

BRINGING FRIENDSHIP AND GOODWILL THROUGH THE HARMONY OF AIKIDO



by CELESTE EASTON

For many American Aikidoists across the country, the month of April brought something special—a return visit of Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba, son and successor of the Founder of the art. Fully seven years had elapsed since the last visit from Tokyo, so almost inevitably a flood of student requests caused the initial plans to attend the Tenth Anniversary of the New York Aiki Kai to blossom into a two week goodwill tour for the Doshu.

Arriving in New York City on April 8 with sensei Mori Suganuma (Chief Instructor at the Kyushu dojo), the Doshu was also joined by top American sensei Yoshimitsu Yamada (New York), Mitsuya Kanai (Boston) and Akira Tohei (Chicago); and together the group spent the next two weeks touring New York City, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Honolulu. In each city the entourage was well received, but nowhere was the response as overwhelming as in Los Angeles.

On April 15, what was certainly the highest-ranking and most proficient group of Aikidoists ever seen in Los Angeles demonstrated to a capacity crowd of 1,500 at the Scottish Rite Auditorium. Ueshiba Aikido, the art of the Founder, was spotlighted in depth—so much so that locals could only feel that the highlight of the Doshu's tour had taken place in their city. Fortunately, earlier in the day *INSIDE KUNG-FU* correspondent Celeste Easton had gotten the story down in an exclusive interview with the Doshu and his interpreter, Dr. Katsuaki Terasawa.

AIKIDO In his memoirs the Founder wrote: *"I want considerate people to listen to the voice of Aikido. It is not for correcting others; it is for correcting your own mind. This is Aikido. This is the mission of Aikido and should be your mis-*

sion."

Aikido has no end—there's just the beginning and further growth. That is the way Kisshomaru Ueshiba understood his father's Aikido, and that's also what he hopes everyone else will someday come



Aikido Doshu (Head Master) Kisshomaru Ueshiba recently demonstrated his art to a capacity audience at Los Angeles' Scottish Rite Auditorium — at what many considered the highlight of his recent two week goodwill tour. The demonstration, arranged by local Aikidoist Daniel Furyua (above, left) and some friends, showcased the art of the Founder before a distinguished and interested audience.



photography: BEN MAKUTA



to know. "Yes, the more the better," states the Doshu about further trips to promote Aikido's harmonious way, "so I can see the progress of Aikido students in this country and around the world, and have a better understanding and more communication, which should be beneficial for anybody who is studying Aikido.

"It's been some time since I last visited this country. I have seen many old friends and have had a heartwarming time with those people. From what I have seen, the progress made among Aikido practitioners is considerable and that is good. There are many great aspects in Aikido and practicing Aikido—each practitioner has found something for himself. The only limitation is your own limitation; how much you can get out of it depends on you."

Aikido is a modern martial art based on traditional philosophies. Founded in 1925 by Master Morihei Ueshiba, there are nearly 1,000,000 worldwide who practice this art, and on the spiritual level see the current Doshu as the leader of Aikido. The stories of Aikido's mixed heritage of sword fighting, Aiki-jujitsu and



Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba (center), and, l-r, Aikido senseis Mitsuya Kanai, Yoshimitsu Yamada, Akira Tohei and Mori Suganuma.



Back in 1925, Master Morihei Ueshiba understood and conceived Aikido in a moment of Spiritual Enlightenment—just eight years after the birth of his only son, Kisshomaru. Now the second generation leader of Aikido, Doshu Ueshiba works out (above) at the Hombu Dojo in Tokyo and (left) in the Aikido Shrine at Iwama. A Shinto shrine in the Japanese countryside, the Aikido Shrine is where the Founder lived and practiced the harmony of Aikido with a few trusted disciples during the chaos and violence of World War II.



points out. “It is quite different from other forms of martial arts in technique.

“You coordinate, you harmonize with your partner—I said *partner*, not antagonist or opposition, because in a way he is actually your partner to enhance yourself or to correct yourself. If you go against their power, it is not Aikido. You harmonize. You take their force within you and then move together. If one practices this kind of form, even at the physical level as a body technique, maybe he can start to think about how to harmonize, how to coordinate, how to be one with all things. And maybe through this kind of training can be found the link between the very abstract and the very physical that lies at the heart of Aikido.”

To be sure, Aikido is as physical as it is philosophical. Its difference with other

Buddhist and Shinto philosophies are well known—but the exact result of this synthesis has sometimes been hard to pin down.

“I think it depends,” the Doshu explains. “If you define a martial art to be very narrow, just a technique in fighting, then Aikido extends beyond that. But some people like to define a true martial art as one which transcends that level. In that case, Aikido is a true martial art.”

