "I'd been wanting to study karate for years, but instinctively I knew that the right teacher hadn't come along. When I saw Sensei, I said, 'Okay, that's it, he's the one.'" Perhaps there other martial arts teachers who provoke this kind of response, one much deeper and simpler than being impressed by someone's technique or "spirituality"—a response straight from the *hara*, the belly. (We call it "a gut reaction.") The only ones I have personally met are the instructors Kancho (Grand Master) Oyama has sent over here to teach. (They include Seiji Kanemura in Brooklyn, Shigeru Oyama in Connecticut, Yasuhiko Oyama in Birmingham, Alabama, Miyuki Miura in Elmhurst, Illinois, and Joko Ninomiya, the reigning All-Japan Champion, in Denver.) If anything remotely resembling a *samurai* is walking around on earth today, these guys are it. In Japan they would be popular heroes, celebrated in comic book, song, and story, making a substantial living as the heads of large dojos. So what are they doing here, in a country with no tradition or deep-rooted understanding of the

martial arts, where real recognition of what they are and can do is rare?

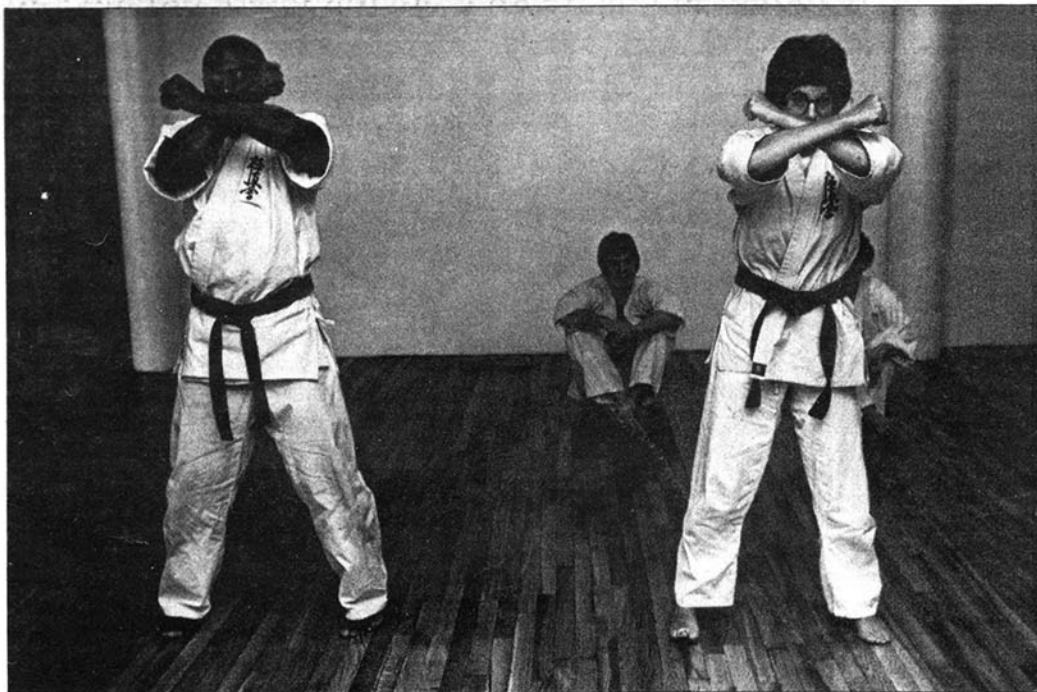
They are here because of Kancho Oyama's dream, which is nothing less than to give karate to the human race. In a speech last spring in the ancient Japanese capital of Nara, he said, "Japan has become very famous in the economic world, but I believe the only real thing the Japanese have got to show the world is Budo [the martial arts] . . . 30 years ago, I looked around at a world that did not know karate. Today I would say a good half of the world's four billion people have at least heard the word. Recently I have felt this realization very strongly: Karate is an international phenomenon now, and is no longer Japanese."

