SENSEI OPDAM IS THE LIVING EMBODIMENT OF THE CLASSIC KARATE TEACHER. HE IS AN EXCELLENT TECHNICIAN, A SCHOLAR, A QUIET MAN AND ABOVE ALL, A GENTLEMAN. HIS DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF TRADITIONAL GOJU RYU MAKES HIM STAND OUT AS ONE OF THE FEW TRUE ICONS OF THE OKINAWAN KARATE. THROUGH DECADES OF DEDICATION AND HARD TRAINING, SENSEI OPDAM HAS GATHERED AN IMMENSE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION THAT TRANSCENDS THE PHYSICAL ASPECT OF THE ART AND MANIFESTS IN THE MOST TRADITIONAL KARATE-DO PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. HIS ULTIMATE GOAL IS PRESERVING THE TRADITION AND ENSURING THAT IT IS AVAILABLE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. THIS KARATE INSTRUCTOR DISPLAYS THE QUALITIES OF EVERY STUDENT’S DREAM TEACHER, NOT ONLY IN A PHYSICAL AND TECHNICAL SENSE BUT ALSO IN AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO THE DEEP KARATE TRADITIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES.
Through the Eyes of a Master

"I have trained in many different martial arts styles and systems other than karate."

How long have you been practicing karate?

After a period of intensive training and high level of competition as a junior in athletics between the age of seven and twelve, which positively influenced martial arts training in later life, I encountered my first training in the martial arts in 1980 at the age of thirteen. At that time I quite athletics because of the strong competitive elements which I did not like anymore and in combination with my fascination of the martial arts, I was inspired and started searching for a martial arts teacher. This brought me to my first physical encounter with the martial arts in the form of the Indonesian martial art Pentjak Silat. My teacher George de Groot was of Indonesian origin and taught the TRI-Bhakti style, one of the many styles of this gracious art.

In 1984 I was working out with a friend in a gym and during the training we got into a conversation with a man who gave karate lessons. He invited us to come over and watch his lessons. Having only experienced Pentjak Silat, I was impressed of what I saw. Before long, we decided to join his karate school. Described as a Kempo school, the school was in the process of switching over to Goju-ryu, a hard-soft style of Okinawan karate. Here, after my initial introduction into the Indonesian martial arts, my karate practice started. So, until this day I have been practicing karate for 31 years.

How many styles have you trained in and who were your teachers?

I have trained in many different martial arts styles and systems other than karate. Next to karate the Russian Systema (Combat Sambo) has had the greatest influence upon my current martial arts practise. The foundation of my karate roots come from the Okinawan karate-style of Goju-ryu.

As I mentioned before, in 1984 I started practising karate. This was under my first karate teacher, Sensei Harry de Spa in Nijmegen. Sensei de Spa was the Dutch Chief-instructor for the International Okinawan Goju-ryu Karate-do Federation (IOGKF) at that time. I have trained under and with Sensei de Spa until the beginning of 1993. I trained very diligently and intensively and tried to get familiar with other karate-styles, training methods and teachers from all over the world. This search for education and knowledge I continued for many years.

Within the IOGKF I periodically received instruction from the founder of the organisation Master Morio Higaonna, who promoted me a Nidan in 1990, and met and received instruction from several foreign Chief-instructors from England, Germany, Israel, France and other mainly European countries.

Together with additional training like weight training, I put a lot of effort in developing my martial art, from which karate was and is a part of my martial way. Martial arts like kobudo, aikido, kung fu, tai chi, fighting sports like kickboxing and other more police and military orientated martial systems formed my additional martial training. My effort in the service of my martial way went also as far to investigate the human body and it’s body mechanics resulting in being a certified fitness instructor and having acquaintance with some yoga, qi gong and shiatsu to broaden my understanding of the human body in training and different Eastern and Western cultures and practices.

