

A BIOGRAPHY OF FUMIO TOYODA SENSEI

by Meido Moore

(Note: the biographical/historical information contained in this article was obtained directly from Toyoda Shihan by the author during a series of interviews in 1998. As no additional research has yet been done at this time, the author assumes responsibility for any errors.)

Fumio Toyoda, Aikido Shihan, was born in Japan on November 8, 1947.

The Toyoda name is an old one, ultimately traced back as a branch of the Fujiwara clan, one of the ancient noble families that vied for control during the early civil wars in Japan. It was such conflicts which ultimately led to the settling of this branch of the Toyoda on their current family lands in Tochigi prefecture, some 60 miles north of Tokyo. This occurred about 400 years ago; at that time the area was undeveloped and far from the center of power in Kyoto. It is believed that the Toyoda, having backed a losing side in war, were forced to move to this place. There, they took up the life of the samurai-farmer. Their *mon* (family crest) - that of the Fujiwara - can still be seen on the eaves of the old family farmhouse.

At the battle of Sekigahara, which resulted in a decisive victory for Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, the Toyoda were this time on the winning side. The result was a large amount of land, which remained in the family until the land-reform policies of MacArthur reduced it. Today about 50 acres remain. Interestingly, these ancestral lands are adjacent to the lands of another prominent Aikido teacher: Koichi Tohei. The Tohei and Toyoda families have been neighbors for centuries, periodically squabbling over their boundary, which is marked by a stream.

This close proximity to the Tohei family was to have a decisive impact on the direction of Toyoda Shihan's life. His older brother Toshi, an Aikido student under Tohei Sensei, would often take the young Toyoda with him while attending classes. At first this was a babysitting arrangement. At age 10, however, Toyoda Shihan himself began Aikido training. He continued throughout his childhood, also studying Judo from age 12 (during which, he recalls, he broke his collarbone twice). Eventually he abandoned Judo to concentrate on Aikido completely. At age 17 he was awarded his shodan rank. Tohei Sensei was in Hawaii at the time instructing, so the examination was given by the famous Morihiro Saito Sensei.

It was at age 17 that Toyoda Shihan also began misogi training, a tradition at the dojo of Tohei Sensei. In particular, this was the training in breathing and Zen meditation given at the Ichikukai Dojo in Tokyo. Ichikukai was founded by a student of the renowned Meiji-era swordsman, calligrapher and Zen master Yamaoka Tesshu; it still carries a reputation for extremely difficult training of a type rarely undertaken by modern persons. Toyoda Shihan recalled the pancake-size layers of skin that would come off his knees from kneeling so long on tatami during breathing training, and the scars many trainees would develop from senior students striking them repeatedly on the back to help them "get the air out" even after blood had soaked through their clothes.

At age 18, Toyoda Shihan entered Senshu University to begin studying law. He lived for a brief time with the late Akira Tohei Sensei at an apartment near the Aikikai Hombu Dojo in Tokyo, attending classes with O-Sensei Morihei Ueshiba as well as the future Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba. Shortly after, while still continuing to train at the Hombu Dojo, he moved into Ichikukai dojo as *Jyoku*, a resident disciple. Here, in addition to the misogi training mentioned earlier, he formally began Zen training under the guidance of Tesso Hino Sensei, the dojo-cho of Ichikukai, and Bokugyukutsu Keizan Roshi, Zen master, who would come once monthly to conduct *sesshin* (intensive Zen retreat).

For three years he endured the training at Ichikukai, while also going to school and training in Aikido. He recalls this time as being one in which there was no time for rest. The severity of the training at Ichikukai, coupled with his studies, tested his endurance to its limits.

After completing his time at Ichikukai, Toyoda Shihan moved to an apartment again near Hombu Dojo, where he continued to

attend classes three hours each day. At this time he finished his law studies and graduated from Senshu. But, upon reflection, he had an important realization: he was not interested in law as a career. Aikido, and the life of *shugyo* or intensive training, was what truly mattered to him. Making the decision to pursue Aikido professionally, he enrolled as *uchideshi* (live-in disciple) at the Aikikai Hombu Dojo. By this time O-Sensei had died. Toyoda Shihan therefore became the first uchideshi directly under the new Doshu, Kisshomaru Ueshiba. Now at age 22, he was ranked sandan and was assisting with instruction at several locations. At this time, the current Doshu, Moriteru Ueshiba, as well as Hayato Osawa, the son of the late Kisaburo Osawa, were beginning their training.

At age 24, Toyoda Shihan was awarded the rank of yondan. His teaching activities in Japan would eventually include classes at 11 dojo, including Daio Bunka University, Seikei University, and International Christian University. He also traveled to South Korea, where his instruction included classes for hapkido groups and the Korean CIA. He traveled often as *otomo* (attendant and demonstration assistant) for Kisshomaru Ueshiba, and had contact with many other prominent teachers such as Saito Sensei and Yasuo Kobayashi Sensei.