Kancho Oyama himself is largely responsible for this development. In the early '50s, speaking no English and owning little more than the suit on his back, he gave the first dramatic demonstrations in the U.S. of this little-known art's uncanny power, breaking 10-pound stones with his bare hand in Madison Square Garden. In the years since then he has built his Kyokushinkai-kan into a world organization, with member dojos in 96 countries on six continents, even in Poland, Romania, and the USSR.

Even so, karate would seem to remain as stubbornly, distinctively Japanese as raw

fish. The spirit of Budo is deeply interwoven with Zen and with the particulars of Japan's warrior history. A bagel bought in Rome is still Jewish, and a bagel baked by an Italian is probably just a poor copy. So what does Mas Oyama mean when he says that karate is "no longer Japanese"? To find out, there's no need to go far afield. It's enough to look at the other human faces in Sensei Kishi's dojo.

We—his students—are Japanese, Chinese, Russian/Polish, Black, Jewish, Irish-American, Costa Rican, Wasp, Latvian, Transylvanian, Yugoslav, and Native American. Nobody planned it that way, it just happened. We range in age from 11 to 51, and a third of us are women. (Some allowance is made in *kumite*, or practice fighting, for women's lighter weight and musculature, and we aren't expected to develop calloused fighting knuckles unless we really want to. Otherwise, we must live up to the same standards of effort, endurance, and form as the men.) Sensei Kishi's physical grace and quick imagination have attracted a high proportion of people in the arts—at last count, four painters, three writers, an actor, and a musician—but his appeal is just as strong for people who have led hard, plain lives, because that is the experience that formed him. We are carpenters, accountants, medical technicians, printers, waiters, we drive cabs, program comput-



Annie Gottlieb (right) takes a traditional Kyokushinkai stance.

ers, climb mountains, make sandwiches at Dean & DeLuca's, manage Mortimer's, finish floors. In the dojo, distinctions vanish. We're all beginners in a common language. The only entrance requirement is a human body, and the unknown, unshaped potential that implies.

The Kyokushinkai school is one that makes no distinction between physical and spiritual training. Many American martial-arts schools still fall to one side or the other of the old body/spirit divide, some concentrating almost exclusively on fighting techniques, tournaments, and trophies, while others focus on meditation, breathing techniques, and the cultivation of *ki*. Neither is as strong, by the simple test of combat, as the Kyokushinkai schools, which train the mind through the body and the body through the mind—on the practical premise that inner peace and the ability to fight off a mugger or rapist are inseparable aspects of the same thing.

Over several years I have begun to understand that physical strength has its roots in a willing spirit and that mind and heart are made clear by hard, sweaty work. It is a lesson I relearn every day—dragging a reluctant body and scribbled brain to what looks like awful exertion and coming out of it an hour later light, strong, and gay. What's perhaps most important, I have learned it through experience, not through words. Sensei Kishi teaches by practice, not by preaching. If you came to him with anything from an emotional problem to a metaphysical question, he would probably mime a few patient basic punches and say, "Just practice." It reminds me of Don Juan saying to Carlos, "Shut up, I'm talking to your body." And the body understands, with an intelligence of its own. The mind hesitates to put words to this process. I couldn't tell you about the state of my *ki*, or the balance of *yang* and *yin* in my constitution. I can only tell you that I've changed, in ways that no book, school, or shrink ever changed me.

Karate changes people. Of course, some of the most obvious changes are physical. There is no better exercise. An hour of karate is an intense cardiovascular workout, with frequent escalations of heart and breathing rates followed by brief returns to the resting state. Endurance builds rapidly over the first months of training, especially since the *kiai* or shout and other breathing techniques help you to exhale thoroughly and inhale deeply. Push-ups, sit-ups, and low, crouching stances build strength in specific muscle groups. High kicks and stretches make you limber. Kick, block, and punch combinations develop speed, muscle tone, and whole-body coordination. Your body starts to look

firm and alive, and to feel as competent as a right hand (or a left, if you're a lefty). Practice fighting breeds alertness and concentration.

