

Aikidosphere

Yoshimitsu Yamada
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Inside Aikido: Interview with Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th dan - Part 2

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Editor's note: This is the second part of an interview with Yamada Sensei conducted in August 1998 at the USAF Eastern Region Summer Camp held at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, New Hampshire.

The interviewers were Peter Bernath, 6th Dan, Shido-in, Chief Instructor of Florida Aikikai, and David Halprin, 5th Dan, Shido-in, Chief Instructor at Framingham Aikikai.



Part two: Coming to the United States

Sensei, how did it come about that you came to the United States?

There were a lot of reasons really. Number one because of the language. I already spoke English, not as good as now but some. That's one reason. Secondly, I had been teaching American people at the American military bases in Japan so I was pretty familiar with the American people's mentality. And also, I wanted to come to New York. I knew that New York was my kind of town. I had met some people from New York who were already practicing and knew about Aikido. That's the main reason. I came over just at the time of the 1964 World's Fair in New York. Originally, Tohei Sensei was going to be with me at the fair to do some Aikido demonstrations at the Japanese pavilion but he couldn't come.

Why couldn't he come?

Well, I don't know if I should say, but he got drunk one night and fell down and broke his back. I think it happened a couple of weeks before we were supposed to leave. That's why he has so much trouble with his back today. From that accident.

So you stayed on in New York after the fair?

Well, I didn't know how long I would stay. I was thinking a few months, whatever but...I'm still here. Like I said, none of us knew if it was possible to teach Aikido for a living. It just kind of happened. Tamura knew some people in France so he had an introduction. Same with Chiba in England. Sugano married a woman from Australia and moved there with her. I know people like to think that there was a big plan by headquarters but that's not true. It wasn't planned, we just kind of did it on our own.

You were married then weren't you?

Yes, but I couldn't bring my wife till later. There was no money. And then I was having so much trouble with my visa. I had this stupid lawyer. If he had gotten me a tourist visa in the first place I would have had no problem getting a green card. At that time it was easy. But, I had this special type of

cultural exchange visa. They don't have that type of visa anymore but because I had one, it gave me so much trouble to get a green card. I never knew when they would kick me out.

Later, with family here, especially with my two kids who were born here and grew up American citizens, they had to think about it before they could just kick me out. Because they have an obligation to protect American citizens. They didn't care about me, my wife or Mika, my first daughter who was born in Japan. Only about my American born children. One time they said, "OK, leave your two American citizen children here and you go home. You and your wife and first daughter just go home. Unbelievable! So I had to come up with many excuses concerning my two kids of why I couldn't leave. That's the only reason they let me stay.

The first excuse I used was that if I go back to Japan, I wouldn't be able to make enough money to support my family. My company, which was the Aikikai, Hombu dojo, could not pay me enough money to support two American citizens. So, then they had to think about it. Of course I had to ask headquarters to write me a letter saying how much they would pay me if I would go back and teach at headquarters. Then I took the letter to Immigration and it took them 3 or 4 months to make a decision. And finally they say no, you have to leave.

Then ... next excuse, as I remember, was about the children's health. I said that Japan was so humid, not a good place to raise a baby, an American citizen. And then they think about it again. At that time one of my students was working in immigration. Every time he went to the desk and saw my documents, he put it back on the bottom of the pile! (laughter) . I tried everything I don't know how many times I went to immigration. I hated it.

Now, if there's one thing President Nixon did good, he canceled that program with the cultural exchange visa. So, all of a sudden, I had no more status. I am free. Because, once you are a resident, you cannot have it changed. Period. It's the law. So, at that time the first thing you have to get is permission from the Labor Department. So I got the permission from the Immigration and Labor Departments. What they did is put out an advertisement in the New York Times...does anyone have a higher rank than I have in Aikido... if so, if an American applies, I don't get the visa. They don't want you to get American people's jobs. But then, after everything was clear, one, two, three, I got permission to stay. That's why I had to send my family back to Japan, even though they were American citizens and they had American passports, because I never knew when they are going to chase me out of this country and I didn't want them stuck here without me. At that time you could go into Canada for a day and come back as a tourist. But I didn't have a tourist visa. I couldn't do that. If I left the country, I was finished. I couldn't come back here for two years. That's why I sent my family back.

