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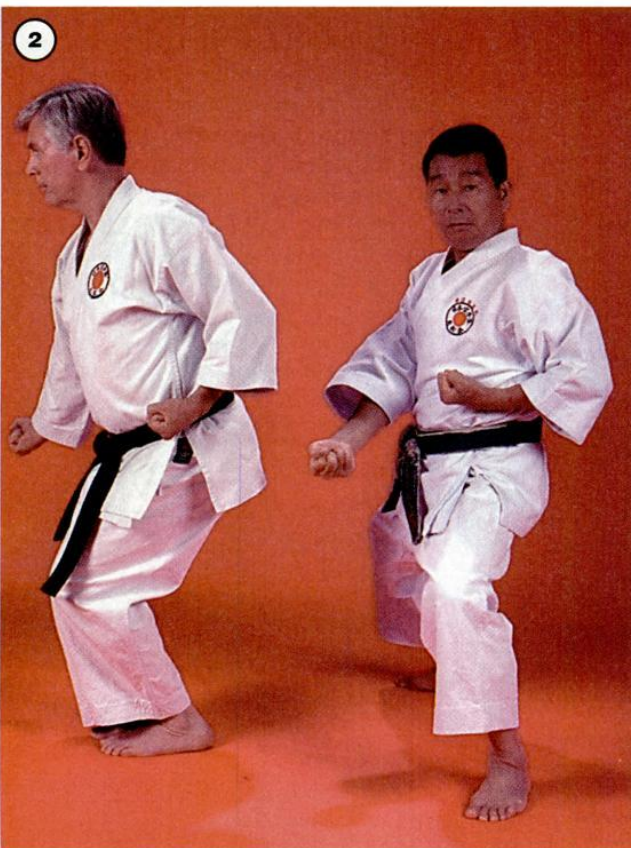
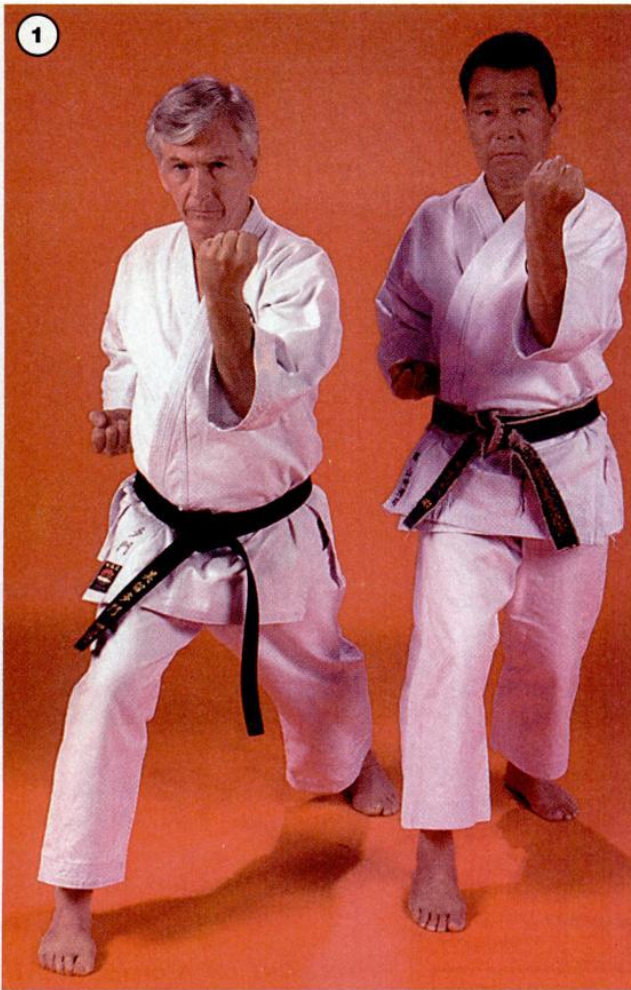
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# The reasons why karate's most popular kata differs from style to style

by Dan Ivan

*Bassai dai* is perhaps the most popular *kata* (choreographed training sequence) in all of the Japanese and Okinawan karate systems. *Bassai dai* is an advanced *kata* and is taught primarily to senior students. It is often one of the criteria at brown and black belt testing sessions, and it probably appears more often than any other form in national and international karate competitions. The movements in the *kata* vary, however, from one style and/or school to another.

