

Tamura Nobuyoshi, the eagle of Aikido.

[translation note: this interview was initially conducted by Leo Tamaki (www.leotamaki.com) in Japanese. The resulting french interview has been subsequently translated by the Edinburgh Aikido Club into english. Any approximations or mistakes are entirely the fault of the translators. Anyone wishing to further disseminate, use or advertise this interview must first seek the permission of Leo Tamaki (tamaki.leo@gmail.com).]

Tamura Nobuyoshi, 8th Dan Aikikai, was one of the closest disciples of Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido. His friendly smile and frail appearance were known to practitioners worldwide, as was his piercing gaze and the technical virtuosity that he demonstrated whenever he practised Aikido. Tamura Sensei's Aikido was quick, subtle and extremely martial. After more than 50 years of practice, his techniques were perfected to the point where all superficial movements had disappeared and only the essence of his art form was visible in such subtle movements that they were almost invisible and appeared magical to the uninitiated.

The Samurai Magazine (note: this is the martial arts magazine where this interview first appeared) presents the longest interview that he has ever given. In it Tamura Sensei recollects memories and reflects on a lifetime of practise. Meet the legendary master with a piercing stare and an excellent sense of humour...

Hello Sensei. What is the difference between Budo and Bujutsu?

In the beginning the techniques came from the analysis of victorious combats. This led to the creation of the first *kumitachis* (paired training with the sword). It was discovered that certain specific movements allowed one to deal with certain types of attacks. Gradually the techniques were combined to create a path that could be followed in training.

However *bu* has different meanings for different people. For some it is a destructive force while for others it is a peaceful one. *Jutsu* signifies technique and *do* signifies way. Studying a *Jutsu* is to learn techniques for the purpose of accomplishing a goal, where the use is an end in itself. Studying a *do* is to follow a path towards the man present in all of us, a way that each of us can use and that was created with a view to being accessible for everyone. This idea also forms the basis of shintoism and buddhism. Nowadays, unfortunately, we are often far from this original idea...

Some teachers refer to zen in their teaching of Aikido, other to shinto. What is your opinion on this subject?

All this is true. The Japanese culture was forged in the dojos. One cannot limit or divide it. Each thing finds its place in a harmonious whole. When someone dies, a monk comes for the funeral ceremony; marriage is carried out according to the shinto tradition....finally today more and more young people are getting married in churches (laughs). It is often something that is not understood by Westerners but in japan this is something very natural. To be born Japanese is to be exposed to and surrounded by a whole that includes both zen and shinto and where nothing is exclusive.

If one does not know the spiritual environment of budo, one learns only combat techniques. This is why i think that it is easier to understand Aikido if one studies the spirit behind japanese culture.

Is it therefore necessary according to you to know the Japanese culture in order to understand Aikido?

It is not necessary but probably it allows one to progress faster, this is an undeniable fact. If one simply takes the example of language; for a Japanese person, even a beginner, *shiho-nage* is quite explicit. The name of the technique defines its physical application. Upon hearing the

name of it, the person understands that it is a projection in four directions, can easily deduce that this symbolically signifies all the directions and can understand more deeply the sense of the technique. When one translates *irimi* into English it becomes 'enter' but this is very vague and it is difficult to rely on this single word to understand the technique. The same occurs with *hitoemi* or *sankakuho*. Often, a Japanese person instinctively understands the significance of these terms because they are associated with the *kanji* (ideograms), which have a range of meanings that is both vast and subtle.

Would it not be better, if one wanted to study English littérature, to learn English rather than to be limited to French translations of Shakespeare? (laughs)



Did you ever spend time with Deshimaru Sensei?

I met him through Nakazono Sensei and the Macrobiotic circle at the time. Deshimaru Sensei was a friend of Osawa Sensei and he was really a very unique character. When he arrived in France a meeting was organised for people interested in Zen. When asked what zazen was, he sat on the desk and did zazen. After that, he left! (laughs).

You teach in a number of countries from France to Japan, from the USA to North Africa. Do you change your style of teaching depending on where you are?

Each country has its own culture but all students try to practise Aikido, which is one and the same wherever one goes. On my part I try to present things in the most comprehensible manner for each person. There are not that many differences. I simply try to answer the questions that practitioners have and to see what needs correcting. Depending on the place the latter varies, but the essence of aikido remains the same.

Of course it is sometimes necessary to explain certain cultural details. For example, in Muslim countries, some students are reluctant to bow in seiza, so I explain to them that in Japan it is nothing more than a form of greeting, a sign of respect and gratitude.

