

# Aikidosphere

**Seiichi Sugano**

**8th Dan, Shihan**

**Senior Instructor -New York Aikikai; Technical Director - Australia & Belgium**

**An Interview with Seiichi Sugano Shihan, Part 2**

**By David Halprin, Editor-in-Chief, AikidoSphere**

Editor's note: The interview was conducted during the New York Aikikai Christmas Seminar in December 2000. We would like to thank Sugano Sensei for this interview. Thanks also to Douglas Firestone, Chief Instructor of Aikido of Westchester for his help during the interview, and Margo Ballou of the Brown University/Rhode Island School of Design dojo for her work transcribing it. David Halprin, 6th Dan is Chief Instructor of Framingham Aikikai.



**Could you share with us memories you have of the older generation of instructors at Hombu dojo, for example, Osawa Sensei Senior, Tada Sensei, Arikawa Sensei, and Yamaguchi Sensei?**

Those are all very strong individuals. Again, we were all together at Hombu, but again our relationship is very similar to the student/master relationship. Not that there was anything difficult in our relationship but there was not much personal contact, I suppose. The barrier is not exactly is the same, although in a different way, the relationship is similar.

**Between the teachers and the students?**

Or even the senior person...

**Was it like learning from O-Sensei: you would take their classes and try to figure out what they were doing?**

Yes, yes.

**Were there special things that you got from any of those guys?**

Koichi Tohei Sensei was the chief instructor, he was much more strong, characteristically strong and technically strong. He was the only one able to give clear explanation of why and how a technique works. That was to me pretty unique. [laughs]

**What were his classes like?**

Normally he'd give an explanation of the technique first of all. He would use the terminology of ki more than anyone else. He could be the only person who used that term! Without knowing it, probably I got lots of influence from the way he explained.

**How would he explain ki, now that you mention it? [laughs]**

Like unbendable arm? [laughs]

**How do you explain ki to people, or how did he explain it to you?**

At that time, thirty or forty years ago his explanation was good. I think today the same explanation is maybe not as good. His explanation was almost the equivalent of a "one plus one equals two" formula, based on coordination of body and mind. So using your mind, thinking in a positive way, is a way of creating energy that can be described as ki movement.

He studied Japanese yoga, and I think that's how his explanation came about. He was a member of the Tempukai, as were quite a few others as well. Tada Sensei was in the same organization. I think even now Tada Sensei does some ki exercises or awareness exercises, that sort of thing.

### **Is that organization still around?**

I suppose so. The key persons passed away. I met them a couple of times. Tohei Sensei had a lot of influence from that. I think probably similar to O-Sensei's borrowing concepts from Omoto-kyo, Tohei Sensei took concepts from the Tempukai. He would try to explain something, and to explain something you must use concepts.

Most sports, like judo, use a scientific concept, for example, the principle of balance. In O-Sensei's case, because he was so involved with the Omoto-kyo, he used that to express his ideas, and therefore he got much more into spiritual aspects. The expression of his body movement obviously started in martial arts, it's there, but probably his way of expressing ideas was much more involved in the spiritual aspect. Then those other people started Zazen or yoga, which involve a type of knowledge that can be used to express the idea of what is Aikido, or develop an explanation of Aikido.

### **Did you do Zazen?**

I did Zazen. I did it three years intensively. The most intensive time was three months when I followed a Chinese Zen master. That was okay. Other than that I like some yoga sutras. They have a very clear interaction and logic that I like.

### **In the yoga system?**

Yes, some. Not all. Patanjali sutra is good. You get more different knowledge, and your understanding of Aikido evolves. But they are never to be mixed. Some people intend to convert Aikido to yoga or yoga to Aikido or whatever, so they start mixing two completely different things.

### **So it's good to study other disciplines, but it is important not to mix them up, and you must keep them distinct?**

Yes. Some things that you experience through the Aikido training, you need some tool to recognize them. Knowledge is just like another language. There may be something you experience physically but if you don't have language, you can't express or recognize it. The physical form and the intellectual thing come together.

