

# Aikidosphere

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An Interview with Yamada Sensei

By Julien Neves-Pelchat, 11 years old, Aikido de la Montagne  
[reviewed by Helena Neves-Pelchat, Julien's mother]

Editor's Note: This is Julien's second Shihan interview. He also interviewed Kanai Sensei. This article is presented with the kind permission of the author and his mother. Thanks to Claude Berthiaume for his help. Photos courtesy of Y. Yamada.



**Pleased to meet you...my name is Julien.**

Nice to meet you too.

**I have interviewed Kanai Sensei in the past and I now have the pleasure of meeting and getting to know you. I will start to ask you questions that I have prepared for you.**

OK. Don't be too tough. (Laughs)

**I have divided the questions into different subjects. I will begin by asking what did your parents do for a living?**

My father was a college professor, and my mother was a housewife.

**What do you remember most about your parents?**

Well there are so many things. My parents were in a way very generous to me. They let me do what I wanted to do which was to become an Aikido teacher, to train in Aikido and that was the biggest gift my parents could give me.

**When you were a child, 10 years old, what did you want to become? Was Aikido what you wanted to do?**

I wanted to become an Opera singer.

**What are your hobbies now?**

I like to read, and listen to music, all kinds of music, pop, Latin, etc.

**Why did you start to practice martial arts?**

Although I said I didn't know anything about Aikido when I was ten, it was not long after that that I found out about it. One of my relatives, my uncle, Abe Sensei, was already an Aikido teacher, so, I that was how I found out about Aikido. I began to think that when I finished school I would just practice Aikido. That's how I started.

**Was Aikido the first martial art that you have ever practiced?**



**Yes.**

**How old were you when you started to practice Aikido?**

I think I was seventeen.

**How old were you when you gave your first class?**

About twenty-one or twenty-two. I was about second Dan at the time.

**Tell me about that first experience. Were you nervous?**

Well... I am still nervous. (Laughs). No, I've never been nervous teaching Aikido.

**What does Aikido mean to you?**

It's my Lifework. I will keep doing it until I cannot move.

**How would you distinguish Aikido from other martial arts? What do you think is the difference in between Aikido and other martial arts?**

Well, I think Aikido is very, very, very unique compared to the other arts, and in saying this I am not saying which martial art is best. That is an individual matter, and depends mostly on what you like. At the bottom line the idea of all martial arts, of all the budos, are the same. They are each just a different way to approach the same goal. To me, Aikido is very suitable, and I like it... That's why I do Aikido.

**How did you meet O-Sensei?**

My family was kind of close to the Ueshiba family, the Founder's family. So we knew them already before I started Aikido. My uncle, Tadashi Abe, was practicing Aikido. I called him uncle, although he was really my second cousin. My father had been adopted by Abe's family after his parents passed away.

**Were you an uchideshi at Hombu Dojo like Kanai Sensei?**

Yes

**How many years were you an uchideshi?**

About seven or eight years.

**What was life like for you as an uchideshi?**

(Laughs) It was tough, but as I say, it was enjoyable as well. When I recall those days now, I remember the enjoyable parts more. At that time, however, I probably focused on the art that was a little tough. But you know, being an uchideshi, you have to suffer.

**What kind of chores did you have to do?**

In general taking care for the dojo, and cleaning, cleaning, and more cleaning. Also taking care of the dojo members, and helping the teachers.

**When you were doing these chores, do you think they worth doing in exchange for what you got back?**

Well, at that time, I was not looking for anything. I wasn't doing it to get some kind of prize. It was just a part of my life. Even when I was an uchideshi and practicing at Hombu Dojo with O-Sensei, I never dreamed that I would become a teacher. I was just happy to be able to practice. I don't think anybody thought that Aikido would grow so much. None of us even thought about being able to make a living teaching Aikido.

**How many other uchideshi were there at the same time as you?**

At that time I joined only three or four.

