

# Aikidosphere

Sugano Sensei - 40 years of Aikido, and still finding something new...

Interview by Mike Clarke

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It has been 30 years since Sugano Sensei first arrived in Australia. In that time he has, with the help of his senior students, built a strong and truly national association for those who wish to discover the art of Aikido.

As an Uchi-deshi (live-in student) to O-Sensei Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, Sugano Sensei received his instruction from the very fountainhead of Aikido knowledge, and has spent the last three decades dispensing that knowledge to all who are prepared to walk the path and face the challenge of this fascinating art.

At 55 years old, he looks at least 20 years younger. His vigorous and enthusiastic approach to training, and his obvious delight when instructing, show he has lost none of his love for the art of peace.

As a guest of the Aiki Kai of Australia, I attended the six-day 1994 winter school, held in the Mountains (near Sydney). The location and organization was first class, even down to the weather, which delivered record-breaking warmth for July (in the mid-20s).

During my time there, I got to meet some really nice people and I was made to feel very welcome. There is a saying in the martial arts that goes: "If you want to know what the teacher is like, look at the students ". It came as no surprise to me, therefore, to find that in nature and attitude, both teacher and students were reflected in each other.

From his early days back in the mid-60s, until now, Sugano Sensei has used the maxim "Quality, Not Quantity". That mentality is evident not only in the Aikido techniques but in the people themselves.

Here, then, is an account of my conversations with Sugano Sensei, a man for whom I now have the greatest respect. He was last interviewed for AFA by my colleague Erie Montaigne, back in 1989, and at that time he had this to say about Sugano Sensei: "Shihan Sugano is one of the most unassuming, egoless characters I have met". I can only echo that sentiment...

**Sensei, you said in a previous interview, you said that the training before World War Two was much rougher than today. How and why has it changed?**

When I said rougher, I meant that today it is much more stylized than



in those days. This is because Aikido has been exposed to many more people now. People's understanding of their body and the world has changed a lot also. You see, before, whoever was training was directly connected to O-Sensei. That was a relatively small number of people and their exposure to other things would not have been like it is for people now.

### **How has your own training changed over the 40 years since you began?**

It has changed because as I have grown older and spent many more years doing Aikido, my understanding of it has evolved. That's why, for me at least, my Aikido has developed as it has. Other teachers will be teaching maybe in a different way, according to the way they are thinking and the different experiences they have.

### **So would you say you have to change your training as you get 'older'.**

Well... not really change in the sense that you plan to change something when you reach a certain age. O-Sensei said that before the age of 25 is better for training hard. You can concentrate on the physical technique at this time and train hard because you are still growing and getting stronger. By 30 you should be expanding your technical understanding through your experience, as well as the physical. By then you have stopped growing, physically anyway. But your Aikido has not stopped. So it is not like a planned change, but more like without even knowing your Aikido evolves.

This is only generally speaking, and for people who start training as a teenager. Again, the way you evolve also has a lot to do with who you are following. The teacher makes a big difference to your development. For me, I would say that my technical understanding is different now than 10 or 20 years ago. Also, my experience grows as time goes by. So even if you look at my technique and see no change, this does not mean that inside I have not changed, because I may now have a better understanding of what I'm doing.

### **How does this evolution affect the way that you teach?**

One of my students in Europe said that my way of teaching was more difficult than other teachers. Not that I do things more difficult than other teachers, but in the way I teach. They said I was difficult to copy. Some of the more stylized teachers are easy to copy by the students; they can imitate their physical form. With the way I teach that is a little more difficult because, you see, I don't like to direct people.

When I am teaching I like to give up the information and try to get people to move spontaneously. And even on the same day my movements might be quite different from one class to another. If you look at a teacher who has a strong style, most of their followers have the same style. With me this has not happened, as I don't have such a thing. As I said before, my understanding has changed a lot from 10 or 20 years ago, so my Aikido has also changed with my better understanding.

### **Is this what O-Sensei meant when he said that nothing is fixed in Aikido?**

Yes that's right, not fixed. Also he gave us a big question mark about Aikido itself. Because it is never fixed, it therefore depends on how the individual studies it and pursues its message. This is why we have many styles of Aikido.

