

INTERVIEW WITH TANAKA SHIGEHO SENSEI

On 15-21 March 2004 Tanaka Shigeho sensei visited Poland, along with 14 of his students, members of the Tokyo University Aikido Club.

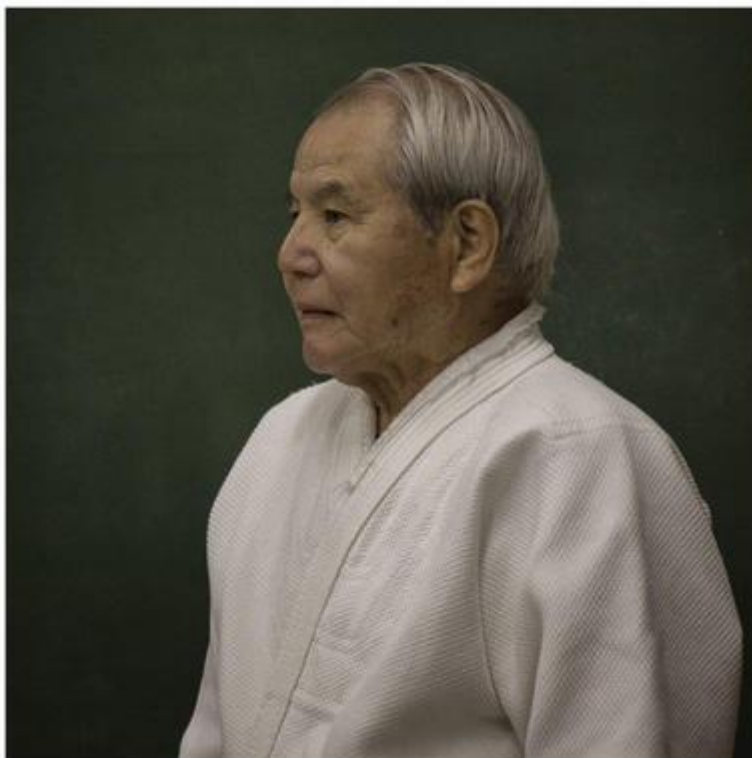
Tanaka sensei has devoted all his life to the study and teaching of Budo.

Born in 1928, still active, he is a living legend, one of three still alive people holding 9th Dan, currently the highest rank in Aikido.

Apart from seminars in Warszawa and Kraków, Tanaka sensei made a demonstration at the Manggha Japanese Art and Technology Centre in Kraków. This landmark visit for Polish Budo enjoyed immense interest of the community.

The halls during all events were fully packed.

Warsaw Budojo was the media sponsor and co-organizer of the visit.



Budojo: How did sensei take up Budo?

Tanaka Sensei: I have been interested in Budo since a very young age, I liked it. I started practicing Budo in primary school.

Budojo: And sensei started with Aikido?

TS: Judo was first.

Budojo: When sensei started practicing Aikido, was it from the beginning at O-Sensei's dojo?

TS: Yes, it was at Ueshiba's dojo.

Budojo: And when was it?

TS: In 1951.

Budojo: Was O-Sensei in Tokyo then?

TS: No, he wasn't. Sensei Ueshiba stayed in Iwama.

Budojo: How often did he visit Tokyo?

TS: A few times a year.

Budojo: For a few days of seminars?

TS: It varied. There were seminars, sometimes lasting for one day, sometimes longer.

Budojo: Who did the teaching? Were the trainings held by Kisshomaru Ueshiba?

TS: Ueshiba Kisshomaru.

Budojo: And anyone else?

TS: There was only one teacher. Ueshiba Morihei sensei.

Budojo: Who was at the trainings with you then, sensei? Who do you recall best?

TS: Okumura, Tada, Arikawa, Nishio, Tamura. I remember those.

Budojo: Kobayashi Hirokazu?

TS: I don't know him well. He was in Osaka back then. Not in Tokyo.

Budojo: How long did sensei train at Hombu Dojo?

TS: Two years. Then I did my own training.

Budojo: How so?

