

## ***Tensho* – Miyagi’s Secret Treasure**

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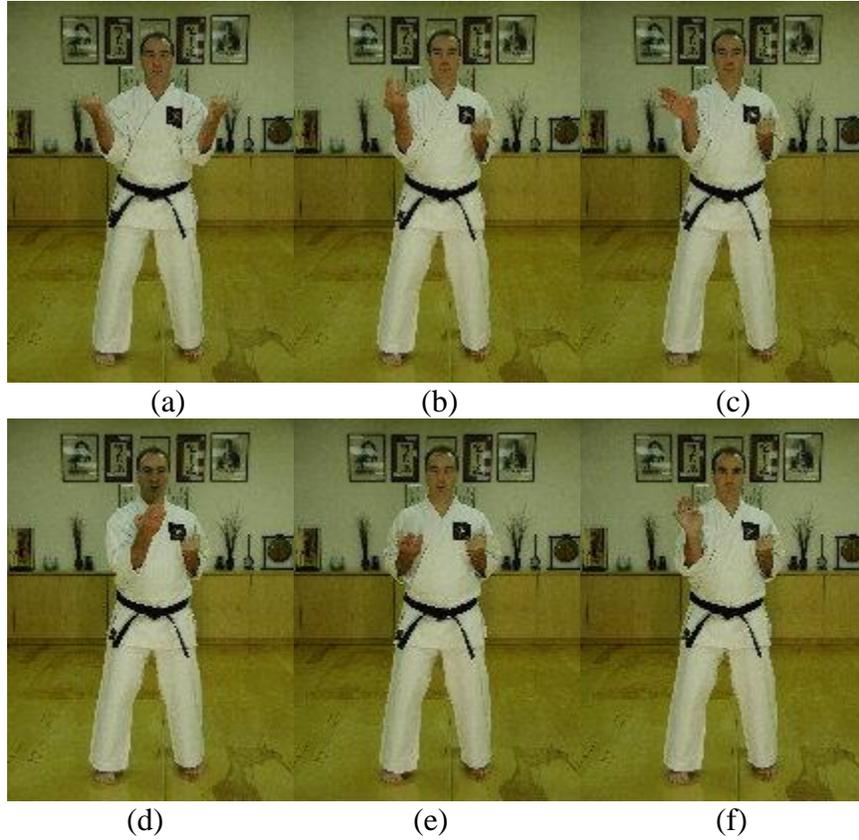
This paper is the third in a sequence of articles that examines the fundamental principles of Karate in the Goju-Ryu style. The first article discussed *hard* (go) elements of the style: the *external* principles of structure, movement, and breathing developed through the study of Sanchin kata (Labbate 1999). These principles are generally the focus of attention during the first three years of study and are the foundation on which all other aspects of karate are built. The second article focussed on transitional principles, such as the karate drum, push-hands, body shifting, and partner training (Labbate 2000). These concepts were introduced through the study of the rising block and are typically taught in the two years prior to reaching black belt level. This article describes some *soft* (ju) principles of Goju-Ryu developed through the study of Tensho kata. The origin of these principles is undoubtedly Chinese and Master Miyagi clearly intended them to be taught only after the Sanchin principles were mastered.

One of the most subtle and beautiful movements in the style, Tensho is the *internal* kata of structure and movement and is typically taught as the first kata beyond black belt level. The kata builds upon all of the concepts presented in previous papers but adds principles of soft fluid motion, weight transitioning, connectivity, and opening and closing. These new principles are illustrated here through the study of two of the opening sequences from the kata. Taken alone, Tensho is deceptively simple and beautiful but beneath it is hidden a wealth of martial treasure.

### **Tensho Basics**

Tensho should initially be performed as a hard kata, using the basic principles taught through the study of Sanchin kata. These principles induce body tension, build strength, and ensure the correct positioning of muscle groups, especially the shoulder muscle group. To illustrate this relationship, Figures 1 and 2 show two of the crucial opening sequences from Tensho. The first sequence begins from the double block position in right Sanchin stance (a). As the left hand is placed into the chambered position, the right hand is opened (b). The right hand is then turned over into a hooking block position (c). From this position, a knife hand (shuto) block is performed (d), and the right hand is brought to the chamber position (e). Finally, the right hand is used to perform a palm-heel strike to the head (f). The second sequence, shown in Figure 2, follows directly in the kata. After

the palm-heel strike (a), the right hand is rotated downward (b), and then drawn inward to the chamber position (c). Finally, a second palm-heel strike occurs (d). These sequences are repeated later in the kata on the left, in a left Sanchin stance.



