

Newsletter "The Source"

Bujinkan Michael Wedekind Interview -May 27th, 1996

with Shihan Richard J. Van Donk

MW - You are one of the highest ranking master teachers in the Bujinkan and also have several blackbelts in other styles. Can you tell us something about your first impression of Sensei Hatsumi when you first met him back in your early training?

Van Donk- My first impression was that he was an incredible human being. His energy was so radiant, so full of life. From my previous experience in hard style Karate I expected Japanese martial artists to be more strict and rigid but I found Soke Hatsumi to be very open and friendly and very exuberant in his energies, almost non-Japanese like in nature. His martial art's skill was way beyond anyone I had ever trained with before and I had trained with a lot of really, really good teachers. The things I learned from other teachers were different , in a different kind of context. What Hatsumi was teaching even back then seemed to be more of a life giving, more open, more complete kind of training. I was really impressed with his skills; his ability to move, his distancing and timing, and his ability to do so little in a fight situation and yet accomplish so much all at the same time.

MW - Some people say that Ninjutsu is not a real art. They say it's mixed from other arts because they have never heard of it before. Maybe they have tried Judo or Karate before but they have either never heard of Ninjutsu before or if they have heard of it all they know of it is what they have seen on videos or at the movies.
What can you say to this?

Van Donk- It is impossible to know what is real as far as how somebody trained five or six hundred years ago, or a thousand years ago for sure because we weren't there. Whatever a person sees or witnesses sometimes gets filtered through whatever they have seen before or whatever their beliefs are about it. If they have only seen Ninjutsu in movies then they will expect to see that kind of thing, the Sho Kasugi or Ninja Turtles type moves, or whatever they have experienced as Ninjutsu in the past. If they have experienced Karate before then maybe they will see Karate type movements in it. If they have experienced Judo before then maybe they will see Judo type movements in it. If they have done Ju-jitsu type movements then they will see Ju-jitsu moves in it. If they've done Iaido then maybe they'll see some of that in it. This is because the art that we do

encompasses a lot of all of these arts. The roots of the schools or ryus which are the Nine Traditions in which we train in the Bujinkan and have been passed down to Grandmaster Hatsumi encompass the very beginnings, the very basics of the true living Budo, and were done in a living time. So we practice all of the aspects from which a lot of these more modern arts came into being. Modern Karate wasn't formalized until the 1920's; Judo until the late 1890's. A lot of these came from Aiki-jujitsu and Ju-jitsu type schools. A lot of those roots come from the same schools that were handed down to Hatsumi and we train in, like Gyokko Ryu, Koto Ryu and some of the other schools, so there will be a lot of similarities.

Also, there are only so many ways you can punch at somebody, or twist a wrist or these kind of things so martial arts wise it will look somewhat the same but one of the things that is really different about what we do is the way we move or the Taijutsu. The movement of the body is not as static, it has more flow and movement to the techniques than Karate or even a Ju-jitsu system. A lot of the modern martial arts have become more stylized and more formed by technique itself. Techniques, you have to remember, even if they are 500 years old or however old, were often written down by people who won in a battle, maybe notes that they took to help them remember what they did that worked. Maybe someone came at them with a sword and they moved to one side and hit the sword out of the hand with a stick and then hit them on the side of the head - so then maybe they wrote that particular move down so they would remember it and then that became one of the techniques in their school. Or maybe even in practice they designed particular drills for different situations and that became their system at their school.

Ninjutsu is not what you see in the movies even though that is what people expect and what some people want. Some even get all dressed up in the Ninja clothes or wear the camouflage to keep the mystique. But inside all the trappings is a real, true, living martial art that hopefully helps a person to grow to be a better human being inside themselves and doesn't just teach them to hurt somebody or even only teaches physical self defense.

MW - The Bujinkan style is growing in the world very quickly and there are those who have studied a little bit and then left to go their own way and do some Ninjutsu mixed up with other things but still claim it as Ninjutsu. How can a person who wants to train in the real art find a good teacher and what must a teacher learn for himself in order to bring the true art to the people?

