

# RAMON VERAS

## GOJU WITHOUT FRONTIERS

By Jose M. Fraguas

**R**ELATIVELY LITTLE HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT SENSEI VERAS BUT ANYONE WHO SPENDS ANY AMOUNT OF TIME RESEARCHING THE WORLD OF KARATE KNOWS THAT HE IS ONE OF THE TOP GOJU RYU INSTRUCTORS IN THE UNITED STATES.



SENSEI VERAS EXPERTISE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF GOJU RYU ARE SECOND TO NONE. MANY YEARS OF HARD TRAINING AND HAVE PROVIDED HIM WITH AN IMMENSE UNDERSTANDING OF THE ART. WHEN HE MOVES, IT IS WITH PRECISION AND DIRECTION; ALL HIS ENERGY FOCUSED TOWARD THE END RESULT.

BUT GOJU RYU KARATE TO SENSEI VERAS ISN'T ALL ABOUT PHYSICAL TECHNIQUES, IT IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS, FRIENDSHIPS AND STRONG BONDS WITH HIS STUDENTS. HE IS ONE OF THE MOST REVERED AND RESPECTED BY THOSE HE TEACHES. HOLDING NOTHING BACK—WHEN A STUDENT IS READY TO LEARN, HE SHARES. AND THIS TEACHING EXTENDS TO LIFE AS WELL AS TO THE DEVASTATING ART OF GOJU RYU.

SENSEI VERAS TEACHES HIS STUDENTS WITH THE SAME PATIENCE AND DEDICATION THAT HE USED TO BECOME A MASTER OF THE ART “THE KEY,” HE SAYS, “IS TO BALANCE EVERY SINGLE ELEMENT IN YOUR TRAINING, SO THAT ONE ASPECT WILL HELP THE OTHERS. YOU DON'T WANT TO BE UNBALANCED IN MARTIAL ARTS. REMEMBER THAT THE SECRET IS BALANCE, NOT ONLY IN MARTIAL ARTS BUT IN LIFE AS WELL. TO BE SUCCESSFUL YOU HAVE TO HAVE GOALS AND WORK IN THAT DIRECTION. YOU HAVE TO TRAIN HARD AND SMART—OTHERWISE EVERYTHING YOU WANT WILL JUST BE A DREAM. A GOAL IS AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM IF YOU DON'T TAKE THE NECESSARY STEPS TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.”



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*How long have you been practicing karate and who were your teachers?*

I begin my training in Goju-Ryu Karate do in 1972 in New City, New York with Sensei Chuck Merriman. I trained with Sensei Chuck Merriman until 1982. From Sensei Merriman I gained my foundation in Goju-Ryu Karate, although it was Japanese style, not Okinawan. In 1982 I moved to Texas for my work. There were no Goju Ryu Dojos in the area. After training on my own for a few years, I decided to start my own group, mainly so I could keep up my training and stay active in competition. During a National AAU tournament in 1984-85, I met Sensei Tereo Chinen and began look into Okinawa Goju-Ryu style. I learned that there were different groups of Goju Ryu with slight differences in training methodology. My training with Chinen Sensei was just in seminars but he gave a very good introduction to Okinawa goju-ryu. Then I met Sensei Morio Higaonna in 1986 when he first moved to the USA, and I took a more serious interest in the Okinawa Goju-Ryu study. I joined the IOGKF with Sensei Morio Higaonna and stayed with him until 1987. Morio Higaonna Sensei gave me a solid grounding in the Okinawa Goju-ryu Fundamentals.

But I was not happy where I was with my study of Goju-Ryu in the United States, so I decided to venture out and visit Okinawa to see and train at the roots of Goju-Ryu. I wrote a letter to Eichii Miyazato Sensei, the founder of the famous Jundokan and Chairman of the Okinawa Goju-ryu karate Do Kyo Kai. He invited me to visit his dojo. In 1996, I visited his dojo and trained there for three weeks about six hours every day to make the changes to the Jundo Kan way. Miyazato Sensei gave me the understanding of Goju-Ryu that was looking for. I visited the Jundokan every year until he died in 1999. After his death the Jundokan was taken over by Miyazato Sensei's son who formed his own new Organization. Now I train with more frequency with Mizatato Sensei senior Student Masataka Muramatsu Sensei and the Okinawa Goju-Ryu karate Do Kyo Kai senior master.

