

THE KIAI

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Newsletter of THE AIKIDO INSTITUTE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH HOA SENSEI

The following is the first installment of an interview conducted on December 18, 1999 at Newens Sensei's home by Peter Slote. Subsequent installments will appear in future issues of the KIAI.

Peter Slote: Sensei, at what age did you begin training in Aikido and in what year?

Newens Sensei: I began in 1966 but officially in the records of the Tenshinkai Federation it was Jan 1, 1967. That would be when I was 12 years old. I was taking private lessons from an instructor at a private dojo in someone's home. I didn't join the Tenshinkai Federation until Jan 1967. But the official records at Hombu dojo say January 1, 1967.



Would you tell us about Phong Sensei, the aikido community in Saigon and what the training was like there?

I began at a branch dojo, not at the headquarters. It was like a gym where people were lifting weights and practicing gymnastics on the side. We had a mat on the 2nd floor. It was open air, kind of a rooftop. I was only 11 or 12 years old. It was not like serious training as far as I was concerned. It was more like play. There were a lot of kids and a lot of the practice was centered around ukemi: rolls, high falls, long rolls and the like. Then after around a year or so the branch dojo closed and we moved on to the Headquarters of the Tenshinkai Federation which is where Phong Sensei was teaching.

What year did Phong Sensei establish the Tenshinkai in Saigon?



I don't remember the exact year but in 1998 it was the 30 year anniversary so it must have been 1968. The year after I joined he went to Japan and got authorization from O'Sensei to start Tenshinkai.

What is your first impression of Phong Sensei? Did he teach kids classes and did you get exposure to him early on?

I don't remember specifically if he was teaching kids classes, maybe once in a while. I think there were other instructors who were teaching kids classes. But I joined the adults class fairly soon when I was about 14 years old. He was a very strict teacher in the sense that he would always remind you to train. There were a lot of people who would train for a while then sit down and rest. There was a lot of resting on the sideline. He would always encourage people to join the practice actively. Basically he was a very stern teacher. He was in the military himself.

He was an instructor in the military academy.

I can see why people would need to sit down and take a rest training with Phong Sensei. The training is vigorous, to say the least.

Yes, a lot of movement.

(Truly understated! – interviewer's note)

What year did you leave Viet Nam and go to Australia?

November 1973.

How did you find Sugano Sensei? What was it like to train under someone other than your original sensei?

I went to Monash University (in Victoria, Australia). There was an aikido club there run by Tony Smibert. He was a student of Sugano Sensei. He introduced me at that time. When I met Sugano Sensei I didn't recognize him. I didn't think he was a sensei, he appeared so young and naïve looking. He had an innocent look on his face, I figured he was just another student. He must have been in his early thirties. I began training with him at that time.

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AIKIDO INSTITUTE
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How did you find the training in Australia?

The training was very similar to what we did in Saigon. It was the same type of aikido. Sugano Sensei was uchi deshi to O'Sensei and the Doshu, Kisshomaru Uyeshiba, at the time. The training style was very similar. There was a lot of circular movement. Sugano Sensei also taught a lot of weapons because he trained in Iwama for a long time with Saito Sensei, I think on every weekend for a long period of time.

What year did you come to California?

1978.

There were so many fewer aikido dojo in the Bay Area to choose from than there are now. How did you come to the Oakland dojo?

Sugano Sensei had a friend named Robert Nadeau. He gave me a letter of introduction to Nadeau, so I went to San Francisco and trained over there for a night or two. But I was living in Hayward then and it was a long commute. I looked in the phone book and found something in Oakland, which was nearby. I took BART and went to Aikido Institute and joined then. That would be around December 1978.

When you trained with Nadeau Sensei for the first time was that at the Turk Street Dojo?

It was. Corner of Turk and Van Ness.

So you had exposure to Iwama style before coming to Oakland?

Very limited only in the sense of the weapons training. But even the weapons training was a little different, though similar.

Was the training in Oakland a different style for you?