Today there are so many teachers. Some say that O-Sensei did this technique this way, or that way, so now we must always do it the same. O-Sensei used to explain his Aikido through his own personal religious concepts. Therefore if someone also made a study of his religion then it might be easier to understand Aikido concepts. To get any idea over to others you have to use words to convey your feelings. He used his religion to do this, but he never said you had to join his religion. He had attained a certain mental state through the religion he had. How he felt because of that, was how he felt about Aikido, That's why he used the terminology that he did. Because none of us joined his religion, we have to find other ways of trying to explain some of O-Sensei's teachings.

Some people have also studied Zen, some yoga, etc. And through these other studies they try to find a language that will describe Aikido. But it is hard to describe something to others, unless you have a common understanding to begin with.

Kano Sensei used scientific terminology to explain his ideas about Judo. This was better for the people to understand what he was thinking.

**Getting back to your early days, I've heard that you used to use the makiwara to practice your atemi. Can you tell us a little about that?**

In the old days, the Aikido Hombu dojo used to have a makiwara outside. I don't know if it helped me with my atemi or not, but in those days I was young and I would try many different things. As the makiwara was just outside the dojo, I used it. I think if you really want to have effective atemi you need to at least know the proper way to form a fist, otherwise you will probably hurt your hand.

I am asked many times about atemi within Aikido. It is very easy to say, "Yes, here I can use atemi", or "Here I can kick", but unless you train properly those techniques will not be effective. So if that is part of your interest in Aikido, then it is better that you practice properly at this. But in general training it is not necessary.

You see in the case of Aikido, atemi is used for other reasons than just finishing off your opponent. We use it to give a sense of the right direction, the right distance, and to prevent a second attack. This is how we see atemi. Because in Aikido we are trying to attain one continuous movement, atemi forms part of the move we are doing. It is not a separate thing that is put into a technique at certain places, it is part of the movement, and if you are not moving right you cannot use it properly.

**You once said that you had to adapt your Aikido to show it to Western students. Why was that?**

I didn't mean I had to adapt Aikido itself, more the way I tried to explain things to the students. Traditionally there was no explanation. Maybe that has now changed, but before, such explanation was not necessary. I had to find ways to help western students understand the information. For example, I could not just say to them: "You must extend your Ki". Just saying that doesn't mean anything unless you have an understanding of Ki. So it was not the Aikido I had to adapt, but my way of teaching it.

**Was it a big shock for you to come from Japan to Australia?**

No, not really. I was young then and it was all like an adventure.

**Can I talk a little about the use of pressure points in Aikido? Do you use any kind of Kyusho Jitsu?**

Not really. It's not like we attack the points on the body that you think of as pressure points. We may bring pressure to bear during a technique, but I don't think this is the same as you mean.

**You once expressed the opinion that training was probably, "Not hard enough for a student to be able to use it to its fullest effect if a self-defense situation arose". Do you still feel that way?**

I was talking about somebody who was purely aiming at self-defense ability or combat. If that is what you want then you need to train much harder physically and mentally. You see, general Aikido training is not for the purpose of that. So from the beginning we are thinking differently. If you just want combat, then you have to train hard for that.

**Can you tell us a little about your fights with the Nippon Kenpo people?**

Yes, in my early days my friend had a friend who was training Nippon Kenpo. So one day we went to watch and it ended up with an exchange of techniques.

**What was the outcome?**

Well they had some interesting techniques, kicking and punching. Also some Jujitsu techniques. They wore quite a lot of pads and headgear, things like that. From a distance they had many techniques, but they were not developed to use against Aikido. We had to watch out for the distance between us. This was one of the main differences. But it was a good experience for all of us.

**I'd like to talk about your time as an uchi-deshi if I may. What was it like?**

The only thing I remember with any strong feeling was the fact that there was so much training every day, and so I was always hungry. I never had a plan to get a senior grade, or to become a teacher. I was just interested in training. It was very hard at times, but I was never frightened or worried about that. By the time I arrived at the Hombu dojo, I already knew most of the people I would be with.

### **What was your training schedule like?**

Firstly we had to attend all of the five daily classes at the Hombu, plus any special training that O-Sensei might want us to do. As well as that we sometimes had to accompany O-Sensei when he went out, carry his bags etc. Really it was not like we got any secret information or anything, it was just that we were involved with Aikido 24 hours a day. So eventually you develop much more attentiveness to what it is you are doing.