*How many styles have you trained in and who were your teachers? Do you practice any other art in conjunction with karate?*

I basically have only studied Goju-Ryu deeply, and I am still learning. Every time my sensei comes from Japan, he makes feel like a beginner all over again.

However I have attended many seminars and workshops in

Shoto-Kan and Shito-Ryu. I have attended seminars with Takayuki Mikami of JKA Shotokan, and with Kanazawa Sensei, Also of JKA Shotokan, and n Shito Kai with Choko Sato from Venezuela. Shito Kai is the father of Karate in Venezuela. Also, I have studied Kobudo with Sensei Anthony Marquez and Master Shinpoh Matayoshi in Okinawa. About 15 years ago I began to study Chen Style Tai Chi with Master Xu Zhong Xin; this martial art really interests me as much as Goju-Ryu.

*Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in karate?*

I really don't have too many stories. But one event sticks in my mind. When I started karate, I trained with three friends. One of them was Sensei Domingo Llanos who went on to become Vice World Champion in WUKO. We were really dedicated to our training. We would train at the dojo three times per week. The dojo was about \_ hour by car and two hours walking. We would usually get a ride to the dojo, but sometimes we had to walk back home. After at least two hours of vigorous training! On our days off from the dojo we would train on our own in the basement of my sister's house. Training in those days was full contact fighting with no protection. We'd go at it practically non-stop for 1.5 to 2 hours. During one of these sessions I got round kicked in the left eye by my friend Domingo Llanos, and for about 8 hours I could not see out of my left eye. A very scary moment in my life. And facing my parents was even scarier. But next day I was back at dojo, but only to watch the class. When I told Sensei Merriman my story, he just smiled and said, "why didn't you block like this?"

*Were you a 'natural' at karate – did the movements come easily to you?*

I was not a natural and had to work hard, and I still train to keep my level up. But, honestly, karate is not a natural thing for anybody. You must work and repeat the technique to look good. I don't feel natural for karate, but karate feels natural for me. I can train in karate, or read about karate, or watch karate videos, and I am still training with passion after 40 plus years in karate.

*Please, explain for us the main points of Goju Ryu and its differences with other styles like Shotokan, Wado Ryu or Shito Ryu?*

When you contrast Goju-Ryu with Shoto Kan and Wado, the differences are obvious. The kata names are totally

different; Goju-Ryu use more circular blocks as opposed to the linear movement in Shoto Kan and Wado, and the stances are normally longer and the movements are bigger in Shoto Kan. As for Shito and Goju, well, here you will find more similarities. The same katas in Goju-ryu exist in Shito, but in Shito Ryu they are done with linear movements. Goju-Ryu is a close-range fighting system. It places a lot of emphasis deep abdominal breathing to generate power at close distance. All defense incorporates circular movement, the kicks are always below the belt and they use a lot of joint attacks when applying the katas and when using controlling techniques.

*Goju Ryu has a low number of kata compared to other styles like Shotokan or Shito Ryu, do you think that the number of kata within the style affects the mastery of the art of karate or not?*

This is a good question and it has been asked many times.

In my opinion, it's not the number of techniques or how many katas you know that defines mastery. Quality, not quantity defines a mastery. For instance look at golf. How many ways can someone swing the club? Not many. But some golfers become masters and other do not. It is the time one spends working on each technique that produces mastery – for that technique. You can become a master of one kata or just one technique. And it is very difficult to stay at that high level unless you keep practicing.

If you have logged over 10,000 hours of training in one kata or one technique over the years, you can be said to have reached a mastery level for that one kata or that one technique, but you have not mastered the ones you practice a few times every other month. Technical skills, or katas – that is, a set of fixed techniques – are learned in three stages: the learning stage, the practice stage, and the mastery stage. No matter what level you are, you will be in these stage when you learn a new skill.

Bruce Lee said it well: “I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.”

