

Hiroshi Ikeda

[Aikido Journal #104 \(1995\)](#)

Aikido Journal: Sensei, what kind of activities are you involved in these days?

Hiroshi Ikeda: I run an aikido dojo in Boulder, Colorado. Also, two or three weekends a month I spend doing seminars in different places all over the United States, such as California, Seattle, Montana and so on. I go to the San Rafael summer camp co-sponsored by Robert Nadeau Sensei and Frank Doran Sensei in California and the D.C. summer camp sponsored by Mitsugi Saotome Sensei, and also my own Rocky Mountain summer camp. Those are my three main summertime activities.

In addition to your dojo, I believe you also operate a martial arts supply company called Bu Jin.

Yes, I started Bu Jin about fourteen years ago. We make items like jo and bokken cases and hakama. I design most of the products myself, so they're things you can't buy at ordinary supply stores. Our hakama are the same as those made in Japan, although their construction may be a bit more sturdy. They've become quite popular because of their durability.

Do you have an actual storefront or is it strictly a mail-order business?

It's completely mail-order. We get business from all over the United States, as well as Canada and Mexico. We even get a few orders from Europe and other places, but really we're not operating on trading-company scale yet. Occasionally orders from Japan come in, too.

Professional aikidoists often engage in side-practices such as bone-setting and police training, but operating a company like Bu Jin is rather unique.

Yes, I suppose so. The fact is, though, it's very difficult for those of us who have left Japan to make ends meet just teaching budo. Of course, I started Bu Jin not only so I could make a living, but also because I wanted some durable training gear.

What brought you to the United States?

Well, it started with my teacher, Mitsugi Saotome Sensei. He was the instructor at my aikido club when I was a student at Kokugakuin University. I guess that was about 27 years ago, and I've been with him ever since. After he relocated to the United States, he asked me if I would consider coming over as well. That was about nineteen years ago, in 1976. I went straight to Florida, and Saotome Sensei then moved to Washington, D.C. I stayed in Florida practicing for two years, then came to Boulder.

Most people are inclined to go to larger metropolitan areas in order to build successful dojos, but you chose Boulder, which is relatively small as cities go. Why was that?

As you may know, Boulder is a student town. The University of Colorado is here so there are quite a few young people. In contrast, the population in Florida includes a large percentage of older, retired people who have gone there for leisure and to live. Many of the young people move away once they become adults. It's fairly difficult to build up a body of aikidoists under those conditions. I was impressed by all the young people in Boulder and thought, "Hey, that's where I need to be!"

Did you encounter any hard times while you were establishing your dojo?

No, not really. I'm more-or-less happy as long as I can train, even if there aren't many people around. It's enough for me if just two or three people can get together to train. When I first came to Boulder, I rented some space in a massage school. There were no mats, so I put some carpets down. Gradually more and more people came and I was able to build a dojo. When I moved here several of my aikido friends moved with me from other states. They really helped me out a great deal.

Were you operating Bu Jin and the dojo at the same time?

During the day I made a little money working at a Japanese restaurant, then in the evening I did aikido. I took care of whatever needed to be done for Bu Jin when I got home at night. Fourteen years ago there weren't so many orders, so I could clear up the day's business in only two or three hours each night.

On Training

Please tell us about your approach to training.

The first thing is that it's important to train with your body, not your head. It's good to take a lot of ukemi to get yourself used to what training is. If you use your head too much, your aikido becomes too intellectual and that will hinder your body movement. I emphasize learning and understanding aikido with your body.

Usually we begin practice with irimi-tenkan. Instead of going right into throwing techniques, I believe it's better to ease the body into the training naturally, beginning with irimi-tenkan to warm up, then moving gradually into ushiro ukemi, and then into the rest of training.

Rather than just teaching or just training it's important that I, too, find opportunities to learn and grow and cultivate my own aikido, so I try various approaches. Practice comprised of simply grabbing and being grabbed is necessary at a certain stage, but I think you have to change and try different things as you advance—for example, practicing how to be grabbed or how to allow yourself to be grabbed properly. Balance-breaking practice is another possibility.

These days I'm working on the concept of "center" (chushin), specifically how to maintain my own center while breaking my partner's balance.

The Quality of Training

Are you influenced greatly by Saotome Sensei?

