

Aikidosphere

Moriteru Ueshiba

Third Doshu

Dojocho Aikikai Hombu Dojo

An Interview with the New Doshu, Moriteru Ueshiba - Part 1

By Peter Bernath & David Halprin

Editor's note: The interview was conducted at the US Aikido Federation Eastern Region Summer Camp held at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts in August, 2000. It was conducted as part of New England Aikikai's video documenting Doshu's visit. We would like to thank Kanai Sensei for allowing us to present this transcript. Also, thanks to Kei Izawa for his translation during the interview.

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Was your childhood different than other children because of your family's involvement in Aikido?

It's very difficult for me to compare with the other children because I don't have any basis to compare. I think I was as normal as the other children I grew up with.

We heard you liked baseball a lot when you were growing up.

As I grew up, most of the time, I grew up in circumstances identical to that of other children, playing baseball or other games that were very popular in those days. There was nothing different that separated me from the others. That being said, it's also true that since the dojo and my home were in the same place, there were always many people visiting, eating together, and coming in and out; in that sense there were certain things that were different from other children growing up. But I had the chance to enjoy all the other games like catch-ball, menko (a Japanese game) and many other things that children were doing in those days.

When did you first begin to practice Aikido?

As I mentioned to you, since the dojo and my home were in the same place, I used to even play in the dojo. As I was growing up, if I recall correctly, I started wearing a keikogi and practiced from the first year of elementary school when I was 6 years old.

I started to practice Aikido in earnest when I entered the university. Until then my practice was on-and-off, sometimes doing, sometimes quitting but it was during my time at university that I started to practice in earnest.

When did you first begin to have teaching duties?

I first instructed when I was around 23 or 24 during my fourth year of college. I started teaching the women's class at Hombu Dojo. This was done because the instructor who was supposed to be teaching the women's class couldn't make it and the head of Hombu Dojo, Kisaburo Osawa Sensei, asked me to come and teach. While I initially

declined, Osawa Sensei insisted that I teach and so I accepted.

When did you begin to become aware that you would become the future Doshu?

Rather than saying that I started thinking about the succession of the Aikido Doshu, I think the principal thing for me was how to help my father in Aikido. Within that aspect there were many people that expected me also to become the successor and it was in that environment that I gradually started to realize that I would be the successor. So it wasn't a decision within myself. It was something that was decided as part of the group surrounding me.

How would you characterize the work your father Second Doshu did to develop Aikido?

The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, my grandfather, was not so much focusing on promoting or spreading the spirit or techniques of Aikido and he had opened up the training to only a limited number of people. There was a major change in Japanese society after World War II, so Aikido had to also face new challenges. My father Kisshomaru Ueshiba, was the person that started to spread the spirit of Aikido and the training to the general public. His contribution mainly was that he was able to expand Aikido so that today it is practiced in more than 80 countries which has contributed to international dialogue and relations. His contribution in spreading Aikido has been quite great in that respect.

Could you tell us about the influence your father, the Second Doshu, had on you?

The impact that I had growing up seeing the shoulder of my father from the back had a great impact on my life. Seeing my father and growing up under his directions is a direct result of why today I am doing what I am doing, teaching Aikido.

Was there ever anything in particular that your father emphasized in teaching you about Aikido history or training?

My father never went into too many details. The things that he emphasized were the need to practice, to look at the overall picture, instead of having too small a vision. He also said that rather than having small "waza" that I should go after bigger movements, lower the koshi and do the techniques and perform and receive the techniques very carefully. As to many of the philosophical and historical issues, he wrote many books so he didn't have to tell me those things.

Did you receive any special training from your father or others?

The basis of my training started in the early morning class at 6:30 a.m. This class started about 70 years ago and became the basis of my training and of course I also participated in many of the other classes taught by the head instructors at Hombu dojo.

Can you tell us about your memories of O-Sensei?

I was 18 when my grandfather passed away. My immediate memories of him were of watching TV together many times. Of course, it's difficult to think of specific things. There were so many things that have stayed in my memory, but one of the things was that I saw him interact with many of the chief instructors when they were still very young and how they accompanied him going out to some sessions. But for me he was a normal grandfather. I didn't think or pay too much attention to the fact that he was the founder of Aikido. But I could see him from two sides: through the interactions he had with the head instructors and my private side with him.