At the beginning of 1993 I quite the IOGKF because of personal differences with my teacher and overall views of the organisation which no longer aligned with the way I see and choose to engage martial arts. After participating at a Meibukan Goju-ryu training-camp in June of 1993 in Israel under Master Meitatsu Yagi, son of Grandmaster Meitoku Yagi, I joined the International Meibukan Goju-ryu Karate-do Association in August 1993.
1993. In December 1993, during my intensive visit to the Headquarters of the Meibukan in Okinawa, Japan, I was appointed by Master Meitatsu Yagi as the Dutch Representative of the International Meibukan Goju-ryu Karate-do Association. My dojo became the Dutch Headquarters of the organisation.

In 1995 I visited karate pioneer Master Anthony Mirakian, the Overseas General Manager for the Okinawan Meibukan Goju-ryu Karate-do Association. Master Mirakian was appointed with this honourable position by Grandmaster Meitoku Yagi in 1972 whereafter Master Mirakian formed his branch of Zen Bei Okinawa Goju Ryu Meibukan (All American Okinawa Goju Ryu Meibukan Association). In his role Master Mirakian was given the responsibility by Meitoku Yagi in overseeing Meibukan Goju-ryu outside Japan. From my position as representative, but also personally because it came to my knowledge what an unique karate-pioneer and master he was, I had to meet this master. In that time I also became aware of the politics within the Meibukan organisation and decided to join Master Mirakians branche. After two very intensive training periods in 1995, I was accepted as his student and in 1996 became his Personal Representative for The Netherlands for Okinawan Meibukan Goju-ryu Karate-do. At the same time my direct college, Sensei Hing-Poon Chan became the Personal Representative for Canada. Unique for the both of us since Master Mirakian never oppointed anyone else in the world with this honour. I represented his Overseas Branche in the Netherlands officially untill juli 2013. Sensei Mirakian honoured me with the title Renshi and promoted me throughout the years from Sandan, 3th degree black belt untill Rokudan, 6th Degree Black belt in 2006. Two years ago, on my request and in compliance with Master Mirakian, one of my students, Sensei Pascal de Haan, succeeded me. Sensei Pascal de Haan was promoted by me untill Sandan, third degree black belt and was promoted by Master Mirakian after my succeision to Yondan, 4th degree black belt.

From the time I have studied actively under Master Mirakian since 1995, I kept on studying and training under and with all kinds of martial arts teachers in Europe and North America. In North America Master Mirakian introduced me to many of them. Also often Master Mirakian invited other masters and teachers of different martial arts and systems to his dojo to teach. Throughtout the years Sensei Fred Lohse was one of those who taught kobudo (Matayoshi-style) on a regular base at Master Mirakian's dojo and I was also fortunate to receive instruction from him in this armed art. I have received Sensei Lohse also in my dojo in the Netherlands to instruct my students and myself in kobudo and some White Crane Kung fu. Sometimes there were also closed meetings in de dojo of Master Mirakian with only one or two students and Sensei Mirakian himself. I remember in 2002 that he told me that he had invited some Russian Systema practitioners in his dojo. Unfortunatly I was not present at that time, but Sensei was impressed of the system's natural body mechanics and showed me some filmfootage of this martial system. Triggered, this lead me to visit seminars in Europa of Systema by Mikhail Ryabko, Vladimir Vasiliev and others and engage even more in this martial system after experiencing it first hand from the masters.

So, from the point of karate styles, Okinawan Goju-ryu gave me my base from which I received instruction within two different international Goju-ryu organisations with two mains teachers being Sensei Harry de Spa in the Netherlands and Master Anthony Mirakian in the United States of Amerika. Over the years I have trained in a more and more eclectic way, to broaden my horizon developing myself both in skill and knowledge, but more important spiritually. Many other teachers, but also a lot of students and other people have crossed my path and all have influenced my live, one way or the other. For me personally, a visual artist by the late Klaus van de Locht, who studied theology and philosophy and was not engaged in martial arts, has influenced my martial art and way of live in a profound way. My personal contact with him in the nineties was intense talking about daily life, but mostly about art and what it meant for us as human beings. He was a true guide to me.
How were your beginnings in the art of karate and your early days in karate?