The dramatic split which shook the Aikido world occurred at this time, when Koichi Tohei, then the Chief Instructor at Aikikai Hombu Dojo, left the Aikikai to develop his own Ki no Kenyukai (Ki Society) organization. Toyoda Shihan followed his obligation to his original teacher, and sided with Tohei Sensei (he stated also that his experience at Ichikukai had led him to feel that the intensity of training at Hombu Dojo was somewhat lacking, and he had hoped that the new organization under Tohei Sensei would be different). Eventually, he was given the position of Chief Instructor of Aikido technique for the Ki Society. He also was the author of the international bylaws for that organization. In 1974, at Tohei Sensei's direction, he settled in Chicago to begin spreading Aikido in the United States. He was 27 years old, and now held the rank of godan.

Aikido was not widespread in the mainland United States in 1974, and so there was little base to build upon. Through the tireless work of various teachers, Aikido began to spread and develop. Travelling nearly every weekend for many years to teach and organize across the United States, Toyoda Shihan - now ranked rokudan and independent from the organization of Koichi Tohei Sensei, founded his own organization in 1984, the Aikido Association of America. Dojo were established in cities and towns which had no Aikido; students trained and eventually became instructors; new affiliates were born.

Along with these travels, Toyoda Shihan worked to develop his headquarters in Chicago. It was there that the first of the National Instructor's Seminars was held; Toyoda Shihan was the first to offer such a training, teaching how to teach rather than simply practicing. It was this recognition - that teaching requires a unique and advanced set of skills not necessarily imparted through general practice alone - that was at the core of Toyoda Shihan's work.

Aikido can now be found in almost every major city in America. While it is easy to talk about this growth as a natural process, it is truly only through the physical work of teachers such as Toyoda Shihan, travelling and sacrificing on a daily basis with the same intensity and energy he learned as a young trainee at Ichikukai Dojo, that this has occurred.

Growth occurred internationally as well. Responding to the request for quality Aikido instruction from many other nations, Toyoda Shihan founded a sister organization of AAA, Aikido Association International (AAI). A third organization, Aikido International Foundation (AIF), was founded as well. A federally tax-exempt, not-for-profit educational and charitable organization, AIF provided economic and other assistance to Aikido practitioners in many nations.

And there were other activities. The Japanese Culture Center, a place where persons of any background could gather to receive instruction in traditional arts such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, calligraphy, as well as Japanese language and various martial arts, was founded in Chicago in 1978, and became the model for several similar institutions across the country. At its height in the early and mid 1990's, more than 1,000 persons per year attended classes there, in an atmosphere of cross-cultural understanding and sharing.

Toyoda Shihan's efforts to spread the practice of Rinzai Zen are also notable. The International Zen Dojo Sogenkai, a lay organization devoted to promoting Rinzai Zen meditation and training methods, was also founded in Chicago in 1979 and eventually spread to a number of affiliated branches. Toyoda Shihan, confirmed as a Zen master in 1997 with the Buddhist name of Tenzan Gensei Rokoji, acted for a time as chairman of the board. Sogenkai was committed to propagating the teachings of the late Omori Sogen Roshi, a Zen, sword, and calligraphy master, considered one of the the greatest Zen masters of the 20th century. Toyoda Shihan was a successor of Tenshin Tanouye Roshi, himself a successor of Omori Roshi. This unique lineage, integrating the teachings of Zen, Budo, and the fine arts, is unlike any other in the world.

All of this activity certainly took its toll, and Toyoda Shihan was renowned as a ceaseless worker who rarely gave his body the rest it needed. Having undergone complete kidney failure and successful transplant surgery in the mid-80's, he struggled with ill health throughout his remarkably productive career, and a sense of being on "borrowed time" following his surgery was certainly one of forces driving him. Tragedy struck unexpectedly on July 4th, 2001, however, when he succumbed to a bacterial infection which claimed his life at age 53.

Leaving behind him thousands of students in numerous dojo and organizations, Toyoda Shihan's influence on the growth of Aikido internationally was profound. His Aikido organizations, AAA and AAI, today continue under the leadership of his wife, Pat Toyoda. Another Aikido organization, Aikido Kobayashi Dojo, has agreed to provide instruction in their own style of training to AAA and AAI, with Y. Kobayashi Sensei, his son H. Kobayashi Sensei, and K. Hatayama Sensei officially named the International Head Instructors of Toyoda Sensei's organizations.

Several new dojo and organizations have begun as well. Shinjinkai, an organization founded in Chicago in 2002 by senior students of Toyoda Shihan, today actively maintains his particular teaching and training methodologies. The Zen organizations built by Toyoda Shihan have also survived, and have coalesced to form Daiyuzenji, a Rinzai temple in Chicago, and the Korinji Foundation, a not-for-profit organization working to fulfill one of Toyoda Sensei's unfinished dreams: the establishment of a traditional rural Zen training temple in the Chicago region.

All of these groups look forward to a day when the dynamism, intensity, energy and sharpness embodied by Toyoda Shihan, in both his technique and his person, are the norm in the Aikido world, rather than brilliant exceptions.