

MEMORIES OF TRAINING WITH TOYODA SENSEI

by Meido Moore

Originally written to be included in a collection of memorial articles immediately following Toyoda Sensei's death in 2001.

I spent most of every day for ten years with Toyoda Shihan. It is difficult to speak about him; he was not a person who could be summed up with words or neat statements. His character was like a raging fire, impossible to pin down. The power of his existence was immense. I tried to follow him, failing at times. His was a hard way of life, and a hard way of training. But it was a true one, and perhaps the greatest gift he gave to me was the ability to discern a true way from a false one.

It may not be of much interest or use, but I'll share some stories of my meeting and training with Toyoda Shihan.

In 1990 I had finished college. By that time I was something of an Aikido fanatic, training several hours a day five days a week. It was something I was using to rebuild my health, which had been destroyed after residing for some months in Asia. I was interested in meditation, spiritual training, philosophy - very introverted and something of a dreamer. I decided that I would devote my life to some sort of discipline, and after learning that Toyoda Shihan was a Zen teacher as well as an Aikido master, I resolved to become his *uchideshi* (resident apprentice).

At that time there had not been an *uchideshi* program fully in force for some years, and I confess I had no idea what it entailed. I simply envisioned daily training, an apprenticeship, something very "spiritual". I laugh now at my own naivete, but I suppose that it was also sincerity. If I had not been so ignorant, I would not have been so willing to jump into it.

That summer Toyoda Shihan visited my home dojo in New Jersey. I was scheduled to take my *shodan* test. I arranged to be the student responsible for picking him up from the airport. I still remember my fright waiting at the gate for him. Presently he emerged, in his blue blazer and carrying the ever-present briefcase. His first words were simply, "Hmmp. You finished college. Now what?" I answered immediately, "Sensei, I want to study Aikido."

He grinned then, that famous grin, the one that took up half his face, could charm anyone, and yet still held an intensity that gave him something of the look of a hungry alligator. He began immediately to talk at length about the life of a martial artist, how it could be done, that it was hard, that it was not a respected profession. Driving from the airport, we became lost. Our conversation shifted as he proceeded to give me precise directions to my own dojo, down to the smallest side street. He had taken that drive only once before, he said.

That weekend I was inseparable from him. I tried to be what I imagined a proper attendant should be. I took my test. At the end of it all, exhausted, we sat alone in the car quietly for a few moments. Suddenly he said, "You have *kiai*, but as far as body-movement goes you aren't even standing up yet." I thought he had complimented my yell, also called a *kiai* in martial arts practice, so I yelled right there in the car. He grimaced. "No, *kiai* is a yell but also it means energy."

I arrived in September, a week before *sesshin* [intensive Zen retreat]. My first class at Tenshinkan Dojo was quite full, as that was the evening that Glen Matsuda Sensei, the most senior of Toyoda Shihan's original students, was given a going-away party before his move to New York. I recall also meeting John Mazza Sensei that evening, and I believe we abused each other's elbows; I recall the technique. I believe I met David Miller Sensei that evening as well. There were many others there, senior students, future friends, some of whom remain and some who now are gone.

A few days later, I recall Toyoda Shihan called me up to take *ukemi* for him for the first time. Back then he was teaching every night at Tenshinkan. My *ukemi* training had begun in earnest already, since in effect I was relearning Aikido from scratch. To correct my defects, Sensei had me doing one hundred *yoko ukemi* (side falls) after each class. On this occasion, however, when he

signaled for a *mune tsuki* attack, there was no chance to fall correctly. He simply sidestepped my attack and purposefully punched me full in the face. Blood flew out and some drops landed in front of the students. Sensei later commented that he had been testing me. I remember that night vividly. That night I also met a few students who were to become close friends of mine; they later told me that my blood landing in front of them had moved them to befriend me, so after all there were several good things to come from that occurrence.

As an aside, I should mention this about the training we did. Toyoda Shihan was justly famous for his control. It was very rare that he would accidentally injure a student. However, at that time uchideshi were treated quite differently from outside students. He would hit, he would go past the limit with joint techniques, he would go completely and fully into the joint so that you felt he was actually walking around inside your wrist or shoulder. One time he struck my throat so sharply with the blade of his hand that I could not eat for several days due to the swelling. Another time I was sleepy and sluggish, so he grabbed my head and twisted my neck sharply, tearing a muscle. There were many instances like this which to us at that time seemed normal and not worth mentioning. He said that he had been trained that way, and that in order to learn true ukemi it must be understood that ukemi is survival. With him, it certainly was. And I'm grateful for that training, since without it I would not ever have developed my ukemi to the point that was necessary. Also, I especially believe my understanding of certain techniques came from these experiences. For example, it was only by feeling Toyoda Shihan's pins that I came to see what the mechanism of pinning is. Aikido learning is like this, which is why it is difficult. Many people seem to think that seeing and hearing is enough to learn a technique, but our idea was to feel it all the way. And one thing I will say is this: the ability and power which Toyoda Shihan showed in class or at seminars was one tenth of what he actually had, and which a few of us were privileged (and terrified) to experience. He was a truly great martial artist, and he hid the extent of his ability.