**Figure 1:** First Sequence, taken from Tensho



**Figure 2:** Second Sequence, taken from Tensho

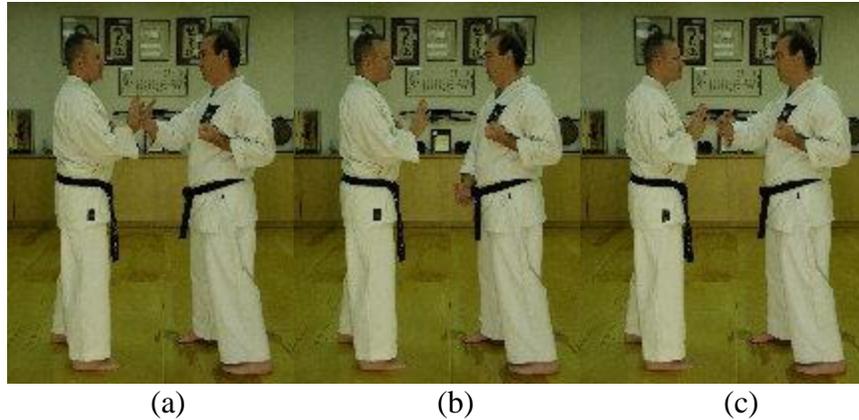
Notice how all of the principles of structure, movement, and breathing are carried over from Sanchin kata (Labbate 1999): The entire shoulder muscle group acts as a single structure under tension, and is locked down at the end of each motion. Tension is induced through correct positioning of the hand, arm, and elbow. The shoulders remain down and aligned forward. Sanchin stance is used to bring all of the leg muscles under tension; the body weight is lowered and becomes firmly rooted, gripping the floor through correct positioning of the feet. Breathing is coordinated with movement, following the general guidelines used in lifting weights: breath is inhaled during preparatory movements such as a block or counter; it is expelled during exertions such as striking motions. Thus in Figure 1, the entire sequence from (a) up to and including (e) is used to inhale, and only the strike in (f) is associated with exhalation. In Figure 2, the entire sequence from (a) up to and including (c) is used to inhale; the final strike (d) is coordinated with the exhale. Finally, to develop power in the techniques, transitional principles such as the karate-drum can be integrated with kata training (Labbate 2000).

## **Soft Fluid Motion**

While Sanchin style practice develops the general form associated with the kata, it fails significantly to develop power in the techniques. The next stage of development requires a radical change to incorporate soft (ju) principles into training. The essence of the concept is to practice the kata using continuous, soft, fluid motion. Soft practice should be combined with chi gung exercises to develop internal energy. The goal of this practice is to develop the ability to hold muscles relaxed externally, providing fluidity, yet firm internally, providing strength. The entire sequence shown in Figure 1 is practiced as a single movement without breaks between the techniques. Similarly, the entire sequence shown in Figure 2 is a single movement.

**Principle #1:** *Practice Tensho softly and fluidly, maintaining muscles relaxed externally, and firm internally.*

To understand this internal principle, place the arm into the position shown in Figure 3 (a) with a partner (on the left) supporting the arm. If the arm is relaxed, the partner feels the heaviness of the arm as it fails to support itself; if the arm is released it falls away without control (b). If instead the arm is held using the principles of Sanchin kata, the shoulder muscle group is locked down, the arm is held under (c). The partner feels no weight and the arm remains in position when released. Now the concepts from both these extremes are merged: externally, the arm is correctly positioned and supports its own weight, yet there is no tension or strain; internally the arm is relaxed and flexible, able to move with fluidity, speed, and strength.

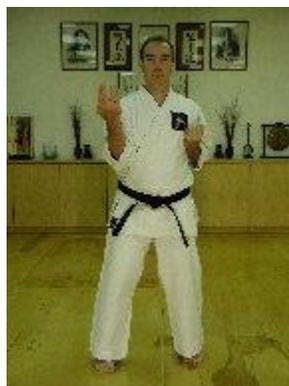


**Figure 3:** Developing Soft Techniques.

When Tensho is practiced in this soft, fluid manner attention must be paid to the *tempo* of the movements: Each movement on the left is balanced in time with the corresponding movement on the right. Every pause on the left should correspond with a pause of the same duration on the right. Attention to temp in this manner ensures that techniques can be performed with the same proficiency on both sides of the body.