In the beginning I had a relatively tough learning school. Full blown punches at the solaris plexus and black-and-blue testicles to learn why some techniques worked and some not …, weekly bruises on the underarms and legs doing bodyconditioning and sparring and occasionally a broken rib and a cracked finger or toe. But all together no Spartian school, but a regular dojo where you would find serious and dedicated students, where the concept of blood, sweat and tears was put into practice in the right way.

The first few years until receiving my Shodan, 1e Dan black belt, was physically hard work. This continued, but I did get used to it and my body and mind liked the challenge, although injuries were never fun. Repetitions of techniques over and over again, a lot of body conditioning and body work like push-ups, sit-ups, squats, jumping jacks etc.. I remember being a white belt doing 10 regular push-ups. Within three years during a regular training I would do 100 full extended two knuckle push-ups after each other. The spirit in de dojo was very good. In these first years there was a strong bound between my fellow karatedoka’s and with a select few we would train outside the dojo in parks, homegardens or nearby forests where we kicked trees and doing other fysical stuff, not always taking care of our bodies being the temple of our mind. At the time I was a brown belt, I trained 5-6 times a week for 4-6 hours a day karate training, weighttraining and other additional training. This tight training regime I continued for several years.

My teacher Sensei de Spa was keen on both the physical, pedagogical and philosophical aspects of the martial arts which triggered my own quest. He was also a bouncer at a dancing a few days a week during his time as an pedagogy student in his thirties. In my young eyes at the age of 20, he managed to guide this practical experience into additional elements incooperated into the self-defence methodes he taught and that were techni-qualy in line with Okinawan karate.
At that time it also triggered me to see what fear and stress related to danger and excitement did to me. This lead me to competition in both kata and kumite and becoming a bouncer at some dancings for a period of time. This experience had it’s positive and negative moments, but taught me something about myself. It taught me that from a self-defence point of view, everything is very relativly. Confronting fear on different levels has been and still is helpfull for me to understand my own drives and motivations of acting better. Karate competition was a game, a sport and in my eyes had little to do with martial arts. Being a bouncer was dangerous, and also did not ad any value to my martial art, except both gave me first hand experience and were a part of my journey. So my first few years were very experimental in a range of different mental and physical challenges. But it was a valuable time, fully in live and strongly focused upon my art.

Were you a ‘natural’ at karate – did the movements come easily to you?

I was gifted with a little talent, not much, but still. Together with my determination and experience at a young age with intensive training, it helped me to adopt movements, handling general karate training, center my focus and develop patience. I was very eager to learn and I always tried to engage every technique or movement as somethings new, although I might already have done it a thousand times. I was especially keen on taking every opportunity to see how masters or skilled people demonstrate their abilities. I am typically visually orientated, have a strong visual memory of body movements. Once I have seen it, is resides in my mind. By analyzing body mechanics, adopting movements myself by copying, repeating and giving instant bio feedback to transform it into my own ‘body feeling’, the process of ‘perfecting the technique/movement’ starts. At the beginning and throughout this never ending process, the questions rises in me how does it suite me, why does or doesn’t it suite me, can I adjust, should I adjust, what do I feel both mentally and physically when I interact these movements with others doing kumite forms, learn from the outcome and implement it. This interactive process, combined with the theoretical information and my required knowledge and experience, I use to fine-tune techniques/movements until I reach a certain free feeling and therefore, had made it my own. The most interesting part is the moment when you are physically trained enough to shift your focus more and more upon the mental part. First you learn what tools (your body) you have and how you can use it, than transform that into a natural way of create something with your mind, giving it spirit. A process that is never so black and white and already active from the start but differentiates during your development.

What do you think are the most important characteristics of Meibukan Goju Ryu?