*How do you see the different “branches” of the Goju Ryu style...Goju Kai, Okinawan, etc...?*

Many different groups and organization promote Goju-Ryu with different names. Every group has a different mission and goals. As long they teach in good faith and are fair to their members, I don't see a problem. The group out there teaching good karate and good Goju-Ryu is good for society. The communities we live in need more dojos teaching proper karate. I respect all the different groups, but I do think that they should at least do the same 12 katas, and follow the principles of Goju-ryu as closely as possible to the way Chojun Miyagi left it. The katas are



models for training and mastering the techniques and don't need to change much. Nor do I feel we need to add more katas or unnecessary movements to the katas.

*Karate is nowadays often referred to as a sport... would you agree with this definition or is a martial art?*

Yes and no. Karate can be practiced as a sport, as a life-long personal improvement tool, as a physical fitness program to improve ones health, as a self-defense martial art, or just as recreational activity for joy of learning. It all depends on your goal. At different stages in one's life, one can practice karate with different purposes. The young people can just practice for the sport aspect, for fun, and for personal improvement. A woman living in the city can learn it for self-defense. As we get older, it can be the perfect fitness program to stay functional as we age. However, we become good at what we practice: if you train for sport, your skill does not really transfer to self-defense, and if you train for just self-defense you may not be prepared to enter a tournament. As a karate instructor, I personally

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like the totality of training, from the physical preparation, nutrition, technical tactical, and self-defense, teaching, and participating in tournaments. I have been a competitor, a coach, a referee, a teacher, and, first and foremost, a student for life.

*What are the most important qualities for a student to become proficient in the Goju Ryu style of karate?*

The most important quality for a student to become proficient in Goju Ryu or any other martial art style is persistence – that is, to show up on a regular basis for classes and dedicate time to practice what they learn in in class. Class time is not enough.

*As a teacher of the art of karate – what is the most important element of your teachings?*

As a karate instructor, I try very hard to keep up my own training and stay up to date with any new sport science methods of training in strength and conditioning. I personally work to stay physically fit and pass whatever I learn on to my students. Sometimes I bring experts in sport science to my dojo for lectures to educate me and my students. I try to connect with my students to find out what their goals are and try to give them what they want from the training. Everyone wants something different out of his or her training.

*Kihon, Kata and Kumite, what's the proper ratio in training?*

This a very complicated question because it depends on the individual student's goal. If students train for recreation, a balanced approach with a good variety of training is adequate. If the students just want karate for fitness, a different training plan is required. If the students are focused on competition, the training should be very carefully planned, using periodization; the percentage of physical, Kihon, kata and Kumite will vary depending on how close they are to the competition and when they need to peak. In these days the competition at the Elite level is more specialized, focusing on either Kata or Kumite. Very few people do both these days. For a one-hour, general training class, I divide my training 25 percent physical preparation, 25 percent kihon specific for kata or kumite, and 40 percent either kata or Kumite, and 10 percent cool down and stretching. I teach kata and Kumite in different classes.

How has your personal expression of karate developed over the years and what is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

My perspective has changed a lot over the years. When I started to train in the early 70s, karate training was very different. The training was a lot more serious; the students came to the dojo to seriously train. We didn't focus so much on belts. We would get promoted when the sensei surprised you. He would call out and say you were ready to move up in rank. It was a 'wow' moment.

Now the kids and the parents want to know how soon can my son or daughter get the new belt. It's very different now in that respect. The tournaments were a lot different with multiple disciplines participating: karate, tae kwan do, and kung fu competed together. However, now the tournaments are much better organized and specialized by style and discipline. Karate, tae kwan do and Kung fu have their own Tournaments. The instructors now are more safety conscious than when I started. There are fewer injuries in training,

*How important is competition in the evolution of a karate practitioner?*

Competition has played a big role in the evolution of karate. Competition is a big part of a modern society and has made karate better known all over the world. The competition is a part of karate and it has played a big role in my karate life. I really enjoyed competing when I was growing up, and it has kept me in karate all these years. I really enjoyed trips to competitions around the East Coast: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and the Boston area. But competition is not the only reason and should not be the main reason to do karate.

*What really means "Ikken Hissatsu" and how it applies when used in Goju ryu Karate?*

Ikken Issatsu is a concept used in Japanese Martial arts. The meaning is to train your fist and foot and body to become a killing weapon and kill or knock down your opponent in one blow. I haven't had the opportunity to put this theory in practice yet, so for me it is just a theory. It more practical for Kendo and Iado because an expert with the Katana could chop someone's head and kill with one cut. In Karate you know how difficult it is to just score a point. In the UFC, which is the more realistic fighting system today, the competitors hit the opponent at full power with multiple rapid punches and the opponents get up and walk it off. So for karate it is better to train for multiple blows in combination.