**Principle #2:** *Every Kata has an associated tempo and timing. Movements on the left must be balanced carefully with those on the right.*

Building upon this soft form of kata training, it is now possible to show the push-hands (*kakie*) applications derived from Tensho – principles that allow a defender to sense and anticipate the movements of an opponent (Labbate 2000). First consider the opening movement from the kata shown in Figure 4(a) in which the right hand is opened. This corresponds directly to the opening on-guard position of all *kakie* drills as shown in Figure 4(b). This position teaches students to use a hook formed at the wrist to grab and hold an opponent.



(a) *Tensho Kata*



(b) *Push-hands*

**Figure 4:** Grabbing at the wrist in the on-guard position

In the next movement from the kata, shown in Figure 5(a-c), the right hand begins in the onguard position, turns over to grab with a hooking block (b), and finally performs a knife hand block (c). This corresponds to the first push-hands drill that teaches *grabbing* and *sticking*. Two students begin in the onguard position with hands positioned so that a grab is formed at the wrist; the students touch by locking these hooks together (d). From this grabbing position, both students roll their hands over at the wrist maintaining contact (e). Finally, they rotate their hands from outside to inside, maintaining contact so as to form a hook on the opposite side of the wrist (f). This process is repeated backward and forward to develop the sense of grabbing with the hook of the hand, sticking to an opponent, and controlling contact at all times.



(a)

(b)

(c)

*Tensho kata*



(d)

(e)

(f)

*Push-hands*

**Figure 5:** Grabbing and Sticking

Figure 6(I) shows the next sequence from the kata in which the right hand performs a knife hand block (a), is brought to the chambered position, and then used for a palm-heel strike (c).



(a) (b) (c)

**Figure 6(I): Tensho Kata**

This movement corresponds to the second push-hands drill, shown in Figure 6(II). As in previous push-hands drills, this movement begins in the onguard position (d). The attacker then strikes slowly and carefully while the defender follows the strike inward maintaining light contact at all times (e). The defender guides the strike to a cupped hand positioned just off the body. The defender then becomes the attacker and returns the palm-heel strike while the partner practices the same technique (f). This drill begins to develop the feeling of *following an attack*. The attacker determines the speed, power, and direction of the strike while the defender simply focuses on maintaining contact. Through drills of this type, students learn to adhere in the presence of motion and to follow a partner's movement rather than block and lose contact.



(d) (e) (f)

**Figure 6(II): Push-hands -- Following**

The same movement from the kata can also be applied through a third push-hands drill, shown in Figure 6(III), to develop the skill of redirecting the energy of an opponent. Just as in the previous drill, the movement begins from the onguard position (g). One student then uses a palm-heel strike to attack which the other follows and maintains contact. However, just before contact, the defender redirects the strike by rotating the hips away causing the strike to miss the body entirely (h). The roles are then reversed and the attacker redirects (i). Once again the basic hook is used to grab and stick to the attacker.



(g) (h) (i)

**Figure 6(III): Push-hands: Redirecting**

Recall now the second segment from the kata, shown again for clarity in Figure 7 (a-d). This segment teaches the fourth push-hands drill that brings together the several soft skills: *grabbing*, *sticking*, *following*, *redirecting*, *loading*, and *rebounding (countering)*. As before, the drill begins with the grabbing position (e). The attacker then performs a palm-heel strike to which the defender sticks and follows (f). The strike is blocked, redirecting the opponent's energy while loading energy for a counter (g). Roles are then reversed allowing the attacker to stick, redirect, load (h), and counter (i).



(a) (b) (c) (d)

*Tensho Kata*



(e)

(f)

(g)



(h)

(i)

*Push-hands*

**Figure 7:** Combining Several Skills

**Principle #3:** *Push-hands corresponds to the application of Tensho kata and teaches sticking, sensing, following, redirecting, loading, and rebounding (countering).*

## **Weight Transitioning**

The karate drum refers to a series of drills that gradually teach the student the internal structure associated with delivering power in karate techniques (Labbate 2000). These concepts are natural to employ in the further development of Tensho kata. For example, each sequence in Figures 1 and 2 is used to load energy that can subsequently be used during an associated palm-heel strike.

