

AIKIDO HISTORY IN JAPAN

The year 1942 is often cited as the beginning of modern aikido. It was at that time that the DAI NIHON BUTOKUKAI, desiring to achieve a standardization in teaching methodology and nomenclature for modern Japanese martial arts, reached an agreement with the KOBUKAI representative Minoru HIRAI to call the jujutsu form developed by Morihei UESHIBA aikido. 20 years before, in 1922, Ueshiba had received the teaching license "kyoji-dairi" from Sokaku TAKEDA of DAITO RYU. He subsequently modified these techniques and combined them with his knowledge of other styles such as YAGYU SHINGAN RYU or TENJIN SHINYO RYU into what was first called AIKI BUDO and finally, with a strong emphasis on spiritual and ethical aspects, AIKIDO. Thus, in 1942 AIKIDO joined the ranks of judo, kendo, kyudo and other modern martial arts. When viewed in terms of the development of Morihei Ueshiba's art, 1942 does coincidentally represent a time of great transformation as the founder retired to IWAMA that year in the midst of World War II. It was there he made great efforts to hone his technical skills and attain a higher spiritual plane. The founder himself declared that it was during the Iwama years that he perfected his aikido. It is therefore not unreasonable to consider 1942 as the dividing line between aiki budo and aikido. In reality, little aikido was practiced at this time in Japan due to the depletion of the ranks of young men who had been mobilized for the war effort. Thus, although the birth of aikido can be thought of as having occurred in 1942, its real growth began well after the end of the war. Morihei Ueshiba lived full-time in Iwama from 1942 until 1955, after which he divided his time between Iwama, Tokyo, and his regular travels to the Kansai region. SAITO Morihiro Sensei always claimed that the Founder taught differently in Iwama than he did elsewhere because the dojo was attached to his home and he could engage in training whenever the impulse struck.

The ZAIDAN HOJIN AIKIKAI, the foundation established by the AIKIKAI HOMBU DOJO, was registered in Ibaragi Prefecture on 9 February 1948 and was the historical continuation of the Kobukai. The Hombu Dojo had been relocated to Iwama due to the restricted conditions in Tokyo following the war. At this time, the Wakamatsu dojo was a dojo in name only, since several bombed-out families were living inside. It was even used for a time as a dance hall for occupation troops. Most Japanese were primarily concerned with getting enough to eat during these years. This, coupled with the fact that the art was virtually unknown, resulted in low attendance at training sessions. Morihei Ueshiba spent most of his time in Iwama engaged in farming and intensive training. The present DOSHU, Kisshomaru UESHIBA, was employed by Osaka Shoji, a securities firm. Hence, the Aikikai, with no full-time instructors, was off to a slow start.

Elsewhere, Gozo SHIODA, an enthusiastic pre-war student of Ueshiba, succeeded in landing a job in 1950 as a guard for the Nihon Kokan Steel company which had been experiencing labor unrest. This led to him beginning regular aikido instruction at the company's several locations in 1952. Also during this period, Shioda conducted numerous aikido demonstrations at police stations. These activities led shortly afterward to the creation of YOSHINKAN AIKIDO.

It was also about this time that the seeds of TOMIKI AIKIDO were being sown at Waseda University. Kenji TOMIKI had assumed charge of the university's judo club in April 1951. In addition to standard judo instruction, he continued experimenting with a series of techniques executed from a separated stance called RIKAKU TAISEI. These were essentially aikido techniques which Tomiki felt formed an essential and complimentary part of a total judo curriculum. Beginning in April 1952, Tomiki began teaching formal courses of "judo exercises" first to women and then to mixed classes. These courses too included such content as aikido kata and much of the preliminary research which would later become the Tomiki system was conducted at this time.

It should also be mentioned that Noriaki INOUE, Morihei Ueshiba's nephew who was then known as Hoken, was active in Tokyo teaching at the Tachikawa Air Base just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War. He later taught in Yoyogi Shinmachi. Although not documented, it seems that Inoue was using the name aiki budo at this time. His art would later, c. 1956, come to be called SHINWA TAIDO and finally SHIN'EI TAIDO. Inoue had long been independent of his uncle and it seems that he had minimal contact with the Aikikai Hombu Dojo.

By this time, the founder began little by little to venture out from Iwama. He spent several months in Osaka in 1952 assisting Bansen TANAKA in launching his new dojo. He also traveled on several occasions to Wakayama Prefecture in the early 1950s where he spent time visiting shrines and instructing in the Kumano Juku Dojo of Michio HIKITSUCHI.

