



Meeting the Masters: Toru Tanaka (1930-2000)

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 some of my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

Born Charles Kalani in Hawaii, “Professor Toru Tanaka” received his first glimpse of fame in the professional wrestling ring and then later in the movies as the evil henchman type who looked like he could not be beaten.

He was in my area working on a private film starring Tang Soo Do Master Richard Byrne and I was invited to meet him and observe his seminar.

First impression: big.

Second impression: strong.

Third impression: like Richard Kim (also from Hawaii), he was as interested in putting his audience in the right philosophical frame of mind as he was teaching technique.

Fourth impression: very big and very strong. To be accurate, he was only an inch or so taller than I and quite a bit shorter than Master Byrne, who stands 6 feet 5 inches, but he was almost twice my width. I knew he had studied Danzan-ryu Ju-jutsu on Hawaii, but was so thickly muscled that I could not see how he would be able to move except in the ominous fashion emphasized in his films. Well, sort of....

He had someone attempt to choke him from behind. In reality, he did not need a defense because no one there could possibly put both hands around his neck. I didn’t ask about its exact measurement, but it was about 20 inches in circumference and short enough that only a couple of fingers of each hand would be able to circumnavigate it at the same time. Still, the defense was for us, not for him. He looped his thick arm around the attacker’s arms, squeezing them together in his armpit. The technique was what we called *ushiro-kubi-jime-odori* (rear neck-choke dance), a version of which exists in many ju-jutsu styles.

I was surprised to see that the Tang Soo Do people, despite the fact that they were smaller and more flexible, had difficulty with it, born of their adherence to their sharp, focused, power-oriented system. They would turn and knock the arm away with a modified knife-hand block—probably a TSD defense that looked similar to them, but was decidedly not the same. They seldom could make their arms encircle their opponents’ even if the opponent were their size. In other words, because of stylistic rigidity, understandable since all styles demand a certain amount of rigidity when being learned correctly, they could not get their bodies to emulate Professor Tanaka’s comparative fluidity.

Fifth impression: Professor Tanaka taught very few ju-jutsu seminars, not simply because he was acting in movies, not simply because it was not his favorite venue, but also because he had a body that

would never convince a soul that he needed *any* self-defense, and one that might actually be incapable of showing the ideal technique, i.e. a technique that most people could emulate in a successful manner.

Certainly, if you were going to meet the Sharks or the Jets under the bridge, you would want Tanaka in your gang. One scowl, one heavy step and the opponents would immediately tend to relinquish their switchblades and zip guns, to use an image from Tanaka's era. But as fascinating as it was to meet the man and see him move, it more fascinating on reflection, to consider both his limitations (that others might consider advantages) and those of the students.