

# Aikidosphere

**Akira Tohei**

**8th Dan, Shihan**

**Chief Instructor of Midwest Aikido Center (1972-1999)**

**Akira Tohei Shihan, 8th dan**

**By Robert Mason, Chief Instructor - Aikido of Dallas**

Editor's Note: The passing of Akira Tohei Shihan was the first loss from our group of teachers. The influence Tohei Sensei had is recalled by one of his long-time students, Bob Mason.



Akira Tohei, 8th degree black belt, was one of the most senior Aikido instructor in the United States and one of the technical directors of the United States Aikido Federation. Tohei Shihan practiced Aikido over 50 years and was a direct disciple of O-Sensei, Morihei Ueshiba, the Founder of Aikido.

Tohei Shihan was born August 20, 1929, in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan. At the age of 15, he enlisted in the Japanese army of World War II and received training as a kamikaze pilot. We are forever fortunate that the war ended just months before he was to fly his suicide mission. After the war ended, Japan was in chaos and Tohei Shihan was in limbo, searching for something to give more meaning to his life and to better serve his country. He had heard about the relatively new art of Aikido, a martial art designed to provide discipline to one's own spirit as well as self-defense without injury to the attacker.

In 1946 Tohei Shihan, intrigued and motivated, began his Aikido training under the then Chief Instructor of Hombu dojo, Koichi Tohei, and continued in 1956 under the direct instruction of O-Sensei and his son, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, at Aikido World Headquarters, Hombu Dojo in Tokyo, Japan.

In 1963, Tohei Shihan accompanied Kisshomaru Ueshiba, the 2nd generation leader of Aikido, on a tour of Aikido dojo in the United States. When the three-month journey ended in Hawaii, Tohei Shihan stayed and taught throughout the Hawaiian Islands for an additional nine months. In 1964, he returned to Japan and joined the teaching staff at Hombu Dojo. For the next eight years, in addition to his work at Hombu Dojo, Tohei Shihan was an instructor at Asia University, Akita Economics University, Keio University, Nihon Women's University, the Ground Self-Defense Forces and the Naval Self-Defense Forces.

In 1966, Hombu Dojo awarded Akira Tohei the title of Shihan, or Master Instructor. In 1972, Aikido World Headquarters dispatched him to America, specifically to become the chief instructor of the Midwest Region of the United States Aikido Federation, headquartered in Chicago, Illinois.

Tohei Shihan was responsible for the establishment and maintenance of thousands of students in nearly 50 dojos throughout the Midwest, including Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Tohei Shihan was promoted to 8th dan in 1989 and practiced and lead

classes up until just two months before his passing away at the age of 70 on July 2, 1999 [in connection with complications due to lung disease]. Tohei Shihan leaves behind his wife Joanne Kiyoko Tohei and son Akihiro Tohei, both of whom have our deepest heartfelt condolences.

Tohei Shihan, or just Sensei\_ as he was known to the tens of thousands of students whose lives he touched, brought to us in the United States Midwest Region much more than any words can express. It is not possible to put on paper the gratitude we feel towards Sensei, who helped each individual student grow from Aikido infants unable to walk or speak to young adults in Aikido practice, able to appreciate the path laid down by O-Sensei. The words here chosen can only pale to the life of such a great practitioner and teacher.

We, his students, will remember Sensei first for his generosity. Sensei was so very generous with his time, knowledge and teaching. Few of us can appreciate the generosity involved in Sensei leaving his home country to be with us in the United States for the last 27 years, and sometimes we took it for granted. Not only did Sensei come to the United States, but he also accepted an immense time commitment by visiting regularly each Midwest dojo, regardless of the number of members practicing. For many years this took Sensei away from home and family more than 35 weekends each year. Yet Sensei never complained. Quite the contrary, Sensei took his commitment to disseminating Aikido very seriously and recognized that there was no substitute for personal time spent at each dojo and with each dojo member.

Though today many consider time and money synonymous, there was never a question of whether Sensei would be paid for his visits, for as we students came to realize, there could never be enough money to compensate for his experience and teachings. Accordingly, we each gave to Sensei from our heart and took inspiration from him to rededicate ourselves to the practice of Aikido. By example, Sensei showed us that money paled in importance to true Aikido feeling.

His generosity was also apparent when Sensei freely provided the opportunity for his students to make Aikido connections throughout the world, never selfishly guarding his students from other teachings but rather exposing us to Shihan from North America, Hombu dojo, and throughout Japan and the world. Without an instructor as generous as Sensei, we would never understand the importance and feeling behind events such as Kagami Biraki, O-Sensei Memorial, Summer Camp, or Kangeiko, yet these are second nature to us now. For so much that Sensei gave freely to us, we can only hope to become as wealthy as he was in the important things in life: family, students, friends, and the spirit of Aikido.

Sensei was clear from the beginning and throughout his time in the United States that he wanted an Aikido dojo and not just a school. For many of us Americans, it was hard to appreciate the difference, though Sensei, of course, knew quite well. The idea of a lot of members just for the sake of having members paying dues never was considered by Sensei, for he was concerned only with having members that were working to become better human beings and trying to understand Aikido feelings.

Trying to build an Aikido dojo from nothing, and cultivating its growth to almost 50 individual dojos, Sensei had many opportunities to express endless restraint and mercy. No matter how severe the breach of etiquette or lack of common sense shown in our actions, Sensei was patient, understanding, and showed abundant mercy allowing us to try and try again with his guidance. Sensei always tried to understand the feelings behind our mistakes and help us along toward Aikido feelings and a true dojo system. Each of us gained courage to make mistakes and try again from Sensei's mercy and guidance.

Sensei will also be remembered for his humility, for from Sensei there was never a brag or boast. Sensei often reminded us that when we got, as he put it, a pumpkin head, i.e., a swollen, large head because we thought arrogantly that we knew something well, it only made it more difficult to keep our balance. Sensei was a brilliant example, never criticizing other instructors, always deferring to Doshu and his memory of O-Sensei.

Sensei rarely spoke of himself, his background, or his accomplishments, and then only when prodded, although he was among the most senior instructors in the world, a former instructor at the World Headquarters, had practiced under O-Sensei himself, was chosen as otomo for the second Doshu's first visit to the United States, was asked to be the first President of the International Aikido Federation, and had given his life first for his country and then later again for Aikido.

Whenever asked a question about Aikido techniques, philosophy or spirit, Sensei even after more than 50 years of dedication to understanding Aikido would always qualify his answer with "I think" or "In my opinion", never presuming that he was correct or others incorrect. Sensei's shoshin was expressed in his every action. For example, every time Sensei bowed it was as if the first time, expressing humility, respect and gratitude, whether the bow was to O-Sensei, his instructors, his sempai, his kohai, or his students. It was because of this humility that so many purposefully sought out his teachings and eagerly supported Sensei in his work to disseminate Aikido as laid down by the Founder.

We students in the United States and throughout the world will never be able to fill the space left by Akira Tohei Shihan's passing, but we will honor his memory by diligently continuing to practice Aikido.