

Aikidosphere

Yoshimitsu Yamada
8th Dan, Shihan
USAF Chairman

Inside Aikido: Interview with Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th dan - Part 1

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Editor's note: This interview with Yamada Sensei was conducted during the 1998 USAF Eastern Region Summer Camp at the University of New Hampshire. It is the first part of an extensive interview. Here, in his characteristically frank and colorful way, Yamada Sensei recalls his early days as an uchi deshi at Hombu Dojo.



Hombu Dojo uchi deshi circa late 1950s, including Kobayashi (far left), Tamura (3rd from left), Noro (4th from left) and Yamada (far right) Senseis.



Part one: The uchi deshi years at Hombu dojo

Sensei, the first thing we wanted to ask you about is your history in Aikido. Your personal history, why you started Aikido and how that came about.

I started because of my relative Tadashi Abe Sensei. He was an uchi deshi of O-Sensei in the early days. Because of him I knew about O-Sensei and Aikido. I would tell myself, someday, when I was a certain age, that I wanted to practice, I wanted to study with O-Sensei. Also, I was fortunate enough to be accepted as an uchi deshi live in student because of the connection to Abe Sensei. I thought this would be a good change in my lifestyle...a chance to establish my character. Of course, like other young boys, you want to be a hero, to be strong, you know? That was my motivation to start Aikido.

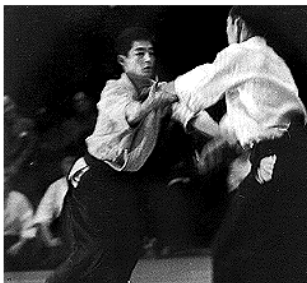
Could you tell us more about your uncle and his group of uchi deshi? What the situation was?

I don't remember too many details, but Abe Sensei's father respected O-Sensei and was supportive of him financially. Mr. Abe was very devoted to O-Sensei. I think that at that time Doshu was young. Abe Sensei and Doshu were about the same age. Of course, Koichi Tohei was there. They were all of the same generation. People like, you know, Saito Sensei was around also but I think he was a little younger.

I understand, Abe Sensei was the first, even before Tohei, to go overseas to introduce Aikido, which was in France. At that time it was very difficult for Japanese people to go overseas. We were still under the American occupation, and it was not easy to travel but using his fathers connections, with certain VIP people, was how he was able to go.

I think he had a very hard time, obviously, because nobody knew what Aikido was. In those days, like everyone else, he had to mix judo a little bit and then show the Aikido. His main philosophy was not to spread judo, of course, but he probably had to use judo people...like it happened to me, I had to use judo and karate people in the beginning to do demonstrations. There was nobody else.

And...of course, Tohei and Abe Senseis, they were like brothers, you



know? So they played like brothers...like fighting...not fighting exactly, but, you know, they had a rivalry.

Did anything ever happen between the two of them.

Well...yes...anyway, I'll tell you. You understand that Tohei Sensei was very strong, and whenever Abe Sensei challenged him, he was always defeated. One time...it was when I was in junior high, maybe younger, and at that time Tohei was in Osaka, taking care of the dojo in Osaka or something. That was just before Abe Sensei went to France, so Abe wanted to challenge Tohei one more time. Well, Abe Sensei thinks there's no way to get him by Aikido, and no way by judo. He was going to the university at the time and he had joined a wrestling club their. So he studies a bit of wrestling and mat technique, and he said to me, "This time I can get him." So he took me with him to be a witness.

I was sitting all by myself in the Osaka dojo, and here Tohei Sensei was in a normal Aikido gi and hakama in the middle of the mat. Abe Sensei was in this workout suit and kind of circling him. He was joking with Tohei about his wrestling training, and then all of a sudden he tried to jump him, with his arms around him, like Greco-Roman wrestling, you know, clawing, grabbing, but nothing worked (laughter)! He couldn't get him at all. After that, on the train home, I said to my uncle, "I thought YOU were the strongest man in the world". He got so mad (laughter). A little while later he went to France.

How long did he stay in France?

I don't know, quite long. About 10 years or so. He came back when I was still an uchi deshi. When he came back, he saw me as an uchi deshi, he was so glad.

Before you became an uchi deshi were you considering any other career, or did you always think that you were going to do Aikido?

No, I never thought about that, I never thought about Aikido as a way to make a living. Nobody did, not Kanai Sensei, none of us though we could make a living teaching Aikido. We were just happy enough to be able to practice.

How old were you when you started?

17 or 18, I'm not to sure. Probably 18.