It was a big difference in the sense that the movements were shorter, appeared to be shorter, and more direct. More high falls.

When did you first meet Saito Sensei?

I think I met him first at a summer retreat on the East Coast, in Springfield MA at some college there. It was a summer retreat where they invited Saito Sensei for one week then Tamura Sensei for another week. That would have been in 1979 or 1980.

What were your biggest impressions of the training at Oakland in 1978.

As I mentioned before there were a lot of short moves, a lot of static techniques with strong grips, a lot of high falls, not much motion, and with a strong emphasis on weapons work.

[Interview to be continued....]

STOPPING...STARTING

Stopping Aikido is easy. Starting Aikido is hard.

Not stretching and being inflexible is easy.

Stretching and being flexible is hard.

Doing a forward roll is easy. Doing a forward roll quietly is hard.

Staying on your feet is easy. Staying in Hamni is hard.

Sitting is easy. Seiza is hard.

Tattered Do-gi is easy. Repaired Do-gi is hard.

Falling flat is easy. Maintaining a circular shape while falling is hard.

Getting disconnected is easy. Staying connected is hard.

Avoidance is easy. Blending is hard.

Witnessing is easy. Involved learning is hard.

Mimicking motion is easy. Thought directed motion is hard.

Showing disrespect is easy. Showing respect is hard.

Being conscious is easy. Being focused is hard.

Carrying baggage is easy. Culling baggage is hard.

Excess movement is easy. Refined movement is hard.

Non-centered Ki-Ai is easy. Centered Ki-Ai is hard.

Ten sword strikes are easy. A thousand sword strikes are hard.

Closed fist is easy. Keeping fingers open is hard.

Shallow breathing is easy. Deep centering breathing is hard.

Standing is easy. Grounding is hard.

Bending over is easy. Lowering your center is hard.

Being Nage is easy. Being Uke is hard.

Watching is easy. Being an Uke in Rondori is hard.

Kihon is easy. Kino-nagare is hard.

Using strength is easy. Using Ki is hard.

Bowing is easy. Respectful bowing is hard.

Uni-directional awareness is easy. Omni-

directional awareness is hard.

Preconceived forced reaction is easy.

Spontaneous blending reaction is hard.

Inconsistent perseverance is easy. Consistent perseverance is hard.

Knowing who O-Sensei is, is easy. Knowing who is O-Sensei, is hard.

Aikido in the dojo is easy. Aikido in life is hard.

RICHARD GARCIA



ENTERING

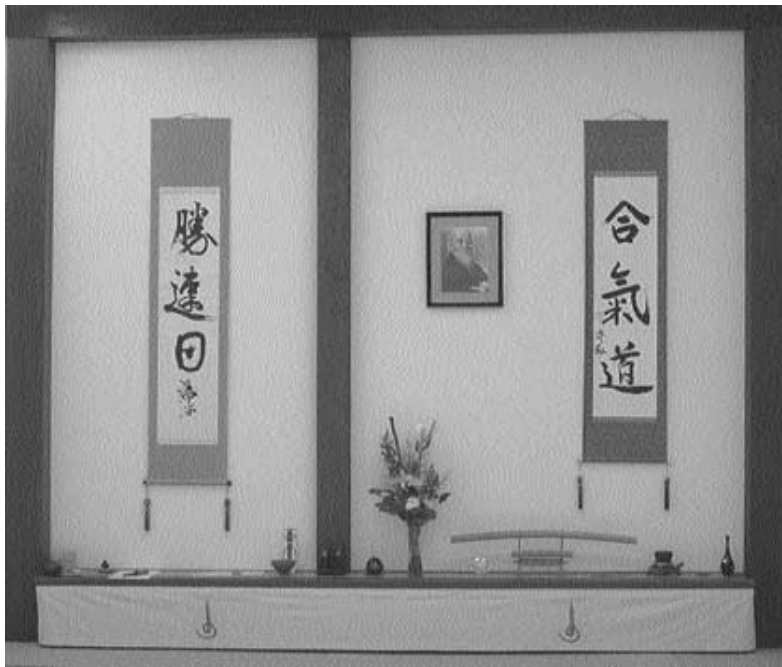
According to all of the books, the safety of Aikido lies in the entry. Stepping past the attack to a spot that is safer than the one on which you are standing is an excellent idea. However, in my experience, the danger of Aikido lies in the entry. Locating the correct spot and then arriving at it at the right moment is nearly impossible. This point was brought home to me this year at two of the seminars I attended.

