

Aikidosphere

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An Interview with Seiichi Sugano Shihan, Part 3

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I've heard that O-Sensei was not interested in Aikido becoming popular or spreading throughout society.

He had, obviously, an idea for how to create peace for the whole world, and that was the same concept as Deguchi. He also had a very extreme nationalistic view, again also he had the attitude or idea of international relationships. That's why they were associating with one religious group in China, called the Red Cross society or something. Then also they were associating with B'hai. I think at one stage they tried promoting the Esperanto language. On the other hand, he had a very strong nationalistic idea of Japan; the core of the Shinto religion itself is very much Japan as the center. It was likely the influence of Deguchi again, as he had an idea towards international viewpoints, they tried to create international associations, and I think that's probably how O-Sensei was influenced to develop an idea for creating peace for the world.

Did O-Sensei also have a more traditional martial arts idea?

They're both very much based on the same cosmology, or creation idea, that is, Japan as the center, the Shinto. Also the idea that God created so many different aspects, including martial, so therefore the martial is the protection of the god of creation. It is therefore not fighting for the sake of fighting; rather they had the idea of a protector, not just fighting with someone. That's the basic idea, so therefore they never had an idea or concept of the way we think that martial arts equals fighting or combat. From that concept, Aikido is never to be a fighting art, but rather a protecting art.

In the same way, as in Shinto, they don't have the concept of good or bad, instead they have only pure or impure. That explains the importance of the misogi, the purification of the body and mind. The concept is different from today's ideas, which tend to see contradictions or opposites. They didn't have such an idea of for fighting with other people using the martial art, but instead to be protecting the creation.

In a way we tried interpreting Aikido, which makes lots of contradictions. That's a contradiction. O-Sensei never fixed the concept of technique, but the spiritual aspect, he created and fixed Aikido to be harmony, love and peace, et cetera. Therefore, generally,

most people are fascinated with the techniques, the technical system of fighting. If it's just fighting, the contradiction is always there.

The idea of harmony or peace or love that O-Sensei mostly talked about was very much in relation to his god. However, technically the way we were training was not in the relation of person to god, but person to person. So people try to apply the same idea of the relationship of person to god, but in the person to person obviously the contradiction is there. O-Sensei's idea goes through the god to make peaceful harmony together, and doesn't deal so much with the person to person. I see a lot of people looking at the person-to-person relationship, so obviously they find a contradiction.

I think in the martial aspect, technically O-Sensei was much more linear; the circular motion is a result of linear movement, or a continuation of linear movement. The essence is just straightforward. There is a lot of explanation of circular motion, but that's a result of a continuation of the linear movement. His technical ideas are very much straightforward.

There's something else: Aikido without competition made some progress towards his idea of everyone coming together, united. When you had a competition, only elites could go to interstate or international gatherings. With Aikido, there were no competitions, so even a beginner, wherever he or she goes, in any part of the world, can just go to training there. But in sports obviously they have a system of competition so only the elite can go to any interstate or international event. In Aikido's case, anyone can go to any seminar, they're open seminars.

What memories do you have of the uchi deshi days, of you and Tamura Sensei, Yamada Sensei, Chiba Sensei, Kanai Sensei, Kurita Sensei?

Well, we trained together. Then and now we're still very much individuals, and independent people. We get together for training, but there are few social occasions that arise to get together.

You went through a lot together just training?

Yeah, just training. Besides training, each of us were so independent, as I said, and besides training, there were few occasions, few social events, just to go out to drink or go see a movie or such. I used to go to Yamada Sensei's house very often. We would gather there, an hour and a half from Tokyo, near the beach. I spent more time with Yamada Sensei probably, I went to his house quite often, also he was teaching in the US army bases, and we used to go traveling and drinking inside the base.

Did the uchi deshi practice a lot with each other, or did you have to practice mostly with other people?

Mostly other people. Occasionally we trained together; in most cases, like at morning class, we had to attend to the beginners. In some special classes we'd only take ukemi. Sometimes, like at any large demonstration, we'd show up with Doshu all together and then we'd have dinner together afterwards. There simply wasn't so much opportunity for person-to-person contact, I suppose. It was different. In one way it was very much independent. Of course most of the time we would stay in the dojo eating with the Ueshiba family, and in the evening we would go out with Kisshomaru Doshu or Tohei Sensei or whoever. After teaching, normally people would take you out to dinner, so you'd be eating together.

Has that group changed a lot since those days?

Personalities never change; they're very much the same. No, I don't think they've changed much.

There have been several generations of uchi deshi since your group. Do you think the uchi deshi system has changed much?

After we left, I don't think they've had an uchi deshi system. Even before, I think probably we are the only type of uchi deshi. I don't know if O-Sensei ever had uchi deshi, if he did they had to pay to stay there training. We didn't have to pay, so I think our group was probably in a most unique situation. I'm not sure, but I think O-Sensei had many uchi deshi. But I think in most cases now they pay there to stay. None of them became professionals regardless of how long they stayed.

How was it that that happened at that time with your group?

I think it was timed just as Aikido started expanding. Probably Kisshomaru Doshu thought he needed some uchi deshi to help. The first time I went to Hombu, after I saw the magazine, the person who came to the entrance and who I talked to happened to be Kisshomaru Doshu, He was the one who would interview persons for uchi deshi. To start with it was financially not possible to have uchi deshi, but he suggested maybe come in and begin training, and after a while maybe the situation would change. So in the beginning we slept there, and they fed us.

They were at that time they starting to expand Aikido, so outside Hombu dojo various places opened up, universities started Aikido clubs, as well as some companies, that's how they were just beginning the expansion. So, then gradually we starting going outside Hombu to teach. Around 1964 to 1966 everybody began to have different specific reasons arose that gave us a chance to go out of Japan, but it wasn't anything planned.

[To be continued.]

