

Aikidosphere

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Interview with Tamura Sensei

By Budo International

Editor's Note: We found this interview with Tamura Sensei in our files, and, embarrassingly, we cannot remember how we got it. If any of our friends and readers can tell us, it would be much appreciated. However, it is likely that it came from one of our friends among Tamura Sensei's students: Stephane Benedetti, Chief Instructor of Mutokukai Europe Dojo Mirabeau, Jean-Jacques (Jisch) Scheuren, Chief Instructor of Aikido Kopstal-Bridel Luxembourg, and Robert Le Vourch, President of the Aikido Club of Lesneven, France. We would like to thank them in general for their help and support over the last several years, and, if it was one of them who gave us this piece, for that as well.

Of course, we would like to thank the European martial arts magazine Budo International for allowing us to reprint this version of its interview, which we have slightly edited for clarity. Photos courtesy of Tamura Sensei.



Many are called, few are chosen. Master Nobuyoshi Tamura finds himself in the small group that O-Sensei has chosen to spread the art of Aikido. Recognized as one of the most representative of the "uchi deshi" and endowed with an entrancing charisma, Tamura Sensei has become one of the indisputable world leaders of this art, but it is especially in France, where he has been residing for a very long time, that he has shared his knowledge.

Budo International has tried to get closer to the spirit of Tamura Sensei in this interview. We hope his words will have an enriching effect on your own quest in Aikido.

How does the meaning of Aikido change for one who has been practicing it for so many years? Is it different for you as opposed to a beginner?

In reality, it is not possible to precisely define Aikido; in any case, one should know that it is indeed a martial art. Those who consider it as such will be correct. The goal of Aikido is none other than unity (Ai = unity): the creation of a kind of forest. This unity is a consequence of one's adherence to the forms of Aikido.

What are the means you use to attain this unity?

In reality, it is very easy to understand this idea of unity. One only has to follow the rules of the practice of Aikido on the tatami. Maybe the fact of chatting with you about Aikido is another form of expressing Aikido. It is also doing Aikido.

So you mean Aikido is practiced on the tatami, but its teachings must undergo some sort of adaptation to everyday living?

Yes. We can consider the tatami as a small-scale model of daily life and, consequently, everything we do inside the dojo can be applied in our life outside.



When an expert practices Aikido, it appears that he doesn't try to defeat the opponent, that his movements are circular and that he always seems to be relaxing his body.

It must nevertheless be said that in a fight, the expert in Aikido will no doubt seek victory. With regards to the question of circular movements, they are symbolic of all that is around us. The world is circular, atoms are round, etc. In fact, circular movements are a reduced copy of the universe.

Why does a typical Aikido class start with relaxation and stretching exercises?

Relaxation is extremely important in all fields. Not being relaxed is not natural and experience has generally shown that lack of relaxation causes the creation of a sort of wall around us that keeps us from doing anything. It's actually thanks to relaxation that we can break this wall and that we can correctly practice Aikido.

It is necessary to be relaxed even if it isn't necessary to try to alter completely our emotional attitude. For example, I can get on the mat in a bad mood, I can be angry with someone. It doesn't matter; the main thing is to behave naturally.

This means we must not have a "closed" attitude, we must realize the way we have to behave at every instant to avoid either having the mindset of the weak or falling into an excess of rigidity. You had the chance to verify this yourself in the beginning of our discussion. You tried to relax by putting aside all the preparation work you had planned. You had to come forward with a kind of improvisation and it's much better.

What were the circumstances surrounding the birth of Aikido?

We can say that Aikido is a very modern martial art. Its catalyst, the one who brought together all the teachings of the art, Master Ueshiba, died in 1968. By 1942, he had synthesized what we today call Aikido.

What are the benefits of Aikido for the practitioner?

That depends on each person and his or her objectives. It's like a cake: you can take a large piece or another, smaller piece.

Would you mind if we asked you what are the benefits that you personally have found in it?

For myself, I have found peace and tranquility.

When people practice very hard, they can become exhausted physically but if they continue, the exhaustion can disappear. Can you explain this?

There are two kinds of tiredness: physical and mental. On the tatami we feel physical tiredness.

You can find this in traditional Japanese teachings which teach us, when exercising, to go from a state of great physical exhaustion to a state of relaxation and peace of mind. These foundations are in our education. It's a very concrete experience, an excellent habit that allows someone to live "out of the ordinary" experiences.

If people in the midst of very intense practice gave up when they hit this tiredness threshold, they often entered a state of sadness and a feeling of oppression whereas if they continue and pass beyond this critical threshold, they attain a much more enjoyable and relaxed state.

Is this similar to Turkish dervishes who attain that state through dancing, or mystics who attain it via asceticism when they stop eating and shut themselves in caves? Does this involve Japanese mysticism?

I think there is nothing mystical about Aikido. It depends how one sees it, and also on the perspective from within different cultures. For example, in some cultures a man going to the moon would not be called a mystic but crazy.

When I used the term "mystical", I was talking about experiences that give a meaning to our lives, reference experiences that change our behavior. I think Aikido makes such experiences possible. With respect to the idea of "threshold" can you tell us about your experiences with Master Ueshiba?

The question is very broad. It concerns too many domains. I can start by saying that for us Japanese, it is very easy to produce very small size television sets or radios and our daily life is flooded with them.

Nevertheless, for those who can't see or hear very well this will seem like a ridiculous and useless habit, similar to those who don't have the experience of the totally "magical" technique. Your "mystical" is of the same order. It all depends on the person concerned.

I will tell you about a personal experience. In February I was in Luxembourg, in a hotel room. I was sleeping. In the middle of the night, I heard someone calling me and I thought I recognized my aunt's voice. Two weeks later, I received a letter from my mother in which she told me of this aunt's death. For me this is normal, it is a perceptive sensation but most people reading this will think I am a "mystic" . . . or a nut.

What would you like the most to make your students understand, on the tatami as well as off? If you could bring out just one idea, what would it be?

I think the most important thing, on the tatami or off, is to do the maximum and to do it today, because tomorrow doesn't exist. "Tomorrow" it will be impossible to do the maximum.

At this point we moved to the dojo and observed practice. Once training was over, we asked Tamura Sensei what he feels when he walks around the mat and observes the students of different levels, from white belt to dan ranks.

I don't make a difference, I simply correct.

When you are teaching, why are your verbal explanations so brief?

Normally, I explain the most important thing. I believe the rest must come from the student's own initiative, through his or her work. That means it is for the student to develop the explanations I give, and through the student's work, the teaching will thus become more complete, more personal. I never go beyond the personal perception of each person.

The main technique could even be given by a series of photographs, but the student must immerse himself in the techniques and recreate the movements to be able to realize them him or herself, to forge himself in Aikido.

So ends our conversation with Master Tamura, an exceptional being on and off the mat.