But it's impossible to draw the line between "physical" changes and "psychological" ones. After just a few months of training, students report much less tension and anxiety (it's all that punching and yelling), more focus and stamina in creative work. Six months to a year, and tough, loud street dudes metamorphose into kind, courteous men; uncertain, passive types of both sexes become solid citizens with authoritative voices. Wherever you are, studying karate seems to bring you in toward the center, toward balance. If you're "spiritual," it teaches you how to kick and punch; if you're aggress-

ive, it calms you. You gain humility if you're arrogant, and self-confidence if you're insecure. If you tend to bottle things up until you explode, you develop an open, available channel for your energy. If you're a head-tripper like I was, you learn to like your body and to live in it more and more. If you're chronically scared, the experience of practice-fighting someone bigger than you brings pride and the realization that fear is in anticipation, not in action.

In short, karate, properly taught, is more than an effective method of physical self-defense; it combines in one activity many of the benefits of jogging, dance-exercise, weightlifting, assertiveness training, primal therapy, and meditation. (It's more accurate to say that it was designed to meet the needs

of a prior unity, before human nature was divided up among different fields of specialization.) This being so, why aren't more Americans doing it? I guess at four main reasons.

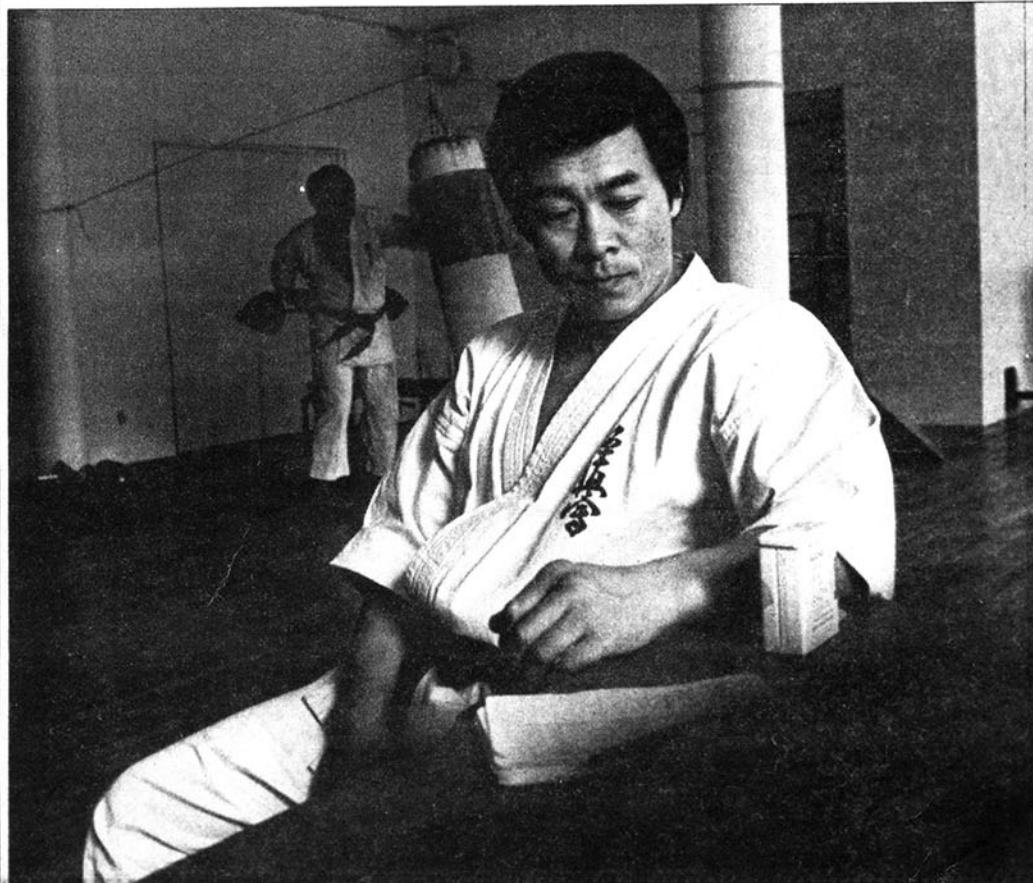
(1) It is often not properly taught, or really well taught, and yet most prospective students have no way of judging with confidence whether a particular teacher is good or not.