Seventh-degree *ryobukai* karate black belt Kiyoshi Yamazaki, who serves as a referee and judge for the World Karate Federation, is a leading authority on *bassai dai*. According to the 56-year-old Yamazaki, *bassai dai* is usually taught after a student has learned the five *pinan* (*heian*) *kata* and is one of the more advanced sets commonly practiced by brown and black belts.

Nearly all of the karate styles of Okinawa and Japan include *bassai dai* in their curriculum. Two exceptions, however, are the Okinawan systems *goju-ryu* and *uechi-ryu*, which

*It takes only four movements into the bassai dai kata of shotokan and shito-ryu to discern differences in how each system interprets the form. Notice how Bill Damon's shotokan version (1, left) features a wider stance than Kiyoshi Yamazaki's shito-ryu rendition of the kata. Just two steps later (2), both Damon's stance and hand position are different than Yamazaki's for a technique designed to block an opponent's kick.*

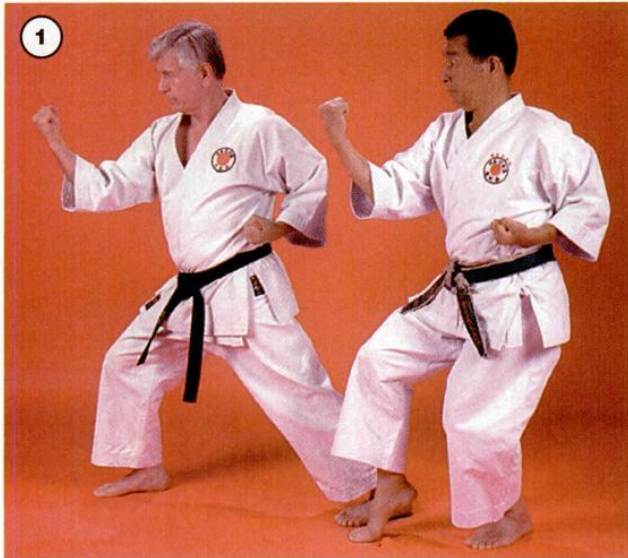




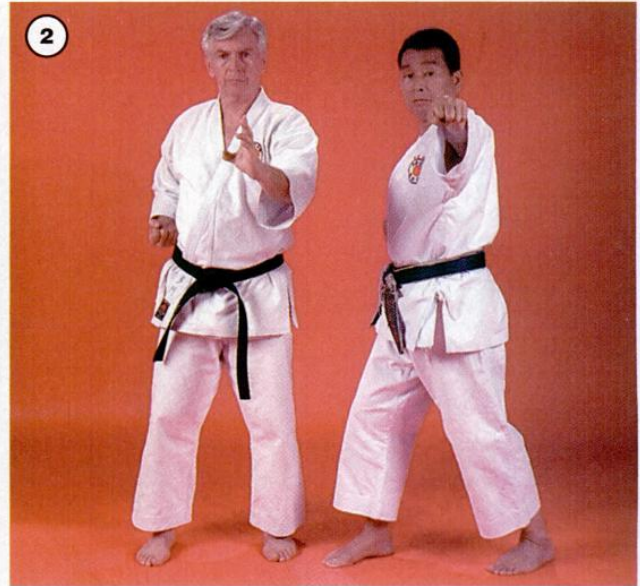
PHOTO BY DOUG CHURCHILL

# BLACK BELT





**Eight steps into the bassai dai kata, Bill Damon (above left) and Kiyoshi Yamazaki (above right) are both executing (1) an outside block, but Yamazaki's shito-ryu version of the form features a shorter stance with the front heel raised, as well as slightly different placement of the nonblocking hand. Three steps later (2), Damon, demonstrating shotokan bassai dai, is blocking an opponent's chest grab, while Yamazaki, demonstrating shito-ryu bassai dai, is punching his adversary. Notice the stance differences as well.**



have different sets of kata.

