

Aikidosphere

Yutaka Kurita

7th Dan, Shihan

Director of Kurita Juku Aiki

Interview with Yutaka Kurita Shihan

Interview by Liese Klein, Chief Instructor - Fire Horse Aikido, New Haven, CT

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Editor's Note: One of the last uchideshi at Hombu Dojo to study directly with the founder, Kurita Sensei was born in 1940, and began studying Aikido in 1959. He soon joined Tamura Sensei, Chiba Sensei and Kanai Sensei as a live-in student. Since 1979 Kurita Sensei has served as the Aikikai representative in Mexico.

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Photographs by Gary Payne. Ukes in photos starting from top to bottom are Harbrinder Kang, Didier Boyet and Eric Gillet.



Sensei, how did you first get started in Aikido?

I was in a bookstore and I saw a book by Kisshomaru Sensei. I had practiced some judo and kendo in school, but I had always been interested in reading and learning more about other forms of budo.

Are you from Tokyo?

Yes, I was born in Tokyo. I'm a real "Edo-ko" [Tokyo native].

What was your first impression of Aikido?

I didn't understand anything about Aikido. The book I found was hard to understand—Kisshomaru Sensei used very abstract language. But I was very interested by this martial art and I wanted to find out more. Fortunately, the address of Hombu Dojo was on the back of the book.

I was still in my last year of high school when I first visited Hombu dojo. I went to the 3 p.m. class, and I saw Kanai Sensei taking ukemi. I didn't understand what was going on, but I found it very interesting. I joined the next day. Doshu's wife was working in the office at the dojo and she gave me all the forms and took my dues payment.

What was it like training in that period?

Kanai sensei was a white belt at that time, and Chiba Sensei was a nidan. I was 19 years old when I joined. Kanai Sensei was a few months younger, but he was much more advanced in Aikido. I became friends with Kanai Sensei and Chiba Sensei right away, because my idea was if you want to learn faster, it's better to get close to the uchideshi.

Chiba sensei was a senior student and he was almost like Waka Sensei in his behavior. He was very strong, he had amazing power.



Kanai Sensei was still a white belt, but he was learning very fast and getting better at a rapid rate. At the beginning, I didn't know who was who at the dojo. No one gave you a formal introduction to anyone. You had to befriend someone to find out how things worked.

Chiba Sensei was entrusted with taking care of the shinzen—the special kamiza at Hombu Dojo. It was kept like a shrine to the ancestors, with rice and sake, etc. You had to arrange it every day very carefully. I asked Chiba Sensei how he learned to do this important job. He shouted at me, "You have to figure it out yourself!"

What were your first impressions of O-Sensei?

The first time I saw him I didn't know who he was. He had white hair, a white beard—he was the perfect image of a grandfather. He looked like my grandfather. It took some time before I realized that behind this image of a grandfather was an amazing martial artist. In the budo world this man was so important, perhaps the most important martial artist in Japan. It was amazing the number the people who visited O-Sensei, people like Haga Sensei, who was a student of Nakayama Hakudo the sword master.

How did you decide to move into the dojo?

I started training more and more. First afternoon class, then morning and evening classes, as well. Every day, I practiced at least three hours.

I wanted to become an uchideshi and I trained as hard as I could. I finished school in April 1959, and I went in to meet with O-Sensei in August of that year. Kisshomaru Sensei said to me, "you want to be an uchideshi, don't you?" He took me to O-Sensei's quarters, and he agreed to accept me. I was the lowest in rank—at that time Tamura Sensei was the senior uchideshi, followed by Nishiuchi*, Chiba, Sugano and Kanai.

Yamada Sensei had left for New York the year before. There were also "jun-uchideshi," who were considered uchideshi but who did not sleep in the dojo. Soto deshi paid dues and were somewhat outside of the system.

Of the uchideshi, Kanai Sensei and I were the only white belts.

It was very difficult to become uchideshi at that time. The list was kept short. Many people said they wanted to become uchideshi, but they would last only one day. They would quit because the training was really rough and the food was very scarce.

We didn't have meat at all, and fish only once in a while. We didn't get any coffee, any fruit or sweets or even beer. Our meals were some vegetables, rice and miso soup. Once in a while, some of the wealthier members would bring us treats or take us out to eat. But life in the dojo was pretty difficult.

What was your life like as an uchideshi?

I was the lowest in rank, and we were often sent to accompany O-Sensei to his dojo at Iwama. We would go out there and work in the garden, chop wood and do lots of chores. O-Sensei was growing daikon radish, carrots and other vegetables.

In Iwama we would have a special morning bokken class with O-Sensei that was closed to the public. Often it was only three or four people—Saito Sensei, often Chiba Sensei, and a few others. In the evening there was a taijitsu class, but there weren't many people at that class, either. O-Sensei would teach all the classes, or Saito Sensei would teach when he couldn't teach. But there wasn't a sense that any of us were really teachers—we were all just disciples of O-Sensei. We were all ambassadors for O-Sensei's art. That is the way it is in traditional Japanese budo.