Yes, to be sure. Looking at what Saotome Sensei has done for years, I see that aikido can't be only aikido; as a budo, it has to be completely capable of responding to anything. In other words, it has to be valid outside its own confines. Saotome Sensei has emphasized this strongly for many years. As I'm sure people who have been around for a while know, Saotome Sensei's demonstrations have always been somewhat unusual, in their explosive intensity and seriousness. Saotome Sensei's demonstrations show not only that there is flow; they point clearly to a training approach that hones an ability to respond to anything. That's something I try to maintain as an important aspect of my own training. I want to pursue aikido as a budo that goes beyond the confines of aikido, perfecting a form of movement like Saotome Sensei's that comes from the center. The way the body moves is extremely important.

Do you use atemi in your aikido?

Not very much at all, especially not strikes to areas like the face. We may, however, touch someone with a small strike if they've put themselves in a dangerous position when grabbing, just to let them know they shouldn't be standing there in a way that makes them vulnerable to attack. But it's not so much of a strike as it is a light tap. That's all that's necessary for them to realize they need to position themselves more to the side or wherever. Giving your partner indicators like this helps them start to pay attention to the various aspects involved in the act of grabbing itself. That way, the person doing the throwing and the person doing the grabbing can both benefit from the training. In other words, both people must consider their positions. So I advocate an approach to training by which both nage and uke can actively learn.

How do you feel about training exchanges?

During my university days we used to share athletic department facilities with people doing other martial arts like Shorinji kempo and judo and sumo. I remember playing around with them figuring out how an aikidoist would respond to this or that kind of technique. Other than that, we often had joint-training sessions with other universities. My university was in Shibuya, so we trained with groups from other universities in the area-Aoyama Gakuin and Kokushikan University, for example. There was a guy at Kokushikan who could do beautiful body shifting movements (tai sabaki) against knife attacks. Watching and training with him was very informative.

I think it's important to study with a variety of different teachers. It's probably best if you can take the good elements that you find useful from a number of different teachers and use them to create something that ideally suits your own body.

Whether or not weapons training is essential to aikido training is a topic of discussion these days. In your view, does the essence of aikido lie in taijutsu alone, or does it also include weapons techniques?

Both, I think. However, becoming proficient with the bokken or jo is really a secondary issue. What's important is that your hands remain in front of you when you practice with those weapons. As I mentioned earlier, I've been training with the concept of "center" in mind. I have my students practice movements with the bokken because it prevents their hands from drifting away from the center of their bodies. If the hands drift off to the side it becomes difficult to get any power into techniques. So I find weapons training very beneficial in terms of helping students establish and maintain their own centers within their aikido movements.

Learning other budo besides aikido must have some advantages, although to tell the truth I don't really know whether practicing other arts like kendo or judo or iaido will have any direct influence on your aikido.

As Yoshio Kuroiwa Sensei teaches, it's important to try to use the ken and jo in a way that is as consistent as possible with your empty-handed movements.

I believe you've trained with Kuroiwa Sensei?

Yes. He moves completely from his center. His techniques have a very "quiet" quality about them. There's no wasted movement. Every movement emanates from his center. Having learned that from him has given me a great advantage now. In weapons training as well, rather than simply swinging the ken or jo, you can practice handling them with movement that originates from your center. It's much more difficult than it looks.

How about training with Saotome Sensei?

Saotome Sensei has always had his opponents strike with full intention and intensity-whether it's a thrust (tsuki) or overhead strike (shomenuchi) or whatever-and he handles the attack decisively. Even when you attack with full intention he can respond with the kind of technique that leaves you in somewhat of a daze. Also, Saotome Sensei's attitude is that if uke happens to make contact, then it's Sensei's own fault, not uke's. Back in Japan at the annual aikido or kobudo demonstrations, he always used karate and kendo black-belts as ukes.

My friend and aikido teacher, the late Yasunori Kuwamori, often took ukemi for Saotome Sensei. He had a fourth or fifth dan in karate and was extremely strong. He once asked Saotome Sensei how he should attack during a demonstration, to which Saotome Sensei replied, "As fiercely as you can." There isn't any so-called "collusion" or pre-arrangement present in his demonstrations. His ukes attack with strikes that could seriously injure or even kill him if he misjudges them and moves in the wrong way slightly. Saotome Sensei's demonstrations naturally take on an unusual air because of the stormy intensity with which both he and his uke approach the encounter.

Operating a successful aikido dojo

In the United States there are hundreds of dojos specializing in aikido. In Japan the numbers are much lower, even in Tokyo. High real estate prices probably contribute to this. Still, despite their numbers, there seem to be various problems associated with running a professional aikido dojo in the U.S.

