

Aikidosphere

Yoshimitsu Yamada
8th Dan, Shihan
USAF Chairman

Black Vortex - An Interview With Yamada Sensei

Translated by Masako Nakatsugawa from a Japanese Magazine 2004

Editor's Note: This interview was first published in Aikido East, the newsletter of the USAF Eastern Region. Photo courtesy of Jaime Kahn.

Would you tell us what prompted you to start Aikido?

When I was a child, before Aikido opened to the public, I had heard about it from my uncle, Tadashi Abe. I even had the privilege of seeing O-Sensei's demonstration at someone's residence. He gave the demonstration in black kimono; it seemed as if I was watching a black vortex whirling around. Since then I wanted to do Aikido, and when I entered a University, Kisshomaru Sensei (Doshu) kindly let me in as an uchideshi. So in my case, the first day of my Aikido was the first day as an uchideshi.

On my first day, I arrived at the dojo, with my belongings in a bamboo trunk. Kisshomaru Sensei told me to put away my bamboo trunk. I found a closet, and put it in there. That closet happened to belong to Arikawa Sensei (Sadateru Arikawa Shihan)! When he came back that evening, he said "Who put this in my closet?" and threw out my trunk. I was really upset, and I almost went home. But, Arikawa Sensei turned out to be a kind man, and has always taken very good care of me since!

I was eighteen, perhaps eight years before I came to USA in 1964. Merely being allowed to practice thrilled me. I never imagined I'd be a professional Aikidoist in the future. Nobody would have thought he could support himself by Aikido at that time. It may be a cliché, but, it was the good old time. The dojo was a true traditional dojo, with real tatami; wooden structure has character, doesn't it? The practice was very hard but I was young. The stamina I had gained through basketball served me well. Of course, Aikido has kansetsu waza (joint technique). I had not been prepared. It sure hurt!

Would you tell us about the memory of O-Sensei?

When I first met O-Sensei, he was in his late years and did not give a fearful impression. He was a gentle old man with humor even in his class. Once in a while I had a privilege of being his uke. Then, I was so tense and beside myself that I only discovered myself flat on tatami. I did not feel I was thrown. Instead of being physically hurt and falling, I felt as if I was caught in a big typhoon. O-Sensei's teaching, to tell you the truth, was beyond my comprehension at that time. Too bad I was not at that level to understand what he said. Having said that, I could not say I have reached that level now.

What was the impression of Kisshomaru Doshu?

He was a serious and courteous person. To tell you the truth, the impression was he was to be revered and kept at a respectful distance. Let me point out that only a man of high caliber could let the youths like us live in the dojo. At that time, dojo and O-Sensei's family living quarters were not separated. O-Sensei's family and Uchideshi had dinner at the same place and same time. Those were hard times economically not only in Aikikai, but in whole post-war Japan. Having us with them must have been quite a burden.

Kisshomaru Doshu taught the morning classes and all uchideshi attended. It is presumptuous of me to say but Kisshomaru Doshu's teaching was unpretentious, faithful to the basic and orthodox. I am trying to follow his teaching even now in my classes. I think individuality and personality in recent Aikido are laudable, but sometimes I see very wild techniques. If uke is good enough, he may fall as you want, but you cannot escape our eyes. To us the difference is clearly evident between the technique that is true to the basics and the one that mocks others.

THE PRICELESS EXPERIENCE

Would you tell us how you decided to come to New York?

I had a desire to go to a foreign country. I loved music and used to listen to jazz on the radio station of the American occupation forces in Japan. I was not such a good student at school, but I managed English pretty well. So I taught Aikido on an American base while I was in Japan, and gained some

contact with Americans. I had an option, through my uncle's connection, of going to France, but I ended up coming to New York since I could speak English.

How was Aikido recognized in New York at that time?