Recently, during a course for seniors (higher than 4th Dan), someone stood up while I gave an explanation in sitting position. In Japan, one would take this as a challenge. In the West, when a woman or an important person arrives, one stands up. The most important people are those who are seated. In Japan, it is the opposite: the important people are those who are standing. These are small things but their meanings are contrary and can give the impression that the person in front of you wants to cause offense even though their intentions are the opposite. If these intentions are not understood, they can be easily misunderstood and lead to an incident. These types of misunderstandings disappear when things are explained. That is why I think it is important to know the culture of others.

Today, Japanese youth seems disinterested in the practice of the traditional ways. What do you think?

In my time, the practise of the martial arts was mandatory in school and represented the bulk of our sports practise as gym classes were virtually non-existent. A qualified sports teacher who could spin around a pole would impress everyone at the school (laughs). The girls practised Naginata and the boys Judo and Kendo. It was natural for us.

Nowadays, young people do not know pre-war Japan and its spirit. They do not know people like General Nogi and the values that he represents. The ways that were created to develop man and maintain these traditional values are today obsolete in their eyes.

Moreover, the *reigisaho* (etiquette) that is at the heart of these ways is progressively losing its importance and nowadays, the practise of these disciplines brings one no more than the practise of boxing. The arts of Kendo and Judo are often pre-occupied only with competitions and have become sports.

Indeed, combat sports are much more popular than martial arts in Japan today.

That is true. In these types of sports, considered to be without rules, one is allowed to hit like this or that; there is no real danger. The notion of life or death is totally absent from these disciplines.

Previously, a samurai who fought even if only with a bokken was at risk of death. Their *shugyo*, or 'training', accustomed them to living at the border between life and death and that made all the difference. Today athletes are willing to do anything, even to cheat and dope themselves to win a medal. The youth of today does not practice budo and does not even know what it is. The people who created the budo have long since left us and I wonder sometimes if it is still possible to save these ways.

Fortunately there exist people today such as Kuroda Sensei here and there in Japan who maintain this heritage. It is without doubt thanks to these people that these ways survive. When Japan entered the Meiji period after the *bakumatsu*, budo almost disappeared for a few decades. And at this time there weren't any videos and very little written texts. In addition, the texts that did exist were incomprehensible if an explanation wasn't provided.

In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of french Aikido?

That is a difficult question. France is a country with a very rich culture. The french love Aikido and they have an artistic soul! But they like to understand with their heads. They know how to explain things that I cannot express. Succeeding in putting that into practice is another thing (laughs).

In Aikido, is weapons training important?

It was O'Sensei who created Aikido. And every time he demonstrated Aikido, he used weapons. It is not for us, his disciples and students, to decide whether or not it is necessary to practice

weapons. It is no doubt a French trait to question everything. In Japan you would immediately be called a fool if you questioned this fact (laughs).

Is the practice of weapons thus essential in Aikido?

Aikido was born from weapons practice and the empty-hand and weapons work make up one whole. If someone masters empty hand techniques he can use weapons correctly and vice versa. But it is rarely the case these days. Just as some people practice well when they are standing but badly on their knees, some people seem to perform well empty-handed but reveal their limitations when they have a sword in their hands...



Is it necessary to practice in suwari waza?

In my opinion, yes. The constraints of the kneeling position allow one to better understand and learn how to use one's body. This in turn enables a better practice of tachi waza. Good work on the knees is always the source of excellent standing work. However a person who works well in standing position cannot do well on their knees without having trained at it.

Did O'Sensei use the terms Aikiken or Aikijo?

He did not use these specific words. He simply took a weapon and practised with it. Occasionally he used the expression *shochikubai no ken* (the sword of the pine, bamboo and plum trees). The pine tree, *matsu*, bamboo, *take* and the plum tree, *ume*, in Japan are symbols of prosperity and happiness. The pine symbolises longevity and endurance because it stays green throughout the year. Its leaves are separated into two like the *In (yin)* and *Yo (yang)* but are united and represent also the concept of *musubi* (harmony, connection). The bamboo symbolises both force and suppleness and grows full of energy up into the sky. Regarding the plum tree, it flowers in the most hostile and cold of seasons and represents the difficulties that one succeeds in overcoming. O'Sensei did not provide detailed technical explanations but he did exhibit these concepts in his practice with the sword work.

At the time, we did not understand anything and just tried to mimic his actions, trying to see what movements he made, what he did with his hands. We understood even less when he was facing us in a technique because we were absorbed in his energy and had the feeling of being absorbed!

