

# Hanshi Haruyoshi Yamada 9th Dan

*“there are no short cuts on the path to perfection!”*

*Interview by Iain Abernethy*

Grand Master Haruyoshi Yamada is a 9th dan of Hanshi rank (awarded by Soke Chojiro Tani). Hanshi Yamada was a student of Chojiro Tani - the founder of Shukokai - until his death in 1998. It was also in this year that Hanshi Yamada became the president of the Shukokai Karate-Do Union. Hanshi Yamada also holds the rank of 8th dan Hanshi with the Japan karate federation. I recently had the privilege of meeting Hanshi Yamada and talking to him about the history of Shukokai karate, his training with Soke Chojiro Tani, the Shukokai Karate-Do Union and his views on karate training.

**TRAD: The Shukokai School of Karate was founded by Chojiro Tani; who, as I understand it, originally studied under Chojun Miyagi (founder of Goju Ryu) whilst at**

**university. When Chojun Miyagi returned to Okinawa, Kenwa Mabuni (founder of Shito-Ryu) took over the teaching at the university club and this is when Chojiro Tani began his training under him. I believe that Mabuni taught Naha-Te to the university students at that time. Is this correct and could please tell us a little more about Chojiro Tani's early studies?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Tani Sensei studied under both Miyagi and Mabuni, but he spent much more time learning from Kenwa Mabuni. Tani Sensei studied not just Naha-Te, but also Shuri-Te and Tomri-Te from Mabuni at the university dojo. As well as learning Karate, Tani sensei also studied Shin-den Fudo-ryu Jujutsu and Kobudo under Mabuni.

Mabuni constantly developed the various styles of Karate and the Jujutsu methods and they eventually evolved into Shito-Ryu. However, Mabuni not only taught Tani Sensei Shinto-Ryu, he also taught him the forerunners to the style. In addition to these studies, Tani also studied judo in which he held the rank of 3rd Dan.

**TRAD: As I understand it, Kenwa Mabuni awarded Chojiro Tani his teaching certificate and soon after he began teaching “Tani-Ha Shito Ryu”. When was that?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Tani studied under Mabuni for 10 years and it was in 1948 that he awarded Tani his teaching certificate. It was at that time that Tani began teaching his own version of Shito-Ryu, which he called “Tani-Ha Shito Ryu”. Mabuni Sensei died in 1952.

**TRAD: Could you please explain how and when the name “Shukokai” originated?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** From 1948 Tani used the term Shukokai for his group. Tani-Ha Shito Ryu was the style being taught; Shukokai was the name of the group. After the Second World War during the American occupation of Japan, the use of the words “martial art” were not permitted. Tani could therefore not use terms like “martial arts association”, but “Shukokai” was OK. The best and easiest way to explain the meaning of “Shukokai” is “working together”.

**TRAD: What are the main differences between Mabuni's Shito-Ryu and Tani's Shukokai?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Tani Sensei was a high-school teacher and he therefore had a good understanding of physics. Tani Sensei was the first person to approach both Karate technique and body movement in a very scientific way. These innovations resulted in Tani Sensei placing a high emphasis on mental focus and scientific body movement. The combination of Tani's knowledge of Karate, his knowledge of physics, and his understanding of how to communicate effectively meant that he was able to develop Shito-Ryu.







The acceleration and dynamic impact developed by Tani Sensei's innovations was extremely impressive. Tani Sensei was very intelligent and knew that this modern and logical approach would give Shukokai a wide appeal. Tani Sensei was a great innovator and as a result Shukokai was less static and more dynamic than the Karate he originally learnt.

**TRAD: When did you begin your studies under Chojiro Tani?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** When I was at high-school I studied both Gojo-Ryu and Judo. It was while I was at high-school that I first heard of Tani Sensei and I became very curious to find out more. I began training with Tani Sensei in 1956.

**TRAD: What was it about Chojiro Tani and Shukokai that appealed to you? Could you also tell us a little bit about your early experiences with Chojiro Tani? What was the training like?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** I was very impressed by Tani Sensei's technique, the way that he taught, and the way he logically analysed Karate. Tani Sensei also not only taught the kata; he also taught how to make use of the kata. In the dojo where I trained prior to studying with Tani Sensei, we would practise applying the techniques, but this was in a very static way. However, training with Tani Sensei was not like that: it was much more dynamic. It was when I heard about this that I decided to check out Tani Sensei. Needless to say, when I did visit Tani Sensei's dojo I was very impressed. He was very charismatic and a great communicator. I've a profoundly deep respect for Tani Sensei.

Tani Sensei also taught Karate for the individual. He did not say "you must do this" or "you must do that", rather he would ask "how does your body feel?" We are all different and Tani Sensei understood that. He would listen to his students and help them to develop in the best way for them.

Tani Sensei used to emphasise the importance of going forwards. It is important never to retreat, otherwise the opponent will be on top of you. The combinations he taught would always involve immediate and strong counter-attack. Also, everything that Tani Sensei taught was related. The basics, the combinations, the kata, and the kumite were all linked and were not taught as separate segments. Partner work was also very important at the dojo.

**TRAD: It was in 1998, after Chojiro Tani's death, that the Shito-Ryu Shukokai Karate-do Union was formed. Could you please tell us about that process?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** When Tani Sensei passed away there was a concern that Shukokai would split and people would go their

own way. There were three people who were awarded ninth dan by Tani Sensei and three people who were awarded eighth dan. If all these people had gone their separate ways, with time Shukokai may have died. We therefore decided to form the union so that Shukokai would remain strong. Having formed the union we then needed to decide which of the eighth and ninth dans was going to be the chairman of the union.