Nowadays I teach and train eclectically, I am independent of any organization and not involved into politics, commercialization, cultural bloodlines or other enhancements nor distractions. I teach and train in what I believe in and dare to question myself and let others question me. As a teacher I have only very few answers for my students, but a lot of questions and challenges both physically and spiritually. I am just a guide with the intention to let us grow as human beings and use martial arts as an instrument. I don’t present any style or teacher (anymore). Having said that, I have learned a lot of investigating
the history of martial arts and have encountered firsthand the style of Goju-ryu karate and the teachings of the Meibukan in particular. Some answers I give are straight forward, others point towards subjectivity.

As far as I can compare the teachings of several masters and Grandmasters of different Goju-ryu karate schools like Jundokan, Shoreikan, Seibukan and organizations like the IOGKF and the Japanese Goju-kai, I would say that the Meibukan school founded by Meitoku Yagi has some body movements that are more Chinese like than most other Goju-ryu schools. But compared to another Okinawan style of karate called Shorin-ryu, with its swift and dynamic tai sabaki (body shifting), this distinction is not worth mentioning. All Okinawan karate styles have fragmented ways of moving with a lot of focus upon power and linear directions as seen in their kata and often also certain kumite forms, which you could translate in the famous words ‘One blow, one kill’, typical for karate. This is in contrast to Chinese Kung fu, which is softer and has more fluid, more circular in movements, but for Chinese standards general Kung fu is still an external, and hard martial art. All is relative.

Most Goju-ryu schools have the same basic curriculum as formalized by its founder Chojun Miyagi being specific kata together with other forms of kumite, hojo undo etc. The Meibukan school has on top of this also unique Meibukken kata, with more Chinese like postures and movements developed by Meitoku Yagi and included into the Meibukan curriculum. They are typical for the Meibukan school and you will not see those anywhere else. (For those who are interested, in a book I wrote titled ‘Karate Goju Ryu Meibukan’, characteristics of Goju-ryu and the Meibukan school are explained in detail. In there you will find a treasury of information about the style and Okinawan karate history and masters.) Also ude tanren (body conditioning of the arms) was introduced in the Meibukan curriculum after a visit of Meitoku Yagi to Taiwan in de 1960’s. Nowadays ude tanren is introduced in many Goju-ryu schools together with drills from other arts like Uechi-ryu, another Okinawan karate style which is known for its hard body conditioning.

You can compare things like Okinawan karate with Japanese karate in all its elements, the different karate styles with each other and Okinawan karate prior to World War 2, the 1950’s till its present day and look at many other comparisons. However, for me it is more interesting to look at the principles behind the curriculum and the methods that are used to achieve certain goals. What lies behind it?

Within the Meibukan organization, there are many different branches, schools and teachers. Some are very sport orientated and others are more spiritual. This is the case with most karate-schools, be it this style or another, be it in the West or in Okinawa and Japan itself.

Every teacher influences the methods, techniques or other elements resulting in different teachings and schools. I think it is good to ask oneself what a style, a ryu is, which position does it take in this or another culture. How does tradition fit in, what goal has
Karate is nowadays often referred to as a sport… would you agree with this definition or is a martial art?

If you talk about sport (karate) or the art of karate, you talk about two different things. For me, one of the most interesting questions is what the meaning of art and sport is. Even great institutions differ on what is one and what is the other. So in the framework of this interview, my words fall short already, but I will try to explain how I see it.

Self-defense is the vehicle of a martial art, but secondary. We use self-defense in martial arts, being techniques, movements, exercises, confrontations, body awareness etc., in a matter that has a higher purpose. A purpose to develop ourselves as a human being. This is a process that is internal orientated.

Within a martial system, self-defense is primary. Clinically seen, without ritualization and mainly focused upon survival. Survival can mean attacking before attacked; it also can mean defending when being attacked. Using all there is, without limitation, just one goal: to survive.

Sport has to do with competition, about winning (over the other) as a primary goal within the framework of fixed rules. Like a martial system, the enemy, the opponent is outside. It is someone that should be concurred, overcome. This is a process that is orientated outside ourselves. I don’t rule out that within sports there is a place, there is room for self-reflection, but our culture, our superficial needs, commercial and political interests have a strong influence on sport. So for me, the purpose of martial art is focus internally, to grow as a person, to overcome myself.