Van Donk- Ok, you have several questions there and I will try to address them one at a time. The first question I heard is that a lot of people who have trained in the Bujinkan have now mixed it with some kind of Karate or other system and claimed it as their own. Well, that's ok - there's nothing wrong with that. People

need to go their own path. They need to learn what they need to learn from someone and then move on to do something else if that's what they want. I more appreciate someone who has said, "Ok, I've taken a look at this, I like these pieces of it, I'm going to go take it and do it on my own with some other things and I'm going to call it my own name. I'm going to call it my own system." That's fine. That's a lot easier and a lot better to me than someone being inside the Bujinkan and adding all their own things and doing their own things that are completely different than the Bujinkan training and still calling it Bujinkan training. This gets confusing to people who want true Bujinkan style of martial arts.

And that leads to the next question of how do you choose a teacher to know whether or not they are somebody who is really doing what Soke Hatsumi Sensei is teaching or something that they have just made up on their own. The only way I can answer that is to say that a person needs to first of all find out if that teacher has actually gone to train with the Grandmaster, or if the teacher's teacher has trained a lot with Soke Hatsumi. Ask questions such as how much time have they actually experienced training with Grandmaster Hatsumi themselves? Have they been to Japan? Have they got the Grandmaster's video tapes? After they have been training in the art a while they will find out if that teacher is known and respected by other senior teachers in the Bujinkan system.

You also have to choose a teacher by the gift you are getting yourself from their training. If you are getting a gift from that teacher it doesn't matter what the name of the school is or what the name of the art is. If you are getting what you need, what is giving value to yourself and your life, this is what is most important. Most people coming new into martial arts have no idea what the difference is between different arts. They are just looking for martial arts. They don't know the names until they have been training for quite a while. To pick a good teacher is the most important. If the teacher is giving you the things you need then you stay with that teacher. If not then maybe you need to look for something else. It's easy to find out if a teacher is really studying in the Bujinkan. It will be disclosed in a short while after training. If the teacher is not building Hatsumi Sensei up and talking about the Grandmaster often in their school, giving rank certification from Japan then that's when you might start checking more if what you are really seeking is true Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu.

MW - Now you have done your first seminar in Germany. Many people have not heard of you here before now. Why is that and what do you plan for the future?

Van Donk - Why haven't they heard about me in Germany until now? Well, I was quieter than some. Some people decided they wanted to write a lot of books. My teacher, Grandmaster Hatsumi told me not to write a book for a while. He said it was ok to make a few videos which I have done. Those change over time. He said

this was because things would change over time, the way the art was represented would change; we would go into a new progression. And we have. It went from Ninja to Ninjutsu now to Budo Taijutsu. And just now he has told me it is ok to write a book now.

I didn't really want to popularize myself that way (the old Ninja image people had in their minds) even though I did my best to make things available to people, putting out videos to help in training and telling them to go to the source, to go to Grandmaster Hatsumi and learn what the true Bujinkan way was. And also trying to create a better community among friends. I've always said this everywhere I've gone to all the top teachers. Let's build a good Bujinkan community. A lot of them didn't really want to listen. A lot of them hadn't really trained a lot in Japan (even though they said they had) and my first priority was my own training. I've made over twenty different trips to Japan and been to over 15 different TaiKai's in different places in the world to train with Grandmaster Hatsumi and spent a lot of time with him. It was all for my own training, not to get famous. The organization that I have (American Bujinkan) was born out of my desire to put more true information out - translations of books and tapes and making it easy for people to get the Grandmaster's videos. I made the first training syllabus so students could understand and know more correct ways of what was expected of them in training. I'm not perfect by any means but I'm still doing my best to duplicate how my teacher has been teaching me and I keep going back to the source training all the time. I think this is very important.