Nishio Sensei was at San Leandro in June. He talked about entry and acceptance. He kept repeating, enter to uke's corner, this is the safest spot. And, he talked about acceptance. Accept the attack and allow it to flow past. Completely entering, without reserve is the equivalent of completely accepting the attack without reserve. Nothing is stopped, nothing is blocked, everything moves forward. To a safer spot.

Saito Sensei was in Denver last September. His feet eloquently expressed the same ideas. He stepped naturally, without hesitation, placing his heel at the spot which gave him the space he needed without crowding uke. He didn't hurry nor did he step twice. The energy he saved with his smooth arrival he expended with his throw.

These seminars demonstrated to me that even though the difficulty of Aikido lies in the entry there's nothing like thirty years of practice to simplify things.

TED ANDREWS



The Shomen in the Year in 2000

JOIN IN CELEBRATING THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AIKIDO INSTITUTE OF OAKLAND

Founded in 1970, our Dojo has been a place for many to start, to continue, to refocus, to renew, or to share their practice of Aikido. The word “Dojo” can be translated as “training hall”, but that cuts the word off from its root in Sanskrit [*bodhimanda*] that means “place of enlightenment”. The word “dojo” is “the name applied to Buddhist temples and any training hall where a Way is practiced.” It evokes the idea of a place where a spiritual undertaking is united with sincere effort to effect a transformation. It is the transformation that occurs in this training hall that is important, not the egos involved, not the actual geographic location, nor even the specific Way that aids in the process of change.

Our Dojo has existed in 3 different locations. Our Dojo has had 4 different chief instructors. But our Dojo has always been a place to study Aikido. And our Dojo has always had a Shomen.

Our Shomen looks different today than it did in 1970, or 1980, or 1990, or... it seems to change with each location, with each instructor. But it is always there: the focal point of this place where we unite to study so that we may change. The Shomen is constant. It is the bearing by which we find our equilibrium before class, after class, as we enter the dojo, as we leave the dojo, after a high fall, after a hard throw, after a disappointment, after a success, after a test, after 30 years...

To celebrate our Dojo’s 30th year, a number of alumni students and teachers will honor us by joining together to teach an Anniversary-Reunion-Training-Celebration.

Training starts at 10 a.m. on Saturday, March 18, 2000.

After training we’ll have a potluck to celebrate
Come to train, come to celebrate, come to see old friends

Instructors [all former students or teachers at our Dojo] include:

Bill Witt, 6th Dan, Leader of Division 1

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MY AIKIDO EXPERIENCE

Keiko 7 days a week, 4 hours on the weekend, no exception. Alumni of my club would frequently come back and lecture us and say that "Aikido is more important than school. There is NO excuse for missing keiko."

This is where my Aikido experience began. I was in Tokyo attending Waseda University during my sophomore year of college. I had wanted to study Aikido for a good portion of my life, so this was an opportunity not to pass up. I joined the Waseda Aikido-kai, which was supervised by Tada-Sensei but instructed by a different third-senior student selected every year by Tada Sensei himself. We practiced at Hombu Dojo, just a 15 minute walk from campus, every day and followed up every practice with a visit to a nearby tea shop. This was a very formal and strict club and we had one of the lowest memberships of all the martial art clubs due to this. We did not speak during class, kohai did everything possible for sempai, and formalities were emphasized both inside and outside the dojo. We would often go out for drinking parties (but not nearly as much as other clubs) and we would be expected to use the most formal language when speaking to them. When all was said and done, all the kohai would exit the restaurant/bar and circle up. The sempai would pay the bill and we would bow and thank them as they exited the restaurant.