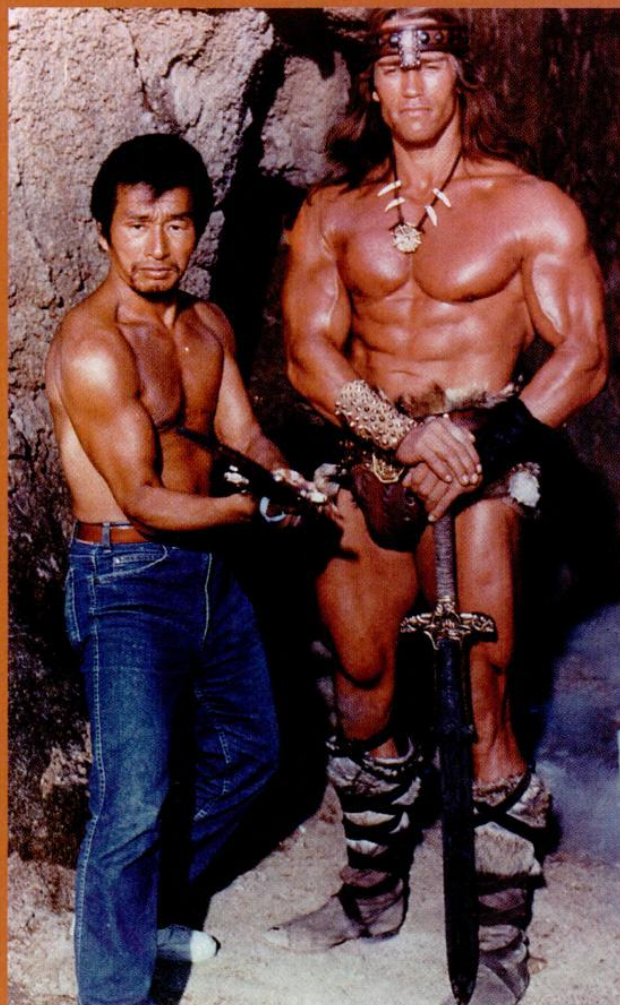
Yamazaki has spent a lifetime practicing and researching karate. If anyone can detail the history of bassai dai and explain why it varies so much from system to system, it is the venerable ryobukai master. Despite the fact he has accumulated a vast number of graphs, charts and textbooks on karate during his lifetime, Yamazaki claims there is little documenta-

## The History of Ryobukai Karate

*Yamazaki Passes on this Tradition-Rich Karate System in the United States*

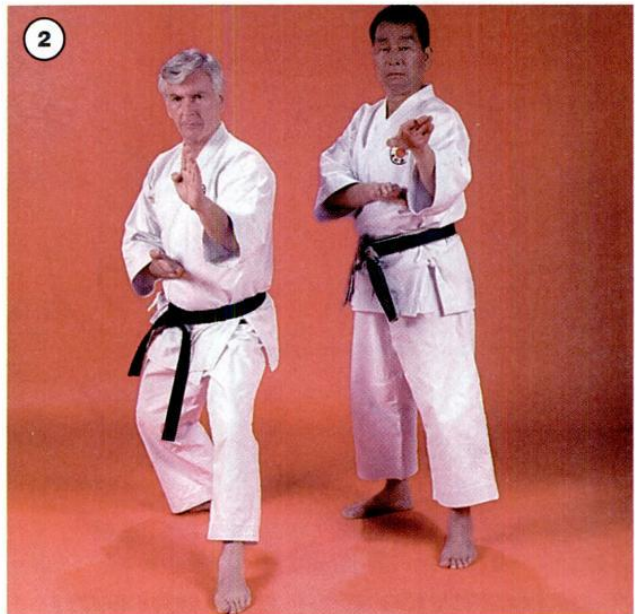
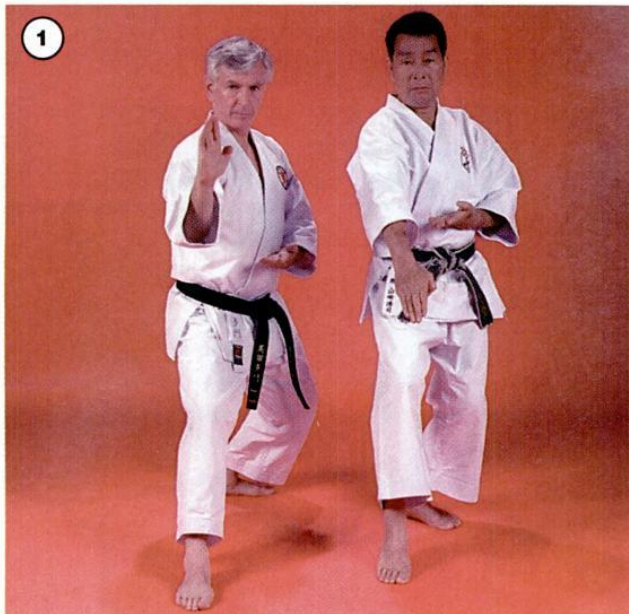
**A**t the turn of the 20th century, *jujutsu* and *kendo* were still the dominant martial arts in Japan, but an empty-hand combat system known as karate was beginning to draw a following, and it wouldn't be long before *shotokan* and other karate styles began to overtake the other arts in terms of popularity.