Some weeks after arriving, and after the exhaustion of sesshin, I began to get ill. Sensei said this was normal, and showed my weaknesses. The dojo then also was cold, with five-inch gaps in the upstairs windows through which snow would blow. My memories of that first winter are largely ones of being alone at night in a dark room, huddled with blankets in the freezing air, sore and tired. It was a very lonely, bitter time. It had begun to dawn on me by then that the many of the things and people I had left behind...indeed, the whole of my former life...was in many ways lost to me. It was solely my choice to do so, of course, but remembering that gave little comfort at the time. Now I understand how important that experience was, but it is still difficult for me to recall that first year in Toyoda Sensei's dojo without deep emotion.

Now, aside from these hardships and the daily scolding which became the norm, there were many bright and happy times. Nearly every weeknight evening it became our habit to go out to a Japanese restaurant where he would treat me to dinner. It was actually in those places, drinking and eating too much, joking with the sushi chefs who would yell "*Osu!*" and "*Shinzen ni rei!*" upon our entry, that we talked philosophy. Our talks were not abstract, though, but practical. How to deal with people. How to lead. How to talk. How to live fully. He would delight in talking about his past, about other Shihan he knew, old friends in Japan, his rowdy younger days, his *misogi* and Zen experiences, the past and future of Aikido. I began to feel his history; for example, though I never met Tesso Hino Sensei of Ichikukai dojo, or his ferocious wife, I certainly feel from these stories that I knew them. To the many masks Toyoda Shihan wore, and which it seemed he could change with alarming speed, was during this time added the one of friend.

Time passed quickly. After one year, more uchideshi came. I began to travel with Sensei everywhere, and eventually taught my first seminar alone. I realized that Toyoda Shihan had given me a career. Other years passed, one after the other, following the schedule of seminars and events which is so familiar to all of you.

At the time when there were several uchideshi in the dojo, we had many crazy times I might mention. Looking back, I think we felt we needed to live up to Toyoda Shihan's colorful past, and in some way he delighted in our activities, perhaps reliving his own younger days. One thing that comes to mind is the "Concrete Club", which could be joined by anyone willing to be thrown full breakfall several times on the sidewalk (anyone who completed three years as uchideshi back then was "graduated" by hav-

ing Toyoda Shihan throw them in the alley, "on broken glass" as he liked to say). Some of us took this tradition further and established an unofficial demonstration team, which would stage fights in local bars. After a feigned shouting and shoving match, one person would swing at the other, who would then throw him in *sbibonage* or *koshinage* onto the wood floor. We made bouncers nervous. Sometimes we recruited students this way. The area around Tenshinkan was a big night-life area, which made for interesting times. Removing drunks, receiving challenges from crazy people, chasing partygoers from an adjacent building off the dojo roof with a *bokken*, were all uchideshi duties.

Also at the center of much of this craziness was the old Shinjinkan dojo, in downtown Chicago. Sensei had given me instructional control there, and we trained extremely hard. The result was a core group of somewhat crazy people. We received a lot of complaints from other dojo that we threw too hard, and sometimes Sensei would publicly scold me about it. In private, however, he would encourage me to continue that way, and we would laugh about it. As I think back on it all, I remember most that everything would make Toyoda Shihan laugh. And that to me was a reward, to sit and joke with him and make him laugh. There were times when I would do anything for that, since I so feared his yelling.

Traveling was an important part of our experience. To Toyoda Shihan, traveling to teach a seminar was *musba shugyo*. *Musba shugyo* in the old sense is the training by which a swordsman wanders the country facing all challengers or visiting other dojo to issue challenges; Musashi and Tsukahara Bokuden are famous examples of swordsmen who did this. Whenever we traveled to teach, together or alone, we viewed it that way. Sometimes challenges would come. Often persons who wished to challenge Toyoda Shihan but could not would "give a hard time" to the uchideshi. Or, sometimes there would be someone on the mat to whom Toyoda Shihan wished a point to be made, so we would be assigned to practice with that person. This is not to say we hurt anyone. Most often, simply throwing someone hard once ("Chicago-style", as some outlying dojos called it, which really just meant Toyoda style), or even just outlasting them with stamina, was enough to make them more receptive to Sensei's instruction. And, beyond this, traveling was a chance to learn about other places and people. Sensei made me keep notebooks from time to time when traveling, and required me to report not only on a seminar but on the local population, industry, infrastructure, etc. of an area. This was how he trained himself as well, I noticed. Recently, in going through some of his papers, I discovered notes he had made in this vein during a European trip. It was very moving for me to see that.

