

# Aikido, History and Future

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July 2004

As I make my way down the path of Aikido study and training, a journey begun over a dozen years ago, I find myself drawn to the history and origin of this wonderful practice. It is helpful to see how this history has influenced the present and how it will impact the future of the art. To fully understand the story, one must delve into the life of O'Sensei, Morihei Ueshiba, whose intense study of martial arts, combined with a deep spiritual quest, gave rise to the unique discipline of Aikido. This essay will discuss the history of the art, where we are today and my vision of where it is heading in the future.

## **History**

O'Sensei came from a samurai heritage, with his famous great-grandfather Kichiemon said to be one of the strongest samurai of his day, and he was a lifelong student of the martial arts. He took up sumo wrestling at middle school age and by 18 began studying jujutsu at the Kito-ryu dojo and swordsmanship at the Shinkage-ryu training center. At 20 he joined the Army and during his 4 years of service he earned his first *menkyu*, teaching license, for a martial art from Nakai Masakatsu of the Yagyū-ryū. Soon after O'Sensei began training with well-know jujutsu teacher Takaki Kiyochi. At 29, O'Sensei led a group north to settle Hokkaido and it was there that he met Takeda Sokaku, grandmaster of Daito-ryū Aiki-jutsu, and studied with him for 7 years.

After this period O'Sensei met Deguchi Onisaburo, "Master" of the Omoto-kyo religion, and spent the next 8 years as his assistant. O'Sensei was born in the area now known as Tanabe which at the time was a very spiritual place known as the Kumano district. At a young age O'Sensei showed a strong interest in esoteric studies including Shingon Buddhism and became a steadfast believer in the Shinto gods of Kumano. So it was not hard to fathom how he became engrossed in the teachings of Omoto-kyo and how they influenced him as a martial artist. In fact it is said that it was Onisaburo who realized it was O'Sensei's purpose on earth "to teach the real meaning of budo: an end to all fighting and contention."

Japan was at the time in a transition from feudal samurai culture to democratic world competitor which started in the Meiji Restoration (circa 1870) just prior to O'Sensei's birth in 1883. This period saw the samurai stripped of their privileges and a shift in focus began in the martial arts away from the study of applied battle techniques to more perfection of the individual. The cultural aspects of many Do, or martial ways, emerged from this shift.

O'Sensei's martial arts study and spiritual development progressed to a point in 1925 when he attained a profound sense of enlightenment. In a dramatic episode that deeply effected him, he had a powerful vision while meditating and was left with the realization that the true purpose of budo was love that cherishes all beings.

O'Sensei moved to Tokyo in 1927 at the urging of Onisaburo to found his own unique "Way," and by 1931 had opened a formal dojo known as Kobukan. At that time his art was known as Aiki-jutsu or Aiki-budo. By 1942 he moved out of Tokyo to Iwama, where he settled into a life of farming and training in what he now called Aikido. In the ensuing years, O'Sensei continued to hone the techniques and philosophy of Aikido. Experiencing the horrors of WWII and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he saw how the world was heading down a path of annihilation. His philosophy of peace and his elegant practice of Aikido, which realized this philosophy in its very structure, continued to grow and spread rapidly until his death in 1969 and it continues to do so today.

### ***Up to the Present***

Around the time O'Sensei retired to Iwama, the classes at Aikikai dojo (formerly Kobukan) became sporadic. Yoshinkan Aikido grew in popularity, reflecting O'Sensei's pre-war martial style which was in contrast to the direction he took his art in the last decade and a half of his life. O'Sensei's son Kisshomaru was still in university when his father established the Iwama dojo, but by circa 1955 he devoted all his time to Aikikai, bringing it back to prominence. From the 1950s on, O'Sensei's core of original students moved around the globe spreading the practice of Aikido and numerous organizations sprang up in addition to Yoshinkan - Shinshin Toitsu Aikido (Ki No Kenkyukai), Aikido Association of America, Tomiki Aikido, United States Aikido Federation and Aikido Schools Of Ueshiba to name some.

In the postwar years, Koichi Tohei became one of the prominent instructors spreading Aikido internationally, most notably to Hawaii and mainland USA. He was also the chief instructor at Aikikai Hombu Dojo. Tohei Sensei emphasized ki in his teaching methods and his attempts to have his approach officially adopted at Aikikai led to increasing tension with Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba. Tohei created Ki No Kenkyukai (Ki Research Society) in 1971 and by 1974 he finally resigned from Aikikai and formed Shinshin Toitsu Aikidokai (Society for Aikido with Mind and Body Coordinated). He immediately sent a letter to hundreds of dojo-cho around the world explaining his resignation and asking them to choose their allegiance. This split rocked the Aikido world, but by no means stopped the progress of its spread.

One notable instructor who left with Tohei was Fumio Toyoda Sensei who became chief instructor of Shinshin Toitsu Aikidokai. Ironically Toyoda and others eventually ended up splitting with Tohei, and Toyoda went on to create the Aikido Association of America (AAA) in 1984 which he then grew into a prominent international organization. In 1994, Toyoda Sensei re-established ties with Aikikai, helping to heal the rift with Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba and bringing a little more harmony and unity to the Aikido community.

### ***The Future***

The future of Aikido looks promising and the art continues to flourish and grow around the world. Especially in light of today's focus on the issues of terrorism and cultural,

religious and political tensions internationally, O'Sensei's message of peace and harmony was never more relevant. It is my opinion that the future growth of Aikido will come about through continued development in three areas: Technical, Social and Spiritual.

Development of the Technical aspect of Aikido will depend on quality instructors. Toyoda Sensei emphasized this through his continual concentration on teaching methodology and stringent technical requirements for rank promotion. Aikido was never meant to be static. O'Sensei's art changed constantly throughout his life as did Toyoda Sensei's Aikido. At the same time, there are certain core traditions, techniques and exercises that form a foundation upon which dynamic growth can occur. It is this core that we must continue to preserve and pass on so that others can then find their own individual expressions of Aikido. And, it is by learning specifically how to teach and maintain a high level of instructional quality that this can be accomplished.

From a Social aspect, the future growth of Aikido will be facilitated by less fragmentation in the worldwide Aikido community. I believe it is fine for numerous Aikido organizations to exist but that it is important to maintain affiliations with the present Doshu Moriteru Ueshiba and Aikikai Hombu dojo. The continued creation of events that include members of various organizations, as well as regionally diverse members of the same organization, will help to build ties and friendships and promote the exchange of ideas that help us all grow as Aikidoka. Furthermore, a general focus beyond our dojo and out into our immediate communities will continue to attract people to Aikido. Principles central to Aikido, especially the emphasis on non-violent conflict resolution, apply as much off the mat as on and our efforts to teach these principles to our communities will make them safer, better places to live.

The development of the Spiritual aspect of Aikido is very unique to each individual, yet it is an essential element of the art. O'Sensei was a deeply spiritual person and this was clearly evident in his art and his life, with his enlightenment to the Oneness of all creation being the core of his vision. It has been my observation as both an Aikido student and instructor that it is this spiritual thread that most attracts people to Aikido and then keeps them involved. I cannot count the number of students who have told me that their experience with other martial arts, whose emphasis is on competition and the destruction and defeat of opponents, just felt wrong at some deep level. Their discovery of Aikido's emphasis on harmony and compassion turned out to be just what was missing for them. Ultimately it is this aspect of the art that will continue to manifest itself and make a huge difference on our planet.