One of the early Japanese karate systems was *ryobukai*, which was founded by Yasuhiro Konishi, who established the Ryobukan training hall in Tokyo in 1920. Konishi became good friends with many of the Okinawan karate masters, including *shotokan* karate founder Gichin Funakoshi, *shito-ryu* creator Kenwa Mabuni and *goju-ryu* founder Chojun Miyagi, all of whom taught at one time or another at the Ryobukan. In addition, many *jujutsu*



*Ryobukai karate instructor Kiyoshi Yamazaki (far left) poses with Arnold Schwarzenegger (left) during the filming of Conan, The Barbarian. Yamazaki, an expert with the Japanese katana, taught Schwarzenegger the sword techniques the actor used in the action film.*





PHOTOS BY DOUG CHURCHILL

**Notice the significant difference (above) in hand placement 16 steps into the bassai dai kata of shotokan and shito-ryu karate. Bill Damon (1, left), demonstrating the shotokan version of the form, uses an open hand to block an opponent's punch, while Kiyoshi Yamazaki (1, right), demonstrating the shito-ryu version of bassai dai, places his hand much lower to block an adversary's low kick. Notice how Damon's stance is also wider. Three steps (2) later in bassai dai, Damon is in a back stance, seemingly blocking another punch, while Yamazaki is in a half-forward stance and is deflecting a chest grab while grabbing his imaginary opponent's arm.**

stylists, disgruntled with training at Jigoro Kano's Kodokan, found their way to the Ryobukan, which became a kind of "melting pot" of martial artists and one of the first open forums for Okinawan masters to teach their systems. The open-minded Konishi, who was also a student of aikido under that style's founder Morihei Uyeshiba, embraced them all at his Ryobukan and remained their friend throughout their lives.

Ryobukai favored the teachings of Mabuni and Funakoshi, and Konishi incorporated their kata (training forms) into his system. Konishi also included some of Miyagi's goju-ryu kata, as well as techniques which can be traced to the powerful Choki Motobu, who practiced his own form of karate. Konishi's goal was to create a well-balanced system to pass on to his own students, which he accomplished without losing the friendship of the great Okinawan masters.

Konishi passed away in 1983, and his son, Takehiro, assumed leadership of ryobukai and has maintained the quality and principles of the system. Helping Takehiro Konishi in this endeavor is Kiyoshi Yamazaki, who is the director of all foreign branches of the ryobukai system. The 56-year-old Yamazaki, who was a student of Yasuhiro Konishi, has lived in the United States for nearly half of his life,

but maintains close ties with ryobukai's *hombu* (headquarters) in Tokyo. Yamazaki, who teaches out of his Anaheim, California, school, began his martial arts training, like many Japa-

**Kiyoshi Yamazaki (below) trained with ryobukai karate founder Yasuhiro Konishi and currently serves as the international branch director for the system.**

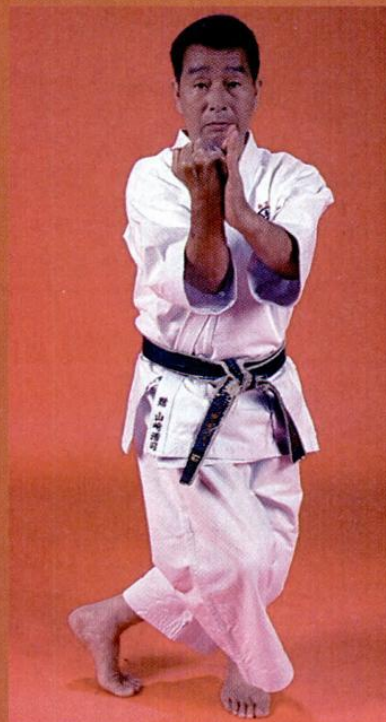


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nese, in kendo and jujutsu. In addition to his ryobukai training, Yamazaki practiced karate under *kobayashi shorin-ryu* master Shugoro Nakazato, and is also an expert in *iaido* (sword drawing) and *kobudo* (classical Okinawan weapons).

