

Aikidosphere

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The Challenges of Aikido - Interview with Chiba Sensei

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Sensei please tell me how you came to study Aikido?

Well, I was very keen on the martial arts from when I was little, and I decided early on to train seriously in at least one of them. I began with Judo and stayed for four years. I then moved to Karate.

You trained at the Shotokan headquarters I believe: what was the training like there?

Oh, I really loved it, it was a very hard spirit in the training, very satisfying, I liked it a lot. Nakayama Sensei was the Chief Instructor but I did see the Master, Funakoshi Gichin on a number of occasions. I joined the Japan Karate Association about a year before Master Funakoshi died I remember that there was a big ceremony to mark his passing.

Where any of the present-day Shotokan Masters there at that time?

Yes. Nishiyama Sensei, Okazaki Sensei and Kanazawa Sensei. Kanazawa Sensei was first Kyu then, or maybe 1st Dan, I'm not sure. Asano Sensei was 3rd Kyu level and Kase Sensei was there also.

Was there anything in particular that converted you to Aikido?

Well, when I was 1st Kyu (the level just below Black Belt) in Judo I entered a competition and happened to be drawn to fight against my senior from the dojo - a second Dan, I think. So I beat him and afterwards he came over to me and said: "You have taken away my Judo, but I still have Kendo." He issued me a challenge. So we went outside. He gave me a bokken (wooden sword) and took a Kendo shinai (bamboo practice sword) for himself. Once we started I was unable to touch him ... not even once! He beat me soundly and I was black and blue with bruises! After this I thought deeply about the meaning of Budo.

I wanted a Martial Art that would be effective in any situation, whether an opponent had a weapon or not. So I eventually decided that I would become a student of Master Ueshiba - the Founder of Aikido. I went straight to the Hombu (Headquarters Dojo) but I had no letter of introduction, which was a necessary requirement then. I arrived at the Hombu and asked for an audience with O-Sensei (Master Ueshiba). They told me that he was not there, and that I should go away. I was so intent to be O-Sensei's student that I determined to wait for his return. So I sat down in the garden of the dojo and waited. At the end of the third day O-Sensei returned, and was told that there was some crazy boy outside who wanted to see him. Well, O-Sensei told them to bring me in. I was taken to just outside his room and told to wait. When the screen was opened, there was Master Ueshiba. Our eyes met for the first time: it is a moment I shall never forget! I didn't know what to do, so I just bowed as deeply as I could. O-Sensei said to me: "Martial arts are very hard, can you take it?" I just said, "Yes Sensei". So that is how I came to be accepted as an uchi deshi ("inside student", or special apprentice) to Master Ueshiba.

Did you commence Aikido training at once?

No, I was not allowed to practice straight away. I had to clean the dojo and all the other rooms at Hombu, plus wash, do shopping, administration and look after the Master's family. Also I had to work in the fields. Eventually I was allowed to first watch the classes and then, after some time, to train. No one taught me at first, I had to learn for myself. Fortunately I could already make ukemi (break falls) so I was alright. I decided to make my best endeavors to be a good uchi deshi to O-Sensei, and learn all that I could from him. It was the greatest time of my life! I remember that O-Sensei always had a strong presence...there was a very special atmosphere when he was around. This came from his physical posture - the way he sat, the way he walked, the way he moved around was so beautiful. Never could I see any opening in O-Sensei's posture, not ever. His eyes were almost

golden, not black as is usual with Japanese people.

Your time as an uchi deshi must have been rigorous.

In one sense it was like a battlefield. We rose every day very early to both work and train, and many nights I had to stay up late to wait for Waka Sensei (O-Sensei's son, Kisshomaru - the present Doshu, or leader of Aikido) to return from his office work. It was so hard and intensive that many times I came close to a nervous breakdown. I used to see strange things: every night a ghost used to come to me. I don't know whether it was supposed to be a man or a woman. At that time I did not realize how close I was to a breakdown but now I realize of course. Just before I fell asleep each night it would come to me, it was really frightening. I could sense its presence. Then all of a sudden it would become like a ton weight on top of me and I would not be able to move. Eventually I found a solution to this. I took my bokken to bed with me and as soon as I felt its presence I held my bokken strongly ... and then it was OK. This was due to exhaustion I think.

Many years ago you told me about your first meeting with Tamura Sensei. Could you repeat it please for the readers of "Fighting Arts"?