It's surprisingly easy to start a dojo in the United States. On the other hand, the fact that it's easy gives rise to problems with the quality of the aikido being practiced. One kind of problem arises when instructors devote so much of their time to teaching that they forget or neglect their own training. Serious students, who are really working hard at their training, progress quickly and may even begin to catch up to the instructor. When that happens, the dojo no longer holds enough substance to keep those students, so they either switch to another dojo or in some cases start off in a new direction or with a new style of their own.

So I think that to have a successful dojo, one of the most important things is for the instructor to make a point of continuing his or her own training. That's something I've come to understand watching the situation in the United States.

It's not uncommon for people to take a lot of ukemi when they're young, but by the time they're in their fifties they spend most of their time traveling around teaching.

Yes, but I'm not referring to teachers who become unable to move for whatever reason as they get older, but rather the younger teachers in their thirties and forties who open dojos and devote themselves so exclusively to teaching that they forget their own training. It doesn't have so much to do with age. You can continue your own training well into your forties and fifties if you have the desire to do so.

Another potential pitfall is this: if instructors are relying entirely on income from the dojo, they may find that they inadvertently compromise their training and teaching. To ensure your income, you must have students. The catch is that you might end up coddling your students to get them to stay and it becomes impossible to do any real teaching anymore. If that's the case, the quality of training-and therefore the quality of the technique-suffers.

One difference between our modern age and the past is that in the past the line between life and death was thinner and more immediate. Neglecting your training could mean your death, so

training as seriously as possible was a necessity and a given. Nowadays our lives don't really depend on whether or not we practice budo.

In order to reach a high level in budo-or many other aspects of life for that matter-one needs to have a certain margin of freedom, material as well as spiritual. If you don't have enough money to support and raise your family, for example, then you have to give priority to that.

Morihei Ueshiba himself came from a well-to-do family and probably lived off his family's assets until he was about forty. His father Yoroku supported him financially while he studied under Sokaku Takeda and later he always enjoyed the support of various patrons.

It's true, if you don't have to worry particularly about supporting yourself then you can afford to steep yourself entirely in one activity. If that's the case then naturally you'll prosper at whatever that is. However, this is a very difficult situation to create these days, so people usually end up doing some other kind of work along with their aikido.

Making your dojo successful simply by making the training easier is definitely missing the mark. It seems to me if you establish high standards and endeavor to make yourself as good a role model as possible, then people will naturally gravitate to your dojo.

If I may change the topic, I believe Boulder has relatively fewer problems with violence compared to many other cities, but what value do you think aikido has in terms of responding to violence?

I've heard a number of stories about aikido practitioners who have been attacked. One aikido student from Boulder related how his experience practicing aikido allowed him to remain calm in such a situation. When someone approaches with a knife it's natural to want to try to resist or react in some way. But according to this student, he was able to keep a cool head during the crisis and feels that may have helped to save his life in the end; had he tried to resist he might very well have been killed.

A practitioner of a more "attack-oriented" martial art might be more inclined to feel, "Okay, let's have a go then!" when confronted by a nasty character. But then they might have a gun, against which even the greatest karate champion in the world probably doesn't stand much of a chance. So in the final analysis, it seems that the ability to maintain one's presence of mind in the face of danger is a primary issue.

To conclude, what kinds of hopes do you have for the future?

I hope to keep training as hard as I can for as long as I'm able. I always train with the hope that I will be able to continue practicing with everyone, no matter how old I am. I want to continue learning as much as I can from various teachers and see how much my own aikido can grow and develop. I also want to share all the things I've learned during my university years and while at the Hombu dojo from teachers like Saotome Sensei and Kuroiwa Sensei, in hopes that everyone will be able to enjoy training that much more, whether their approach to training is gentle, severe, or somewhere in between.

Sensei, thank you very much.

Profile of Hiroshi Ikeda

Born January 1950 in Hachijojima, Tokyo. Learned aikido from Mitsugi Saotome Shihan while in the aikido club at Kokugakuin University. Entered Saotome Shihan's Reimeijuku dojo in 1970. Moved to Sarasota, Florida in the United States in 1976 and instructed at the Sarasota Aikikai during 1978-9. Moved to Boulder, Colorado in 1980 and established the Boulder

Aikikai. Travels in the United States two to three times a month. Also operates Bu Jin Design.
Aikido 7th Dan.
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