As far as the future, I think more people in Europe will know me now because I am going to more TaiKai's in other countries, not just the USA. Word spreads quickly when people enjoy what you have to offer. People were very, very happy with the seminar we just did. They saw things they had never seen before and so I am happy about that.

MW - You just now trained 3 days with some of the Germans. What is your impression of the training in Germany and do you have anything to say to the people training in Germany?

Van Donk - Yes - Keep training! And keep training with good teachers like yourself. I saw students who were very hungry to learn, really wanted to learn and were very open and friendly. I was really happy to see that. Everyone got along well with each other and were willing to try new things, even when they were very different from what they were used to doing. When I teach a seminar I like to do things differently than what the teacher normally teaches because you have good teachers here and the students already get that. So I do some wild and crazy things to get them to think in a different way, to explore movement differently. I was impressed with the level of many of the students. I think they need to work just a little bit more on form and posture but their ideas and knowledge of how to move and how to play and get down and roll was really very good.

They had a good understanding of this. They were a great group of people to work with.

The message I have is not just for Germany but for everywhere. This word politics always comes up and I'll just say this straight - people need to grow up. I didn't hear any of this from the students at the seminar we just did but I usually do hear all the time, "Well, this person is saying this" or "This group is doing it this way" or "That group does it that way". I think it's wonderful that different groups do things different ways. Why? Maybe one teacher has been to Japan at a different time than another teacher. Or maybe they've seen a certain thing and they love that particular thing because it fits their personality. Another person has a different personality and they train in a slightly different way. This can add (to what they know) so people can train with different teachers at different times, go to different seminars and learn new ideas, new aspects in training. It's really about learning to share together, about building a community of friends. It's not about being Number 1 - nobody's Number 1. If anybody is Number 1 it is Grandmaster Hatsumi and it needs to always go back to that. There are a lot of great teachers both inside and outside of Japan now - especially since the move to Budo Taijutsu. Soke Hatsumi has sped everything up ten times faster than even before. This next couple of years is a very important time of growth for students and teachers in the Bujinkan. Teachers need to become an example. They need to be an example for their students. If they are always talking, talking, talking bad about this person, bad about that person, they are wasting their time. They are hurting their students, they are hurting the Bujinkan - and it doesn't make them look any better. To me it actually makes them look worse. It means that they haven't learned the true essence of the feeling of what my teacher is teaching all the time. It's that feeling, that spirit, that living essence. They've lost that and they are trying to hold on and maintain just their little group of students and say, "Oh look, I'm great. I have this." I think some of them are trying to justify in their own minds even the rank number they have been given because the ranks have gone so fast - so they have to hold themselves taller and say, "Oh, you don't want to train with so and so." But they need to quit talking and train with the Grandmaster. Many people are lost now because they haven't trained with Soke for so long and they are trying to catch up. If they had spent all that time they spent talking and just trained they would be much better off now. It's the people who didn't care who said what and just trained that have gotten good. Even though they may not like some of the things that other people do.

Some of the very wrong things that I've been hearing is how people have printed up their own certificates and are stamping them and selling them and they don't pay Hatsumi Soke. That is terrible. Some of these people make their whole living off of what Hatsumi Soke has given them the ability to do. Soke has changed their whole life and this is what they do in return. Why do they want to steal from him? Why do they want to steal from their students and not give them authentic ranking? They themselves don't want a phony certificate, why should they give one to their students? I get calls all the time from people with this problem.

It's only fair that the money goes to the Grandmaster. But other than that it is just up to

people to get along with each other and build community. Share training, share ideas, share notes. I do my best and I have tried a lot in the United States and I will continue throughout the world, encouraging people to build a better Bujinkan.

Just train. The people who continue training will be the ones still standing in the future. Over time ranks change and people catch up with each other. You have to think long term. It will work itself out in time. That's why I didn't write a lot of things for a while. All I did was train and stay out of those kind of things. People can say whatever they want, but I keep training. And I have a great relationship with the Grandmaster so I'm where I want to be. Have the courage to do it for yourself.

See you next time.

Shihan Richard Van Donk