How long did they have to stay away?

Well, they started school over there. It was a good thing my family could take care of them. There was no way I could support them on my Aikido income at that time. How could I? I feel bad about my family. I don't have too many memories with the kids. We were separated, and after they came back I was busy, and we weren't as well off as we are now. I couldn't just take them everywhere I went. To a seminar ... no way, impossible. I took Mika one time to Summer Camp when she was little. That's my one big regret, the time I missed with my family.

What was it like in the classes at the New York Aikikai in the early days ... in the beginning?

In the early days, as I was saying, all of the students were ex-judo and ex-karate players. They were the only people who were interested. We didn't advertise publicly. There were Tai Chi people too. While I was teaching, I could hear them discussing everything in the dressing room, the techniques, the effectiveness. This guy Lou Kleinsmith was a judo instructor and a Tai Chi teacher and kind of tricky. He was always telling them, "This is how it really works, blah, blah", and show them some little trick or something. Of course it wasn't Aikido (laughter)

So then, about that time, Karate had started to boom. I had good relations with all of the American karate teachers, so every time they had a tournament, they always invited me to come and demonstrate at Madison Square Garden and other places. Almost every week they invite me. Of course they didn't pay me, but it's a good opportunity to spread Aikido.

So people who saw the demonstrations...

Yes. Every time I put on a demonstration, they loved it. After watching Karate for three or four hours they were tired of it and wanted to see something new, different. I'd come on stage, I don't stay too long, just bam, bam, bam and I finish it off. The people never saw anything like that. They loved it. The next day they would come to the dojo.

So that really helped the dojo get going.

Yes, because that's the only way to advertise. It's the only way to let people know what Aikido is. That's why I don't like to do demonstrations anymore. I did so many, I'm sick of them. Just too much. But then we would go at any opportunity. I demonstrated on the streets of South Bronx, on the concrete. It was wintertime, so I wore black gloves. I remember this guy was saying like, "Oh he's a killer, he's got the black gloves!" (laughter) At that time lots of people had crazy ideas about the martial arts. You know, they would copy Bruce Lee from the TV series he had.

The Green Hornet?

That was it. That show helped a lot to bring the martial arts popularity, more interest. And another guy ... I put a demonstration together with him, that movie star ... he plays a Texas Ranger now.

Chuck Norris?

Yes, that's right, Chuck Norris. Nice guy. We used to demonstrate together. He likes Aikido. We did a demonstration at the New York Hilton one time. I did a demonstration with this Karate teacher once. I went on after him. It was funny, my students were so bad. He did this demonstration where he would knock the head off these whisky bottles with his hands...bam, bam bam. So, all my students were joking afterwards, " The karate people go first and chop off the heads of the whiskey and Aikido people come after and we drink it." (laughter)

It sounds like those were some wild days.

Yes ... it was wild...

Who were some of the early people at the dojo.

Well, let's see. In the beginning I had no place to live, so I was sleeping in the dojo, in the dressing room ... with Angel Alvarez. Angel was an uchideshi. He was a thirteen year old kid. He was going to school. I don't remember exactly how he ended up at the dojo. I'll have to ask him. But, in the old dojo, we lived together. He would go to school after class. He was a cute, innocent boy, you know?

That's hard to believe. (laughter) Was he the first uchideshi at New York Aikikai?

Sort of, yeah. He was the first one.

So he was there before Harvey was there then?

Yes. Harvey came after Harry McCormack. I think Harry introduced him to Aikido. Mike Abrams was there already. He was in the last year of his college, something like that.

How many members were there at New York Aikikai the first couple of years?

Maybe fifty actual paid members. Like I said at that time they couldn't afford to rent an apartment for me. There was no extra money ... just enough to pay the rent and the lights. I had brought some dollars with me from Japan. Otherwise I could not have lasted.

I told a lie to my father when I came over that I was going to attend Columbia University. That's how I got the money from my father to stay. I went for one day. (laughter) I took an English course. All they were teaching me was, "This is a pen ... Is this is a pen?". I said what the hell... (laughter) I don't need to spend tuition for this. I already know what a pen is! (laughter) I'd rather go to a bar to learn living English. Which I did. That's how I improved my English. But I had to show my father that I was going to college. That's why he sent me money.