A major event for the struggling new art took place in 1954 when a large public demonstration sponsored by the Life Extension Association was held at the Tokyo Gymnasium in Sendagaya. Some 15,000 persons attended this exhibition and it is said to be the first large-scale public demonstration held after the war. Gozo Shioda and Koichi TOHEI were among the participants and the excitement generated by this event added much to make the name of aikido known. Shioda, in particular, made a strong impression and soon was able to attract the backing of Shoshiro Kudo of the Tomin Bank and Kiichi Minami of the Kokusaku Pulp Company. The availability of financial assistance led to the establishment of the Yoshinkan Aikido dojo in Tsukudo Hachiman in 1955. That same year, Shioda published a book on basic aikido techniques and the art even began to appear on television.

Then in 1956, the Aikikai held a series of demonstrations over a five-day period in which the founder Ueshiba appeared at the Takashimaya Department Store in Nihombashi. It was around this time that Kisshomaru left his job to devote himself full-time to aikido instruction. Moreover, the Aikikai was given a boost by the arrival of André NOCQUET, a French judoka, in the summer. Nocquet became an UCHIDESHI at the Aikikai Hombu Dojo and shared life with the Ueshiba family. Besides being an enthusiastic practitioner, he was well-connected in diplomatic circles and arranged for numerous foreign dignitaries to come to the Aikikai dojo to witness demonstrations. Several of the more talented individuals who joined the Aikikai after the war began to teach in other locations and branch dojos began to crop up all over. Among these teachers were such well-known names as Kisaburo OSAWA, Koichi Tohei, Hiroshi TADA, Shoji NISHIO, Seigo YAMAGUCHI and Nobuyoshi TAMURA, to name but a few. Shigenobu OKUMURA, though holding down a full-time job, also played an active role. Fukiko SUNADOMARI acted as head of the women's instructional staff and was very much involved in the inner workings of the dojo and affairs of the Ueshiba family.

Assisting Shioda in the spread of Yoshinkan Aikido were such names as Kiyoyuki TERADA, Shigeo TANAKA, Tadataka MATSUO and later, Takashi KUSHIDA and Kyoichi INOUE. The Yoshinkan was very active giving public demonstrations and received considerable media coverage.

Although the diverse curricula and organizational structures of the Aikikai, Yoshinkan and Tomiki Aikido styles were emerging, the personal bonds formed during the KOBUKAN DOJO period lingered. For example, the Aikikai and Yoshinkan would sometimes appear in the same demonstrations and Kenji Tomiki taught from time to time at the Aikikai in the mid-1950s.

The Aikikai represented the continuation of Morihei Ueshiba's prewar efforts and enjoyed the prestige of his name, and it also began creating a network of branch dojos and university clubs in the late-1950s which were later grouped into federations. Moreover, the Aikikai was able to develop a solid teachers' staff based on an active uchideshi program. This approach produced a close-knit team of young professional instructors who supplemented the efforts of the senior teachers. It was its success on the organizational level and active formation of instructors which led to the numerical predominance of the Aikikai over other styles. Kisshomaru Ueshiba and his close associates deserve much credit for this progress. The founder's son also published his first book entitled Aikido in 1957--more than 20 would later follow--which was a popular success and subsequently reprinted many times.

It is also essential to mention the contribution of Koichi Tohei to the growth of the Aikikai. An outstanding martial artist with an outgoing personality, Tohei spent considerable time abroad, mainly in Hawaii, where an active aikido following soon gathered. Moreover, Tohei succeeded in raising funds for the cash-strapped Hombu Dojo in the early years. He was also a member of the inner circle of decision-makers at the Aikikai and was the brother-in-law of Kisshomaru, the two having married sisters. Although they would later become embroiled in an acrimonious dispute which led to a definitive rupture, at this time they worked together and aikido thrived.

By the late 1950s Morihei Ueshiba was dividing his time between Iwama and Tokyo. Ueshiba also began traveling more and more especially to the Kansai area and Wakayama Prefecture. He was not, however, heavily involved in management and organizational matters at the Hombu Dojo. Ueshiba's role at this point in time was primarily on an instructional level and as a symbol of the higher goals of the art.