1) With Sensei Teruya. 2) With Sensei Miyazato. 3) With Sensei Iha.  
 4) With Sensei Hichiya. 5) With Sensei Muramatsu. 6) With WKF  
 Coach Antonio Oliva. 7) Paying respects to Sensei E. Miyazato. 8)  
 With E. Miyazato 9) Instructors training in Okinawa.

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*How do you see the art of Goju Ryu evolve in the future?*

Goju Ryu and all karate can keep evolving and at same time maintain the traditional culture of karate. It is very important to know about the history and tradition of Goju-Ryu. I try to stay connected with my past teachers and pay them the respect they deserve. These things should not change about karate. The instructors are the ones that need to evolve and make the training more scientific, safer and interesting and effective. There are lots of resources these days online on sport science that can help us make our training more interesting. I think getting more education about the science and methodology and periodization of training can make our training better and more interesting for future generations.

*Do you feel that you still have further to go in your studies?*

Yes, of course. I have a long way to go in my study of Goju-Ryu and in learning about the how and why of training and how to teach better. This objective for me will never come to an end.

*What advice would you give to students on the question of supplementary training?*

Supplementary training is an important part of Goju-Ryu training but it should be done in conjunction with technical training. It should enhance your technical training. It should be done with small progression over time. We should never over-do it so we can train again the next day. If you train hard one day, go light to medium the next day. Never train hard too many consecutive days.

*What advice would you give to an instructor who is struggling with his or her own development?*

I've been there and I have seen many people plateau in their training.

When this happens we need to change our training. Training the same way for the same number of hours with the same intensity day in and day out will lead to saturation after six weeks. No matter what type of training you do. Variation of training is necessary to avoid stagnation. Vary the volume, the intensity, and duration of training and how you train, at least every four to six weeks. In karate we have so many choices in techniques, Katas, and physical training, that we should always have a new, interesting training plan.

*Have there been times when you felt fear in your training?*

No not really, I have always enjoyed my training. I enjoy teaching karate as much as practicing Goju-ryu karate. That's why I've kept at it so long. I simply enjoy my Goju-Ryu training and talking to people about all aspects of karate.

*Do you think that Olympics will be positive for the art of karate-do?*

I really don't think karate will be an Olympic sport in my lifetime. For one the Olympics don't have room for another sport in their agenda. At present they allow 28 official sports in the program. That means an existing Olympic sport would have to be taken out, and that's not very easy to do.

As for whether it would be a positive event, certainly the publicity Karate would get as an Olympic sport would be positive. But if Karate becomes an Olympic Sport, Karate will become more and more a pure sport, and maybe that's not a good idea. Not too many people really join karate because they want to be in the Olympics, and that would likely change.

Eventually the sensei would become just a Coach and the traditional sensei would disappear; you would get fewer karate dojos serving the community.

I don't see too many judo schools, and the Tae Kwan Do Schools that teach Olympic style are disappearing in my Area.

More people these days are interested in Okinawa Karate because it is not so focused on Sports. Traditional Karate has more value to offer the community than just as a sport.

*What are your views on kata bunkai? Is it bunkai really important?*

In Goju-Ryu the Kata Bunkai has a lot of value, so it is very important. The kata without Bunkai is just a physical exercise, which is fine, because we need this part of karate as physical conditioning. The bunkai gives the kata meaning; it gives you a reason to practice the kata. Goju-Ryu Karate is a practical self defense art. You will find the self defense part of Karate in the Bunkais. When people understand the bunkai in the kata, it is easier for them to practice the katas. When we practice kata, we should be mindful of the bunkai in the technique being practiced



in the kata and make the practice as real as possible. In Goju-ryu, kata practice is visualization of self-defense techniques.