(2) People who have overdone on Bruce Lee movies mistakenly believe that karate is violent. Even those who know it is an art of self-defense are often afraid of being injured in practice fighting. (In a well-run dojo, with a responsible teacher, the risk of injury is no greater than in any other active sport, and perhaps less.)

(3) Though it is no more dangerous than basketball or living, karate isn't comfortable or easy. It's a challenging art that demands commitment, courage, and effort.

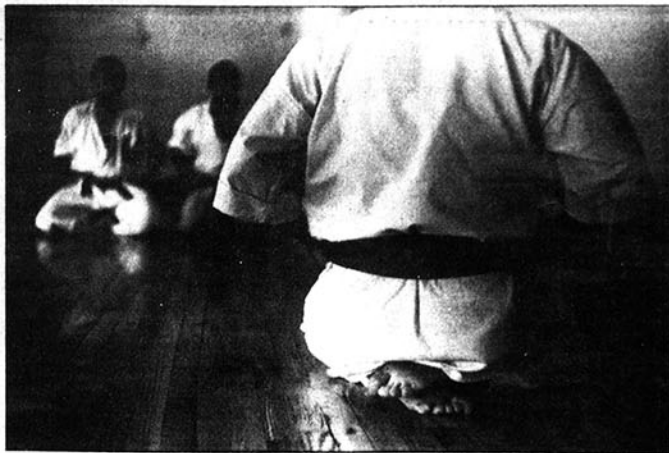
(4) Karate involves—requires—an element of rank, discipline, and obedience alien to many Americans. It isn't easy on the sovereign ego to don a humble white belt, take orders from your sensei, and bow to him and to the picture of his master. Suckled on the democratic dogma of equality, which says, "I don't have to do a damn thing to be as good as you," we sometimes have trouble acknowledging even a superiority that is plainly hard-earned. Worse, all this hierarchy and bowing might seem to smack of cult.

These questions are very important, because it is here that the real promise and power of karate lies—right beside its potential danger. Americans need discipline. Having in many cases grown up without much, we crave it even as we flee it. We are hypersensitive to the slightest infringement of an "individual freedom," a sacred right to "do your own thing," that often adds up to nothing more than the right to stay as fucked up as you are. And then, when we get sick enough of ourselves, we're ripe for the Moonies. Both in our private lives and as a culture, we have recently been oscillating between these two extremes: "narcissism" and cultism, exclusive preoccupation with the individual self and its total abandonment as the price of reconnection to community and cosmos. There has to be a middle way, one that strengthens the individual—perhaps the single greatest discovery of Western culture—through disci-



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plined, nourishing connection to something larger than the self. If the old balance of rugged individualism, God, country, and family doesn't work any more, maybe the Eastern connection can provide an alternative. I think it's just this that the martial arts have to offer.

Supposing you could voluntarily forfeit, for just an hour a day or a few hours a week, your cramped self-will and your status quo? Then the crucial question becomes: forfeit to what and to whom? An extraordinary trust is implied; for that hour, you've got to put yourself in the hands of someone who *really* knows better than you—and won't exploit the advantage. Everything depends on the teacher, and whether or not he remembers that his charismatic power belongs not just to him but to his tradition.

Power is heady, and karate teachers are human. In Japan, they're controlled by a permanent hierarchy and a strict code of senior/junior relations; America can be quite a temptation for an ego battered by years of subordination. I watched a former teacher of mine go off the deep end, and it was like watching white magic turn black. His face gradually changed from open sweetness to sullen calculation, and the atmosphere around him grew sour with paranoia, intrigue, and favoritism. I've heard rumors that this man, like a little Sun King, now descends to view his students from a "master's room" five feet above the dojo floor. Perhaps America is as much a test of character for a *karateka* as karate is for an American. I only know that Sensei Kishi and most of his fellow Kyokushinkai instructors have survived the temptation.