Can you tell us a little about Hombu dojo at the time you started?

Well then the dojo was an older building than the one you see these days. It was a nice, typical wooden dojo, a good one, with only one floor. Like a "dojo" dojo, it was nice. It was connected to Ueshiba's family's home, and we all slept on the tatami, so obviously, every day you had to get up, because we slept where the people have class. In Ueshiba's family part we were given a tiny room for all of us to put our belongings, so it is just a mess.

When I joined, Arikawa Sensei and Tamura Sensei were there. Then this guy, Mr. Noro was there, now he has his own kind of system, and then myself, and then Chiba, Kanai and Sugano. Of course, there were many people in and out, but basically that group. Already Tada Sensei and Yamaguchi Sensei had a regular class to teach and I think Tamura too. Some senseis had one or two classes.

At that time Koichi Tohei was the chief instructor and after I joined he went to Hawaii or I joined when he was in Hawaii, I don't remember exactly. Anyway, it was at that time that there was a connection with Hawaii.

What was the schedule like at Hombu at that time?

I still clearly remember. Morning classes were from from 6:30-7:30, then 8 to 9, then they didn't open up till afternoon class from 3 to 4, 4 to 5 and then 6:30-7:30 in the evening. So during the time in-between regular classes, there were many private lessons which people could buy with like like the chief instructor Koichi Tohei. Every one of us had to be available for ukemi for these lessons, because wealthy people would pay a lot of money for private lessons. Naturally, all of the money went to support headquarters.

How about the students in general, not the uchi deshi. It sounds like there were a lot of private lessons. How many students were there at that time? What kind of people were practicing?

Well...still in Japan at that time, Aikido wasn't all that well known. A few people knew about it. They didn't advertise, there weren't any public demonstrations. Now we have the "All Japan Aikido Demonstration" every year, right. I still remember the first one because O-Sensei didn't give them permission to do that.

Who organized that?

After Doshu took over, of course, there were many people's advice. You know, there has to be change. It wasn't the old days anymore. I think Doshu convinced O-Sensei that you have to show this to the public, but he didn't want to show it to the public. I heard that in the old days basically, all of the martial artists, they didn't want to show their technique to others...how they draw the sword, whatever...they didn't want to show just anyone. They only teach certain students because they didn't want their enemies to see it. That's why, in the old days, if you selected people to study, you had to have an introduction first. But that changed, just like our dojo was opened to the public. Anyone could join. But not until then did we start to do public demonstrations. It wasn't so organized over there at that time, no office, no registration office. People who joined came and opened the doors of the Ueshiba family entrance. Whenever we hear somebody come in during classes, one of us would jump up from the dojo and see who it was and greet them..."Can I help you?" There was just a tiny table where they signed to join. Not so organized at that time....

Did O-Sensei wind up adjusting to the new thing of opening up to the public?

I think so...I think he had no choice. They had to make a living.

What was it like training with O-Sensei?

O-Sensei didn't teach on a regular schedule. Doshu taught the 6:30 morning class. Whenever O-Sensei was around, whenever he would feel like it, he would interrupt the class. He would just step in and say, "Don't bother, don't bother, keep practicing". But he wanted to make a speech. He was so cute you know. He would just walk by while we practiced because every time he went to the bathroom he would have to cross the entrance to the dojo. He would just go back and forth, waiting for somebody to invite him in, you know? After being ignored couldn't take it. He would step in and say, "Good morning, everybody", and then say, "Continue, continue ..." (Laughter)...then we would talk and go on and go on...you know. It was funny.

Then 8 o'clock class was taught by Tohei Sensei when he was there, Tohei Sensei and Osawa Sensei, basically. At that time Tohei Sensei was commuting to Hawaii, you know. He would go maybe one year, then come back.

For the 6:30 class in the morning we were kind of rushed. We had clean the inside and outside of the dojo. We had a half-hour. We would get up at 6 o'clock, and clean all of the dust away because it's our dojo. We took responsibility for the outside and the inside. We had to finish before all of the students came. In the 6:30 class we had to help them, they were kind of beginners. But the 8 o'clock class was really practice for us. Many college kids came to that class, so it is good for us. Then the afternoon 3 o'clock class was taught by Tada Sensei which was very popular with the young boys and that was good practice for us too.

We were usually out with either Doshu or Tohei during the evening classes because they had to go out to make income for the dojo. So I don't remember too much about the late classes. Also, if I had free time I played hooky, so I'd skip that. Once in a while I'd go. I was a genius about playing hooky.