The purpose of sport is more in line with that of the martial system: external focus to overcome the other.

Do you think Kobudo training is beneficial for a Karate practitioner?

From a point of self-defense, I certainly think that it is beneficial for a karate practitioner. Personally I did not practice jumping kicks much myself, nor do I spend much time teaching jumping kicks to my students. It is useful to learn the technique, to know by experience what an opponent can do with that technique and how to deal with such an attack...
when implemented upon you. This also goes for using weapons. So, from that point of view it is good to know how it works, to practice how to deal with armed opponents and get familiar with all kinds of weapons or objects that can be used as weapons. Although the battle between an armed and unarmed person is an unbalanced one.

From the point of body dynamics, I also see beneficial ways to teach the body to move and get familiar with something outside the body (the weapon as a tool) and become one with it.

Do you need Kobudo for the development of karate used as an art form? No, don’t think so. You don’t need all the kata, the entire curriculum of a style or system to practice martial arts and therefore you also don’t need another martial art like Kobudo. A simple technique as a punch or a body shift could be enough to practice your martial art. But on a self-defense level, it can make you more universal, more developed, enhancing your abilities and possibilities.

Don’t forget, karate is the Way of the Empty Hand, although originally the word “karate” was a way of expressing “martial art from China.” On the surface, it deals with the physical component of emptiness, without weapons, with our bare hands. More interesting is that it also refers to empty our mind, our spirit to look at things as they are.

When teaching the art of karate – what is the most important element for you; self-defense or sport?

When teaching the art of karate or any martial art, you commit yourself to the other, your student. As a guide, you try to formulate the questions the student has, but of which he is not (sufficiently) aware. Being a guide you also give direction to your student’s journey of self-cultivation. This is only possible when the student opens up himself to you.

I use self-defense to reflect upon the students own conflicts. This is the core of my teachings. Practicing self-defense can be very useful and is confrontational both physical and mentally. In my opinion self-defense, clinically seen, can also be very useful to confront the enemies inside. Is it the martial art which directs it into something meaningful. Sport has no additional value for me in this context.

Kihon, Kata and Kumite, what’s the proper ratio in training?

It’s all depends on what your goals are, what is needed to reach those goals and what time you have at your disposal to train and under what circumstances. So, to my opinion, there is no fixed ratio that can be applied for everyone.

With this in mind, one should first investigate the curriculum’s content. Not such much what it contains, but what it means. For example what kata means. Where did it come from and why? For what purpose was it created? How was it perceived throughout its history? What purpose does it have now? What purpose has my teacher given it and what do I want with it. The same is applicable to kihon and kumite.

I personally believe that what is the closest to us humans, from a physical point of view, should be the departure of self-defense. A martial system should in my opinion support the primal instincts reactions and reflexes. Beyond these we try to gain control over body and mind to support our chances of survival in self-defense. Training and practicing supports our body and mind reaching that goal. Within this context of self-defense you can create a martial system with room for individual competences. This is something that can be trained. Within the context of an art, we add, adjust, exclude to form the conditions for a higher goal than only self-defense. This is something that requires practicing.
**How important is competition in the evolution of a karate practitioner?**

Having been a competitor myself in both kumite and kata for a few years in the late eighties and early nineties, looking back I personally see no importance for a karate practitioner in the light of martial arts practice to engage into competition. Don’t get me wrong, everyone has to choose his or her own path, and a path in life is never straightforward. One of the reasons I have chosen to use the symbol of a labyrinth to present my martial arts school.

Maybe one sees competition being beneficial and for someone else it has no meaning. It all depends on your own goals. I think competition can teach you something, but it has also contradictions towards the goal of karate as a martial art and can work against you. Again, you should ask yourself with what purpose you want to do something. Investigate what competition in all is aspects and ask yourself why you should participate in it.