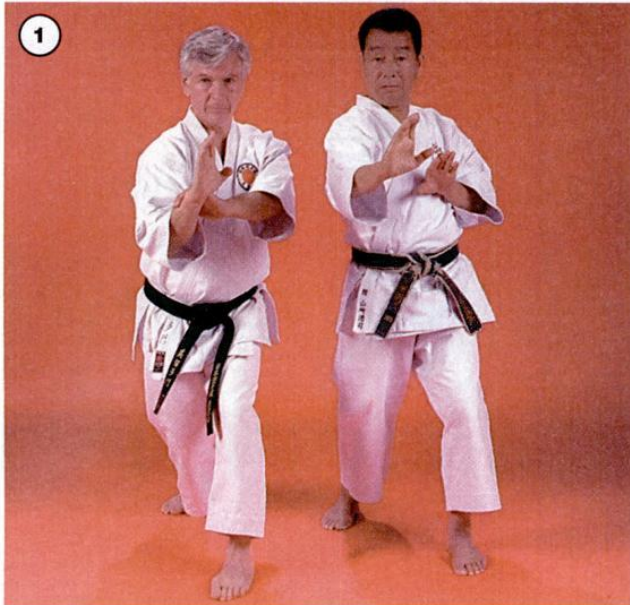
Yamazaki has a reputation for outstanding technique and possesses the speed, precision and power of a karate champion in his twenties. His proficiency has led to many jobs in film and television as both an actor and technical adviser. He is perhaps best known for teaching sword techniques to Arnold Schwarzenegger for the film *Conan, The Barbarian*, but Yamazaki has also worked on such motion pictures as *Dune* and *Dragonheart*.

A prominent member of the Japan Karate Federation and a World Karate Federation referee and judge, Yamazaki was recently appointed technical chairman in the USA National Karatedo Federation, which is currently the governing body for amateur karate in the United States.

Very little in English can be found on the tradition-rich ryobukai system, but Yamazaki is working hard to change that. He is currently involved in writing a ryobukai training manual, and he recently produced a series of instructional videotapes which are available through *Black Belt* magazine.