When watching, at times, it looked like a hoax to us. At the very instant that you had that thought O'Sensei would turn around and stare at you. Perhaps it was just because we had a guilty air about us when he turned his head (laughs). But he was very good at hearing everything and knowing what was going on around him.

O'Sensei would tell us to attack and we were suddenly hit or cut. Even when watching with all of our attention, we did not understand how he could have performed the technique that he had. We tried but always found ourselves cut! When you study with people who do not understand, it is natural that you do not understand either (laughs). I am truly sorry for that.

What was the *shochikubai no ken*?

Shochikubai no ken is not a specific form. The movements of O'Sensei varied according to his mood. *Shochikubai* is a symbol, not a particular sequence. The Western mentality has a tendency to want to define everything. Yet when you seek to define something, you realize that it is made of many things. These things themselves break up into multiple things. And so on until finally one, I can imagine, arrives at the smallest parts. But then you realize that you have lost the view of the whole and that you absolutely do not know the essential thing, the totality.

What are the origins of the weapons techniques in Aikido?

O'Sensei created the techniques of ken in Aikido based on a wide range of sources and personal research.

Takeda Sokaku was a fierce warrior. He permanently kept a cane-sword at his side since at the time the carrying of a sword was not outlawed. He was a master of *Daito-ryu*, but also the sword, notably of the *Ono-ha Itto ryu* school. He principally taught empty hand *jujutsu* techniques but probably showed weapons techniques occasionally. But at that time, even if one saw these techniques, one could not ask to be taught them.

Subsequently Kisshomaru Ueshiba studied *Kashima Shinto Ryu*. The daughter of O'Sensei was also married to Nakakura Kiyoshi, a famous teacher of *Kendo* who became a great master. And his students, Sugino Yoshio and Mochizuki Minoru also practiced *Katori shinto ryu*.

Whether it was his friends or students, O'Sensei was surrounded throughout his life by sword experts. His art is the fruit of his research and these encounters that allowed him to introduce new elements, to transform what he had studied by adding them to his personal creations.

When one practices budo, one sees in all 8 directions and one must know how to seize anything interesting that is within reach. One must keep one's eyes wide open and experiment with what appears interesting, keeping the good and rejecting the bad. This is how one must live. This was how we were taught by O'Sensei and in a sense, we were encouraged to study, search and understand by ourselves.

Was it O'Sensei who created the katas such as *Ichi no Tachi*?

These are creations of Saito Sensei. O'Sensei showed the *shochikubai ken* but did not teach katas as such.

Hirokazu Kobayashi Sensei who lived in Osaka had a lot of experience with weapons work because he was an advanced practitioner of *Kendo*. He came from a wealthy family and was often *otomo* (companion) to the founder in his travels. I would accompany O'Sensei from Tokyo and Kobayashi Sensei would meet us in Osaka. He would take us to excellent restaurants and I was really happy (laughs). He told me that he had often helped Saito Sensei to correct what he had seen in the founders' movements.

At the time O'Sensei taught through practice. We attacked him and he hit us. Suddenly we would receive a blow, and he would tell us that it was obvious if we did what we were doing. It was painful but effective. Kobayashi Sensei had lots of experience with the sword and was useful to many students including Saito Sensei.

Saito Sensei wished to compile all the weapons techniques. He helped O'Sensei - who had a house in Iwama – a lot. Saito was at the same time a train driver and this must have been very difficult for him. We were not working and devoted ourselves solely to training; our situation was much easier than his. It was a difficult time for many people.

Did O'Sensei not teach paired katas, whether at Iwama or Hombu dojo ?

No. He never even taught Ikkyo! Sometimes when he was in the mood, he would correct somebody, explain *hiteomi*, things like that. But he never followed a pedagogy in a scholarly sense with established steps. We would wonder why he didn't explain things (laughs). We told ourselves that without an explanation it was normal that we couldn't do it. But he saw things with a much broader perspective. We were like kindergarten children listening to an academic discussion and telling ourselves that we didn't entirely understand what was being said. With time we came to understand certain things.

When you practise you never clash with the weapons. Did O'Sensei practise like this also ?

One can see it in the films. O'Sensei never clashed with weapons. If the weapons clash, it means that there is a block and one never blocks because this signifies that one has been cut.

What type of bokken did O'Sensei use ?

Saito Sensei invented the thick bokken which carries the name Iwama. O'Sensei generally used a magnificent thinner bokken made of *kokutan* (ebony) in the Yagyu style. I was hoping that he would give it to me one day until I noticed that he had already given it to someone else! He was very generous and gave things away easily.