At Waseda University, Tomiki continued to experiment with the introduction of competition to aikido in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At this stage, a type of practice called TOSHU RANDORI, or empty-handed free competition, had been developed and was being tested. Tomiki wished to obtain the blessings of the founder for his efforts. Exchanges of views took place between Tomiki and the Aikikai with Shigenobu Okumura often acting as intermediary. However, the founder was very firm on this issue and adamantly insisted that aikido did not include competition. A rift between Tomiki and the Aikikai consequently developed and Tomiki continued on his own.

1960 marked the first year the All-Japan Aikido Demonstration was held. The first exhibition took place at the Yamano Hall in Tokyo. This event created a consciousness of the spread of aikido and a sense of unity within the Aikikai structure. It was held for many years at the Hibiya Kokaido and then, beginning in 1977, at the NIPPON BUDOKAN, its present site. Moreover, the early 1960s were characterized by the steady growth of the Aikikai organization as regional and national university federations were created. The presence of numerous university clubs insured the spread of aikido within the Japanese business and professional world.

The Yoshinkan, for its part, maintained a high profile by conducting many public demonstrations. Robert Kennedy, brother of John F. Kennedy, witnessed a Yoshinkan Aikido demonstration in 1962. The Yoshinkan also managed to create inroads into police institutions to offer training programs. Instruction of riot police began c. 1960 and Kyoichi Inoue started teaching policewomen of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department in 1967. In 1970 he became a full-time instructor and today some 1,000 women are in his charge.

By the mid-1960s aikido had taken its place among the ranks of major Japanese martial arts. The art was featured in newspapers, in books, and on television. Also, a steady stream of foreign practitioners began to frequent aikido dojos, a fact which did not escape the attention of the Japanese public. Although figures such as Minoru MOCHIZUKI, Tadashi ABE, Masamichi NORO, Aritoshi MURASHIGE, Mutsuro NAKAZONO and, of course, Tohei had gone overseas earlier, now the Aikikai dispatched many of its former uchideshi to Europe and the USA in a more systematic manner. The list includes Tamura (France), Tada (Italy), Seiichi SUGANO (Australia), Yoshimitsu YAMADA, Mitsunari KANAI and Shuji MARUYAMA (USA), Kazuo CHIBA (England), and Katsuaki ASAI (Germany)

As the decade of the 1960s came to a close, the founder had reached an advanced age and was in frail health. His passing on 26 April 1969 marked the end of an era. Kisshomaru followed his father as the Second Doshu and continued to lead the Aikikai. Inside the Hombu Dojo, a new generation of teachers was emerging from among those uchideshi who joined the Aikikai in the early to middle 1960s. Among those active were Mitsugi SAOTOME, Norihiko ICHIHASHI, Masando SASAKI, Shizuo IMAIZUMI, Kenji SHIMIZU, Nobuyuki WATANABE, Mamoru SUGANUMA, Seishiro ENDO, and Koretoshi MARUYAMA. The number of foreign students at the dojo also reached sizable proportions, many coming to Japan from all over the world specifically to study aikido. Kisshomaru had the strong backup of Osawa and many of the old guard instructors who had joined the dojo in the years after the war. However, with the founder no longer on the scene, the disparity in teaching methods between Koichi Tohei, who placed a strong emphasis on KI, and Kisshomaru and other shihan became increasingly apparent. Loyalties within the Aikikai grew to be divided. Tohei's attempts to impose his methods at the Aikikai met with strong resistance and he eventually set up the KI NO KENKYUKAI outside the Hombu Dojo in September 1971 under strained conditions. By March of 1974 the situation had worsened considerably and a major split became imminent. Finally, sparked by events occurring during trips to the U. S. by both Kisshomaru and Tohei in April, Tohei announced his resignation on 30 April 1974. At the same time he established SHINSHIN TOITSU AIKIDO (Aikido with Mind and Body Coordinated). The consequences of this rupture were devastating both in Japan and overseas, especially in the U. S. Dojos were required to chose their loyalties and

yesterday's friends became today's enemies. Apart from the inconveniences and bad feelings experienced on both sides, the aikido world suffered a deep psychological blow from which it would take years to recover.

The early 1970s were difficult years for the Yoshinkan. A dispute occurred between Shioda and one of his sponsors, who was also managing the dojo. This led to the sponsor's resignation along with the entire office staff and all but one of the Yoshinkan Hombu Dojo instructors. Moreover, the dojo had just been moved from a central location in Yoyogi to a difficult-to-reach location in the suburb city of Koganei. Although its external structure remained more or less intact, the Yoshinkan was greatly weakened internally by the mass resignation and many years would be required to rebuild its teaching staff.

