

# Aikidosphere

**Yoshimitsu Yamada**  
**8th Dan, Shihan**  
**USAF Chairman**

**Interview with Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th Dan**

**by Francisco Manchon, 3rd Dan and Michelle Feilen, 3rd Dan - Asociacion Cultural Feilen Aikido Dojo Central, Barcelona, Spain**

Translated from Spanish by Sharon Silberstein and Javier Dominguez, New York Aikikai.

Editor's Note: This interview, conducted by the instructors at the annual seminar in Barcelona, was originally published in the May 2000 issue of Budo International/Cinturon Negro. We are happy to make an English translation available, and thank Francisco and Michelle for allowing us to present in here. Photos courtesy of Y. Yamada and Peter Bernath, Florida Aikikai.



## **Sensei, what led you to start practicing Aikido?**

My uncle, Tadashi Abe was O-Sensei's uchi-deshi (live-in student), and, since childhood, I knew about Aikido. I couldn't wait to be able to start practicing. When the moment came, I started and that's that. Because of the family ties of my uncle with O-Sensei's family, I was accepted as uchi-deshi. My situation was not typical. My first day of Aikido was also my first day as uchi-deshi.

## **Do you remember the first time that you saw O-Sensei? Could you tell us about that moment?**

It was at a non-public demonstration at his house for an intimate circle of people. I was invited, thanks to my uncle's connection to O-Sensei's family. Like every other person there, I felt so thrilled and moved that I practically don't remember anything else.

## **What is the most important teaching that you learned from O-Sensei?**

Obviously, aside from technique, I learned to be a good person, to be generous and kind with the students.

## **Do you think that the current Aikido of today differs much from the Aikido that you were practicing with O-Sensei?**

Yes, definitely. If O-Sensei could see Aikido today, he would be very surprised. There exists in the within the world of Aikido, many different individual characters, therefore, many different styles. This is inevitable, given the very creative nature of Aikido. The most important thing is to define oneself by one style. The whole world is free to follow what they like, to choose what is good for him or her self. There are many forms of Aikido. Nobody can say which style is correct or not.

It's like translating a great work of art. One can always express the different nuances, based on each person's interpretations. There are many interpreters of O-Sensei and evidently the only way to know O-Sensei and his work is through his interpreters.

**Which personalities in Aikido have most influenced your personal development on a technical level as well as spiritual?**

Well, personally I do not like to copy anyone. I have tried to take pieces from everybody and integrate them into my body and digest it like a good meal. Many people think that my style is very orthodox with circular and dynamic movements following the style of Kisshomaru Ueshiba. That's what people think.

**How would you define your technique?**

Dynamic and elegant. Well, at least I hope so.

**What does Aikikai Hombu Dojo represent in our times?**

Basically for us, Aikikai Hombu Dojo should be a spiritual symbol. I am sorry to say that this kind of relationship does not exist between the Aikikai Hombu Dojo and the Aikidoists. Today, it is more a business relationship (degrees, certificates, etc.) I feel that the spiritual link is getting lost. Even though, there are still people who feel this relationship, but there are many people who don't care about it. In the future, this could represent a problem, especially when the unifying links or interpreters of O-Sensei, won't be around any longer.

**What do you think about the proliferation of Federations and Associations around the world following different Shihan? How could this situation affect the unity and development of Aikido in the future?**

The ideal situation would be a Federation that unifies everything, but that is absolutely impossible. It is like Aikido styles. It is now that we clearly realize that it is impossible and it is now that we have to think how to face this situation. We all know that we cannot unify, however some entities are still trying, such as, for example, the International Aikido Federation (IAF). Everybody should have the right to be a member of the IAF.

**In your organization, the Aikikai certifies all degrees issued by you. In Europe, there are National Degrees, issued by the Federations, Associations and those of the Aikikai. What is your opinion regarding this separation of degrees?**

I understand that each country has its own administrations (different Ministries, etc.) Some countries have no other option, but I think that regarding the Dan ranks, they should come from the original source, because they have a spiritual significance. To do so, Aikikai Hombu Dojo should understand these different realities, adjust, and be flexible. This is because each country faces different administrative and financial situations. Personally, I think that if Aikikai Hombu Dojo does nothing regarding this problem, any country or the same Shihan will issue the certificates. This will happen if Aikikai Hombu Dojo doesn't offer any solution.

**Fortunately, your visits to Europe and especially Spain, are more and more frequent. How is Aikido evolving in Europe and especially in our country?**

Europe, as a continent, has a very long Aikido history, but at the same time very confusing. There are many Shihan and professors. Obviously, there are many thoughts, styles and philosophies. Nowadays, there is more information, traveling is easier, and people have the opportunity to see more Shihan, allowing them to access different Aikido lines around the world. People have more opportunities to see what it's happening in Aikido. For example, in my country (U.S.A.), Aikido students not only see me and the other Shihan living in America, they also have the opportunity to see Tamura Shihan (Europe) or to meet students who travel from Europe to America.

I acknowledge that I don't know that much about the situation in Spain, but every time I come here I enjoy teaching very much. I feel that people here are very interested in learning Aikido.

**After what we have seen around the world, your seminars are characterized by the presence of students from other countries. What do you feel when students from far away travel to learn under your guidance?**

Naturally, this makes me very happy. To me, this means that I have to do a good job. It's not only good for me, it's also good for my Dojo and my students that people from all over the world come not only to my seminars but also to my Dojo. It creates friendships.

**How do you see the technical and spiritual evolution of the high-ranking people throughout your seminars around the world? Would you like to give them any advice?**

All of them are following the right path, although they should, once in a while, come back to the source and be more humble.

**Through the passage of time (36 years), the New York Aikikai has become a pilgrimage site for a large number of Aikidoists from around**

**the world that go to your Dojo to deepen their Aikido training. What kind of spirit do you want to instill to all those practitioners?**

As I said before, it gives me great pleasure when I see people from so many different countries come to New York Aikikai. I don't think that they only come to see me, but also come to meet my students, for which I am very proud. My dojo has a special atmosphere, I don't know how to describe it, nor do I know how I created it. However, my motto is to make my dojo a place where one can practice sincerely and, at the same time have fun. In this way, they create lasting friendship ties. It is good to be able to love and at the same time feel loved. Perhaps that is the atmosphere that we were talking about

**What objectives would you want to achieve in Aikido?**

Objectives? Hmm.. I hope one day I can throw people without touching them (laughs.)

**Define with one word and in three seconds the following personalities within the Aikido world.**

K. Ueshiba: a gentleman

K. Tohei Sensei: charismatic

O. Osawa Sensei: understanding

N. Tamura Sensei: a hard worker

M. Kanai Sensei: a samurai

K. Chiba Sensei: passionate

Y. Yamada Sensei: flexible