*How important is for a Goju Ryu practitioner to know all the Kata of the style?*

The kata are a big part of Goju-ryu, but in Goju-ryu we don't have so many katas as in other styles. You can practice other characteristics of Goju-ryu, such as basics and application of the basics, pre arranged kumite, kumite drills, supplementary training for body conditioning. I emphasize kata depending on the age and maturity of the students. Kata is very hard for young kids so I teach them basic for kata and a lot kumite drills early on. Eventually they will be ready for kata. The adults enjoy the kata and bunkai practice more than kumite. But you don't need to learn all the katas unless you want to become an instructor, you can just focus on a few katas. I once met Master Sakiyama, one of Chojun Miyagi's students in Okinawa. He was a Master of Zen and a master of Sanchin. Although he know all the Goju Katas, he said Sanchin was enough. His Sanchin kata was amazing.

*How do you like to train yourself?*

My personal training these days is very straightforward and very general. My main goal in training is to stay fit and healthy and maintain my karate level good enough to teach. Three times per week in the morning I train some basic and the basic katas and a follow it with strength training. My weight training is a mixture of Hojo Undo and modern weight training, not too intense but very specific to karate movements.

The other days of the week I practice Sanchin kata and one advanced kata; I end the kata practices with Tensho and stretching. I repeat this over the week so I cover all the Goju-ryu katas. Twice a week I find some time and I do ten rounds on the bags with different techniques to get some cardiovascular training. I do the traditional Okinawa Goju-Ryu articulation warmups and stretching every day.

Shotokan, Shito Ryu, Goju, Ryu etc...How do you think the different branches/styles affect the complete art of Karate?

These styles are all karate. Each style is a model for training and to polish and perfect self-defense and fighting techniques. Each style has some unique training methods. They are all equally effective for self-defense, and they are all part of karate history. They should all be preserved for future generations.

*Do you think Kobudo training is beneficial for a Karate practitioner in general?*

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I have done Kobudo training before; it is a very good martial art.

I trained in Kobudo first with Sensei Kimo Wall, Sensei Anthony Marquez, and Master Shipoh Matayoshi. Kobudo is very interesting but I don't think it will help your karate. If you want to be good in Karate you need to focus on Karate, and if you want to be good in Kobudo you should focus on kobudo. However if you want to just learn kobudo for the sake of learning, by all means learn it. Learning is never a waste of time.

*What is your opinion about the "Shobu Ippon" division in Karate competition?*

I been in the tournament environment from the mid 70s and I have competed with all of them: Shobu Ippon, Shobu San Bon, and now the current rules WKF rules. It's just another form of competition. Competition is just that – competition. You learn the rules and train to compete within the parameters for the rules. In the old days with Shobu Ippon, the match was just one point, but it was not that easy to get an Ippon and the match was boring. Everybody played it safe and there was not much variety

to the techniques. Now there more opportunities to get points, and the matches last longer. In the new WKF style of competition, the competitors need to be in better physical shape, the match is more exciting to watch.

*What are the most important points in your personal training these days?*

In these days technical training is still very important, but it's more important to enjoy the training. And it's much more important to have balance in your training between physical and technical; balance is essential to staying fit and healthy.

*What karate can offer to the individual in these troubled times we are living in?*

Yes, modern life can be very stressful these days. We spend most of our time driving to work and at work. Most people have sedentary jobs, they lose mobility and flexibility just sitting at work. Karate training can be an escape from the daily stress. From the fitness point of view, karate keeps people functional so they can stay healthier and more productive in society.

*After so many years of training, what is it for you that is so appealing in Goju Ryu and why?*

I love everything about Goju-Ryu: I enjoy the physical training, the katas are very interesting and very well balanced and practical. I have a great Sensei Muramatsu who visits my dojo every year to share with us his special training methods. When I visit Okinawa, I train with many great seniors in the Okinawa Goju-Ryu Karate Kyo Kai. My sensei is 68 years old and still looks great physically – and technically super great. He does things like one-arm pull ups, push ups with one arm in one knuckle. I want to look close to him when I get up in my 60s and 70s and beyond. He is my inspiration for training.

*Finally, what advise would you like to give to all Karate practitioners?*

I want to tell all karate practitioners to continue their training no matter what, to have multiple goals in training; to keep improving in karate and in all areas of their lives, and to contribute to the sport of karate if they do it as sport. If karate is not done as a sport, contribute in your dojo and keep the tradition moving forward for the next generation. 