An election was organised. All the dojo heads voted and I was elected as the head of the union. I was the youngest of those eligible and in Japan it is very unusual for the youngest person to be appointed to such a position. Unfortunately, some people did not like the fact that a person younger than them was elected and they left the union. However, some have since come back and we retain contact with others.

**TRAD: Do you think it's important for Karate groups, associations and individuals to have a strong and direct lineage?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Yes. Groups, associations and individuals need to have a good lineage. It is very important to have strong roots.

**TRAD: If people reading this would like to know more about the Shito-Ryu Shukokai Karate-do Union, how should they go about it?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** They should contact the representative for their country. The main website is [www.shukokaiunion.com](http://www.shukokaiunion.com) and people can find out more by visiting that site. If people would also like to learn more about the philosophy behind the Shito-Ryu Shukokai Karate-do Union they can also contact the head dojo in Japan.

**TRAD: What are the main characteristics of Shukokai that differentiates it from other Karate styles?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** A very important characteristic of Shukokai is that it makes use of natural movement so that the techniques belong to the individual. You don't need to be big or strong to make use of Shukokai techniques. Blocks and strikes are also performed with one flowing movement such that the body is always ready to move onto the next technique. It is Tani Sensei's way of moving the body that makes Shukokai unique.

**TRAD: What is the purpose of kata training?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** The purpose of kata is to enable you to use and move your body effectively. Kata contains all kind of movement. In the second century in China there was a doctor called Kada. He would look at animals, such as the monkey, the



falcon and the tiger, to see the way they moved and breathed. If you leave an iron door outside it will rust shut and deteriorate. However if you constantly open and close the door, it will not rust. It is the same with the body: if you do not use the body, it will deteriorate. However, if you use the body and are breathing properly you will remain strong and healthy.

**TRAD: Does kata have any relevance to actual combat?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Of course. We can look at Karate and kata from both a Budo and a sport perspective. In sport Karate there is a referee and rules that prevent anyone from applying techniques in a way that would result in serious injury. The kata has no such limitations. The techniques are there to incapacitate. In Chinte kata there are strikes to the eyes. Kata also contains groin strikes etc. Such techniques are obviously forbidden in tournaments, but we learn them through the kata. An understanding of kata helps the student to understand the difference between Karate as a martial art and Karate as a sport.

**TRAD: Do you have a favourite kata? If you do, which one is it and why?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** The kata Sanchin and Tensho are my favourites. They teach good breathing, and breathing is very important for good health. Breathing belongs to the inner individual. Good breathing promotes the flow of blood; it aids digestion and promotes an overall feeling of wellbeing. Proper breathing is very important and one of the main benefits a person can gain from Karate training.

**TRAD: Could you tell us a little about the Shukokai Karate-do Union World Cup?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** We have both kata and kumite in line with the WKF rules. At the moment we don't have demonstrations of bunkai in the team kata finals, but I would like to see this. In the not too distant future I will be talking to the representatives of each country in order to make a plan for the inclusion of bunkai demonstrations. I'm looking forward to seeing this develop.

**TRAD: Do you feel Karate can be both a martial art and a form of combative sport?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Yes, but only if proper rules are in place to ensure safety. Miyamoto Musashi was a skilled swordsman, and he was also very streetwise. He used the environment and was a great tactician. When Musashi fought he would try to position himself so that the sun would be in his opponent's eyes. When fighting for real, you need to do what you can to give the advantage to yourself. If the situation is very dangerous it may be necessary to use something to hand as a weapon so you can safely get away. Bujitsu is not sports knowledge; it is keeping oneself safe and ensuring you are not killed. Bujitsu is not "fair play" and is very unpleasant. The sport side of Karate has rules and etiquette and is therefore more positive.

**TRAD: I believe you are also a 4th Dan in Kodokan Judo. Would you recommend that Karateka also study Judo and other arts?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** It is very good for a Karateka to study another martial art, so long as that learning does not interfere with their Karate or cause it to deviate.

**TRAD: What advice would you give to those reading this interview to help them develop their Karate?**

**HARUYOSHI YAMADA:** Firstly, there are no short cuts on the path to perfection. A shortcut to progress or the acquisition of complete skills does not exist. We have to spend a lot of time and energy developing ourselves. Make the utmost effort to improve yourself and your Karate technique, even if it seems a very minor thing. Secondly, esoteric skills exist within basic technique. So we must not neglect basic practise. We must constantly keep working on the basics, from beginners to those of high rank.

If you learn the technique, and you learn how to apply the technique with complete concentration, then you have knowledge. Listen to what you are taught and digest it. Keep it inside and get the essence of it. If you listen to your teacher, and keep it inside, in time, your best will come out.

*For further details of Shukokai Karate-Do Union, you can visit [www.shukokaiunion.com](http://www.shukokaiunion.com). The European chief instructor is Tsutomu Kamohara 8th Dan and the website for Europe is [www.shukokai-europe.net](http://www.shukokai-europe.net). The chief instructor for England is Denis Casey 7th Dan and the website is [www.shukokai-england.com](http://www.shukokai-england.com).*

**Left to Right: Iain Abernethy (interviewer), Tsutomu Kamohara 8th Dan, Haruyoshi Yamada 9th dan**