Building upon these procedures, a new principle can now be added to place weight behind the delivery of each technique and enhance stability. The central concept is to transfer weight between techniques so that the body is always in either an offensive or

defensive posture; rooted to the floor, at the same time stable and balanced. Figure 8 shows a simple drill that builds upon the karate drum to develop this principle. The karate drum technique is practiced from a right Sanchin stance. However, as the right hip and shoulder swing forward, weight is transferred to the forward foot (a), as the right hip and shoulder transition backward, weight is transferred to the backward foot (b). The general weight distribution is approximately 70% to 30% to ensure stability. Notice that the hips rotate to follow the motion of the arms, and the body sinks as it moves backward to accept the additional weight on the rear leg (b).



**Figure 8:** Transferring Weight

There are several common errors to be avoided in performing this drill. When swinging forward and backward, the student should not lean excessively into the drill, the shoulders should rotate remaining parallel to the floor, and the student should not tip from side to side. Many of the common errors can be avoided by slow practice with the knees slightly bent.

**Principle #5:** *Weight transitioning is used to reinforce the transfer of power into a technique and enhance stability.*

## Centering and Connectivity

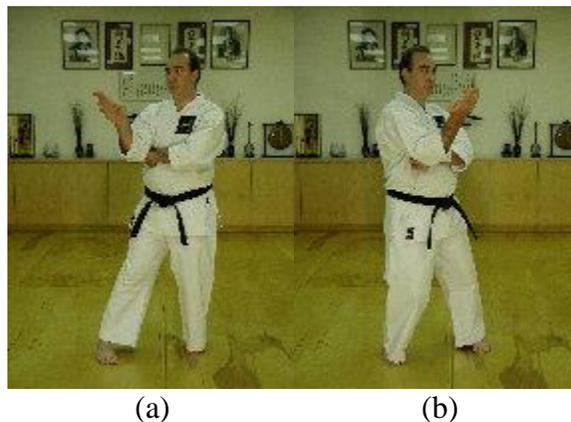
Previous articles have explained in depth that power does not originate in the movements of the arm during a punch or strike. Instead, it emanates from the center of the body, and in particular the *tanden*, a region in the lower abdomen (Labbate 1999). Many of the drills described in these articles are concerned with how incrementally to build techniques that transfer this energy into the powerful delivery of blocks, punches, and kicks (Labbate 2000). In combat, motion costs time and it is important to deliver techniques with the strong solid muscular position of Sanchin, in a manner directly connected to the center of energy in the body and without extraneous movements. The

practice of Tensho is now used to build these centering and connectivity concepts as shown in Figure 9. These movements are taken from the first Tensho sequence, Figure 1 (c & d). In the open hand middle block position, a fist is placed between the elbow and the rib cage (a). In performing the knife block (b), the arm is kept connected to the center of the body as the block is performed (b) and the shoulder muscle group maintains Sanchin structure (b). Notice that in the only manner in which this transition can occur is the body rotates from the center into the knife block (b). All of the techniques in Tensho can be practiced in this manner, maintaining Sanchin structure.



**Figure 9:** Centering and Connectivity

Figure 10 shows how this technique is combined with weight transitioning. As the hooking block is performed, weight transitions to the rear catching, grabbing and redirecting a blow (a). As the knife hand block is performed, weight transfers to the forward foot delivering power into the block (b).



**Figure 10:** Centering and Weight Transitioning

**Principle #6:** *Connectivity and Centering are used at close-quarters to ensure that energy is delivered directly with Sanchin structure without extraneous motion.*

## Opening and Closing

Although Sanchin structure is important in all aspects of training for maintaining the correct positioning of muscle groups, it lacks a key ingredient used in transferring power into a strike. The desired outcome is an *explosion* of energy directed at a point on the body of the opponent. Unfortunately, at this final moment of contact, the hard structure of Sanchin inhibits the flow of energy. An analogy that is helpful in understanding this difference is to think of the destructive force associated with a whip: the whip is drawn loosely back to load energy and then flicked at great speed so that the tip strikes for an instant and is then retracted immediately. The blow is extremely painful because of the tremendous kinetic energy built in the whip and transferred to a single point of impact. The alternative is a soft principle in which a strike opens to transfer energy and closes to load energy for the next technique, just like the whip in the analogy. This concept is illustrated through the palm-heel strike taken from Tensho in Figure 11. The strike is delivered from the chambered position (a). Sanchin structure is momentarily lost as the shoulder muscle group is opened allowing energy to flow from the center into the strike (b). After the strike has made impact, the shoulder muscle group returns to a locked Sanchin structure, conserving the remaining energy for the next technique (c).

