



Meeting the Masters: Richard Kim (1917-2001)

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.

Master Kim had won *Black Belt Magazine's* honor of "Karate Sensei of the Year" in 1967. I loved his book *Weaponless Warriors*, which made history come alive by telling it through stories about Okinawan martial artists. Sensei Brian Ricci, a fellow martial artist of my generation,

had been studying under and traveling with Professor Kim before deciding to sponsor him in a Boston-area seminar. I was excited about attending.

Clearly, although Sensei Kim was an American of Korean/Japanese descent from Hawaii, who taught his seminars in English (although he could speak Russian, Korean, Mandarin, and Japanese), he was not averse to being the Japanese taskmaster. I remember his directing Robert Leong (1923-2013), one of his senior students who often traveled with him, to demonstrate a technique to help illustrate an instructional point. Robert was somewhat confused by the directive. Kim repeated it, then seemed to "lose his cool", telling Robert that if he did not pay attention, he would line up at the right rear of gym with the white belts. It was unnecessarily harsh, in my opinion, but I must report that his students not only tolerated this treatment, they even seemed to love him for it.

His main theme that day was "contraction" and "expansion", two skills he felt American karateka were lacking. He insisted on our expanding the front of the torso (by contracting the back) when applying lower and in-to-out middle blocks and contracting the chest and stomach muscles when applying upper and out-to-in middle blocks. This was a method also used by the JKA's Hidetaka Nishiyama Sensei with whom he was associated, and one that my instructor had only partially emphasized. It made such a difference in the success of blocking movements that Master Kim had immediately won me over again. To emphasize what he had taught, he had us run through Bassai-dai several times, concentrating on the beginning forearm block sequences. Although I maintained strict decorum, inside I was smiling from ear to ear. This was exactly my cup of *cha*.

About fifteen minutes before the seminar was scheduled to end, Sensei Kim called us to order and sat us down somewhat less formally. It is not unusual for a very traditional Japanese-style sensei to deliver a short address on the themes that he had emphasized in class, or in many cases, have one of the sempai perform this task. Although I am not religious, I have no objection to those who are religious drawing non-secular parallels to karate lessons in articles, however I felt that, in this case, I had been lured into a revival tent through an entranceway that looked like a dojo.

I had studied aiki and karate under a very religious man from South Carolina and a Greek Orthodox karate teacher from Massachusetts, both of whom could cite chapter and verse. Neither of them ever mentioned their beliefs in the dojo. Perhaps there are students who can accept clerical messages only when delivered in a secular context. Certainly Robert, Brian, and other students of Sensei Kim were not put off by his attempt at religiously oriented philosophy. As for me, I respected Kim's knowledge and his accomplishments, and contented myself with taking away a few of the golden nuggets that his students regularly seemed to find. I would look forward to more of his books and his insights, but I preferred them to be in print.