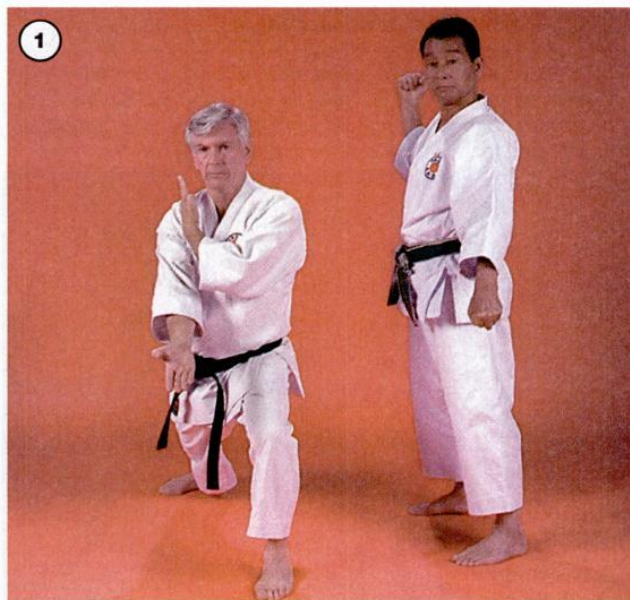
—Dan Ivan



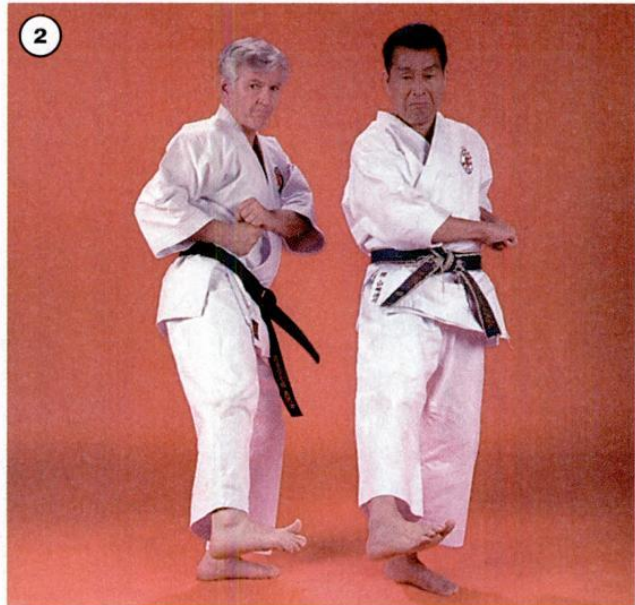


tion about who actually devised bassai dai. According to Yamazaki, the kata originally carried the Chinese-sounding name of *passai*, and to this day, some Okinawan and Japanese karate systems still refer to the form by this name. Yamazaki is of the belief that most of the kata the world knows today likely originated in China, other than a few which were developed by the Okinawans. Whether *passai* refers to a person, or perhaps a city or district in China, Yamazaki cannot say. It's all theory and speculation, he says, because most of the Okinawan records were destroyed during World War II.

According to Yamazaki, variations occur in bassai dai because, over the years, many small, intricate moves have been lost or mistranslated. In addition, he says, some instructors



might have altered the moves to suit their particular body type. There are, for example, quite a few differences in the *shotokan* and *shito-ryu* versions of bassai dai. The most obvious differences, Yamazaki points out, are the stances the two systems utilize. Shotokan stances are lower and deeper, whereas shito-ryu features higher and narrower postures. In addition, the nonstriking hand in shotokan is held on the hip area, while shito-ryu stylists hold their "draw" hand up high

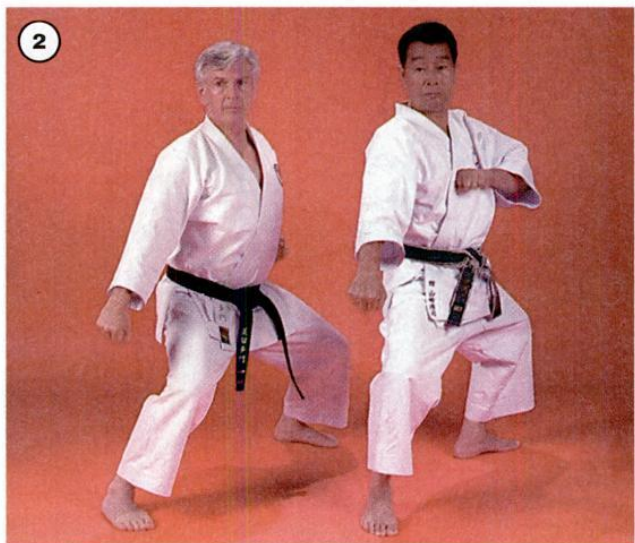


*There is a defense against an opponent's attempted arm grab nearly halfway through the bassai dai kata. In the shotokan version (1, left), the practitioner traps his opponent's grabbing hand and applies a wrist lock, while the shito-ryu stylist (1, right) grabs and pushes his adversary's grabbing hand. In the very next movement (2), the shotokan stylist delivers a side kick to the knee, while the shito-ryu practitioner applies a stomp kick to the knee. Notice the difference in hand placement as well.*