Well, it was one day after class and some of the students were doing Judo randori (practice fighting) on the mat. I was standing in the corridor watching this and one of them invited me to join in, which I did. I was surprised at how weak they were, and I repeatedly threw one man who was Sandan (3rd degree Black Belt) in both Judo and Aikido. So the master, Tamura Sensei called me over and invited me to practice with him. Then "bang", Tamura Sensei struck me hard in the belly. I learned a lot from that; it was a good lesson in awareness, distance and posture for me. I believe that Tamura Sensei is one of O-Sensei's greatest students. I learned a great deal from him in the past.

Anyone else that you would like to talk about . . . perhaps Saito Sensei?

Yes, he is a great Master. Every time he visits the United States I invite him to teach at my dojo. Saito Sensei was a special disciple of O-Sensei. He stayed with him after the war to take care of him and manage the farm at Iwate Dojo. I have seen the kind of responsibility that he carried, and nobody could have done it as well as did Saito Sensei. I really appreciate Saito Sensei's work.

What about Doshu ... the successor to O-Sensei?

The teacher directly responsible for my training was Kisshomaru Ueshiba Sensei. O-Sensei had already retired to the mountainside of Iwate, and only came to Hombu Dojo occasionally. The growth and development of modern Aikido since the war has been due to Doshu's hard work. His Aikido is very beautiful.

What about Master Koichi Tohei of the Ki Society?

Yes, Tohei Sensei is very good. He is small but very powerful. I saw him take a challenge from a wrestler once.

Sumotori or Western style?

Western style. Two brothers - Germans I think from Argentina - and they were enormous! They had to bend over to avoid hitting their heads on the gatepost of the Hombu. This was the only time that O-Sensei accepted a challenge for Hombu. These people were travelling the world with a film crew and were challenging different martial arts masters. They had been to the Kodokan, (Judo HQ), but the Judo men had not been able to handle them. So they challenged the Aikido Hombu. When they arrived I met them and brought them in. Inside the dojo were O-Sensei, Kisshomaru Sensei, and Tohei Sensei, who was then the Chief Instructor to the Aikido Foundation. O-Sensei nominated Tohei to go first, as he was so strong. So the wrestler crouched in a low posture with his hands out stretched in front of him, and just moved in a circle around Tohei Sensei for a long time. Tohei Sensei was very relaxed and just followed his movement, and eventually cornered him. Just as the wrestler began to move Tohei leapt upon him, threw him to the floor, and bounced his head for him. Tohei Sensei then pinned him down with his hand blade extension, which, as you may have heard, is very powerful. This guy could not move, and his brother declined to try Tohei for himself, so that was that. Apparently at the Kodokan the Judo men advised them not to make a grab for an Aikido master. That is why he circled Tohei Sensei for so long.

With friends like that who needs enemies! As we are talking about challenges would you mind telling me about your confrontation with Mr. Wang, the Tai Chi master from China?

Who told you about this, Mr. Cottier perhaps?

Perhaps I'd better not tell...

(Laughter) O.K. then. I was in a big demonstration of martial arts in Tokyo in the early 1960s, and Tai Chi Chuan was being shown by Mr. Wang. He was from Taiwan and he was very big indeed. He became quite famous later in Japan. Well, at the end of his display he had a number of Karateka line up in front of him, and each of them punched him in the belly. It had no effect on him. I was not impressed. I would have done something else (Sensei demonstrated a groin kick and face punch whilst saying this). So, anyway two of my private students were also studying Tai Chi under Mr. Wang, and they were very impressed with him. They invited me to come along and see him. Eventually I accepted and went to watch his class. At the

Dojo my students introduced us, and he politely asked me to show some Aikido. Even though his words were warm it was still a challenge! Well, we faced each other, and Master Wang made something like a Sumo posture with his hands outstretched. I stood and waited for an opening. This went on for some minutes until he moved forward to push me. So I met him, made Tai Sabaki (body evasion) and took his wrist with Kote Gaeshi, (wrist crush/reversal) ... his wrist made a loud snapping noise as I applied it. Even though I applied Kote Gaeshi strongly and injured him, he did not go down. Master Wang snatched his wrist from me, and challenged me immediately. So this time he pushed me with both hands in the belly, and threw me quite a distance across the room. I landed, but I also did not go down. It was an amazing throw. My students then came between us, and that was that.

How did you come to be sent to England?

Well in 1964 when the Olympic Games were held in Tokyo, the famous Judo Master, Kenshiro Abbe Sensei came to Hombu to pay respects to O-Sensei. He asked O-Sensei to send a young and spirited instructor to England to develop Aikido for the British Judo Council. I was supposed to go to New York to assist Yamada Sensei, but O-Sensei agreed to send me to England.

Why did you choose the North East area first?

