

Aikidosphere

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An Interview with Seiichi Sugano Shihan, Part 4

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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 giving this interview to Aikido Online. 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 Photos courtesy of Bill Bresnihan.



When you left Japan you first went to Australia. How did that come about?

It wasn't planned. It just happened. My wife was an Australian living in Japan, so I needed to go see her family.

Was that the first time you were outside of Japan?

Yes.

So when you first got to Australia, what did you think?

When I went there, only a few judo people knew about Aikido. Some judo teacher was teaching so-called Aikido from a book. That was their style. I got the most students from a yoga group. I think Tohei Sensei's book was out, and I think his idea was "let's talk about ki", that is what his Aikido was like. Some yoga people had an interest. My first students were more yoga people than from judo or karate.

What was it like to suddenly be in a foreign country?

Culturally, I didn't have much shock. When I moved to Belgium, it probably took me more time to adjust. Of course the first time in Australia, I was much younger, so I think it may have been easier to adjust, but culturally, I didn't have much trouble. I think part of it was that in Japan I was much more exposed to Americans through teaching at US army bases, so already I had a feel for the Americans. My wife was Australian, and she had lived in Canada before, and we had lots of friends among the foreign Aikidoka living in Japan. Culturally, in Europe and Belgium there was more, you can't say shock, but all the habits were different. It took some time to, not adjust, but get used to.

Did you enjoy living in Australia?

It was good.

You were there for over ten years, right?

Yeah. And I am still going back.



Then you went to Belgium, and that was harder to adjust to?

Not harder, it just took time. I think the main difference is between Teutonics and Latins, whose attitudes or ideas were different. Other than that, in a way maybe I'm not totally Japanese, that probably made some difference too. You know, even after I was in Australia for three or four years, even food-wise I didn't miss anything. Most Japanese miss miso soup. (laughs) In Japan I didn't drink miso soup.

In Belgium nothing's the same, the religious habits are different, and the lifestyle is different. In Belgium I remember first, in one of the buildings I was waiting in an elevator and I was expecting the door to open. No, you have to open it yourself! (laughs) Unlike Australia, in most small elevators in Europe you have to open them yourself, so I kept waiting for it to open, and it never opened. [general laughter] They also have a habit of shaking hands. When you meet, and when you say goodbye, everybody shakes hands individually, so you better shake hands with everyone!

It's like when we go to Japan, it's hard to get used to not opening the taxi cab door ourselves. [laughter]

Also, in Europe, counting the floors in a building is different. Second floor is first floor. It's easy to pass your floor. [more laughter]

Sometimes people say that each country has its own personality. Do you see that in Aikido?

Yes and no. Maybe it is just that country and personality are obvious differences. When you move from northern to southern Europe, things change. Generally speaking, English speaking or Germanistic language speaking people are very similar. When you go south, to France and Italy, all that changes. It also changes the way I was thinking. When you think you have to use language. When you're thinking in a Germanistic language and change to a Latin language, your thinking changes.

I have some questions about Aikido practice. What are the key principles that students should observe in their practice?

Ki? Key?

Key as in most important.

Ah, key.

Yes, k-e-y. [laughter] What are the most important technical, mental and spiritual principles that students should observe in their practice?

The question is how to study the important things. Obviously it is very important to carefully observe what the teacher is showing, how the teacher is applying technical points, so that's how one learns to carefully study what they're teaching. The basic principles are distance and direction. With any technique, you need to know the clear distance and direction. Those you can apply to any technique in your training. Without those, there are no techniques.

In general training, we are not really teaching or including the spiritual aspect, so the only thing you can do is just point out how to study, how to carefully observe. Sometimes you describe your eyes, the gateway to your mind. The mind guides your body, so you should carefully observe.

During general training we are not providing teaching of the spiritual aspect at all. Aikido training is based on the idea of a unique harmony, so the system is supposed to be teaching that way.

It comes down to the point that it depends on how you practice: how you approach practice makes a difference. The technique itself is one thing, obviously, you practice to kill someone or control someone, or defend yourself. That's a result, it's there, and it is a result of your training. However, the only way to make something different is to change how you approach these objectives through your training.

You're aiming at applying the concept of harmony et cetera. Then the process of practice changes into sort of contemplation of your moral spirit, it changes the direction of practice. The technical result won't change, but just how you approach the practice makes a difference, so you can approach the practice as if you are just as martial artist, and learn to kill someone or defend yourself, or you can apply the principle of harmony, etc.

Those processes cultivate your spirit and the moral sense, and so they have some kind of value in daily life. Then you're not just training in the

context that technique equals the use of these arts for killing, instead you're approaching it in different ways which cultivate different things.

