

Aikidosphere

An Interview with T. K. Chiba Shihan

Part 1

By Peter Bernath & David Halprin

Editor's note: This interview with T.K. Chiba Sensei was conducted at the US Aikido Federation Eastern Region Summer Camp held at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts in August, 2000. Parts of it are featured in New England Aikikai's video documenting the first visit to the U.S. of Moriteru Ueshiba as the Third Doshu.

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Sensei, what it was like when you were young and practicing as uchi deshi at Hombu Dojo?

All that I wanted was to sleep and eat. That's about it. Always tired, always exhausted. Not enough food. Not enough sleep, so that was very important for us, especially for me, I can't talk for others. To snatch sleep, ten or fifteen minutes, any time, if there was ample opportunity. Just to go to bed, lie down on the floor, throw a blanket over and sleep.

That training was very important for me now. I can sleep anywhere, any place, any time, just BAM! And get up ten, fifteen minutes later.

Did you guys have a room there, or were you sleeping on the mat, or...

We slept in the dojo, the main dojo. There was a small room available for uchideshi, in the center section of the dojo. It had no wind, no light, no sun. Like a prison.

How many of you were living in that room?

There were six of us.

And a small room?

Six pieces of mats, of tatami.

Six tatami mats?

Yes. There was a big desk, telephone; it was a combined office also.

Did you cook there too?

Yeah, but basically we had a cook: Doshu's wife. We did shopping, cutting up veggies, and making a hot bath, whatever else was needed to help take care of the Ueshiba family.

So pretty much from when you woke up until you went to sleep, you were working.

Yeah, we never changed the gi from morning to evening. We go out with gi jacket and the haori on top of it, and go shopping and so forth.

You first came in as an uchi deshi, so you were a student, but then how long was it until you started teaching?

As soon as I got shodan, I was dispatched and started going to teach in university circles. So about, I got shodan after 10 months. Pretty fast: Aikido was rapidly progressing, populating the society. There were a lot of universities studying about Aikido activities. But there weren't any instructors available. For me, for instance, I was teaching four universities at the same time.

Plus you were doing training also at that time, so you would train and then go...

Yeah, come back and train, and come back...

In the daytime you were teaching at the universities, or at nighttime?

Daytime.

And then you would come back and train at the dojo in the evening?

Yes. And I started to teach private lessons; that was an important part of Hombu Dojo's finances, because we could charge a lot of money for private lessons. Every one of us had a few students for private lessons.

Like businesspeople, or...

Yeah, business, politicians, or just big guys, and foreigners too.

Sensei, who were the main instructors at that time?

The instruction was headed by Second Doshu, Kisshomaru Sensei, assisted by Osawa Sensei, Dojo-cho, then number of Shihans Okamura, Arikawa, Tada, Yamaguchi and so forth.

And Koichi Tohei was there at that time?

Koichi Tohei Sensei was the chief instructor of the dojo. But he goes to Hawaiian Islands and the United States of America, back and forth; so he goes out, comes to stay a while in the United States, then stay a while in Japan, so back and forth at that time.

Did you have to do many demonstrations or things like that at that time around Tokyo?

Oh yeah.

For ukemi or also...?

Yes.

Did you go with anyone in particular? Did you go with O-Sensei, for instance?

Yeah. I was the one who traveled the most with O-Sensei. It wasn't demonstrations, but a teaching tour. He would visit everywhere in the country to see his old disciples, those who had established a dojo elsewhere in Japan. The trip always included interviewing or seeing famous spiritual and religious masters in Japan. He liked to visit temples, monasteries, and so forth.

Would you ever do demonstrations on those occasions?

Oh, yeah! ...It's not really a demonstration, we'd just sit together in a small room, a Japanese room like this, and my teacher O-Sensei and the master were interviewing and talking, and all of a sudden O-Sensei would stand up: "Come here!" Bam bam bam bam! Always like that, you know.

Sensei, you said that you learned to sleep anywhere. Were there important lessons that you got from the uchi deshi time that are still very important to you?

Yes, a kind of awareness. When I am sleeping in my house, if anything ever happens in my house anywhere, I can just get up, bam! I can feel it: that kind of instinctive awareness is very important to me as a martial artist. In a number of cases, because I have this kind of awareness development, a number of times it has saved my life.

Do you have memories of the Third Doshu, Moriteru Ueshiba when he was a little boy?

Everybody knew that he was going to be the Doshu in the years to come, because he himself declared, "I am the one who is going to be like O-Sensei," when he was little. He was about six or seven, five or six, and he said he was going to be so. We were very proud about that.

How would you characterize the work that Second Doshu, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, did to develop Aikido?

I think the most valuable work he did was the popularization of Aikido throughout the world through disciples he cultivated.

To begin with, this was against O-Sensei's will. He finally accepted Kisshomaru Sensei's wish to introduce Aikido to the public. As I have said earlier, again, as a martial artist, O-Sensei was not interested in the popularization of the art.

He was very much interested in his own art, and passing it on to a small number of people, sort of elected people. That was how he did it before the war. So I think Second Doshu had great difficulty to persuade O-Sensei, to make him understand the importance of popularization of the art after the war, and he succeeded.

Sensei, did that start with the university clubs that you were talking about?

Well, to begin with, the first public demonstration held in Japan, that was what, 1953? O-Sensei strongly objected to it.

By the time that yourself and the other uchideshi (now the Shihankai senseis) were going to go overseas, at that time O-Sensei had accepted the idea that you were going to be...

Yes, yes.

And he supported it?

Yes. Well, you see, to begin with, a martial art is something very personal, sort of a deep love affair. There are a lot of sacrifices and pains, studies and so forth, you know; it's not an ordinary life. You have to have dedication, commitment, and faith in what you do. And you don't talk about it to anybody! It's something very personal. I understand the feeling of doing demonstrations as really shameful, it seems to me. I feel that way. I don't even talk...I hate talking about Aikido to anybody! It's very difficult for me when I'm asked what my profession is, you know, if somebody asks, "I am an Aikido teacher professionally?" It's very, very tricky for me. I want to be nobody.

Mainly O-Sensei was very pleased when we were going out overseas because his religious belief was world peace, and through Aikido he dreamed to realize, to cultivate this dream to be realized.

I believe that martial arts should not be exposed to society openly. In many ways I think martial art is a dark corner of human society. It's a killing art, don't forget. It can be very destructive. That's my feeling, my personal feeling.

If there's one thing I disagree with, not necessarily related only to Aikido alone, but including martial arts as a whole, it's become so professional; it's become so...so popular. Everywhere you go. It's like a handgun issue. You don't carry around a handgun in front of me in public, do you? It has to be hidden away, under control. That's how I feel.

So, O-Sensei had two ideas: he didn't want to expose Aikido to the public, but he thought it was a way to realize his dream of world peace.

That realization had much to do with Second Doshu's efforts to talk his father into it.

Did O-Sensei shift over more to that in the end?

Yes.

To be continued