

January 22, 2010
Palo Alto, CA

Quotes from the Founder

Recently I came across a number of quotations by the Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba. Reading them brought back old memories of sitting in the dojo, during class, and listening to him talk about aikido subjects. I had not been in Japan that long and had to rely on others to get the gist of what he was saying. My friends either could not translate or fully understand what he was saying. I always felt I was missing something, when he talked. Nonetheless, I listened to what he said, understood little, and tried to get the feeling of what he spoke.

I did hear him tell some stories of his younger years and once understood enough to appreciate, one day in the dojo, his retelling of the famous story of him dodging the bullet in Manchuria.

Over the years since, Saito Shihan referred to his relationship to O-Sensei many times and shared with us his recollections. Other aikido sensei I have been privileged to know have shared experiences as well. These stories have been absorbed into my aikido experience, and, as a result, I am reluctant to retell stories about the Founder, unless I heard it directly from someone who knew the Founder or actually saw the situation. This is because stories have a way of changing rapidly, depending on the distance from the originator.

In Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba's book *Budo, The Teachings of Aikido*, there is a brief biography of the Founder. While reading it one day, I was struck by some of the events depicted. The Founder lived a long and interesting life. He must have had many experiences which would be inspiring and colorful to read. Why, I wondered, were these particular stories included and others left out? This book was written while the Founder was still alive, and I am sure he had a firm say in what was included.

It came to me that he was interested in passing on some important lessons he had learned over a lifetime of budo training. There are some very basic issues we encounter as we train. How long will we train? Should we do this for a living? What happens when we get injured or sick? These are questions that affect us all in our involvement with aikido. They have nothing and yet everything, to do with our training in the dojo.

At first, after finding a competent teacher, one should try to set a schedule for training. Following this schedule sets a pattern for progress. Such a pattern, interestingly enough, usually only takes about three weeks to develop. It is also interesting that this pattern seems to hold true for other habit forming situations in our life as well. The Founder set a rigorous daily schedule for training. "This old man must train," he said, according to my old Hombu training partner, now in Virginia, Gordon Sakamoto Sensei.

What really leapt out at me, while reading *Budo* again, was the story of O-Sensei contracting beriberi and being confined to bed for a long time. Why was that included? It was a significant event to be sure, but how important was it? O-Sensei, I believe, was telling us what it was like to begin from the beginning and how we should train. His former strength and condition dissipated by illness, he began by light training. At first he walked a short distance. He then increased the distance. Then he began running. He was consistent. His strength improved with a gradual, continued progression of training intensity. Sometimes great teachers will illustrate principles through personal stories. This has nothing to do with ego and everything to do with passing on insights to students. The Founder is still passing on important advice many years after his death.

Another item from *Budo* is the Founder's statement that Aikido and farming was the way to go in life. The Founder farmed extensively and was brought up in a rural area. It was how he earned his sustenance. This statement, however, can be put into a more personal, modern context:

Aikido and dentistry, or aikido and plumbing. I believe he was saying aikido could be balanced with a profession. Although I know a number of full-time aikido teachers, the Founder was saying that path is not for everyone. The normal student in the dojo, enthusiastic about aikido, must always balance earning a living with the art. The professional teacher, said Saito Shihan, worries about the business aspects of running a dojo and attracting and retaining students—making a living. This may cause a change in one's core beliefs and even in one's training. Saito Shihan, himself, never taught full time, until after he retired from his job. By then, he had other income, so he could spend his time teaching and not worry about compromising his aikido to get by. Another way of looking at this is that there are many more students than teachers. The student is usually not able to put full time into aikido and must maintain a balance with his/her personal affairs.

Now I am looking at some of his other quotations, translated into English by John Stevens. I won't pretend to understand everything the Founder said, but I would like to discuss some of these quotes with you in the future. I believe the Founder left us a valuable legacy in these sayings, if we will take the time to consider them. Hopefully they will get you thinking as well.