Can you tell us some of your techniques? (laughter)

Simply just disappear! (more laughter)

That's the secret, just disappear?

Yeah...of course, when I joined, there was nobody under me at that time. There was just Arikawa Sensei, Tamura Sensei and myself, and Noro once in a while, but I was the youngest so I had to do everything.

The toughest job then, for me it's easiest, was to clean the shower room and the toilet, there are two toilets, Japanese style. Because it takes a long time to clean them, it's a good excuse to be late for the class (laughter). So I volunteered to do that. Also you could catch a little bit of extra sleep. I was in the toilet, so nobody bothered me, and it was a good excuse to be late 10 minutes, 15 minutes.

When we met the older instructors, Osawa Sensei, Tada Sensei, Arikawa Sensei, they each have a lot of individuality, how were they then? What was it like at that time? Where they the same?

Of course. Tada Sensei never changed. I see his demonstrations on videos. He never changed. I think that someone who has changed a lot is Arikawa

Sensei, from bad to good. He was wild, mean.

Was it scary?

Yes. It was scary to take his ukemi, he used to scratch.

It seems like there was always a special relationship with Osawa Sensei?

Yes. I was his favorite uke. He always liked me. Believe it or not I was a good uke. I was very flexible and very skinny. He had a big, sort of leading movement, difficult to follow. His technique needed a good uke. He looked better. Of course, everybody needs a good uke to look better. Except Arikawa Sensei doesn't need a good uke. It doesn't matter...you have no choice (laughter)!

How was it like with Tohei Sensei?

To take his ukemi...was a bit difficult for some people. I used to take ukemi for him a sometimes in his private lessons because I spoke English. Not real good, but at that time at least, he had trouble communicating because of his pidgin English. But many American people came to take private lessons with him, so I had to take ukemi.

What happened with Tohei Sensei?

Well, I'll tell you what. Unfortunately, what's happened has happened, but he was an incredible person. Strong personality, good uke, manly, you know, big heart. Completely opposite from Doshu's personality. Doshu is more like quiet, low key. You could talk to Tohei Sensei about everything. He loved to drink. He was kind of an idol. As far as I'm concerned he was. You know, when you're young you get impressed. The guy went to Hawaii and came back with a nice new Hawaiian shirt, smells of good cologne and can drink scotch like water. I was like, "God", you know? Always surrounded by women, you know? We were young, had no money, so he really impressed us.

How did it happen that you started teaching?

It's because I spoke a bit of English already. That's how I ended up teaching. At that time there were many American military bases around Tokyo. That's another reason I couldn't attend the evening classes. I was responsible for teaching at two bases. I had to leave the dojo at 4 or 5 o'clock to go there. They were about an hour away by train. By that time all of the students had finished their daily work.

That was a good time. I would go to the officer's club after class, drink a nice Scotch. Which, of course, was impossible to get in Japan at that time. Scotch? Forget it! But there you could drink Scotch like water. I was teaching classes at the University as well, so all the collage kids wanted to come with me to help me! Then, I don't know how it happened, but me and Kanai made a team. We went together to Yokohama every weekend.

Yokohama? Was that where the American dojo was?

Yes. It was on a military base.

How did the Americans in the military know about Aikido.

Well, I don't know exactly, but again, there was information from Tohei Sensei's connections in Hawaii. It was about that time that people started knowing more about Aikido, the Americans were there, and some military people had come to Hombu dojo.

At that time, that was a big income for Hombu dojo. When I would go out and teach, I would charge by the lesson, collect money, and go back to headquarters. That was big money. I still remember. At that time, the dollar was strong because of the Japanese economy. The yen we nothing. I think back then, when I joined the dojo, monthly dues were about 500 yen. 500 yen at that time was pretty good. I remember a bowl of ramen was about 25 yen or something. When I charged the GI's, I collected 2,500 yen per person for one class! So, with 10 or 15 people in a class that was big money. Almost the average collage graduates monthly salary I would get in one night. That was good for the dojo.

Did you become good friends with the other uchi deshi at that time?

Yeah. I had no problems. I got along with everybody. We were all poor. We didn't have much of a chance to go out. Once in a while, someone would invite us, some member would invite the uchi deshi, to go out together. But mostly, everyone is out teaching, so we didn't have too much time to get together. There was no way to get together to buy food and drink like there is today. There was no way we could do it ourselves. When we did go out together, somebody would sponsor us, invite us.

I was pretty much good friends with Noro. We hung around a lot together. Later, Kanai Sensei and I got close when we were teaching at the military base. Like I said, we were a good team together.

To be continued.