When did you start thinking about founding the USAF?

I could think of two reasons: one was because of Tohei Sensei's split with the Aikikai. We had to have our own identity. Also, because of the establishment of the International Aikido Federation. We were kind of forced to join quickly. We weren't told about it till after everything had been established because it was more of a European situation. So Chiba asked us if we were going to join. We said OK, so then he said we had to form a national federation to apply as a member. That's why we started. We had to have so many meetings to go over everything. Yoshioka in Hawaii cooperated. We got together a pretty good group of people. Bill Witt, Frank Doran, Bob Nadeau ... the West Coast group.

Who were the Shihan here at that time?

Kanai Sensei of course. Akira Tohei Sensei was in Chicago by that time ... he was in Hawaii before that for a long time. Actually, he was in Hawaii when I was on my way to New York in 1964. I stopped by and met him. He was sent for two years to Hawaii. At that time he was Koichi Tohei's direct student. That's why Tohei Sensei sent him there. Then he went back to Japan for a while, and later he went to Chicago.

So the USAF was formed after Koichi Tohei Sensei split from the Aikikai?

Yes, after. We already had an East Coast sort of affiliation but nothing national.

I guess that was a difficult time when Koichi Tohei left.

Yes. It was a big split. Some of the Japanese instructors went with him. Mostly the older former Tohei Sensei direct students from his hometown. Toyoda was one of them who split. Also this guy Shuji Maruyama. He was in Cleveland at first. He'd been hired by some martial arts school there.

And then later he moved to Philadelphia. He went to Tohei, which was good for me and Kanai. He was a pain in the neck. (laughter)

In a way I hated to see the split happen because I didn't know how or exactly why Koichi Tohei changed his mind about the Aikikai. But ... he was a good leader. He had charisma. He was strong, positive. He always said everything straight. He was very nice, an easy boss. In a way I hated to see it happen but in another way it was a positive change. The Aikido became clearer, the aspect of technique itself. It's much clearer what were teaching now. You know, Tohei Sensei's stuff ... unbendable arm, ki, ki, ki ... too much philosophy, not enough basic technique. So, in a way it's good it happened. In a way it was good what happened with Saotome too. The people who went with him ... it cleaned up our house, in a way.

So even though you had a close personal relationship with Koichi Tohei you didn't want to split.

I told him straight. He was so sure I would go with him. It was a big, big, big miscalculation for on his part. There was no doubt about it in his mind that I would support him. I had a lot of influence ... he thought he could get the whole United States. I wrote him, "I positively respect you, I still consider you as a teacher, but I have heard different sides to that story for why you are leaving the headquarters. I have a responsibility to my students. If I was by myself, I might go with you, but I can't." And, that's another good thing about him. He wrote me back a nice letter saying, "I understand your situation, which is very clear." He was very nice, so I had no problem with. But he thought there was no question that I would go with him.

Did he think the others would go with him too?

That, I don't know. Probably. I think that he is a very confident man ... he thought that the United States was for him so maybe he supposed so, but it didn't happen that way. Even in Hawaii, which was like his own territory, they didn't do it either. Yoshioka was kind of in charge there but he wouldn't go. Yoshioka was a very old fashioned guy. His mentality was very loyal, you know, headquarters was headquarters. Headquarters comes first. It's our duty. Personally I like Tohei Sensei. But, I'm in an organization. Some people split and went with him but then they split from him later. Everybody did the same thing he did.

That's interesting. When people split, they often split again.

It's like a nuclear reaction, split, split, split.

Do you think that as a result, the people that stayed emphasized more the technical aspect of Aikido?

Yes. The more easy going people had an attraction to Tohei Sensei. People who don't want to practice too hard, they don't want to suffer. So he attracts them, that philosophy of teaching. It was easy to do. The training wasn't as hard. That's why I said it was good, the way it happened. Those people went with him, and we don't need them. Of course Tohei Sensei had many good things to offer. Even many things I'm doing now I learned with him. But no way could I do just that one hundred percent of the time. Impossible. But he gave us some good points. Useful. There's no question. But I don't like to be one-sided and insist that it has to be just that way.