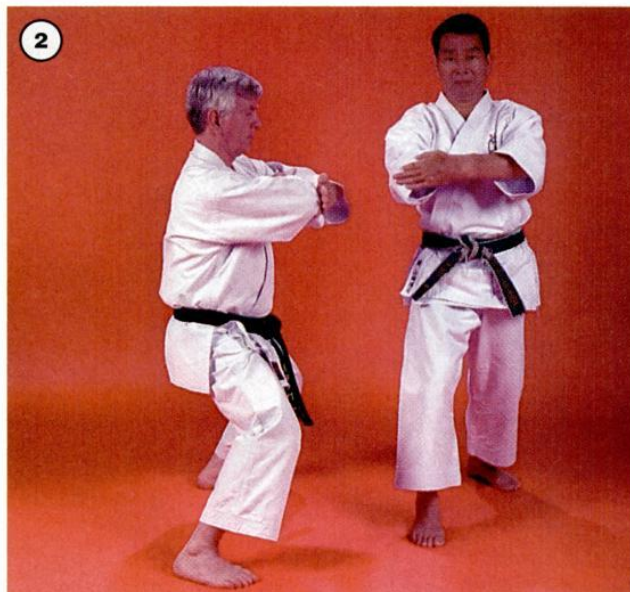
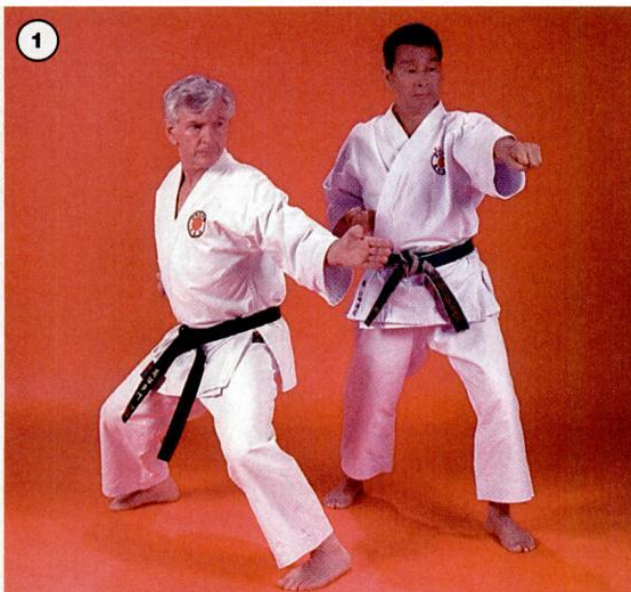
and tight near the chest and armpit.

There are other differences between the two methods of bassai dai. At one point in the shotokan version of the kata, the practitioner delivers a low side thrust kick to an opponent's leg. In the shito-ryu version, however, this move is interpreted as a grab of the opponent's extended arm, and then, instead

*A wide disparity appears in the 27th movement in the shotokan and shito-ryu versions of bassai dai. The shotokan stylist (1, left) parries an opponent's punch and attacks the groin with a knifehand. The shito-ryu stylist (1, right), on the other hand, is executing blocks both front and rear. Shotokan adds a movement to the kata at this point to match the front and rear blocking technique of shito-ryu bassai dai, and a step later (2), both practitioners perform downward blocks. Their stances and left-hand positioning, however, are different.*







Another difference in interpretation of bassai dai appears near the end of the shotokan and shito-ryu versions of the form when the shotokan practitioner (1, left) blocks an opponent's punch with a knifehand, while the shito-ryu stylist (1, right) delivers a reverse punch. The shito-ryu version adds a movement to the kata at this point, then, three movements (2) later, both practitioners are executing an elbow strike and block, but at significantly different angles.

of a side kick, the karate practitioner stomps his adversary's knee to disrupt his balance and/or take him down.