TS: I took care of my own training, I practiced on my own.

Budojo: Did sensei look for help or inspiration from other teachers?

TS: I drew from the teachings of Kunii Zen'ya, master of Kashima Shin Ryu. I learned from master Kunii for about a year. Naturally, I wanted to keep learning, but unfortunately this was impossible because of sensei Kunii's death.

Budojo: Is it true that sensei also practiced at Gozo Shioda's dojo?

TS: I did more than just practice, I taught there.

Budojo: As Shinan?

TS: Yes, from the beginning of Yoshinkan I had trainings there as Shinan.

Budojo: When was it?

TS: In 1954.

Budojo: How did it happen that sensei had trainings at Yoshinkan? Was it at the invitation of its creator, Gozo Shioda?

TS: Yes, I was asked and invited personally by sensei Shioda.

Budojo: Has sensei taught at any other places? Except Shiseikan and Tokyo University?

TS: No, I haven't.

Budojo: And sensei was at Shiseikan from the beginning?

TS: I am the founder and the first director of Shiseikan.

Budojo: Before the founding of Shiseikan, were trainings held elsewhere?

TS: First there was the Aikido Club at the University. Hence the half-century of teaching Aikido at Tokyo University.

Budojo: Sensei has classes at Tokyo University. But the students who practice Aikido while studying, they stop when they graduate.

TS: Most of them, almost all, indeed stop. Very few continue.

Budojo: From a teacher's point of view, what is the feeling when you have to say farewell to nearly all your students after 3-4 years?

TS: There is naturally sadness from the parting, but also curiosity, how this person will do in life, what will they achieve, what way of life they will choose. Interest, curiosity, care.

Budojo: Does sensei often meet his students?

TS: Yes, I meet them often.

Budojo: I'd like to ask about the students not living in Japan.

TS: There are a few of them, not many. In Canada, England, possibly also Australia and South Korea. Much depends on themselves, too. Some consider themselves my students, though they're not. There are also those who are my students, but don't consider themselves as such. Many different cases.

Budojo: What were the Aikido ranks in the early 1950s? When did they formalize?

TS: They were in place when I started training.

Budojo: What was awarding such ranks like back then? Were there exams or did the teacher inform who had what rank?

TS: There were no exams, the sensei would award Kyu and Dan grades at his discretion.

Budojo: Did Kisshomaru sensei or O-Sensei do that?

TS: As long as Morihei sensei was in good health, it was him who issued all certificates. When he passed away, Kisshomaru sensei took over.



Budojo: And what was it like in practice? Did sensei Morihei come and say who had which rank, or did Kisshomaru sensei do it?

TS: Something like this never happened to me, so I can't say.

Budojo: Would rank-skipping happen? Everyone knew somebody was 1 dan yesterday, and today he's 3 Dan?

TS: I can't recall anything like that. All ranks up to 7th Dan I got from sensei Morihei, and 8th and 9th Dan from sensei Kisshomaru. I waited 20 years for the 9th Dan. And do you know how many 9th Dan teachers there currently are?

Budojo: Three. There's sensei Tada and sensei Okumura. The late sensei Arikawa was also 9th Dan.

TS: I received my 9th Dan together with sensei Tada and sensei Arikawa.

Budojo: Sensei said some people consider themselves your students, when in fact they're not. How would sensei describe the teacher-student relationship?

TS: I support freedom of choice. I will not impose on anyone that they are my students. It's about attachment. You can see when somebody feels attached to me and wants to learn from me. For me it is obvious then that they are my students. I don't want to force anyone's attachment. I don't want to impose myself on anybody and don't want anyone imposing themselves on me. I'm not interested in such relations. It must be voluntary on both sides.

Budojo: Let us change subject a bit. TV in Japan often shows allegedly unrestricted martial arts: UFC, Pride, K1. Are these interesting from the point of view of Budo practice and theory?

TS: Some see value in them. I'm not much interested.

Budojo: And if somebody, let say Mr Inoki, told sensei: Mr Tanaka, please prepare somebody to such fights? If they came with a contract?