I studied with the Aikido-kai for 10 months and occasionally was able to join other classes at Hombu, including the 6:30am class with the second Doshu, Kisshomaru Ueshiba. I then moved back to Los Angeles to finish up my college career at U.S.C. I quickly found a proper dojo and began studying immediately. I became a student of Furuya Sensei, a student and good friend of the late Kisshomaru Ueshiba, at the Aikido Center of Los Angeles, in little Tokyo. I chose this dojo for many reasons, but mostly because it was very similar to the Aikido environment I was used to in Japan. I also noticed that the dojo had

very strong ties to Hombu dojo and many of the Hombu Dojo Shihan came to visit Furuya Sensei. I wanted to stick to something true to the Japanese culture. In fact, the dojo itself is often said to be more Japanese than Japan.

I went back to Tokyo during the summer of '97 to work for a Japanese company. I accepted the job based on the fact that the company would put me in a host family that was near Hombu. For the first month I practiced with my old club at Hombu. I was then transferred to a different host family and was unable to make the trip to Hombu every day, so Furuya Sensei arranged for me to study underneath Kobayashi Sensei for one month. Yet again I was transferred to another host family and was fortunate enough to train at another dojo for one month. Needless to say, I certainly have visited my share of dojo's in Japan, but I feel this has only helped me grow my appreciation for Aikido.

My year in Japan was the best year of my life and I would me more than happy to share my experiences with anybody. I thank you for welcoming me into your dojo and look forward to some good practice.

In gassho

ERIC RUSSELL



GASSHUKU 99

On Saturday, October 9, Hoa Sensei, Peter, Kathy, Leif, Girard, Gavin, Richard Garcia, John Dallara, J.R., Paul, Mary, Prav, Saill, Darrin, Tim, Julie, Ken Mason, Mike, Adam, David, Tom and I all traveled up to Bolinas to Geoff's house to train. Geoff has a beautiful house with an adjoining studio on a bluff in Bolinas overlooking part of the wooded town and the Pacific Ocean. He and Gavin put in work to set up a mat outdoors, spreading hay and driving two by fours into the ground to hold down the canvas. It was a

real treat to train outside, and it was a flawless day.

We bowed in at noon, and Hoa Sensei focused the first two classes on kokyuu. We went through katate dori kokyuu ho, variations on katate dori kokyuu nage, kote gaeshi and kokyuu nage from mune tsuki, and koshi nage, irimi nage, and kokyuu nage from yokomen uchi. We then practiced these techniques in groups, randori style. With the hot sun right overhead, sunglasses, a hat, sunscreen, and/or Leif's wave-cap were an absolute necessity. After taijutsu, we practiced ken awase from shomen uchi. We then moved to jo awase all throughout the yard, with sempai attacking from yokomen. We blended high to low and low to high with uneven terrain and hard attacks. The last hour claimed our first casualty of the weekend, a victim of heat exhaustion.

After training, there was dinner. We made pasta with pesto and marinara sauce, garlic bread, salad, and also ordered pizzas. I don't think anyone went hungry. After dinner we cleaned up and took a walk down the hill, onto the beach and through the town. It was a clear night, and away from the lights, the Milky Way was visible. Getting back to Geoff's, Sensei led us in stretching on the mat and sitting in meditation. The neighborhood tomcat was quite attracted to this, weaving in and out of the circle, rubbing against the shomen or sitting on its haunches in the center of the circle watching us. After tea, we all said good night.

Sam saw us up, standing in meditation and going through breathing exercises, then jogging down to the beach with our bokkens. We did kokyuu exercises towards the ocean, then 1000 first suburi strikes, then we were back up for breakfast. After cleaning up, we took our weapons down to the beach, and warmed

Something already knows
How to do this.
It's waiting in my body.
I practice while I'm gone.

