

Aikidosphere

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20th Century Samurai - Part 1

by Mike Yates

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Editor's Note: This article was published in the magazine "Australasian Fighting Arts" around 1974. Mike Yates is currently proprietor of Zen Imports in Sydney Australia. We received invaluable assistance from Mike Clarke, founder of the Shinseidokan Dojo in Tasmania, Australia and author of Budo Masters and Roaring Silence (available at [www. Ryukyu.com](http://www.Ryukyu.com)) Thanks also to John Litchen, John Watson and Andrew Dzedzic of Aiki-kai Australia for their help.

Seiichi Sugano, 6th Dan chief instructor of Ueshiba Aikido in Australia, began his martial arts training at an early age when he was accepted by the founder of modern Aikido, the late Morihei Ueshiba, as one of five apprentices to study directly under him at the headquarters in Tokyo. With more than 20 years of martial arts training behind him, 35-year-old Mr. Sugano is now acknowledged as one of the world's foremost instructors of Aikido. Australian Aikido practitioners - and martial artists in general - are fortunate to have such an accomplished master in their midst.

How were you introduced to Aikido?

Well, I went from my birthplace (Hokaido, Northern Japan) to Tokyo, intending to further my education but ended up studying judo for three years at the Kodokan. I had read a lot about Aikido and was very interested so I went directly to Mr. Ueshiba to see if I could be apprenticed to him to study Aikido. I was 15 at the time.

Although I hadn't completely lost interest in judo, I saw no point in the competitive aspect of this art. In judo they are much more interested in competing against someone else, rather than studying the art.

Mr. Ueshiba accepted me as an apprentice and I lived in the dojo. There were five of us living there. Actually, the headquarters could not afford to keep anyone but they gave us our food and board and taught us, in return for our helping them with different jobs around the headquarters.

Was it very hard to become an apprentice and how did you manage to get their approval?

First of all partly because I approached Mr. Ueshiba personally and also one of the senior assistant instructors also recommended me to be an apprentice. He was, in fact, the one who talked me into studying Aikido.

How quickly did you progress in Aikido when you started?

That is difficult to say. We used to train at least six hours every day starting at 6:30am. We slept in the dojo so we had to get up and clean up the dojo before the class began. At that stage in the Hombu, they had five regular classes. In the early part of training it was more concentrated around ukemi (breakfalls). Also when we used to train in outside dojos we used to carry Mr. Ueshiba's or Mr. Tohei's bags. Often we used to accompany them around to other schools in the Tokyo area, e.g. the universities.

When did you first train under Mr. Ueshiba?

Practically the same time that I started. Mr. Ueshiba used to teach classes. At that stage he lived about two hours outside Tokyo. When he came into the headquarters we used to train under him. At that stage he was about 60 years old. He used to teach the morning class and occasionally ran some special training sessions during the day.

What was your first impression of him?

Very hard to describe. He seemed very much like a strongly religious man or philosophic type. Physically he was small but very solid. His appearance

was not like someone who had been training hard in the martial arts, but more like a master or a teacher of a religious group.

Did your opinion through the years change at all?

No. Sometimes when he was in Tokyo, at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning before training he used to pray to his God. He was a very strongly religious person. In the beginning, studying any of the martial arts, including Aikido, we were more concerned with attaining physical accomplishment. Once you pass that stage you must believe in something - not necessarily a religious philosophy but you try to make one total being, both the physical and the spiritual. Mr. Ueshiba was very strong in this area.

Did he bring his influence into the dojo?

Yes he did. He didn't give you much meditation in the dojo but put more emphasis on integrating his spiritual philosophy into the way he explained and taught techniques. I think that is probably the whole attitude of Aikido.

Before the Second World War the training was a lot rougher than today because there was a much stronger emphasis towards personal combat. Although the technique is similar to what was practiced then, the main difference was in the mental and spiritual approach. This also explains the existence of some other groups of Aikido that look the same, but follow different mental approaches to it.

As martial arts are not used much for one's own personal protection these days, is the greater emphasis on technique and character building detrimental to the effectiveness of the technique?

Maybe this could happen. But when you look at the total martial art, one way of solving this particular problem is having competitions. Another way to develop is to practice techniques, and another method is to practice the essence of a martial art in everyday use as an alternative to wanting to fight all the time. In the sporting aspect the aim is to win. But once you have accomplished this result, it becomes meaningless to fight. Aikido tries to eliminate this desire to win attention. This also benefits students who do not participate in competitions, where there must always be a loser. This way a student does not gain negative feelings about himself or the art because he was declared a loser.

In Aikido although you do not have strict competition, surely students try to compete against fellow students, even if subconsciously?

I guess in the beginning all students try to throw someone showing superiority, but through training they change their opinion. In most arts they train to try and take points - whether throwing in judo, punching in karate and striking in kendo. We are seeking more to harmonize with someone with any movement they do. This attitude is completely opposite to "point taking". Of course this does not mean that the throws and other techniques are done softly. People still can have accidents and be hurt.

How does the Kyu-Dan grading system work in Aikido?

In the headquarters they have five kyu grades before black belt. In Australia we have eight. Usually in the Hombu it takes about two years to get your black belt and to pass each grading you have to pass tests of basic techniques. In Australia we have a little more emphasis for gradings on how often you train and how hard you train and the circumstances pertaining to each individual - old age, for example.

Why are there more Kyu grades in western countries than in Japan?

In Western countries the students take much more interest in the gradings. Therefore if you only have five kyu grades there is a much longer time between gradings and the western student will often feel discouraged. They tend to respond more to incentives and to encouragement.

Also at the headquarters we don't have any colored belts, just all white belts up to black

What is the difference in the student/instructor relationship in Australia as compared with Japan?

I don't think there is much difference, but possibly in Japan students tend to follow what their instructor says more in blind faith, whereas the western student wants to know why with practically everything he does. The western instructor participates more during training than some of his Japanese counterparts, who tend to run a class without any active participation, just based on their seniority in rank. Unless the instructor tries to improve himself his standard becomes very bad.

What are the highest graded students that you have?

Second Dan.

Do you have any trouble coping with them during training sessions?

No trouble at all. Most of the students of Aikido, even when they get to black belt, just keep training rather than showing off they have their black

belts. I have been very lucky with the types of students I have training with me.

How many students do you have in New South Wales?

There would be several hundred registered students but of course these are not all active. There are many students in other states that I visit, especially in Melbourne.

How long did it take to get first Dan?

Just over one year.

Did your Judo experience help you?

No, it was primarily the concentrated training that we had to do. Most of the gradings that I did I did not actually do the exam. As we were there all the time we were recommended for the grades only when our instructors thought we had reached the standards required. In those days most people were not particularly interested in doing the tests, which were about two or three times a year. In fact most would not even turn up for the tests and they were hardly worth holding. Then they became rather meaningless.

Has that changed now?

Now everyone takes tests for all grades. When I left Japan there would be sometimes over 200 doing tests on a particular day. Now there are standardized requirements to fulfill for each grading exam.

[to be continued...]