**What happened to the other uchideshi? Where are they now?**

They are all overseas now, teaching in different countries. For instance Mister Tamura is teaching in France, Mister Sugano has lived in Australia and in Europe and now he's with me in New York. Kanai Sensei is in Boston; Chiba Sensei is in San Diego.

**In order to know you better, my mom asked me to read your article Reflections on September 11th. I agree with your philosophy about teaching Aikido and that Aikido should not be taught in a religious way. When I was younger I sometimes wanted to belong to a religion but nowadays, because of all the wars that go on for the sake of religion, I am not sure anymore.**

Well, if that's your decision, that's fine.

**I know the difference between right and wrong and I think that is the most important thing for human beings. And I think that right now, the philosophy that I identify most with is Buddhism. So I guess that I consider myself Buddhist.**

Oh yeah? (Laughs) That is interesting.

**Are you a religious man?**

No. I am not.

**Did the September 11th disaster changed your life or way of thinking in any way?**

Not exactly.

**But it made you feel a little sad?**

Oh! Of course, definitely!

**We will talk about travel now. I have also seen the yearly calendar of Aikido seminars and was very surprised at the amount of traveling you do. This year alone you've been to Spain and France more than once, you've been to Hungary, Venezuela, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Germany, Argentina, Brazil and you have just come back from Italy. Combining overseas and North American travels, it seems you are on the go almost every week. Do you enjoy all this travel?**

So far, yes, I'm still enjoying it. It keeps me going.

**On these trips, do you get to visit the area a little?**

Unfortunately, not too much. (Laughs) Not too much. (More Laughs) Most of the time you spend practicing and resting.

**What is the trip that you have the fondest memories of?**

Any place when I went the first time. Each place is very impressive, each in a different way. Each country has its own good and bad things. (Laughs).

**So you have learnt a lot about many different countries?**

Well it's nice to see so many places and have such a variety of experiences. I suggest that if you have a chance when you are grown up you travel also. It's nice to see how people approach life in different ways. And it's so interesting to see the different cultures. But in seeing so many different things, it is very important to maintain your own perspective and develop your own ability to make correct judgments.

**Apart from Japan, where do you think Aikido is most popular?**

I think in Europe. Particularly in France.

**In your opinion, which country that you have visited has the yummiest food?**

Yummy? I would say Spain. That's my favorite: Spanish food.

**And what is it about Spanish food you like so much?**

First of all I am Japanese and Japanese people like rice. Spanish people have a lot of rice dishes that they call arroz. They also eat a lot of seafood. And the way they cook is very simple, not too creamy like French cooking. That's why I like it.

**Are you married?**

Oh Yes.

**Does it bother your wife that you go away so often?**

No, no. Maybe she's happy. (Many laughs) I have been married over forty years, and our marriage is very, very fresh because we don't spend too much time together. (Laughs) So you know, we still feel that we are just married.

**I think that people would be interested to know whether you plan to resume your trips to Japan bringing Aikido students with you.**

I'd like to do it again. I had to skip this year and I probably will have to skip next year too. Unfortunately, the hotel that I have been using is out of business. Of course, if you're rich there are millions of hotels. But I try to make everything affordable for my students. So if I can find another hotel maybe I'll do it again.

**I have heard some rumors that you intend to do a Summer Camp Seminar for kids sometime in the near future.**

Yes, we tried to do that this year but it didn't work out, but we will continue to work on this for the future.

**Are you ever going to teach us? To give a class here to the kids?**

Here? I would like to! Next time! But you'll be sorry you asked! (Laughs)

**Since you travel a lot to Spain and South American countries, have you learned any Spanish?**

I cannot speak it, but I understand a little bit. I've learned also in New York City, because there are a lot of Spanish speaking people. Also, several of my uchideshi are from South America. In our Dojo we sometimes say the official language is Spanish. (Laughs)

**Thank you very much for your time.**

You are quite welcome.

**Domo arigato gozaimashita.**

Do Itashimashite. And I must say one thing: When I was your age, I didn't know about Aikido, but you already do, so you have a better chance than me to get good. So, good luck and keep practicing!