Back in Tokyo, Osawa Sensei was in charge. Before the war, Osawa Sensei had been running a bar, but Kisshomaru Sensei called him back to help out at Hombu Dojo. Osawa Sensei was 7th dan already at the time I joined.

Other instructors at that time besides O-Sensei were Tada Sensei and Arikawa Sensei, who were both 5th dan. Tamura Sensei was 3rd dan and he was teaching outside of the dojo. I often went to the 3 p.m. class, which was taught by Tada Sensei and some of the younger teachers. Kisshomaru Sensei was teaching in the morning and evening. Osawa Sensei would teach the 8 a.m. class.

What were your experiences with O-Sensei?

Well, one of my first assignments when I moved into the dojo was to prepare O-Sensei's bath. He had a traditional Japanese bath that was heated with wood. You would heat up the water, then take the wood out of the stove and call O-Sensei. It was a considerable distance from O-Sensei's quarters to the bath, so by the time he got there the water had cooled off a bit and was just perfect.

Chiba Sensei and Kanai Sensei gave me the job to prepare the bath one day. Of course I forgot to take out the wood, and when O-Sensei removed the cover to the bath, the water was boiling. He was furious!

He stormed into the uchideshi room, which was nearby, and started yelling at Kanai Sensei. "Who did this? Kanai, are you trying to kill me?" He was really mad! I ran off as soon as I heard him screaming. Then O-Sensei called us all into the uchideshi room and demanded to know who had screwed up. I stepped forward to admit my mistake. Because I was the junior, I got away with it. But O-Sensei warned me, "You do it again, you're out!"

I also remember how strange it was that I had to start teaching almost right away. When an instructor was out or sick, the system was that the first available uchideshi would teach the class. Sometimes a white-belt like myself would be teaching with 5th and 6th dans in the class! Somebody would often complain if that happened. O-Sensei's answer was that the uchideshi were the most qualified because they knew the "kaeshi waza," the secret techniques. He said he taught the "kaeshi waza" only to the uchideshi.

What was it like to take ukemi for O-Sensei?

I was very bad at taking ukemi for O-Sensei. There were other teachers as well who weren't so good, but I was the worst. One time we had a demonstration, and the uchideshi were all there, lined up in seiza to take ukemi in order of rank. O-Sensei called up Tamura, Chiba, Nishiuchi--by the time he got to me I had been sitting seiza for about an hour. My legs were completely asleep. I got up and immediately collapsed onto the mat. That was the end of that.

Looking back on your experiences, what was the most important thing you learned from O-Sensei?

I learned a lot from acting as O-Sensei's bag carrier on trips back and forth to Iwama. On our way back to Hombu Dojo one time, we were changing trains in Ueno Station. We had walked through the station and then O-Sensei turned to me. "You don't walk anything like a martial artist!" he said. So he sent me all the way back to the platform to walk back again, this time like a martial artist.

On another occasion, I was accompanying O-Sensei somewhere. When the uchideshi would travel with O-Sensei we would stand to right and slightly in front, acting sort of like a bodyguard. If anyone were in the way, we would push them away and protect him. I must have been pretty bad at this duty, because one time O-Sensei said to me, "Get on my left. I'll be your bodyguard." Then we walked around with O-Sensei acting as my protector.

If you think about it, he was making me aware of how danger could be coming from either side. You have to take care of both sides. I think that's the way he was passing on to me the essence of Aikido. It's not necessarily the technique; it's the way of being a martial artist, of being aware.

How did you end up teaching in Mexico?

When O-Sensei died in 1969, I decided to quit Aikido. At that time, all of my contemporaries had left Japan and Hombu dojo to teach overseas. I quit Aikido and started working for a series of car companies. For eight years I didn't have anything to do with Aikido.

Then in 1977, Chiba Sensei tracked me down and asked me to come back. He had returned to Hombu after years in England. Chiba Sensei said, "We need you. You have to come back." So I started practicing again, and left for Mexico in 1979.

What is it like teaching Aikido in a different culture?

Every culture has its own way of thinking. In Mexico, the cultural obsession is to become strong and powerful. I think that's because Mexico is a developing country, and seeking to become more powerful as a nation. However, that makes it difficult in Mexico to transmit an art like Aikido, in which you're trying not to rely on strength and power.

There is also a difficulty in overcoming the language barrier and trying to communicate very abstract concepts. With much of budo, you're trying to transmit ideas that are outside of logic. People want logic--they want to know why something is done one way and not another. Budo is more based on instinct and feeling than logic. Like when you put a sword back in the scabbard in Iaido practice. You can just sense where the tip of the sword is when you return it to the scabbard. You don't have to look down when you're sheathing the sword.

What is your sense of how Aikido is being transmitted after O-Sensei's death?

It's not being transmitted.

The basics need to be emphasized, in America and everywhere else in the world. People need to be aware of the importance of the basics. The basics have to be solid and they have to be exact. Nikkyo and other technique are done in a certain way. You can't move on to reversals or variations until the basics are established. I don't think that is being transmitted at all around the world. You have to work on the basics. All that O-Sensei did was the basics, and that idea is not getting through.

* Editor's Note: Mr. Nishiuchi was an uchideshi who later quit Aikido around the time of O-Sensei's passing.