ANONYMOUS

up with the ken suburi. Shell fragments were plentiful on this section of the sand, and not a few people were wearing socks by the end of our session with the ken. We went through the 6th and 7th ken aware, and the first through fifth kumitachi. By the time we got around to group practice, the tide was rapidly shrinking the beach. Weapons, food, drink, shoes and other supplies got moved up the cliff face as the water advanced. With sempai attacking, we did an extended third kumitachi into the waves. Dave, with a sock on his injured foot, was considering a one-legged defense of Peter's attack, but thought better of it. We continued with the jo suburi, and the first through the sixth kumijo. By this time the beach was virtually nonexistent, and in group practice, the sempai ran us into the ocean attacking shomen uchi. Parrying the strikes and backing into the tide added a whole new dimension to the practice. It was a lot of fun.

Bowing out back up on the mat and with many thanks to Geoff, we concluded the gasshuku. Disassembling the mat, cleaning up and eating leftover food brought us to the end of our time together. Glowing and tired, we made our way back to the bay.

PODRICK

The surfacing wakes me
The tumbling ashore
Solid and clumsy
Rough sand and wet
Rough mat and seat!

ANONYMOUS

ON AWARENESS

Consider Awareness, Humility, Perseverance, the three principles of our Dojo code. Of these, awareness is primary because it allows us to focus our attention on our practice and thus realize the full potential of our training. Without it, our training would lack direction as we would be forced shift our attention between what is essential and inessential to our practice. Our growth, both inside

and outside of the Dojo, depends on our awareness.

In Aikido, awareness has many forms. Awareness of place is just the beginning. When bowing in to the Dojo, we should take the time to feel aware of the specialness of a space dedicated to the growth of each member through the practice of Aikido. We must have awareness of what we bring into the Dojo and what we take out of it. By bringing what is needful to practice and dispensing with what is not, we can honor and promote that specialness.

One must also have awareness of others. In training, we are aware of everyone on the mat - their location, the intensity and direction of their movement. We are aware of our own energy and motion in conjunction with everyone else so that we can sense where throws and rolls may be followed-through and we can safely allow space for all to move smoothly. We can have awareness of ourselves as one of the 'others.'

A larger sense of this awareness of surroundings is to know where Sensei is on the mat at all times. We must develop an awareness of our Sensei's presence during training so that we can be always ready to receive his direction. An awareness of his location can be as practical as always having him within the periphery of our vision. Simultaneously, it can be as subtle as a sixth sense of our connection with him, as if he is always our third partner in practice. Through awareness, we can at least avoid the awkwardness of blindly backing into him (yes, it has happened!) when he has clapped to signal the demonstration of a technique. At most, it places us at readiness for his grace and guidance.

Partners must share a special degree of awareness in training. Matching the level and speed of a partner - taking into account any special injuries or conditions - allows us to know when, where, and how to throw him or her.

We incorporate into our technique an awareness of how our partner takes our balance. This presents us with a challenge

to our training no matter whom our partner may be.

Partner practice also requires that we maintain our connection throughout our training period. This will ensure that our awareness is continuous and uninterrupted by inessential distractions. For example, upon completing Nage, not turning one's back and walking away from one's partner will sustain the focus for the next attack. As Uke, keeping one's attention on Nage during the throw and fall, and getting up such that Nage is kept in sight will maintain the connection. All should feel like one long technique with no break in the focus.

As one can conclude from the above, consciousness of ourselves as we come to the Dojo, with all of our energies, expectations, and experiences, is an essential cornerstone to our ability to achieve the many forms of awareness we need in Aikido practice. Awareness of place, others, Sensei, and training partners, requires that we impose little of ourselves while we accommodate much of our surroundings. This is how awareness opens us to the wholeness of our training, and enables us to focus our attention so that we may fully develop our practice and personally grow as individuals.

GEOFFREY EVANS

Just now I was weightless
Strong as the ocean,
I turned caught and curled
Coiled and corkscrewed
Surged up and crested, laughing

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