**What really means “Ikken Hissatsu” and how it applies when used in sport Karate?**

Ikken Hissatsu means to annihilate or solve resistance with one single technique of blow. As I mentioned before referring to the power of karate translated into ‘one blow, one kill’, technically the focus or kime (total movement of the muscles chains bringing it to a maximum energy outcome) in delivering a devastating technique to finish of the opponent, is typical for karate. Karate is known for its powerful techniques, especially its straight punches. The strong input from the legs and the hips attached to a strong conditioned body, a body that is used to resistance training like makiwara practice, can deliver such a powerful punch. Don’t get me wrong, in self-defense, finishing of an opponent with one technique is not an easy thing to do and tactical and more realistically there are numerous technical combinations possible and trained for the purpose to annihilate a physical threat. With most of the regular sport karate, powerful techniques are not always permitted or hardly can be performed. Often the body and fists have too much body protection and one needs to focus upon speed and retracting power to score points and therefore will not take the risk of losing points doing otherwise. This is somewhat different with full contact karate, but again, you may fully punch at chudan levels, often not on the face. But this is still superficially. Ikken Hissatsu goes beyond that. It is also a question of finishing of an attacker who wants to kill you. If this is the case, you want to defend yourself and want to stop a physical threat immediately, annihilate the threat at any cost since your life is in danger and nothing else has more priority than preserving your life. So no half decisions, only one decision right now, right here and so effective as possible with every technique possible at any location on the opponents body. No rules like in sports. Here you find its deeper meaning. Originating from you basic instincts, it is the will that has chosen to act, without hesitation, without holding back giving orders to the body to focus all its energy into one single action. There is a mindset to take one’s life in order to preserve your own. This intention has no place in sports. There is concentration, there is focus en determination in sports, but not with such a mindset. It’s life or dead.
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From a technical point of few, this is also the case in martial systems like for example the Israeli all-round self-defense system of Krav Maga.

So in my opinion in sport karate related to kumite it has no place. Demonstrating Ikken Hissatsu in kata could be. Then it should be demonstrating Ikken Hissatsu in its pure form, with the proper mindset and body movements / outcome. No distractions, no additional goals. Unfortunately, in demonstrating kata in sport events, there are so many other goals and therefore adjustments made that there is nothing left of the concept.

Practicing kata, or even no ritualized kata but just shadow fighting on an imaginary opponent, you yourself form your own process by visualizing. You could bring yourself to such a mindset, the question is if the body can deal with punching in the air without damaging your body. But again, it is possible to initiate the thought through the correct mindset starting to perform the technique, but withholding it at the last moment, to come back often before overstretching yourself since there is now real body contact and therefore no body resistance where the released energy can go into. I have seen many kata champions performing for points, not for a demonstration of their mindset being in Ikken Hissatsu. Controlling balance, exact embusen (patterns), decently and fully aligned artificial postures are focused and trained upon by many. Demonstrating Ikken Hissatsu with visualization of fighting applications (bunkai), creates to much risks of not winning the contest. There are exceptions, but I personally hardly saw them in sports competition on any level at all.

How do you see the art of Karate evolve in the future?

I am not sure how karate will involve. For my own practice and teaching I have an idea of the direction I would like to take for the near future. I think it is important to express and illustrate the spirit of martial arts since it is meaningful for life itself and I believe it can be of value for others as well.

I have seen all kinds of martial sports and shows pass by. It is ok that these forms of ‘karate’ exist, but they unfortunately overshadow the true spirit of the martial arts. At the moment I have noticed that karate is back on the agenda to be nominated as a sport for the Olympics. If karate becomes an Olympic sport, I really hope that out of respect for karate deeper meaning, they change the name karate for this purpose in something else that defines it as sport karate, being nothing else than an offshoot of an Okinawan martial art used fragmented for sport purposes.

What advice would you do to those who want to focus on becoming a Karate teacher?