Another thing that strikes me as I think back is that people learned a lot from watching the interaction of Toyoda Shihan with his uchideshi. Sensei often complained that the dojo atmosphere was too casual, and stated that he was using uchideshi to show other students how they should act. Especially during a demonstration when taking ukemi, this was the case. My experience of taking the role of his uke is one of attempting to be utterly and completely aware, to anticipate what he wished to demonstrate before he did so. It was that way as well working daily in his office (the "dragon cave" as we called that smoky, terrifying place), not only on the mat. Concentrating in this manner can lead to some interesting experiences. There was a time for several days when I found it literally impossible to differentiate myself from Sensei. It was an important moment in my training, I think. It may be that my nature, which is impressionable, predisposed me to this kind of illusion. However, whatever the case, that will give you a sense of how we tried to train ourselves moment to moment.

I should mention the Zen training we did. Toyoda Shihan, as most people now know, received transmission of the Dharma from Tenshin Tanouye Rotaishi, who was in turn a successor of Omori Sogen Roshi, one of the most famous Zen masters of the 20th century. Zen was, to Toyoda Shihan, an indispensable part of training. He insisted on it for uchideshi, though it was optional for regular students. Many of the deeper moments of my training occurred in that context. I recall especially the time when I was working on a first koan, a problem to be penetrated in meditation. The question was simply, "Who am I?" I worked on this koan for almost two years. Most evenings after training I would go down to the lake and sit on the rocks there, internally whipping myself over and over with the question, "Who am I, who am I." When one sesshin approached, I felt I was at the breaking point. I did everything I could to throw myself into the question, and I suppose I was walking around wide-eyed like a zombie. Sensei saw this and sat me down. "You look strange," he said. "What you're looking for is nothing special." At those words, "nothing special", I felt like a tremendous weight had been lifted from my body. It was as though I'd awakened from a strange dream. That

night I went to sleep working on the koan, and the next morning upon waking an answer came out. The significant thing to me is that Toyoda Shihan's words were the turning point, a sword cut that slashed through my obstructions. He had that kind of power. It was a common thing for people to walk into the office, sit down in front of him, and suddenly feel their state of mind change. His vibration in that wasy was incredibly strong.

I had the chance to meet Tanouye Rotaishi only once, during a visit to Chozen-ji monastery in Hawaii. He encouraged me to be a martial artist. I think Toyoda Shihan asked him to do that. Still, it was very meaningful to me. When Toyoda Shihan received his *inka shomei*, recognition as a Zen master, he gave me a *rakusu* (buddhist garment) and *nenju* (rosary) which Tanouye Rotaishi had given to him. These, along with some calligraphy from Sensei, are my chief treasures in the world.

With these stories you might catch the feeling of what it was like to train with Toyoda Shihan every day. There are many other things to tell, some of which I hesitate to relate since they seem shocking to some people. But the important thing is that we truly tried to live that lifestyle, the way of the samurai. I don't know how much people can understand that feeling, if they are not in that sort of relationship and situation. We would joke, for example, about crazy old traditions like cutting off our little fingers if we made a mistake, or signing papers with a blood oath (*keppan*), using blood drawn with a tanto; but there were times when crazy things like that did happen. The thing you must understand about Toyoda Shihan is that he straddled two worlds. He was very modern, even very American in some ways. But his other foot was squarely set in a feudal place of several hundred years ago. He was the real thing, a true martial artist.

But still, what I miss most at the end of it are simply the easy times enjoying each other's company in the office, talking about everything. Walking in Japan with him, reminiscing and talking history. Talking about life and death, drinking beer and eating peanuts.

The last time I saw Toyoda Shihan was like that. We were sitting, chatting. We had both had rough times that month, and were arguing back and forth over various things. But that evening we were just talking, and there was the old feeling of warmth. We just looked at each other and smiled, silently, for a long moment. That smile is my last memory of him.

Now is perhaps the time to mention what Sensei often said were the things of which he was most proud. His family, his wife and sons, his brother, first of all. He constantly spoke of them, proudly related their daily doings and accomplishments, worried over their troubles, and stated that many things would be possible without them. Second was his organizations, the fact that so much had grown from such humble beginnings. Third was his teaching skill: he knew he was talented, he knew what he could do, and he knew it was rare. Fourth, his status as a lay Zen master - this filled him with a deep sense of accomplishment. Finally, Toyoda Shihan was proud and happy simply to have a dojo. If all his efforts had faded away to nothing, he would have continued with one dojo, properly arranged and cleaned daily, with daily training available to all. The dojo, and the concept of *shugyo*, were to him the great treasures of his culture that transcended national boundaries in their value. To have transmitted his understanding of these things to us was a thing of which he was tremendously proud.

In Toyoda Shihan I lost a teacher, a best friend, and a mentor. It is hard to continue without him. Recently I dreamed of him, as many of us are doing. He simply looked at me long and seriously and said, "Work hard. Work hard. Work hard".

It was a good dream. It is what he would say if he were here, and it is what we should do now.