O'Sensei probably used something else when he was younger but when I was uchi-deshi he generally used light bokkens only. He used whatever was close at hand but his favourite bokken was long and thin, of the *yagyu shinkage* or *jiki shinkage* type. Except for *tanren*, where he used a heavy and thick bokken. Tada Sensei used it easily with one arm !

There is a famous photo of O'Sensei with a row of bokken behind him. It was like this when I became uchi-deshi. We would use these ten or so available weapons.

Are there common points between the Jo of Aikido and of Jodo ?

No. They are very different. It seems that *yari* (spear) techniques are the origin of the jo as it is used in Aikido. And it is true that both use similar types of movements. O'Sensei actually practised weapons techniques as though his hands were empty and empty hand as though he was armed...

How should one strike with the jo ?

The work of the jo in Aikido comes from the spear. Initially, before the birth of Aikido, it was for his skill with the spear that O'Sensei was known and invited to Tokyo. I never saw him do it but it is said that he was capable of moving 60kg bags of rice with the tip of his spear.

In his youth, he used long spears but I mainly saw him work with *teyari*. O'Sensei generally made the jo slide, which was a very different way of hitting from Jodo. When I hit, I turn my hands in an opposite direction to one another.

[author's note : *teyari* are short lances with which O'Sensei was often photographed or filmed.]

Must one practise the jo on one side only or alternate the guards between left and right ?
Both sides are possible. However generally the guard with the jo is the opposite of that with the ken. This allows us to develop our bodies in a balanced and harmonious way.



Are the swords of Aikido, Kendo and iaido different ?

They are technically different but similar in their essence. Unfortunately today, in Kendo, the sword no longer cuts. In competitions it is sufficient to touch. Kendo has in a way followed the evolution of Western fencing where one can win by touching non vital points that would expose one to a mortal cut in true combat. These disciplines have become games where one seeks only to be the first to touch the opponent.

Kendo is the way that seeks most to preserve the tradition but competition has made it lose the essence of budo.

Judo has also lost its essence which was based on flexibility. Nowadays the competitors know only two or three techniques that they 'force' even when the situation is not suitable for that type of technique. This allows one to win medals...

These disciplines have been lost by practitioners' desire to win at all costs.

Did O'Sensei use other weapons other than the jo and bokken ?

He used the spear, the *yari*, for a long time. There was actually a long spear in the dojo that he used to use a lot. It seems that he initially became famous for his mastery of this weapon before he became known for his empty hand techniques.

He had also learnt how to handle the *juken*, the bayonette, in the army. In fact you can see him do a demonstration of it in a film from the 30's.

Did O'Sensei also practise tanto dori ?

I never saw him do it. Back in the day the *Yakuza* always fought with a knife. One day a fighter asked what one could do against these types of attacks. It was the *sempais* who developed this work. It was very spectacular for the demonstrations.

Is it more important for a beginner to concentrate on acquiring good form, the theories that underpin the techniques or the correct use of the body ?

This must all be one and even if it is difficult, one must pay attention to all these points at the beginning of practice.

Should the techniques be carried out in one movement or be broken down?

The whole body must move in harmony. The movement does not work if it is not continuous. It may seem simple to use one's hands and feet together but it is a very difficult thing to do.

Comprehension must not become segmentation. *Wakaru* must not become *wakeru* (this is a play on words as *wakaru* means 'to understand' and *wakeru* means 'to divide').

The thought process according to how we break things down is not efficient in our endeavor to master Aikido. If you wish to learn how to ride a bike and you divide the movements in order to study them independently of one another, learning first to peddle, then to steer, then to brake, even by working very hard you will never learn to ride a bike! (laughs).

The same applies to Aikido techniques. They must be carried out, studied and understood in their totality. If we learn them by breaking them down there are inevitable lags that make them inapplicable.

It is a difficult method of learning that however has no alternative and must be considered ineluctable. By working in this way there are still of course always lags at the beginning but one day the body instinctively understands and finds the solution.

Should aikido practice go through the stages of *kotai*, *jutai*, etc... ?

There are steps like these. But one should not be mistaken concerning the meaning of these terms. The French words are precise but limited. *Kotai* means solid work but it is generally interpreted as hard work. This is completely incorrect. In this solid work Aikido must be supple. In the same way *jutai* is generally translated as supple work but is not synonymous with complacency.

These are stages that can be compared to calligraphy where one first learns the very precise form which makes up the base, before moving on to more fluid and purified work.