My sponsor, Mr. Logan, was a businessman in Newcastle, so I went to that area. However, during my journey from Japan something happened with the BJC and they were not able to work with me. So Mr. Logan had to pay my salary - it was a difficult time. It was in the North East that I promoted my first British Dan grades, Mr. Pat Butler, Mr. Fred Jenkins and Mr. Ron Myers.

Yes, Sensei I trained Under all three of these men for a number of years, particularly Ron Myers. On your voyage from Japan I believe there was an incident...?

Ah yes, we had a party on the ship when we crossed the equator, and I was asked to demonstrate. So I agreed, however there was no-one on board with any Aikido experience to act as my partner.

Or if there was, they were keeping very quiet about it!

(Laughter) Yes maybe. So one of the ship's crew was asked to assist me, and he attacked me with a knife. At Hombu Dojo, in knife work, we made a positive attack with a Tanto (a dagger). But this guy was crouched low, moving around me, changing the knife from hand to hand. This was difficult, as when he made his attack I would not know which hand had held the weapon. So when he came at me I made Gedan Barai (the low sweeping block) with both arms, and I was able to deflect his attack. The point of his blade actually went through my Obi (belt) and just touched my flesh. From Gedan Barai I moved to a counter technique and broke his arm.

With which technique?

Katakatame, I think.

Blocking techniques such as Gedan Barai are not usual in Aikido. Mainly the hand blade is used as a deflecting move.

Yes, but it is not always possible to move, so I believe that you need to be able to make a strong block when necessary.

Can you recall your last meeting with O-Sensei before you left for England.

My brother and I traveled by taxi to Hombu Dojo before going to my ship. We were badly delayed because of the Tokyo traffic, and I was late arriving at Hombu. This was very bad, as uchi deshi students must always be ready to receive and meet their teacher. Anyway, when I arrived O-Sensei was waiting for me, and said how happy he was that I had come to say goodbye. My teacher gave me tea, and said that I had looked after him well over the years, and wished me good luck. He also said that I should not worry about him, and that he would live to be 126 years old.

Was O-Sensei joking with you?

No, he was very serious. He had given me a Koan (a Zen riddle) and only now do I understand.

Sensei, in 1976 you returned to Japan. Actually, I was the last Shodan you promoted before you left...

Yes, that's why I went home! (Laughter)

How were things at Hombu on your return?

Well the standard of Aikido was fine of course, but too much in Japan had changed and I didn't like what had happened. I was given the job of International Secretary at Hombu Dojo, and I was not happy with it. Paperwork all day, and no time to train. This was no good for me. I am a martial

artist, not a clerk. So I left Tokyo and went to live in the country. I farmed and practiced Zazen (Seated meditation) for a time. Later I was invited to move to San Diego by the United States Aikido Federation.

May I ask about your laido training?

I like laido (the art of drawing the sword) very much. I really like to handle the Katana (the longest of the Samurai swords) and I feel an affinity for the Japanese sword. I practice Muso Shinden Ryu, which was founded by Nakayama Hakudo Sensei at the turn of the century. O-Sensei always had a very good relationship with Hakudo. His students used to practice at Kobukan.

That is what Hombu Dojo used to be called . . .

Yes, that's right. There was a good interchange of students. Actually Hakudo Sensei's senior student was married to O-Sensei's daughter. He was All-Japan Kendo champion at one time.

I always find a good awareness in laido training, almost a moving Zen...

Yes, indeed, a good point. It is good for developing Zanshin, I always combine Zazen with lai at my Dojo. Maybe 20 minutes of sitting meditation and 10 minutes of sword drawing, and then back to Zazen.

I have been told that now you have background music played during Zazen at your Dojo . . . is this true?

Well, not always. My Zen master used to do that with either Bach or Beethoven, and we would sit. Very enjoyable. You can go really deep in your meditation in such sessions, depending on the type of music of course: I don't think that jazz would go with it, for example. My Dojo faces a main street in San Diego, so the background music helps to cut out the sound from outside.

Over the last twenty years I have had the pleasure of training under a number of O-Sensei's personal students -yourself of course - also Sekiya, Tamura, Kanai . . . and you are all so different: Would you like to comment?

Well, I think that Aikido is very much wider than other Martial Arts. Aikido allows everyone to train together. The communication that takes place on the mat is only a part of it.

Do you think that each of you expresses a difference facet of O-Sensei's Aikido in your individual practice?

Yes, I think that is so.

Some people say that O-Sensei was a very gentle and kind old man, yet others refer to his direct and severe martial attitude . . . what is the truth?

I think that it was quite natural for him to be very kind, gentle and peaceful with ordinary students, but with uchi deshi he was harsh and severe at times.

Why do you emphasize weapons training in your Aikido?