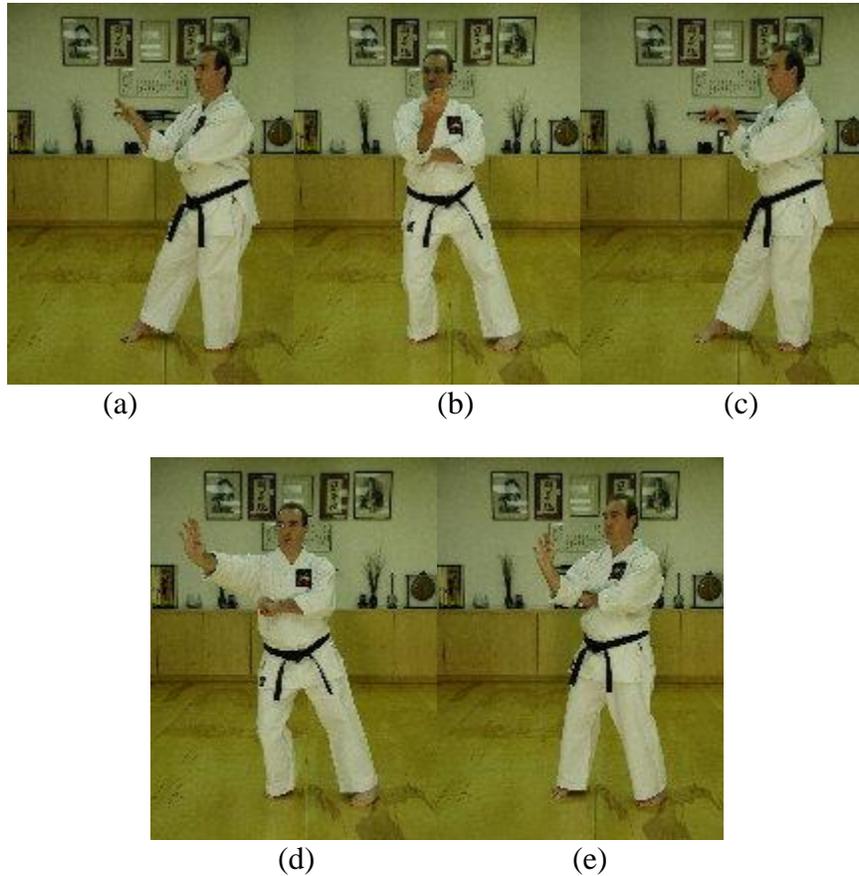


**Figure 11:** Opening and Closing

**Principle #7:** *Opening and Closing provides an explosive release of energy directed at the instant of a strike.*

Putting all of the concepts together, let us now reexamine the opening sequence of Tensho kata taken from Figure 1. Figure 12 shows the new soft fluid movement; notice how different the sequence is from the hard original structure. The first open-hand middle

block is combined with weight transitioning (a) to grab and redirect the opponent. Movement to the second knife block is achieved without extraneous arm motion, maintaining Sanchin structure, by weight transitioning and moving from the center (b). Energy is then loaded into the palm-heel strike (c) and delivered by opening and closing to transfer energy into the strike (d). Notice the position of the hand when preparing the palm-heel strike (c), just like a whip being wound-up and flicked into the opponent. The transition from this position to the final strike position occurs gradually throughout the technique, just as a whip unravels during flight.



**Figure 12:** Assembling the Principles

Figures 13 and 14 demonstrate the difference between the conventional Sanchin structure for the palm-heel strike and the modified structure based on the combination of these new principles. Although powerful and hard, the Sanchin style strike in Figure 13 has only a moderate effect of the glove representing the opponent. In contrast, the modified strike loads energy like the whip, smoothly transitions the energy into the strike, explodes with devastating impact upon the target, and subsequently returns to a locked Sanchin structure in preparation for subsequent movements. Notice the synchronization of body

and strike, reminiscent of the whip that lunges power at the opponent while supporting the strike with the appropriate structure.



**Figure 13:** Palm-heel strike with Sanchin Structure



**Figure 14:** Transferring energy by coupling the principles

## Applications

Figure 15 demonstrates the practical application of the first sequence from Tensho shown in Figure 1. An initial punch from the attacker is immediately blocked with an open-hand block (a). At this point contact has been made with the attacker (push-hands), allowing his/her movements to be determined by sensing while the first strike is redirected away from the defender. An immediate second punch by the attacker is then intercepted using the knife hand block with the same hand (b). This block redirects the opponent while energy is loaded (c) for the final palm-heel strike (d). The shoulder muscle group then returns to a locked Sanchin structure (e). The entire sequence is carried out as a single movement, without breaks between the techniques. Its circular style effectively winds up energy in the body that is deposited onto the attacker's chin at the end of the sequence. Notice the use of weight transitioning correctly to position and support the movements throughout this sequence.