It is the same with the body. At the centre are the bones, then the flesh. But one does not work without the other. The fundamental bases must thus always be present even in *jutai* while suppleness must be present from the beginning in *kotai*.

After that comes *ryutai* work and finally that of *kitai* where one guides the partner as soon as their intention forms.



Does the concept of traditional teaching *Shu Ha Ri* also apply to aikido ?

It applies to all traditional techniques, be that in Chado, the way of the tea, Kado, floral arrangements, etc... All these practices are studied in this way and go through these stages. In *Shu* one scrupulously follows the teachings of their master until one can reproduce the techniques exactly. Once one gets to that level one tries to see what such and such a change implies. One leaves the mould to continue studying. That is *Ha*. Finally one overcomes the contradictions and the technique becomes one's own. This is *Ri*.

These days people want to start with *Ri*! (laughs). They cannot do as the master does, so they seek another way. They cannot do one thing so they do another. In that case it is better to do something else from the beginning.

And if I correct people, they tell me that they cannot do it, that it is impossible. But it is useless to do something that you can do easily. Studying implies trying to do something that you cannot do! There is no shortcut.

How was falling (*ukemi*) taught in Aïkikai ?

In the old days in Aïkikai none of us were given any specific training concerning *ukemi*. We were all experienced in martial arts, be it in Judo, Kendo or Karate, and from the first day onwards we were thrown ruthlessly. It was thought that you learnt *ukemi* by being thrown.

You are silent when you fall, contrary to falls in Judo for example which are very loud.

In Judo we are taught to diffuse the shock by falling in that manner. But in Aikido we do not assume that we are falling on a tatami. You must imagine that you are falling on stones. It is thus in order not to hurt ourselves that we must fall softly.

O'Sensei regularly gave demonstrations and sometimes we had to fall on gravel. Rather than make a noise we sought to fall in a supple manner. However when we were demonstrating on *tatami* we willingly made loud noises to impress the public (laughs).

We generally insist on the tori's work but rarely explain that of the uke.

Ukemis and the uke's work consist of movements that aim to protect the body. These are things that one must understand by oneself. And if one becomes good it is then possible to apply counter techniques, *kaeshi waza*.

Are the preparation exercises that you do linked to the techniques, or are they simply carried out to stretch and warm up the body?

In the past I used to start with *Ame no torifune*. Then there were other educative exercises like *Ikkyo undo*. These are movements O'Sensei used to carry out and they are perfect for young people. Children also like them a lot.

Now I am older and am more sensitive to my body. I feel that it is good to do this or that exercise depending on the moment and I vary the preparation. I repeat this a lot but these are things that I discovered over time and that bring me wellbeing. I currently do a sort of Chinese gymnast routine that I find very interesting. I offer things to people. Each must find what suits him or her best.

Exercises can be done with a view to health initially but little by little they must become a work of introspection on the body. If you truly pay attention to each movement, an exercise that you thought you did correctly will appear difficult the next day.

The body is an extraordinary thing and you must learn to listen to it. When I am sitting like this (Tamura slumps down) I feel that my energy no longer flows in the right way. When I sit like this (Tamura Sensei sits correctly with superb *shisei*) I feel much better. The correct action is linked to a pleasant feeling. Our body carries within itself the memory of the correct posture.

All that is not natural imposes constraints on the body. Positions that may seem comfortable superficially are often incorrect and do not allow the body to function naturally. The most correct postures are the best for health. They do not use any force and do not tire you regardless of how long they are maintained. If your *shisei* is correct then your breathing grounds itself and your body relaxes.

This is why practicing *kokyu ho* is so important. You find the same type of study as in zazen or yoga. Budokas should have the same posture that yogis or zen monks have.

Recently, the practice of laido has grown considerably. Do you think that it helps to progress in Aikido ?

When I arrived in France I made people work with the bokken, jo and tanto. But by using only the bokken it is difficult to understand that this comes from the use of the sword. So at one time I asked my students doing their *shodan* to know four katas from laido.

At the time I did not know very much and injured my elbows by doing things incorrectly. Do the schools that are considered traditional such as *Omori ryu*, *Eishin ryu*, etc... have the same practices today as in the past? It is difficult to tell.

I would have liked to study under Kuroda Sensei and learnt to draw my sword smoothly in one fluid and continuous movement. Not just to draw the sword but learnt to use the body in its totality.

Is *atemi* important in Aikido ?

O'Sensei used to say "Aikido is *irimi* and *atemi*". But if you say this to your students the only thing they work on is *irimi* and *atemi*! People are like this.

