

# Aikidosphere

**Seiichi Sugano**

**8th Dan, Shihan**

**New York Aikikai, Technical Director - Australia & Belgium**

## **Arms and The Man: Sugano Sensei and Arms Training**

**by Skip Short, New York Aikikai**

Editor's Note: One of our objectives at AikidoSphere is to transmit information directly from our Shihan and to make this information available to a wider audience.

Because their instruction is most frequently delivered on the mat, rather than through writings, this is often difficult. We're happy that Skip Short of New York Aikikai has attempted to capture the comments of Sugano Sensei during his weapons classes. It is reprinted from Aikido East, the Journal of the United States Aikido Federation Eastern region, Volume 1, Issue 4, Spring/Summer 1999

"There are so many different types of knowledge in the world. Aikido is only one of them. It is unrealistic to consider Aikido as the end of our search for knowledge. And in Aikido we should still be searching for what Aikido is and why we are practicing."

So said Seiichi Sugano as we started our discussions. I was surprised and intrigued. I had expected from his demeanor in the dojo and on the mat that Sugano Sensei would portray Aikido as a discipline with spiritual aspects and the potential for serving as a catalyst for learning in one's own life. Aikido certainly may have such a potential for each of us. And Sugano Sensei has clearly chosen to consider Aikido as an opportunity for continual growth and learning rather than a way to display superiority over others. He has apparently not succumbed to the temptation to equate his own phenomenal proficiency in this art as the equivalent of spiritual mastery in any aspect of his life or the lives his students.

As those who have trained with Sugano Sensei are aware, he has an affinity for arms training both in suburi classes and in regular classes. This article sets forth some of his principles. Sensei cautions that arms training is something that should only be attempted with a qualified teacher. It cannot be learned merely through articles. This piece is intended as a supplement to those training with Sensei.

### Arms Training and Aikido

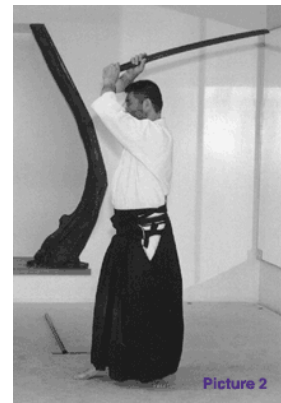
Aikido to Sugano Sensei represents an art created to permit spontaneous movement and continued growth. Sensei considers the use of weapons within this context and does not emphasize any weapons kata or form. Weapons training is a tool to intensify focus and to "confirm open hand technique."

While there can be a relationship between weapons and Aikido, for Sugano Sensei the arms system must itself be functional. It is not merely an adjunct to demonstrate Aikido techniques. During the six years Sugano Sensei spent with O-Sensei, weapons were only taught by O-Sensei to a private group that included Sugano Sensei.

Perhaps the greatest value weapons offers in its confirmation of open



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

hand technique is in learning about maai and timing. The distance between partners with weapons and the moment at which nage must move is of the greatest significance.

According to Sugano Sensei, "Aikido has no set weapons training. A difficulty in using weapons in Aikido is in having sufficient training for an instructor to know enough about weapons and their relationship to Aikido to have the knowledge to properly teach weapons. My idea in teaching weapons is that weapons training should be functional. There must be a point to it."

### Safety and Weapons

Traditionally, Sensei notes, one practiced bokken strikes for a year before being permitted to work with a partner. Today, in the United States, it is common for some Aikido students to begin working with weapons with a partner without any prior training. In this context, safety becomes of great importance. The more experienced student should receive the strikes and no student should strike faster than their ability to control the weapons.

Strikes should not be near the partner's eyes, where the danger of a slip of even a light strike is serious.

Constant repetition of the basic forms not only develops precision in weapons proficiency, it also promotes safety.

### Basic Forms

Sensei does not utilize katas in arms training. Sensei explains that katas traditionally were used to pass technique down from one generation to another. Because of the spontaneous nature of Aikido, there is no such lengthy tradition and kata are not needed. Kata can become so fixed that the movements are no longer functional in actual training.

Sensei uses repetition of basic cuts to develop weapons precision. With the bokken the basic strikes are shomen to the hand and the wrist from both the right and left sides, yokomen to the knees and tsuki to the center (not right and left) at both high and low positions.

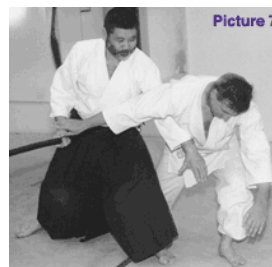
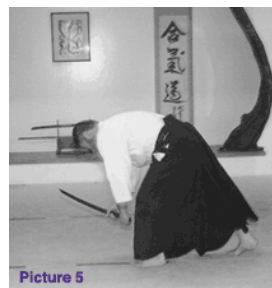
One starts in hanmi (see picture 1) with the bokken protecting nage from any possible strike. The bokken forms a triangle with the center and the shoulder. Sensei recommends using a light weapon, which permits greater speed.

The basic strike for Sensei involves raising the bokken, bringing it down and then completing the strike moving forward. This type of strike is more difficult than merely raising and striking. Its purpose, consistent with Sensei's belief that arms training must be functional, is that the lowering of the bokken before moving within uke's strike range, protects nage. Picture 2 shows the first step and picture 3 the difficult part of bringing down the bokken before moving forward.

In moving with a partner, remaining in proper maai while one's partner is moving, is a very important challenge. Proper hanmi with a partner is illustrated in picture 4. The tips of the weapons are almost touching and each person holds the weapon in position to protect against any strike. There should be no opening. One should learn proper hanmi before proceeding. Maai and hanmi without an opening must be developed as a foundation for the other techniques.

### Ukemi and Weapons

Traditionally, given the dangers of a sword, there was no ukemi with a sword. As an exercise Sensei does utilize ukemi but whether it is with a



bokken or a jo, the ukemi must arise out of a practical situation. Sensei uses a forward roll, since it is most likely to arise out of a reaction by nage to a forward strike by uke. Uke begins with a strike forward and then rolls. The weapon starts moving forward and as uke rolls the weapon must be moved to be perpendicular to the body. See picture 5.

#### Disarming Techniques

Utilizing Aikido techniques presents an opportunity to practice with an increased focus and to study the refinement of maai. Sensei uses a variety of techniques with shomen strikes, including kotegaeshi, udekimenage, shihonage, gokkyu, and a kokyu projection. Koshinage is not included. An illustration of udekimenage is set forth in pictures 6 and 7. Uke begins with a shomen strike. Nage moves in with atemi to the face and then grabs uke's weapon between uke's hands. See picture 6. Nage tenkans which brings uke around, making sure to keep the weapon pointing up and away from both uke and nage's heads. Nage then completes udekimenage as in picture 7.

This article is an introduction to Sensei's weapons training. As those who have studied with Sensei know, he is always seeking to learn and teach something new. Thus, his classes are unpredictable. One never knows if he will turn off the lights in the midst of class, introduce weapons in a regular class or announce that everyone in class should roam the room randomly attacking everyone else. He is not afraid to try new things himself: About eight years ago, he took up fencing, starting as a complete beginner.

His arms training has the same purpose: to attain proficiency and precision through constant repetition and then to use spontaneity to continue to grow and to enjoy.

Thus for Sensei, the answer to the question of what Aikido means remains both fluid and individual. "We must all continue to search and develop our own answers to that question", he says.