



Meeting the Masters: Tony Mirakian

Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

In the USA, there are a few top-notch practitioners who seldom seem to get any press. To my mind, at the head of this list is Sensei Anthony Mirakian, the founder of Okinawan Goju in the USA and student of Meitoku Yagi. I started visiting Sensei Mirakian's dojo in the late 1960s. A friend of mine was studying Goju at our university under two of Sensei Mirakian's students, so I thought I would drop in to learn more. I found him cordial if a little cautious, although I suspect he realized quickly that a college student with only a few years of Judo was not there to prove anything. Over the next several decades, I would try to visit him every year or so just to keep in touch.

Even though he was very highly ranked in Meibukan Goju, he was interested in Chinese systems and especially in Iron Shirt kung-fu, I suppose because it related to the "armoring" that *Sanchin* practitioners experience. He discussed this with me once I had started studying Shotokan, and explained that, although he had attended several Boston area Iron Shirt seminars, he remained unconvinced. When the instructor asked for volunteers to strike his body, Mirakian Sensei explained, Sensei stepped forward. To be both brief and delicate about it, the Iron Shirt instructor was knocked down immediately and Sensei did not continue attending these seminars.

However, I ran into him at a seminar by William Cheung (famed for his Wing-chun and his relationship with Bruce Lee), for which Sensei volunteered his dojo when something went wrong with original venue. Mirakian Sensei was one of the few high-ranking instructors who actually would attend other instructor's seminars.

In observing his Goju classes, I was surprised that he "taught" the old-fashioned way, letting his senior students do much of the on-deck guidance while watching quietly from his desk upon which incense was usually burning. Just when he seemed to have disappeared behind the scented smoke, he would step on the floor and demonstrate the detail of a kata with a ferocity that radiated across the room. "No, no. It's like in here," he would say, with little other explanation, as the students and especially the seniors watched intently, the air around his technique seeming to rumble.

The basement of his dojo was full of traditional Okinawan training devices. Sometimes I would come in during a class and he would be in the basement using the *makiwara* or *chi-shi*, or occasionally in the rear of the dojo stretching out while the class worked on a basic application under the direction of a black belt senior.

When I was writing for *Kick* magazine (later, *Inside Karate*), the editor John Corcoran asked if I would be able to do an interview with Mirakian Sensei. Fellow contributor Emil Farkas was getting together his landmark book *Martial Arts: Traditions, History, People*, and not only did John want the article, but he wanted to borrow some old photos from Mirakian Sensei. The photographs were forthcoming, but the article for which I had done over 6 hours of interviewing, was stalled because John couldn't arrange to have a cover shot taken of Mirakian Sensei without a costly trip across the country. Although I hoped to make Mirakian Sensei better known with the article, Sensei quipped that he was going to make *me* famous for having written it.

Sometimes I felt that Sensei was so committed to old-school ways, he would never be rediscovered, nor be able to supplement his broad knowledge with any other material. Then, I saw him again quietly taking part in a Chin-na throwing seminar taught by a person half his age. Although, in the USA, there are just a few top-notch practitioners who seldom seem to get any press, some of them don't seem to seek it or need it.