That's not to say that America hasn't changed them. Sensei Kishi arrived here looking like a raw Marine recruit: He had a crewcut and never smiled. Five years later, he takes shy pride in his own sensuous handsomeness, and laughter and mischief often light his face. The American freedom to be open and expressive, to follow one's own taste and judgment, to *take it easy*, is liberating to these drilled and stoic *samurai*—the other side of the marriage between Western liberty and Eastern discipline that is proving so vital for both.

But if Sensei Kishi's outward style has changed, his inner values have not. They still pivot on the word "respect"—a word which is the essence of Budo, the antidote to egotistical and ecological abuse, and the heart of what the West needs to become sane. If you ask him what all the bowing is about, Sensei Kishi will say, "*Just respect.*" That is the only credo associated with our practice of karate, and it isn't so much a credo as a way of life.

Respect your teacher, for the tremendous effort and commitment he has made to make himself what he is—and on a more modest scale, respect your fellow students for the same thing. (In a dojo with integrity, rank reflects hard work and willingness, and is therefore absolutely democratic: Anyone willing to work hard will progress.) Respect the place that graciously permits these good things to happen to you: we bow to the dojo floor, and keep it clean. Respect your ultimate teacher, the tradition: the ancient, vital wisdom, honed by many masters, that knows so much more about you than you know

about yourself. Respect the universe which—the children of the supermarket have all but forgotten—is continually giving you life. Sensei Kishi shows us a simple way we can experience that connection for ourselves: if you're panting, trying to grab more air, you feel more tired, but spend your lungs in a fierce shout, and energy rebounds into you. Give and you will get.

At the end of class, I sometimes laugh about the word "brainwashing," because it really feels as if my mind has been washed clean: Whatever tensions and obsessions I brought in with me have vanished. But real "brainwashing" wipes the mind clean only in order to write indelibly on it what some new authority dictates you shall do and believe. Our transplanted karate tells you what to do for the hour of class, no more. You are not asked to dedicate your life to it; it will strengthen you in whatever you *do* choose to make the purpose of your life. You are not told what to think, or even to think at all.

Moving in and out of your habitual self, never abandoning or destroying it, little by little you expand its limits, dissolve its rigidity, open channels to anonymous energies—vast, inhuman lakes of health. And so you change, gradually, without ever "snapping"—the term that has been coined for the leap into cults. As your body changes, perhaps you yourself begin for the first time to take on human form—the deeper form discerned by the masters, to the realization of which they devoted their lives. Very few people can ever follow where *they* led, but it's enough that your ordinary life is leavened by a new awareness of what you are: a piece of life itself. The same body that makes you single and separate is the ground of your connection to others and to the whole.

Individuality, community, and cosmos all meet in the human body. It could become a central symbol again, as it was in the Renaissance—only now no longer the image of man supreme, man in God's humanoid image, but the image of man as a calligraphy of the elements. The moves of karate are like an alphabet of nature. And it is worth remembering that in the late 1970s, nature is political.

Historically, karate—the word means "empty hand"—was "the fighting method for those whose weapons have been taken away or who are forbidden weapons." Kancho Oyama writes that "throughout Oriental history many instances occur in which the people have risen to resist authority using only their empty hands." We can't literally do that today; corporate, military, and nuclear power won't be conquered by bare fists any more than the Pentagon was by the flowers of the late '60s. But we can and must begin by radically revising our experience of personal helplessness, of dependency on authorities and machines. Studying karate is one way to do that. Needing nothing but the body, gravity, a floor, and another body, it is a-technological—an art of absolute self-reliance.

Now I've done what all enthusiasts do: decided that what has saved me will save the world. And I'm *still* going to moan and groan tomorrow, when I have to go to class and face, again, the grueling climb to miracle. I can hear my sensei saying reproachfully, "Why so much yak-yak-yak? *Just practice!*"