In O-Sensei's case, obviously, he expressed his feeling of training by explaining it with the Omoto religion, but he didn't follow that side exclusively in how he did things, although maybe it is the most developed. Judo is obviously Kano Sensei's scientific way to explain. Almost any of the classic martial arts, one way or another, borrows some type of religious concept to express its style or technique. Unfortunately, when they start borrowing the other terminology, any terminology, the meaning changes. Similarly, I think translating into English changes the nuances of the Japanese terminology a little bit.

Terminology itself gives something kind of mystical; it gives some special impression to other people, even in something like the name of a technique. Aikido's way of naming techniques, like ikkyo, nikyo, is very much a numbering system. In many other martial arts, like Daito-ryu, each technique has an "extreme" name. The idea seems to be to impress the "outside people". Even judo has certain techniques where the terminology itself expresses the feeling of the technique but also the name itself gives expression to the character of the technique. There's one called ganseki otoshi, meaning "dropping rock" or something similar. Terminology can be a common language that helps very much the ease of understanding, but there are a lot of people who like to use extreme terminology.

### **Because it sounds good?**

It sounds good, and it's a property of the Japanese language, giving a certain feeling or meaning.

### **So it does actually express something important?**

Using a common language to describe things allows much easier understanding. In Aikido, "use your ki" is a key. You say "ki" and even when people are talking about it without clearly understanding it, something feels special. [laughs] It is borrowed from some other system, like a religion, which typically has many terminologies.

The origin of the term obviously comes from Taoism, but in China everything is set up logically, including ki itself. But when it came to Japan, they started using it in different ways. They started identifying ki as the cause of anything unexplainable. But in China, they have every meaning of ki fixed; each one is defined exactly.

In China it is a very logical system, there are three or four different kinds of ki, at least three: kuki, uchiki, uanchi. Mostly you when they say chi or ki, they're describing a sexual power. Another one, kuki involves the intake of food and air, it starts from the lungs. Another type of ki starts from the source of the body. They have three different kinds of ki, with exactly logical meanings.

But when the term moved to Japan, they started using so many forms of ki, including weather, which they called tenki. Or, for example, Genki-desuka. The main thing here is that it's not like modern days; in older times there were so many phenomena that were impossible to describe scientifically. So, obviously, describing ki as the cause of things was the only way available, and people started using it.

I don't know now, even in Japan, if anyone is describing or using ki terminology to explain things in training. I think that Tohei Sensei mostly promoted and used the terminology of ki. O-Sensei, I don't think ever used it. There was kunoki, O-Sensei used ki in kunoki for explanation but that's the only way he used it.

In the Omoto religion, in mystic Shinto, they used basically three methods or principles in the kotodama system, tumoni, kuzitama, etc. So they have three or four different principles. Most of the kotodama system is not really logical. It's illogical. You can really only practice it in the Japanese language.

### **Do you think, on balance, ki is a good way to explain things or does it just make people confused?**

Right there you're dividing ki into positive and negative. I don't know nowadays if anyone uses it to describe anything for training. In the kotodama system I think they have a couple different systems, but I think none of them are used, not really.

So you can follow up certain points, but then mostly it comes from O-Sensei's talking about vibrating in the body. You can get the idea with the Japanese terminology. For example the kami, meaning the god, they divide into the ka and the mi. The ka sound was equivalent to the fire, and mi sound is equivalent to water. The ka-mi is both together, the fire is vertical, water is horizontal, the symbols make a cross and you are there, that's the way to use the kotodama.

It's not necessary maybe to believe in it as a total religion. It is much easier to follow a religion, because you start with your emotional attachment so you don't need to be logical. But if someone wants to study it as a system, he looks at it in intellectual and logical ways and it's sometimes difficult to follow. It's the same thing with Zazen. Even practicing Zazen is not necessarily following the religious order, but just extracting the system of sitting.

### **Using it as an exercise?**

Yeah, exercise. O-Sensei probably didn't completely finish developing Aikido. He left lots of writing or poems, but in most cases you just have to guess what he was trying to say.

(to be continued)