Aikido was fairly popular on the West coast, but it had a long way to go on the East Coast, like New York. It was the time the word, Aikido, was starting to spread among the judo-ka. When I came to New York, I could count the number of people who were interested in Aikido: like people who were dissatisfied with judo, people who found judo too strenuous because of age, people who found concordance with the philosophy of Aikido, and even people who had been to Japan to learn Aikido.

In those days, there was no video. Media would not show interest. The only way to introduce Aikido was doing demonstrations. I did so many demonstrations till I hated the words, "Aikido Demonstration". At that time, karate was experiencing a boom in the USA and there were a lot of competitions. American karate instructors as well as karate instructors who had migrated to the US kindly offered me opportunities to demonstrate Aikido on those occasions. I did many demonstrations under many conditions - even on the sidewalk.

As I look back, they were wonderful days of my youth. Of course, there were hardships. There were financial difficulties. But, I had experiences money could not buy. I would not hesitate to do it all over again. There were the things I could not do at that time.

Maybe I could find a better direction. If I had today's thought and experience and the stamina of my youth, that would be fantastic. Unfortunately life does not work that way and it is always too late when we realize it. It is because I'm at this juncture that I can say "I would do it over again".

Have you ever felt a gap between the USA and Japan as you taught Aikido?

Basically it's the same, I think. Some do Aikido because they like the techniques, and some seek Aikido for its spirituality. A good thing about Aikido is that many different people can be united together. I never feel out of place. Maybe it's because of my adaptability. Maybe it's my personality. I never felt I was in a foreign country as I knew Americans in Japan already. I felt that both Americans and Japanese are the same human being. Of course there are differences between two cultures, but that was not an obstacle as I knew it before coming to the US.

What difficulties did you have in teaching Japanese culture?

It would make no sense to say "I have come to teach you Japanese culture, and therefore you must cast off American culture." Americans have their own backbones like the pioneer spirit, which is not part of Japanese culture. I must make some compromise because teaching a different culture is based on the understanding of each human being. This is my sincere idea of teaching, nothing else. Maybe this is what people felt as they accepted Aikido and me.

I think the national character of America suited me, too. Americans are the people of freedom because they came to this country looking for the New World. If you insisted on your own old culture and traditions of your background, you could not unite to build a new country. I really respect the United States of America because people are united over the difference of religions and races. In our dojo, students from many countries, like Jews and Germans, practice together peacefully...unbelievable! In New York, if you insist on the old history, you cannot live. You cannot accomplish anything.

YOU ARE LEARNING FOREVER

Would you tell us about the motto for practicing Aikido?

It depends on the level; the people close to the perfection and people who need detailed advice need different guidance. I do not like teaching in a set style, because there are different movements fitting different body types. If I teach details and the student doesn't enjoy it, he would not last. There is no point in forcing something that the student doesn't enjoy. It's very important to give students the atmosphere and spirit that are enjoyable.

You have to correct if you have to. But some students get confused or cannot improve if they are constantly corrected. After you hold the hands of a blind person and lead him many times to a certain place, he can go there by himself because his body learns the direction. Aikido works in the same way. Let the body learn to move even with closed eyes. If you stop a process in the middle and explain the details, you may be slowing down the progress.

You mean to let their body learn the movement?

When I was young, I emphasized taking ukemi. You can learn the timing of the technique and movement by taking ukemi. So when I was young, I felt and learned the technique by being thrown by the superiors. And in my teaching, I let the student teach when he has reached a certain level. By teaching you can see things you could not realize before. This is an important training. I too gained by teaching. I still have so many things to learn.

Everybody has something that I do not have, something that we can learn. When I see the class of Senpai (superior) or the practice of others, and find something good, I do not hesitate to pass it on to my students. I do not care if somebody says I'm copying others. It is not a shame at all to copy a good thing, for attitude to learn is always important.

If I pass the things I learned on to the students, it comes back to me in a different form. It is a circle. It is really interesting. As I teach, I sometimes find a new way of teaching. Trust seems to grow in the circle of students and me.