What is your view of the process by which O-Sensei created Aikido?

This is such a difficult question. We would have to ask the Founder himself. We have to say that the back stages of history were different then and it's not the same as today. Because of that, Aikido was born. That is a very difficult question to answer.

O-Sensei was obviously a remarkable man and had such a profound influence on so many people. What do you think were the qualities that O-Sensei had that made him so unique?

Probably the most important one was the spirit of Aikido as generated or created by O-Sensei, because this was a totally new way of thinking. Taking out some elements of martial arts and Japanese history, he managed to create something totally new, which is something wonderful and that is what I think he has contributed the most.

It seems that O-Sensei was influenced by his religious beliefs, his martial arts training, and his life experiences. How do you think each of these influenced O-Sensei's development of Aikido?

In brief, I could answer this issue by saying that he managed to combine all of these elements into one and that is what has made this very special.

So this means he was able to combine religious beliefs with martial arts training?

Yes.

Can you share with us any memories of the older generation of instructors at Hombu Dojo, for example, Osawa Sensei Sr., Tada Sensei, Arikawa Sensei, and Yamaguchi Sensei?

I would like to differentiate that Osawa Sensei and Yamaguchi Sensei have already passed away but Tada Sensei and Arikawa Sensei are still teaching at Hombu Dojo, so in that sense there are still current Sensei and I wouldn't like to be label them as an older generation. But as to Osawa Sensei, he started Aikido before the war and he was a wonderful strategic support to the previous Doshu, Kisshomaru Doshu, and the same can be said to Yamaguchi Sensei who joined after the war and assisted Kisshomaru Doshu in many ways.

Can you tell us any memories you have of the days when Tamura Sensei, Yamada Sensei, Chiba Sensei, Kanai Sensei, Sugano Sensei, Kurita Sensei and Shibata Sensei were uchideshi?

Let me clarify that of the people mentioned in the question, Shibata Sensei is basically the same as my generation, so I may have to exclude him from the next statement. Beginning with Tamura Sensei, most of the other Shihans used to live together in the dojo and my home, so eating and other things were done together. Tamura Sensei was there even when I was younger than preschool age. They played with us and they allowed me to practice with them. We ate together, we did catch ball, fishing, we went to fly kites and did many other things. We lived as an extended family. However, I was so small I saw things as a child. They probably had their own lives at different times of night, so probably if you have some questions about that you may want to ask them directly what they were doing. (Laughter).

How would you compare the Shihan as they are now with your memories from them in the old days?

My recollection from the old times when I was very young and the feelings that I have for them have not changed very much. Now that I come overseas and meet many of them and interact with them, I think that the impressions I had as a child have not changed very much.

You have been coming to seminars and summer camps of the United States Aikido Federation for over twenty years now. Could you share with us the impressions you had during your first visits to New York Aikikai and New England Aikikai and Florida Aikikai?

When I came in the first time in 1980, I was around 30 years old. At that time everything was very new to me. I had to do my very best to respond to appropriately to the different situations I encountered. It was so refreshing coming overseas. That doesn't mean I am not working as hard now! But the biggest impression was that everyone was so serious and very willing to learn. Since then, 20 years have passed and even now people are still extremely serious and sincere about trying to learn Aikido and the scope of the learning is broadening. I am very pleased about that.

We think that our group of instructors is unique in that they have maintained without any break their strong loyalty to the Ueshiba family and Hombu Dojo over the forty years they have been in the west, and have also continued to work closely with each other. What thought do you have on the nature of these relationships?

Probably it is not appropriate for me to answer this question – and maybe this is not an answer to the question – but most of the people who have gone outside Japan to the US and Europe, I believe they had a very strong passion to do Aikido. Regarding questions as to why this happened, probably it would be best to ask them rather than for me to answer these questions.

We are curious about whether you have observed that different countries around the world have, in general, different tendencies in their practice of Aikido?

The thing with the biggest impact is not nationality, but rather the practice depends very much on who is the instructor who has gone to that particular country.

(To be continued.)