Working on *atemi* means that you can hit without being hit. If you carry out a technique in this way you risk taking an *atemi*, if you carry it out in this way you get the opportunity to hit when you want to, this is the true spirit of *atemi*.

One day a boxer came and grabbed O'Sensei from behind. O'sensei smiled and put two fingers over the boxer's eyes whilst laughing. Even without practice a finger can easily

penetrate the eye that cannot become hard. It is by witnessing this type of scene that I understood what O'Sensei was trying to teach us. Otherwise you can miss the point and practice to hit hard using a *makiwara*. This is actually what we used to do at the time (laughs).

What is the meaning of *musubi* ?

Aiki is *musubi*. It also means birth, creation. There are lots of hidden meanings and we can't reduce it to a single word or concept. It is also the *musu* that we find in *takemusu*.

It is because there is union that something appears. It's because man and woman unite that a child is born, that something new is created. If one considers oneself different, unique, 'other', nothing could be born. This is also what O'Sensei wanted to teach.

He said "*Ame no ukihashi ni tatete*", 'stand on the floating bridge of heaven'. At the time we wondered what he was trying to say (laughs). Today I understand better what he wanted to say. There is a bridge between the sky and the earth that we cross and where we become the connection.

Budo is a path of purification. It is *misogi harai*, it is not a path of destruction of the adversary. It is a path beyond victory and defeat. This is what he (O'Sensei) was trying to transmit to us in the idea of *musubi*.

The mother protecting her child is the real symbol of '*bu*' and has the same sense as the '*ai*' in Aikido. It's the absolute opposite of searching to destroy the other. Obviously for us this was incomprehensible. Once again we were like a rabble of children from kindergarten unable to comprehend university level discussions (laughs).

The ancient *Mutekatsu* School is known for being where the great experts practiced how to win with empty-handed techniques.

With the other uchi dechis we always said that to fight *muteki* - without weapons - you needed and extraordinarily high level. For O'Sensei *muteki* signifies that we have no weapons and we are all the same. The same expression reveals a totally different meaning. Without weapons and in the spirit of brotherhood, conflict doesn't appear and there is no winner or loser. We received an extraordinary teaching but we were blind. And we have made our students bear the weight of our ignorance!

Today many forms of Aikido exist. Is this a good thing? Should O'Sensei still be the point of reference?

Aikido is the creation of O'Sensei! The Shin Aikido (New Aikido), Tamura ryu (Tamura School) or others have no place. Aikido is Aikido. The work consists of finding a way to arrive at the level of practice of O'Sensei.

The same cup of tea seen from the side, from above or from below has a totally different form. Today, everyone believes himself or herself to be in the right and opposed to all others because of a limited perception and in so doing goes against the teachings of O'Sensei. One should open one's heart and see that this or that way of seeing things can also be interesting. We must not become enclosed in certainties, even if the fundamentals must always be respected.

Did O'Sensei consider Aikido to be connected to other traditional ways?

He never spoke explicitly of this, but he often did calligraphy. At first I often thought that it wasn't so great and that his characters resembled those of a child. But one day a famous master of calligraphy saw his work and exclaimed "This is extraordinary, who has written this?" And later his writing became even more interesting. His calligraphy was very appreciated. We can see in calligraphy the heart of the writer. A true master is recognisable no matter what field he expresses himself in. If this isn't the case, then he is an impostor (laughs). Without going so far as to say that, it seems to me that a master is revealed in the ways that he has chosen.

One of the origins of Aikido is Daito Ryu. How did O'Sensei develop his practice ?

At the beginning O'Sensei taught Daito ryu exactly. Then little by little his practice evolved at the same time as his vision of life took shape, surely influenced by his religious convictions. These changes didn't happen all of a sudden, they were gradual and sometimes not even visible from the outside. His ikkyo that could have seemed identical seen from the outside was underlined with a different intent.



Did you practice other martial arts before Aikido ?

I started Kendo at high school with a friend of my father's who was a teacher of Kendo and also Judo.

Why and how did you start Aikido ?

I had heard of Aikido and I wanted to try this discipline because I wasn't very good at Judo and I frequently got beaten up. So I wanted to practice an extraordinary Budo with which I could beat everyone! (laughs)

How did you pass your days at the time ?

There was the morning training at 6.30am. As we slept in the dojo we had to quickly get up to put away the futons and then tidy up. We occasionally slept in and were awoken by the first students. After that there was training from 8am to 9am. Then we would have breakfast. During the day we worked and in the evenings we went back to training. And little by little the number of classes increased. I also often accompanied O'Sensei on his travels.