As the mid-1970s arrived, the situation within the Aikikai stabilized and Kisshomaru's son, Moriteru, became more and more a public figure. As the new WAKASENSEI, he was being groomed to succeed his father as the next Doshu. Moreover, Kisaburo Osawa, now DOJO-CHO, stepped into the spotlight as a leader in his own right and traveled a great deal abroad. Spurred by political events in Europe, particularly, in France, the Aikikai decided to create a formal international structure in order to better oversee the development of aikido both at home and abroad. The result was the creation in 1976 of the INTERNATIONAL AIKIDO FEDERATION for overseas nations and the All-Japan Aikido Federation for its national network. The Aikikai system in Japan was already organized to a fairly high degree and the creation of the national organization was more a matter of form than substance meant to achieve uniformity among the structures of national aikido bodies. A considerable amount of inertia prevailed within the Aikikai system, with its branches spread thick throughout Japanese society. Given its strong base in Japan and having now set in place a formal international structure, the Aikikai directed great energy to the administration of its overseas interests.

On the instructional scene at the Aikikai, some of the new faces of the late 1960s and early 1970s had become the new wave of junior instructors of the 1980s at the Aikikai. They included Masatoshi Yasuno, Ichiro SHIBATA, Shoji Seki, Tsuruzo Miyamoto, Yoshiaki Yokota, and Hayato OSAWA. They assumed part of the teaching duties at the Aikikai and made frequent trips abroad to instruct.

Any recounting of the growth process of the Aikikai in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s would be incomplete without mention of the efforts of Yasuo KOBAYASHI. A former uchideshi, Kobayashi established his first dojo in Kodaira in 1969. From this start, he carefully constructed a network of schools known as Kobayashi Dojos which by 1990 has grown to include more than 80 locations. Moreover, this feat was accomplished entirely within the framework of the Aikikai structure. The keys to Kobayashi's success lie in his ability to develop a corps of loyal instructors and excellent lines of communication. The structure of his group is flat, flexible and devoid of bureaucracy.

Aikido at present is an institutionalized part of Japanese society. The Aikikai has a history going back more than 40 years and nearly 1,000 affiliated dojos. It has survived the major split caused by the departure of Tohei and many other minor defections of teachers who have gone their separate ways. The uninterrupted transfer of leadership for the next generation to Moriteru Ueshiba seems assured. [This article was written around 1980. As of today - 2010 - Moriteru is in charge at the Aikikai and his son Mitsuteru is being developed as the next doshu]

What is commonly referred to as IWAMA AIKIDO is a vast technical system consisting of taijutsu, aiki ken and aiki jo techniques. The taijutsu component alone includes somewhere in the vicinity of 600 techniques. Add the various weapons suburi and paired exercises and you have well over 1,000 distinct forms. This curriculum is far more elaborate than those of the Yoshinkan, Aikikai, or that of Koichi Tohei prior to his departure from the Aikikai. It is these latter systems that provide the basis for the styles of aikido that spread in Japan and overseas after World War II, rather than that of the Founder. This is not to imply that the Iwama system is superior but simply that it differs in important ways in content and scope compared to the other major aikido styles.

A fair question to ask is how could such an elaborate technical system have developed in the isolated countryside of Iwama if Morihiro Saito were its creator? Saito had only a middle school education and, aside from a short work assignment in Tokyo as an employee of Japan Railways, spent his life up to the age of 46 years in and around the town of Iwama. His studies of judo and karate as a teenager were brief and superficial, his main influence being his apprenticeship under the Founder starting from 1946.

It should be pointed out that Morihei Ueshiba lived full-time in Iwama from 1942 until 1955. By comparison, O-Sensei's appearances at the Aikikai Hombu Dojo in Tokyo in his final years were sporadic and unpredictable. His erratic schedule did not allow the teaching of a complex technical system in the city. Moreover, the old Tokyo dojo was comparatively small and did not lend itself to weapons practice in contrast to the countryside of Iwama with its ample outdoor spaces. Besides, the Aikikai of the late 1950s and 60s had an experienced cadre of some of the best instructors in the world who oversaw instruction.

