

Aikidosphere

A Lesson of Honesty

An interview with Sugano Shihan during his visit to Venezuela in 2001.

by Hector Villagomez

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared on December 8th, 2001 in Contacto, the sports magazine of the Venezuelan newspaper *El Carabobeño*. In memory of the death of Sugano Shihan, who passed away in August 29, 2010, AikidoSphere has translated this article from Spanish to English, and it is republished with the kind permission of the author. Mr. Villagomez is a member of Ecole Budo Raji in Venezuela and holds the Shoden rank. He runs an EBR dojo in Valencia, Carabobo, Venezuela. Please refer to these links for more information: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ecole-de-Budo-Raji-de-Valencia/254211708015768> , <http://www.budorajicaracas.com/?mod=ryu.php>, <http://www.ecoledebudo.com/>



The code of the warrior, or “Bushido”, is one of the most important characteristics of the Japanese martial arts. So much so that it has permeated into the entire Japanese culture, giving a touch of mystery to the whole society, and a particular touch of efficiency that we see of things made in Japan. However, it would be naïve of us to think that all Japanese people understand and live by these ideals of rectitude, loyalty, courage and honesty. It would be just as naïve to think that all Venezuelan people know how to dance joropo. (Joropo is a traditional folklore dance and music, and is considered as the national dance and music of Venezuela.)

From December 7 – 9 of this year [2001] we had the opportunity to enjoy the visit of Sensei Seiichi Sugano, 8th dan of Aikido and “uchideshi” or direct pupil, of O-Sensei Morihei Ueshiba. The visit was on the occasion of the 25th National Aikido Seminar organized by Aikikai Venezuela directed by Sensei Nelson Requena. This event had an excellent organization and attracted Aikido practitioners from all over the country.

Sensei Sugano is a man who throughout the event showed not only his technical quality as a teacher, but also that quality of a true warrior that defines him as a fair, calm and brave man. We had the opportunity to talk briefly with him, and these were his thoughts.

When did you begin to practice Aikido?

I really don't remember; it was such a long time ago, but more or less when I was 18 years old.

Did you start as O-Sensei's pupil right from the beginning?

Yes, from the start I began practicing in the dojo of O-Sensei.

During this week's practice, I noticed that you give great importance to work with weapons.

The “hamni” position is very important for Aikido, and this is developed especially during my work with weapons. Training must be flexible; we do not look for form. It is intrinsically there within the art. It doesn't matter if you do one hundred different techniques; you have to see them and understand them as part of a system. In fact, there can be more than one hundred ways of teaching. It is my understanding of Aikido that I try to

transmit.

Despite the fact that in Venezuela all the groups of practitioners converge into the Aikikai organization, there has been some distancing among them. What bonds must we strengthen to overcome these differences?

It is normal to find different tastes among practitioners. Some prefer to go with one instructor, others with another. This is the natural way that groups are created and grow. It is a mistake to fight against one another. If one decides not to be in a group, that's fine. Organizations must be allowed to generate and regenerate themselves in a natural way. That is the natural way of the politics of Aikido, it has nothing to do with training.

What are the qualities that an aspiring student must have for Shodan (black belt 1st dan)?

Again, in Aikido one must work in a natural way. If in Japan, one can use the Japanese system, but each group can have different ways adapted to the people that are practicing.

Does the responsibility for exams prior to the level of Shodan lie with the instructor of the dojo, or with the organization?

The basic relationship in Aikido is the one that exists between teacher and student. The idea of improving the system of studies is developed in the dojo, and should always be within this relationship. This same situation generates changes because there are many organizations and many teachers. In the past, the relationship between student and teacher was stricter, but now there exist many organizations and many teachers. For example, today I will examine several students of several teachers, without directly knowing anyone of them. The evaluation system cannot be something rigid. I have to adapt myself depending on the group.

And how can one recognize a good instructor from a bad one?

That is something that one gets to feel...

So does one have to work with different instructors in order to establish the difference?

There exist many concepts that one must study. You can be with one good teacher and feel that you don't like his/her technique; or you can be with a bad one and feel that you like his/her technique. So then there is no fixed criteria that can be followed, it is something that has to be felt.

This defies the old belief that the student must blindly follow the teacher.

One can follow a teacher unconditionally, but the teacher must be good (laughter)...

Sensei, would you like to take the opportunity to leave a message to all Budoka of Venezuela?

You all must take advantage of your training, and enjoy it as much as possible. People do not come to Aikido only to learn how to defend themselves. There are other reasons that modern day society imposes on you. It is possible that after several years you will come to think about Aikido in a more serious and deep way, so you may need different types of instruction. But in general, you must come to enjoy training. I would like to add that as a teacher, you have to really teach, because otherwise there would be no evolution of Aikido.

Sensei, thank you for your time and I hope that your stay in Venezuela will be very fruitful.

Following this interview, exams for 1st and 2nd dan were given to six candidates. When the last exam ended, the people there (numbering about 200) broke out in thunderous applause. The support given to the examinees was truly striking.

After talking slowly with Sensei Requena, Shihan Sugano got up and with an intimidating calmness told everyone there that the examinees, in his opinion, were not ready for the higher ranks they were testing for, and that he considered it better for them to try again next year. The room was covered with a silence that misted up the senses...

These were the words of one of the direct pupils of O-Sensei, and these were the events that happened during his visit. Maybe after this, Aikido in Venezuela will never be the same.

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Picture Captions:

1) Seiichi Sugano. 8th Dan Aikikai. He was born in 1939, entered the Aikikai in 1957, and became an uchideshi one year later. He traveled to Australia in 1965 and founded Australia and New Zealand Aikikai. He settled down in Belgium in 1979. Currently [2001, year of this interview] he resides in the United States and teaches in the New York Aikikai.

2) Shihan Sugano with Sensei Requena during the day of exams.