(a)

(b)

(c)

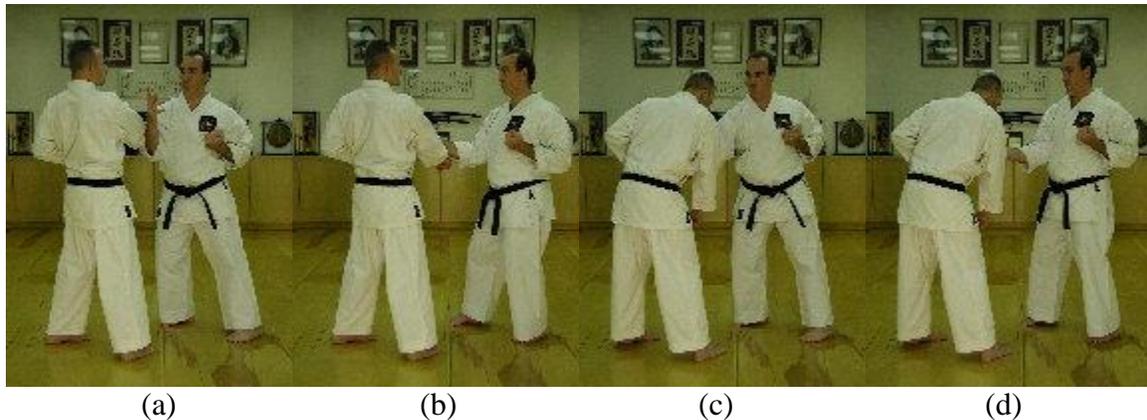


(d)

(e)

**Figure 15:** Applying the First Sequence

Figure 16 shows a practical close-in application of the second sequence from Tensho. Here the defender grabs an incoming strike (a), sticks to the opponent and redirects the strike (b). Energy is loaded by the defender (c) and then transferred into the opponent with a strike to the groin (d). Notice how weight transitioning is used to position the body (c) for this technique, and power is transferred by opening and closing (d).



**Figure 16:** Applying the Second Sequence

## Conclusion

Goju-Ryu is a close-in fighting art that couples soft principles, for sensing and anticipating the movements of an opponent, with *internal* methods for transferring power at close quarters. Tensho kata contains the Okinawan push-hands drills (*kakie*) and incorporates a wealth of concealed meanings to teach and develop these soft internal components of the style. The kata builds upon Sanchin, the *external* kata of structure, movement, and breathing, together with transitional techniques such as the karate drum. *Soft fluid motion* is then used to couple speed and power; *weight transitioning* maintains stability when redirecting an opponent and reinforcing subsequent counters. *Moving from the center* reduces extraneous arm movement and maintains a reinforced structure. Finally *opening and closing* provides explosive force at the point of impact. These concepts are but a few of the hidden treasures within the kata. Others, beyond the scope of this paper, include *shedding* as a method of forcing an opponent to lose balance and structure, *trapping* to immobilize an attack, *folding* to refine a succession of blows, and *multi-strike timing* to ensure that counter attacks strike an opponent between breaths.

In Goju-Ryu beginning students find comprehension of elements that are fundamentally hard (*go*) and external easiest to accomplish; study of soft (*ju*) and internal elements must build upon that foundation. At that point understanding of the meaning of the pairings of hard-soft and external-internal principles becomes possible, and for this objective there is

no better vehicle of study than Tensho. The relatively simple and beautiful structure of this complex kata is indeed deceptive.

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## **Author's Biography**

Marvin Labbate is a eighth Dan in Okinawan Goju-Ryu, fifth Dan in Okinawan Ryukonkai kobudo, and a certified Yang taijiquan instructor. He has studied karate for over 35 years and is the International Representative for the Okinawan Seibukai Association under its president Nakasone Kinei. Mr. Labbate is the director of CNY Karate ([www.cnykarate.com](http://www.cnykarate.com)), founded in 1963, the oldest karate school in upstate New York. His children's program incorporates comprehensive life skills training curricula. He also teaches special classes for children and adults that include the popular "stranger danger" program for children and self-defense classes for women. In addition, he conducts seminars on a broad variety of martial arts topics and develops advanced teaching videos.