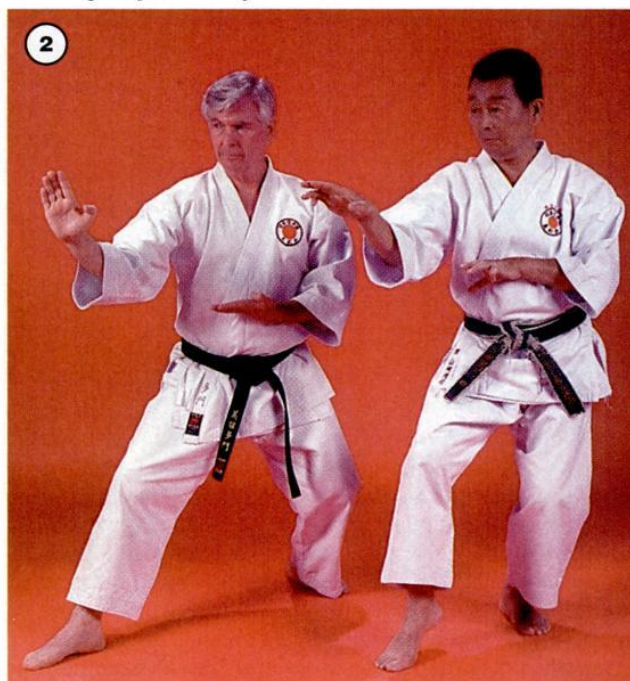
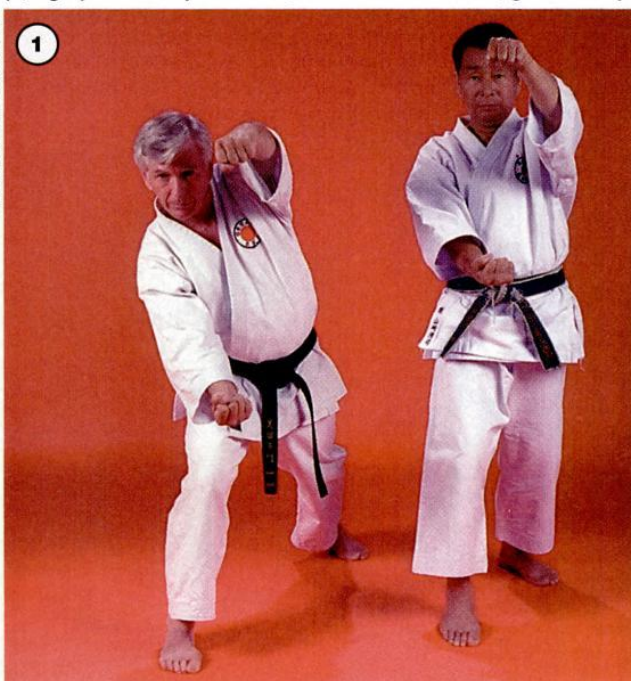
The blocks used in each system also differ. Shito-ryu stylists utilize grasping sweep blocks of an opponent's punch, while shotokan practitioners prefer to deflect blows with a knifehand block.

Yamazaki, whose ryobukai organization is headquartered in Anaheim, California, learned elements of shito-ryu and shotokan from Yasuhiro Konishi, who was a personal friend and karate disciple to both shito-ryu founder Kenwa Mabuni and shotokan creator Gichin Funakoshi. Yamazaki claims the

variances in the shotokan version of bassai dai from the Okinawan method are directly attributable to Funakoshi and his son Gigo Funakoshi.

Yamazaki believes some of the alterations in the shotokan bassai dai kata have a lot to do with size differences between the Okinawans and the Japanese. The Okinawans were smaller physically than their Japanese counterparts, and old photographs of the Okinawan masters show them standing taller and in narrower stances than today's shotokan stylists. Yamazaki suspects the Okinawan stances were developed, in part, to make the masters appear taller. *Continued on page 170*

Perhaps the most distinctive maneuver in the bassai dai kata appears 36 steps into the form. Here, both shotokan and shito-ryu practitioners execute (1) a simultaneous block and rising punch, but the shito-ryu version (1, right) is more upright. Seven movements later at the end of the kata, the shotokan stylist (2, left) blocks an opponent's punch, while the shito-ryu practitioner (2, right) blocks a punch and, with the same hand, grabs and pulls his imaginary adversary's extended arm.





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# BASSAI DAI

Continued from page 38

Yamazaki believes the wider, deeper stances of shotokan are better suited to taller body types. This also applies to the larger, sweeping movements of shotokan, which Yamazaki feels are easier for a big person to perform than the smaller, tight moves of shito-ryu and other Okinawan karate systems. Yamazaki claims that the lower, deeper moves of shotokan are also better for strengthening leg muscles.

Yamazaki has seen bassai dai performed at least a dozen different ways in international competition. Even competitors who claim to be performing the same version of bassai dai often differ in their interpretation of the form. Yamazaki says he must therefore judge the performances based on the competitor's focus, balance, speed and precision, rather than the specific movements of the kata.

"No matter," Yamazaki says about the variations in bassai dai. "Without differences, we would be all alike, and wouldn't our lives be boring?"

*About the author: Dan Ivan is a Black Belt Hall of Fame member and martial arts historian.*

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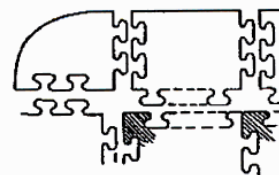
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