First of all you should be aware of the task before you. It is a great responsibility to teach something like karate to others. Karate is not meant to entertain someone. Karate
techniques can be very brutal, when not guided properly by respect for others and values related to society and us as social human beings. Karate practise can be physical harmful when not carefully approached. Know why, in which way and to whom you teach. So, be aware of your intention and be clear and honest in what you can offer people. Be also clear in what you expect from each other, teacher to student and student to teacher. Karate is a long term process, not a take away product.

**What advice would you give to an instructor who is struggling with his or her own development?**

Development can come from the interaction with many things. Karate in its deeper meaning is not contained to techniques, form, etiquette and rituals alone. It is intertwined with life. I found myself often too much focused on what was told, what was demonstrated, what was framed by so called authorities, be it a teacher, organization, culture, or subculture like a certain martial environment I was in instead of seeing what really matters. My advice would be to actively search contact with those people who are looking for answers, not those who think they possess or know the truth. If an organization (or a person) promotes itself by saying that this is the only way, this is the true way, the most traditional one, be aware... Try to form a strong basis, but also try to look behind your own horizon, behind your organization and style. Don't withhold yourself, empty your cup more often. Dare to ask yourself fundamental questions and, above all, try to listen to your inner voice and act accordingly. In this context Sensei Mirakian often said that you should not wear someone else's suit. The chances are it might not fit. To me, this is very true.

On different levels, I felt the need to find out myself what was suitable for me and what was not. I couldn't find one system, style, way or teacher that had it all. Not only for the self-defense part but also for my personal growth and self-education. And I don't believe that it is possible to find all the answers in one location / with one style or teacher. I believe everything is already there, all the answers are available within oneself, but you have to find your own way, push the right buttons, dare to leave something behind, embrace something unknown, listen to your inner voice and find your way by yourself. What do you have to lose? You can only gain if you want to develop from within. Struggle is something natural. I struggle every day. I can only see a direction, no final answer.

**What karate can offer to the individual in these troubled times we are living in?**

To my opinion the art of karate or any other martial or non-martial art, can give a person direction. For me, martial art has everything to do with mindfulness, everything else is secondary. Especially in this troubled times, we need to find a place for ourselves but also for sharing with others, were we can meet not only physically and socially, but connect also on a spiritual level. We should be more aware of the masks we wear and feel confident to take them off, reaching out to each other in love on a journey that leads us to who we are, to our true self. With all our strengths and weaknesses searching for connection with ourselves and others.

I am aware of the connection between our body and mind that we as human beings have and believe martial practice can confront us, putting a mirror in front of us, openly exposing ourselves and help us develop as a human being.

**Tell us about your relationship with the late Sensei Anthony Mirakian.**

I have never met a more charismatic person than Sensei Anthony Mirakian. He was one of a kind. Before I first set foot in his dojo, he asked me more than once what my intentions with karate were, what my history was. By letter, by telephone and again upon arrival when he first welcomed me in his house and dojo in 1995. He was keen on all the details. This continued for quit a long time. Like a sort of never ending trial period.
I heard from his students, of which a dozen or more trained under him at that time for more than 20-25 years, that Sensei Mirakian taught 4 times a week in his dojo for 2,5 hours a day. Three times a week for the adults in the evening and on Saturday a class for children followed by a class for adults.

In the periods I visited his dojo in Watertown, Boston MA, USA, he would open up his dojo earlier, and often stayed until midnight, sometimes even gave an extra opportunity so I could workout. In the first few years I would spend more than 5 hours a day training in his dojo under him or with his students. I was therefore very honored and fortunate. Not only because he gave me the opportunity to practice and receive instruction so much, but also in giving personal attention to me when we sat down after training or welcomed me in his house, discussing karate for long periods of time, watching old movies. The same warm hospitality I received from his students.