How was O'Sensei when he travelled?

Whenever we took the train for example we had to buy tickets. We obviously had to wait in line. But O'Sensei would leave without waiting. And of course we had luggage with us. There were gates, but no one would stop a grandfather walking through as if there was nothing to it. I would panic and he was hard to see because he was small. Finally I would find him again and somehow we would get on the train.

In Tokyo the uchi dechis had to come to fetch him when he returned. Obviously we had no way of knowing what carriage he was in. We only knew which train he would be on. We would wait at the entrance to the station and look to try and see him. Often by the time we found him he had already got into a taxi and would lecture us when we got back! Everything served as training.

O'Sensei also made decisions suddenly. One day he asked me to go and fetch a taxi. So we headed off towards Shibuya because he wanted to go to a religious establishment called Korindo. The taxi driver clearly didn't know where it was and O'Sensei got angry. Finally he recognised the path and we made it there. That day I understood that I should always educate myself as to the area we were going and the route to get there. It was a good lesson.

How did O'Sensei walk?

In appearance he walked like anyone else. But he always practiced wearing *tabis* on traditional *tatamis*. This is extremely difficult because they are very slippery. This is how he developed an extraordinary technique.

With the other uchi dechis I also noticed that O'Sensei's *tabis* got whiter with use at the level of the joint between the foot and the big toe. It is an area not normally worn out when people wear *tabis*.

Did everybody wear a hakama in the past?

Yes. The hakama is the practice uniform of traditional martial arts. It is used in Kendo, Kyudo, laido... It was used in all of these disciplines independently. It was even forbidden to practise without a hakama.

Was there not even a minimum level to wear it ?

No. In fact it is I who am indirectly and unwillingly the cause of the fact that not everyone wears it straight from the beginning.

When I was uchi deshi I was in charge of giving lessons at university. But after the war, even more so than today, students were often very poor! (laughs). Because of this some of them could not practise so I asked Kisshomaru Sensei if it was possible for them to not buy hakamas until the second year of practice. This question was discussed and the students were eventually allowed to do their first year without a hakama.

The habit then spread. In Japan, university students generally practised daily and made it to 2nd kyu after a year. This is how it became mainstream.

When I arrived in France I tried to make all students wear the hakama but this failed. Teachers thought that not wearing it motivated students to continue practising. I told them that if everybody wore it from the beginning this would no doubt attract more students but they were unconvinced (laughs).

It is sometimes said that the folds of the hakama are linked to such and such a virtue. Did O'Sensei ever mention this?

No. I never heard him speak of this.

Why do we wear trousers under the hakama?

I think one of the reasons is to not wear the hakama down too quickly in suwari waza. (NB : Aikido is the only major discipline where trousers are worn under the hakama. This is not done in Kendo, Kyudo, laido or traditional *jutsu's*).

Where did O'Sensei live the majority of the time when you were uchi deshi?

He was everywhere! He spent a week here and a week there. When you thought he was in Tokyo he had already left for Osaka. When you thought he was in Kansai he was in Iwama, and when you thought he was in Iwama a phone call asked you to go and pick him up at the train station! He also often went to Wakayama at Hikitsuchi Michio's place. He no doubt inherited this trait from Takeda Sokaku, who taught one week in one place and then went elsewhere. He was not the type to stay in one place.

Did you ask questions to O'Sensei ?

As an uchi deshi it was unthinkable to ask a question of O'Sensei. We watched as attentively as possible, absorbed his corrections and exchanged our points of view between ourselves. This is how we had to develop our techniques.

Can one achieve the effectiveness of O'Sensei without going through, as he did, life or death situations ?

No. But if you practise to win in combat it is better to learn how to use a gun (laughs). The question is to know what we are looking for in the practice of Aikido.



Didn't you have moments where it was difficult in the old days?

At twenty, nothing seems difficult. We didn't have money so we went to the vegetable seller and collected radish leaves that were cut before selling them and normally thrown away. The sellers would give us some out-of-date products. I would say to them "This banana seems over-ripe, I'd be surprised if you can sell it" And she would say "you're right, we have no choice, you'll just have to take it!"

There were shops that have disappeared, at Ameyoko, at Ueno. There was a cake seller where lots of young girls worked. After New Year's Christmas cakes were hard to sell and we would come and collect them too. It was that kind of time.

At the Kuwamori dojo I heard that you were teaching 5th Dan though you were not yet a 1st Dan ?

