



Master Tatsuo Shimabuku

Master Tatsuo Shimabuku, the founder of Isshinryu Karate, was born on September 19, 1908 in Chan Village, Okinawa. Master Shimabuku's birthname was Shinkichi (in Japanese), or Kana (in Okinawan). When Master Shimabuku began teaching professionally, he took on the professional adult name (as is custom in Okinawa) of Tatsuo, which means "Dragon Man".

Master Tatsuo Shimabuku had a relatively large family. His wife's name was Uto, and they had 4 children, 2 daughters, Matsoke and Yokiko, and 2 sons, Kichiro and Shinsho or Ciso. Ciso is the child who studied karate the longest with his father.

Master Tatsuo Shimabuku started studying karate when he was approximately 13 years of age with his uncle, Goneku. Later, when he was in his early 20's, he continued his study of karate by studying with some of the masters of his time. First, he studied Shorin-ryu karate with Master Kyan Chotoku and he was with him approx. 4 years. Then around 1936, he studied with Master Chojun Miyagi in the art of Goju-ryu karate. Shorin-ryu and Goju-ryu would become the 2 main arts from which Tatsuo would later use to create Isshinryu karate. In 1938, Tatsuo Shimabuku studied for a short while with Master Choki Motobu.

From 1939- 1940, Master Tatsuo Shimabuku spent time in the Philippines where he worked as a laborer. Then in 1943, due to the 2nd World War, he moved his family to Kyushi, Japan, and did not return to Okinawa with his family until 1946, once the war had ended & he felt it was safe to do so. The following year, 1947, Master Shimabuku began teaching karate at nighttime while farming during the day.

In 1955, Tatsuo Shimabuku opened a dojo in Chung village. Later in 1956, after his dojo had changed locations, and after many years of practice and development including creating his own kata that used some of his favorite techniques, Sunsu, he was ready to officially announce the name of his new style. On January 15, 1956, Master Shimabuku had a meeting with his senior students and told them of the name Isshinryu. When asked about the name, Tatsuo replies that he was calling it Isshinryu because all things begin with one, and that all things begin in the heart or mind thus you should do karate with your whole heart, developing wholeheartedness.

In the late 50's and early 60's, Master Tatsuo Shimabuku studied weapons under Moden Yabiku and Taira Shinken. Taira Shinken also taught weapons training in Master Shimabuku's dojo. Master Shimabuku would also combine some aspects of his karate and weapons training and would develop his own weapons kata such as Kusanku Sai.

Master Tatsuo Shimabuku had a strong belief in his karate and its philosophy. He believed that there were no “winners” or “losers” in karate because everyone learns and improves. He also believed that karate should be a way of life, and that courtesy was most important, and that fighting ability was never more important than courtesy and respect. He believed in the Okinawan dualistic approach to life, and through a vision he had, used the Megami (woman goddess) as the symbol for Isshinryu karate.

Outside of farming and karate, Tatsuo Shimabuku also had a remarkable interest. He was a sumuchi, which means reader of the books (or more loosely fortune teller). He would use the old Chinese books, such as the I-Ching to predict people’s futures and people would come from all over to have their fortunes read. It is said that he was very accurate as a sumuchi and often maintained a 90% or above accuracy rate!

Master Tatsuo Shimabuku visited the United States twice, once in 1964 and then again in 1966 performing and teaching Isshinryu karate for his benefactors who brought him over to visit the U.S., and their students. On May 30, 1975, Master Tatsuo Shimabuku passed away at the age of 66.