What then are the possibilities as to the origin of Iwama Aikido? As I see things, they are three: (1) Morihei Ueshiba did teach a technically rich system including weapons in Iwama over a protracted period of time with Morihiro Saito as his leading student. Saito passed on the Founder's teaching methods essentially intact, changing or adding little; (2) Saito took the loosely-organized aikido basics he learned from the Founder and devised an elaborate curriculum of his own without outside input that is substantially different from what the Founder taught. (3) Saito acquired a deep knowledge of aikido from his long association with the Founder and systemized this body of information into a modern, pedagogically sound system. The third conclusion seems the most convincing to me.

I once doubted that Saito Sensei's methods were closely rooted in O-Sensei's teachings because of the apparent differences in their execution of techniques. I based myself on the Founder's demonstrations in the films from his final years where he performed very few techniques, many of them involving little contact with his uke. On the other hand, Saito Sensei's aikido was precise, martial and technically diverse. However, I was forced to reevaluate my opinion on this key point following the discovery of O-Sensei's 1938 technical manual "Budo" where photos of several key basic techniques are virtually identical to the aikido forms taught by Saito Sensei in Iwama. My later exposure to the more than 1,000 photos from the Noma Dojo series of 1935 reinforced this change in my thinking. Literally, hundreds of very precise and complex techniques stemming from the Founder's years in Daito-ryu aikijujutsu are preserved. Only a true martial art master could have acquired such a marvelous skill set.

Many have implied that the Founder was somewhat haphazard in his teaching approach but, at least during the Iwama years, he seems to have left intact a brilliantly conceived and original martial system.

[update: IWAMA Aikido had always been embedded in the Aikikai. After SAITO Morihiro passed away in 2002, the differences between his son Hitohiro as his successor and the Aikikai made SAITO HITOHIRO separate from the Aikikai in February 2004 and form his own organization called Iwama Shin Shin Aikishurenkai. Their homepage iwamaaikido.com in 2010 lists 15 dojos in Japan as affiliated and representatives in 12 european countries.]

The Yoshinkan Aikido Hombu Dojo, now in its 35th year, has recently created an INTERNATIONAL YOSHINKAI AIKIDO FEDERATION and announced Shioda's son, Yasuhisa, as his successor. Although relatively small in terms of numbers, Yoshinkan Aikido is very well-known both in Japan and abroad and its new organization, if well managed, should promote steady growth. Tomiki Aikido, with its solid base in Waseda University and at the Osaka SHODOKAN dojo, continues to go its separate way, holding competitions. It is overseen by the JAPAN AIKIDO ASSOCIATION and seems destined to make steady gains given the sound theoretical basis left by Kenji Tomiki.

Shinshin Toitsu Aikido is at a transition point as leadership of the school is being passed from Tohei to his successor, Koretoshi Maruyama. The group has been plagued by numerous defections from among the ranks of its top teachers, both in Japan and abroad. Although Tohei's personal reputation remains intact, his Ki No Kenkyukai organization is still small in Japan, and much of its remaining support comes from overseas branch dojos.

YOSEIKAN AIKIDO seems destined to disappear from the Japanese martial arts scene as its founder, Minoru Mochizuki, is at an advanced age and no dojo network exists. [update: After the death of its founder Minoru Mochizuki in 2003, YOSEIKAN AIKIDO lives on in two branches. The YOSEIKAN headquarters was, due to the efforts of Mochizuki's son Hiroo, moved to France, where it has a strong base, albeit in altered form. On the other hand, a group of Minoru Mochizuki Sensei's direct students who stayed loyal to his teachings continue his style under the name SEIFUKAI and several dedicated groups exist in Canada and the U. S. and Germany.]

MANSEIKAN AIKIDO, an independent group centered in Kyushu, under the leadership of Kanshu SUNADOMARI, is well organized and should continue to show gains in that region. TENDOKAN AIKIDO taught by Kenji Shimizu, formerly of the Aikikai, has one large dojo in Tokyo and several branch dojos in Europe. Many other small groups who use the name of aikido exist today in Japan. Some are headed by individuals who have left the mainstream and others by persons whose claims to connections to Morihei Ueshiba or Sokaku TAKEDA have not been documented. The Shin'ei Taido of Noriaki Inoue seems headed for extinction as its founder is approaching 90 and has few students.

The idealistic goals espoused by aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba, though not realized, are recalled and aspired to by many and seem likely not to be forgotten. As a unique martial art with a humanistic emphasis, aikido seems destined to continue its slow, steady growth and remain a constant force for the betterment of society.

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