Quite often people think we got special training or something, but it was not like that. We just had so much involvement, 24 hours a day, that we developed attentiveness to O-Sensei's teaching. If you compare this to the normal student who comes to the dojo a few times a week for one or two hours, you can see why we would appear to be different.

### **O-Sensei is credited by some with strange powers. Did you ever experience anything "strange" with him?**

No, nothing like that. He was a very spiritual person, very religious. So maybe his lifestyle and the fact that he had a connection with another religious group make some people think that way. When you are young, as I was then, I had more than enough to do just being attentive to him and all the training I was doing. I never really became involved in anything else.

One thing I do remember, though, was that he always seemed to know what was going on in his house and the dojo. Even if he was not in the same room, he had a strong sense of what was happening in his home.

### **So the rumor that he could vaporize and appear elsewhere are not true?**

No, I don't believe such things. He was a man.

### **Who else was an uchi-deshi at the same time as you, and did you all start at the same time?**

No there were deshi who were senior to me, who started before me. The people who were uchi-deshi while I was, are all now well-known teachers who live around the world. They are Mr. Tamura, who is now in France, Mr. Yamada is in New York, Mr. Chiba, who spent many years in England but is now in San Diego, California. Also Mr. Kanai now lives in Boston. I, too, live in New York now.

### **Why do you think none of the uchi-deshi stayed in Japan?**

Well there was no problem. It was just at that time that Aikido started to expand around the world. We as a group of people just happened to receive invitations to go abroad. For instance, I never had any idea of coming to Australia. At that time I was married to an Australian, and so my main reason to come here first was to meet my new family. Within about three years from 1964 to 1967, all the uchi-deshi had gone abroad. But as I said, this was because Aikido was expanding on an international level, and we just happened to be the ones who were ready to go.

### **Was that an on-going thing, to produce teachers to send abroad?**

I believe we were the last group to go through the uchi-deshi type of training and go overseas. Mostly, now, people become teachers at the Hombu dojo. They have to graduate college, and I think they only have to live at the dojo for about one year. So things have changed a little from my time.

### **Can I quote you now. You have said in the past: "In Aikido to keep the obligation to the master is the main idea of training". What exactly is this obligation?**

We have to teach in a way that helps people see what O-Sensei was trying to achieve. He was pursuing something. Therefore, students should follow the Master's desire to pursue knowledge, not just master technique. Therefore I can't see any importance in saying that O-Sensei used to do a particular technique this way at some point, so now we must always do it that way. I don't think this is following the Master.

He never fixed anything this way. He was searching for something and following his ideas. We should continue to search for that same thing he spent his life looking for. In that sense I don't see that we should see the physical form and say, because he did this a particular way, we have to do it like that forever.

To me the obligation to O-Sensei is to follow the development and try to find what you are looking for. At first you follow your teacher, but even here the teacher cannot say all the students must do something this way or you are wrong. As a teacher I am trying to help a person discover and develop feelings from within themselves.

### **What is Misogi?**

Misogi is a Shinto term. It is relating to methods of purification of the body and the mind. There are many different types or ways of doing this. Normally, in traditional Aikido training we use some methods at the beginning of training. We do this without explanation and it is symbolic of what we are about to do. That is to clear our bodies to receive energy.

According to O-Sensei the whole of Aikido is a Misogi. His idea was that you should purify your body and mind in order to receive the universal energy. This is a concept like in Shinto, where you always purify yourself before receiving whatever comes into your body.

**That sounds to me like the Catholic tradition of confession to cleanse the soul, before receiving the body of Christ in the communion...?**

Yes, I guess most religions have similar lines of thought running through them.

**Do you feel you get more benefits from Aikido now that you are older?**

Hmmm... Well, after so many years of training I am still always finding something new, even in the way of teaching. It is still fascinating for me -- the whole idea of Aikido To me it is still like a big question mark. O-Sensei knew that it is important to keep looking.

**Would you recognize this thing if you ever found it?**

Probably not. But that's the fascinating part of Aikido. That's the difficult part. If anything was fixed, then once you have achieved that, it's over. With Aikido you are searching for some idea or feeling. Just when you find that, you realize that there is more and you have to go some more.

Some people fix their idea of Aikido. They say, "Oh, Aikido is a Martial Art". They train -- bang! bang! bang! But they have stopped. Even if your technique has stopped, you do not have to stop there yourself. Aikido is boundless -- a way of seeing life.

**Sensei, thank you very much for your time.**