Yes, it's true! We were uchi deshi's but we didn't know much at all! We were sent teaching here and there, I even got sent to teach in the army. There I met Sasaki Sensei. A really extraordinary person. Later he opened a spy school but had to close because the story was published in Time magazine. As soon as I left Japan I asked him to replace me for a year at the Aikikai. That lasted more than forty years ! (laughs)

Are there things that only time can help one understand ?

One of O'Sensei's students also studied the *naginata*. His professor was considered one of the biggest experts in the army of this weapon at that time and I was lucky enough to be invited to one of her demonstrations. She was a 75-year old grandmother. After the demonstration I had the privilege of being introduced to her. She didn't stop talking about O'Sensei whom she admired and considered the greatest budoka. Suddenly she looked at me and asked me how old I was. I told her I was twenty and she said: "You can't understand anything until you're seventy"! I told myself "how cheeky of this grandmother". Now I know she was right! (laughs).

It is said that O'Sensei only taught *kaeshi wazas* to uchi dechis ?

It wasn't so much that as the fact that we were the only ones sufficiently trained to be able to see what he was doing.

Were there still *dojo yaburi* (challenges)?

There had been in the past but there were no longer any truly. However, there was one interesting story:

Haga Sensei was a young and famous Kendo and laido *shihan*. He was an exceptional master. In Japan when a museum buys a blade they make sure that it is authentic and experts are asked to test it. If this task is given to the wrong person, the sword can be irredeemably damaged. Haga Sensei did this kind of work.

He was also an extreme person. During discussions about martial arts, when somebody got out of hand because they had had too much to drink he often asked them to back up their words with an actual sword!

He came one day having heard of the dojo. He had not seen OSensei at training but we politely invited him to dinner. He then thought that it was not a serious dojo. He came regularly to eat when he had no money for nearly a year.

One day his work forced him move to Korea and he came to bid us farewell. OSensei then invited him to the dojo. He gave him a bokken and said: "I'll simply walk in the dojo, hit me whenever you like".

Later on Haga Sensei told me: "Tamura, there were no openings and I could not hit him! He beat me. To be beaten in such a way, and to say that I never used this past year to receive training from him!"

I hear that you trained with *shuriken* in the past ?

We all played with that. We also amused ourselves by wearing iron *getas* and *ipponba getas* to walk in Shinjuku. There was Yamada, Kanai, Chiba, Noro, Sugano, Saotome...

I read a story according to which the current *Doshu* served as a target once...

Oh yes, that was Noro! (laughs)

He was very good. He could throw with precision and from a distance. I was not aware of this but one day he asked the *Doshu* who at the time was a small child to serve as a target. He threw *shurikens* all around him but finally landed one in his leg! Moriteru then started crying but Noro asked him not to say anything and he promised that he would buy him chocolate in return. He (Moriteru) was in pain but that night when he came home he said that he had fallen. But after three days Noro still hadn't kept his promise so Moriteru denounced him, calling him a liar (laughs).

40 years later Noro Sensei offered him a huge pile of chocolate!

Recently Yamada sensei has written that you have refused the 9th Dan. What is the reason ?

O'Sensei had told us that Aikido was up to 8th Dan; that eight was the end of a cycle that brought us back to the beginning. Eight in Japan has a positive meaning, the ideogram being in the form of an opening. After eight we go back to the beginning. This is what he told us. And it is what I explained in turn. I was then offered the 9th Dan in Japan. That put me in an uncomfortable position (laughs).

I asked them to give me this title posthumously only. Unfortunately I put them in an uncomfortable position in return. Now it is necessary to make the practitioners who are younger than myself and who would no doubt be happy to become 9th Dan wait patiently. They must be asking themselves "Why doesn't Tamura Sempai accept this?"

It's obviously not a problem with *Doshu*, it's just that it would be difficult to say to my students that this kind of thing has changed now that they've offered me the 9th Dan ! (laughs). The *Doshu* is troubled and I'm really embarrassed. I would really like that they forget this whole business.

What do you wish for your students ?

Aikido is a way that allows one to discover oneself and to construct oneself as a human being in order to live a full and happy life. My students are like my children. I hope that they are in good health and live happy lives. That they find a way to happiness and that they are able to look back on their lives when they are dying and say that it was worth it. This is what I want people to achieve by the practice of Aikido.

Thank you Sensei.

Leo Tamaki (interviewer):

Leo Tamaki has been doing martial arts for around 30 years. After having done Judo, Kung Fu and Karate he started Aikido which he teaches today. He lives between Paris and Tokyo where he follows, among others, the teachings of Kuroda Sensei. You can find his articles online at www.leotamaki.com.