Sensei was, like he would call it, the ‘Rock of Gibraltar’. He was always present in the dojo, since the day he started his dojo in Watertown back in the sixties. He sometimes joked about this and mentioned that his wife Hellen, with whom he had a good relationship, called herself a karate widow since he was away from home so many hours a day, teaching karate besides his job and when he retired sometimes even more. He was someone who you could build on, who not compromised his way teaching karate and did not commercialize it. Sensei often spoke with me about karate history, his own experiences with the masters he had met and trained under, but also about the political circus of the many martial arts organizations, be it Okinawan or otherwise. He disapproved what was happening in the world with karate. He felt that karate should not be about politics and sport, but had to focus on self-realization. He also often spoke about the fact that there were distortions in karate history by consciously manipulated egoistic motivations. Sensei Mirakian never expressed his thoughts in public out of respect for others, especially to honor his master Meitoku Yagi, but even within the Meibukan organization from the moment Meitoku Yagi stepped back from his active role within the Meibukan, he had his thoughts and doubts about the succession and direction of the organization and continuation of the late Grandmaster Meitoku Yagi’s heritage.

Never the less, he continued acting in accordance with what he believed in and tried to stay out of the politics as much as possible. “People call me a dinosaur”, he told me once. “But I rather be a dinosaur that is about to become extinct, than selling my principles for money or power. I would rather die”. His voice, his eyes were fierce on those moments, like the mindset when he demonstrated techniques in de dojo. For some things there was no in-between for him.

Sensei was very strict during the workouts. Workouts that were as rigorous as the ones he received in Okinawa in the 1950’s. He did not gave much compliments or was coddling during his classes. The only time when he said something about my personal
physical abilities, was after the first two weeks I was in his dojo, where I trained every day for more than 10 hours nearly until exhaustion. “Your well trained” were his words. For me the message was, ‘you are serious, let’s move on’. Years later, when I taught some lessons to his students in de dojo, he said; “You are a good instructor”. That was all, during all these years. And it was good. I wasn’t looking for compliments, I was there to learn, to practice.

When we as his students were not moving around, stood still, you could hear a pin drop. His eyes saw right through you when you were working out. He saw the flinches when your concentration would lack for a moment and pull you back on track with his exceptional penetrating voice. After the training session ended, he would transform and become milder and was very approachable. He was laughing, getting food and drinks for all those who were present and telling stories. And stories he had, with his photographic memory and colorful way of telling things!

Sensei Mirakian had strong personal relationships with his students. He helped them in finding a job or gave them advise in personal issues and brought students and family together also outside the dojo. Many of his students started doing karate since childhood under the watchful eye of Sensei Mirakian and therefore had become like a father figure to them.

When I came to Sensei Mirakian, I was already formed in my way of karate in Goju-ryu, but was fortunately to have meet this exceptional master, receive his instructions, advise and insight, but above all, his kindness in taking care of others. There is so much to tell about the legend Master Mirakian, that I want to refer to the interview with him that was originally published in the famous Fighting Arts magazine. If you read that intensive and long interview, with its unique pictures, you will grasp something of old school Okinawan karate and the unique position of this Western karate-pioneer at The Golden Age of Okinawan karate.

Although I am very grateful for what Sensei Mirakian has done for me, and the great honor he has given me, I had to follow my own path. This was not an instant decision, but a longer progress. I had to listen to my inner voice and wear the suit that suits me best, my own suit. I am dedicated to the higher goals of martial arts which I shared with Sensei Mirakian, but still, I needed the freedom to form my own structure without framing it into somebody else’s style, form, organization or otherwise.

Sensei Mirakian will be in my memory as a great teacher, a gifted master, a unique karate pioneer and above all, a human being who cares about others and offered his guidance with the intention of making the world a better place.

**Finally, what advice would you like to give to all Karate practitioners?**

Ask yourself the question every single day if it feels good what you do for yourself and for others and I don’t mean fulfilling materialistic or short term satisfactory goals. What does really matter? How can you be part of society developing yourself and helping others in doing so? As human beings, social as we are, we share goals with each other and when we accept who we are, we will accomplish a lot, inside and outside the dojo.