TS: If one of my students wished to fight in such competitions, I wouldn't object.

Budojo: So sensei does not disapprove?

TS: Why would I forbid anything? If my student wants to fight, then let him.

Budojo: From the point of view of theory, the physical part of combat, are there any interesting things happening there?

TS: Of course.

Budojo: Has sensei seen any new or improved techniques?

TS: I don't think that in terms of technique there is anything new, but on the physical side, some behaviors of those people are interesting to me. If, for example, somebody wished to practice sumo without having the necessary physical traits, they'd fail.

Budojo: Currently these freestyle fights are dominated by people using chokes.

TS: And joint locks.

Budojo: Isn't that a return to the roots of jujitsu?

TS: It may be a return, or simply a modern use of old techniques.

Budojo: For example, in judo the ne-waza techniques have been all but eliminated.

TS: They haven't. You can see them sometimes at judo tournaments, though very rarely.

Budojo: What was the decisive factor in sensei's choice between Aikido and Kashima Shin Ryu? Was it the meeting with great people, such as O-Sensei or Kunii Zen'ya?

TS: It was always the admiration of the teacher that decided, the impression he made, the liking you took to him.

Budojo: Kunii Zen'ya allegedly had a difficult personality, he was very tough on people.

TS: I think he was straightforward. A simple, honest man.

Budojo: He shouted at his students a lot.

TS: There is a difference between humiliating and deprecating students, and strong, tough teaching. To deliver to somebody something you deeply believe in, something you have worked on, something you have in you, sometimes you have to use this direct, tough, firm teaching. With Kunii sensei it was amazing that he was prepared to give his life for Budo. It had always been most important for him. He was tough, but not greedy or arrogant, he never abused his students, never took money from them.

Budojo: We've heard he was a very poor man.

TS: Not poor perhaps, but financially he got nowhere. But he was a good-hearted man. As for O-Sensei Ueshiba, the mere sight of him commanded respect.

Budojo: During demonstrations sensei radiates with calm, as if everything had already happened.

TS: I breathe at demonstrations as I breathe every day.

Budojo: Does sensei train as if he did everyday things?

TS: Emotions go a long way down to the Centre. When a man gets agitated, emotions rise and reach the head. Then there is no calm and control over the legs. There is anxiety. The thing is to concentrate all feelings in the lower part of the body. This provides control over the legs and allows proper stance.

Budojo: Where did the foot position, slightly to the side, come from?

TS: It was taught from the beginning by master Kunii. This stance allows for the easiest reaction to any attack.

Budojo: Gozo Shioda sensei taught this as well.

TS: Their leg positioning was very similar. As was the arm position. But I have a question, too. Wherever I go, I'm being asked when I started training. What is the meaning of such questions? Why doesn't anybody ask me about my teaching at the university? I'm the only teacher in Japan who has been teaching at the same university club for 50 years. People live long, but few can achieve something like this.

Budojo: People practicing Aikido are fascinated by the honor of meeting somebody who trained with O-Sensei Ueshiba, who knows all the greatest *Aikidokas* and is one of them.

TS: Trouble is, we don't know how to tell the truth about Ueshiba today, after so many years. If somebody met O-sensei Ueshiba, learned from him, then how should they talk about him? There are many sides to a man's personality, nobody is one-dimensional. You may be worshipped, and want to worship someone else. Then on the other hand you can be a thief. For me practice is about improving and nurturing your positive traits. Every sensei can think his way. There is a natural drive in every sensei to have many students and make a lot of money on what you do. It may also be a normal, human need for the sensei to have a good meal. For me it doesn't matter that some of my students were famous people. It's also not about somebody practicing Aikido or Kashima Shin Ryu being famous for being my student. I'm happy that my students are excellent doctors, diplomats, lawyers, scientists, who achieved something in their professions. They are not renowned for being my students. Not everyone practicing Aikido becomes a professional. It is my dream that what I teach at trainings helps them in their future professions. That being doctors, diplomats, or professors in the future, they keep the spirit of Budo I taught them.

Budojo: Thank you for your time.



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