Technically the result won't change, but by following this way, probably you can evolve to a different purpose, I suppose. That's why you don't overly concern yourself about the result of how you apply the technique. In that case you're just training in using a fighting technique, you're only concerned with the result in terms of how strong you are, how to defend or kill, so you're training that way to start with. But this way eventually contradicts O-Sensei's ideas. So when you're starting in Aikido, what makes a difference to how you approach the practice.

General training is not really encouraging the spiritual aspect, but therefore it makes more important how you view your training, how you approach the training, really, how you come to training every day. If you are just always thinking about how to throw someone, or how to defend yourself, obviously you develop a certain attitude, or a certain mental process.

But if you're just purely coming to training to learn about harmonizing with others, obviously you develop good coordination of your body. You have good coordination of your body even if you're not looking for it, and a technical efficiency is there. The way you are coming to training depends very much on what you want to get out of Aikido, rather than the Aikido giving you something.

Again, it's difficult to say, but a high percentage students come to training very much for recreational purposes, ...that's as far as it goes. If someone wants to study more deeply, that's another thing, but generally, people are coming to train just to have fun.

To understand how to approach the training, individuals have to find what they want to get out of Aikido. If you are looking at the strictly martial aspect, that's the way you want to train, that's the way you train.

In most cases, in any technique or system, as long as you keep moving, it probably becomes technically more effective, rather than becoming formalized or a kata.

If you continue, part of the training is not fixed. That's the way of training like O-Sensei, who made a break with the traditional idea of martial arts. Most traditional ideas pretty much fix the kata forms. Even now people tend to think that this is martial, so training tends to become more formalized or static rather than moving. O-Sensei broke with that idea by spontaneously moving, that's why he never fixed them.

Ikkyo is there, but each time you do ikkyo it is not exactly the same, as opposed to the kata form which requires the technique to be this particular way, with precision. A part of Aikido training is that each time it repeats not quite the same.

Individual students have to find what they want. That's why, probably, more students tend to see teaching as primarily the teacher giving out information, rather than the student having to take information out. Then there is the issue that some teachers will say it has to be a certain way, you must do it that way. Again, students are probably the same way; some students need to have clear, strict guidance in order to follow; other students need to have more room.

It depends on how you do it, on both sides. In Aikido there are so many different things, that's why technically I very much more focus on the study of distance and direction. As far as the details of the technique, how to do the technique, everybody has a preference or someone does it this way, someone else does it a little bit differently. But no matter how you do a technique but you must have a concept of distance and direction.

Can you say something about ukemi?

Ukemi at present is also affected by developing an idea of teaching something or developing a system to teach, as well as the student also expecting to have instruction. That all has affected the idea of ukemi, and of how to do ukemi.

Originally there was no such system, just you attack, you get thrown, so you gradually develop the perception of how to do it, and you have to be receptive. Ideally, if you start younger, you don't have to worry about it, it takes care of itself automatically whatever situations come up. In that case there isn't a system or way to develop ukemi, it's just naturally there. But now some people are thinking more about how to do ukemi in what situation. Already it is influenced by the idea or notion of teaching and getting instruction. Particularly with ukemi you have to be receptive.

So again, ideally you're supposed to be younger so it's physically possible to take care of yourself if someone throws you or something. If someone just starts training it's probably not the same as for the young ones. You're just training, so automatically your body becomes more receptive to the movements. There's no need to have uke have to move this way or that way.

I think that's the way we first learned ukemi, if I can remember back that far.

Now, I don't know, people start talking about how to do ukemi. Even in Europe, in some groups they teach people to jump. They teach the uke, for iriminage, jump forward. Ideally it should be you just train, and it just automatically takes care of itself. Ukemi is basically a heightened perception and reaction of your body. Once you formalize it, it's already artificial.

One thing is that obviously you have to be able to roll backward and forward. The main idea for backward and forward rolling is to condition your

muscles because you're not used to such training. It gives you a certain exercise, and that gives the conditioning for muscles, so forever you need to roll to maintain that conditioning, but that's the only reason you teach rolling backward and forward. That's how your muscles get to know how to react, and your body is not used to moving in that way. Once you establish that into the body, you roll forward or whatever, it's physically easy to take ukemi.

Hitting the mat isn't necessary, unless you really need it. Without knowing exactly why, people get the idea from judo. In judo they have reason to slap the mat, that way they reduce the shock. But in Aikido's case, we use rotary movement to reduce the shock, so the two approaches are different. But once you make habits, it's difficult to stop.

I have one last question. For forty years our teachers, now the Shihankai senseis, have had close relationships with Hombu Dojo and the Ueshiba family and also each other. You are all in the West now, and still you work together. What is it that led you to have that kind of loyalty and connection for so long?

That's part of Aikido.