Aikido is based on the traditional swordsmanship of Japan. So in Aikido body art we move like a swordsman without having a sword. Weapons are particularly important in place of offensive, or dualistic training such as Randori in Judo, and Jiyu Kumite (free fighting) in Karate. It helps us develop martial spirit and other aspects like timing, distance, centering etc. Also we can relate directly to basic technique from bokken cuts, out-extension of breath power, use of hips etc.

May I ask a little about Aikido history: O-Sensei was once invited to teach at the Kodokan by the founder of Judo, Dr. Jigoro Kano: did he accept?

At the time Kano Sensei was trying to consolidate the traditional martial arts of Japan, to help preserve them. That is why he asked O-Sensei to come to the Kodokan to teach. But O-Sensei refused: he felt that Aikido and Judo were so different that they should not be classed together. So instead Dr. Kano sent three of his senior students to study under O-Sensei - Master Mochizuki and Master Murashige, and one other I can't recall his name. They studied with O-Sensei but returned every so often to the Kodokan to meet with Dr. Kano.

Was Tomiki Sensei the other master?

No Tomiki Sensei came later. He combined Aikido and Judo: he would use Aikido for open distance in combat, and judo for a closer Maai (critical distance), I don't altogether agree with this idea, but Tomiki Sensei was a very good martial artist...and a real gentleman.

I read somewhere that there is a cousin of O-Sensei, a martial artist himself, still alive in Japan!

Yes, that is Master Hogen Inoue. His resemblance to O-Sensei is amazing. He is of course very old now, but his Aikido was second only to O-Sensei's at one time. He calls his Budo form, "Taiwa Shindo" now.

The Shotokai Karate Master, Harada Sensei's teacher, Master Shigeru Egami was a student under Inoue Sensei ... I have heard that there was an interesting encounter between these two great masters when they first met!

You must ask Harada Sensei about this incident. Harada Sensei and I are good friends: he is an intellectual and a great Karate master.

Other than your confrontations on the ship, and against Master Wang have you ever had to use your ability outside of the dojo?

Well a gangster attacked me with a knife once in Japan. He lunged for my belly, so I blocked him with Gedan Barai, and broke his arm with Kata Katamae. On another occasion I was in Paris with Noro Sensei, and we visited a night club together. I was having a drink in one room and Noro Sensei was sitting in another room playing cards, or something. Suddenly there was a terrible commotion from where Noro was, so I went in to see what was happening. It was a fight. An old gentleman was lying on the floor and a young man was kicking him. It was terrible there was a lot of blood on the floor. I think he would have killed him, so Noro, Sensei said to me "Chiba, sort that out!" He did not want to get involved. (Laughter). I took hold of this man, and stopping his attack, I asked him what he thought he was doing. He spoke to me in French, so neither of us understood and so I pulled him outside... then something happened. My body reacted and I threw him down with Osoto Gari (major outer sweeping throw) the judo technique. He hit the ground very hard and I heard a clatter of metal. It was then I realized that he had pulled a knife. My awareness had been such that I reacted to the situation from my subconscious. This guy was a gangster from the Pigalle and that was why no one stopped him. He was well known apparently . . . but not to me! It made no difference who he was.

Anything else Sensei?

When I returned to Japan from England, in 1978, a man issued a challenge to us. But Hombu Dojo refused it, despite his persistence.

Was he a Karateka?

Nobody knew what he did. As I said he was persistent, and every few weeks he would return to challenge us. Each time I had to explain that we could not accept. I think that the man was not quite "right" in the head. Anyway, eventually I personally had enough of him and accepted his challenge. We arranged to meet and sort it out. I insisted that we agree not to press charges in the event of serious injury and we exchanged letters to that effect. I told him as a martial arts teacher I was prepared to die if need be. Well we met and I initiated with offence, moving directly to him and I struck him first. This threw him back against the wall and as I came to him he jumped on me: he was like a tiger. I then finished him with Nikkyo (the second immobilization). He had had enough by then. There was much blood and he was on the floor screaming. That was the last challenge he offered us - it seems that he did not expect an Aikidoist to initiate an attack.

To conclude our talk may I ask you about two separate things: Atemi and competition in Aikido?

Well I believe Atemi (the striking of anatomical weak points) is very, very important to Aikido technique. It is not usually taught in class ... but I personally train in Atemi, of course. There is no competition in Aikido because it would eliminate a lot of people from the training. The purpose of Aikido is to allow as many different people as possible - men and women, young and old, weak and strong - to develop their potential through practice together.

What would you consider to be the most important quality in a good Aikidoka?

Sincerity.

Chiba Sensei may I thank you on behalf of the readers of "Fighting Arts" for taking the time to speak with me.