HARMONY From the standpoint of self-defense, Aikido has to be seen to be believed. In the almost surrealistic free-style *randori*, where any number of opponents are free to attack a single Aikidoist in any way they choose, the flying bodies and seemingly effortless performance of the Aikidoist just doesn't seem possible . . . yet there is no doubt that it is real. “Aikido movement is characterized by smooth, soft harmonizing rather than striking, linear form,” the Doshu

martial arts lies in the fact that the essence of Aikido is realized during the harmonious synthesis of the physical and spiritual—a synthesis that the Founder devoted his life to refining. “He studied many different forms of martial arts to start with,” recalls the Doshu of his father, “and in *budo* martial arts the first emphasis is to be good and strong. But as the Founder developed, he ran into a fundamental question: ‘What was beyond the level of attainment on a physical plane?’”

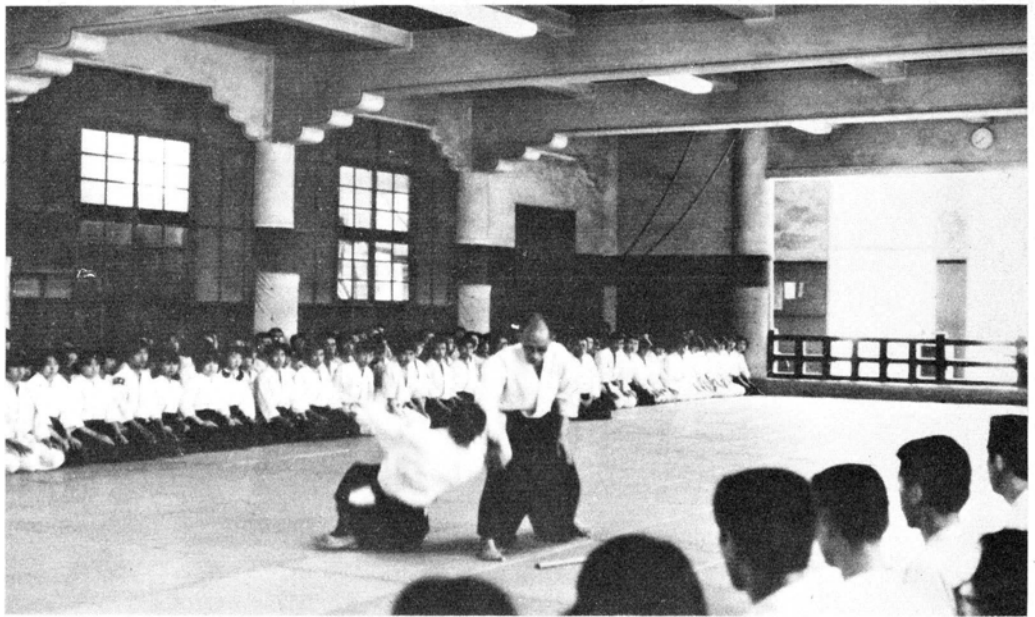
“The Founder did many types of training and realized that reconciling the physical with the intellectual and spiritual creates a world in which you don’t have opposition. You become harmonious and you don’t have the conflict. That is the way Aikido states one of its objectives, which is to create a world without enemies, to make an understanding and harmonious world, and not just rely on the bodily aspect to achieve it.”

Aikido as the Doshu perceives it, then, is not to train just the body, but also the mind. Very often Aikido’s effectiveness as a form of self-defense, a martial art, obscures the mental aspects just beneath the surface. But the Doshu emphasizes, “you have to train the mind as well as the body. Strength counts in Aikido, absolute strength in the body counts. But the strength must not only be in the body, but also in the mind—mental strength. One doesn’t have soft technique. It is important to develop one’s strength in the body, but the other level has to be developed too. It’s a very hard and strong training, and is not soft.”



TRANSMITTING THE ART Aikido is a fairly new martial art—founded in 1925 and kept from the general public until 1948—and as a result, has suffered less from the bastardizations and commercializations that have plagued other arts. Most of the top sensei in America (including senseis Yamada, Kanai and Tohei) have teaching experience from the Hombu Dojo in Tokyo, the headquarters of the world federation, and they have tried to remain true to the Founder’s way. “In Aikido we are very close together and very united,” adds New York’s Yamada. “The control of it is in the hands of the instructors and the fact that the Founder’s son is alive is a positive factor. So far, we have managed to keep the art pure.”

Nearly 1,000,000 persons worldwide practice Aikido, with the greatest concentration in Japan, of course. But from what he was able to see in his brief tour, the Doshu has few fears that the art is any lesser outside of the homeland. “Al-



The Hombu Dojo in Tokyo serves as headquarters for Aikido with nearly 30 students of the Founder as instructors, in addition to the Doshu himself.

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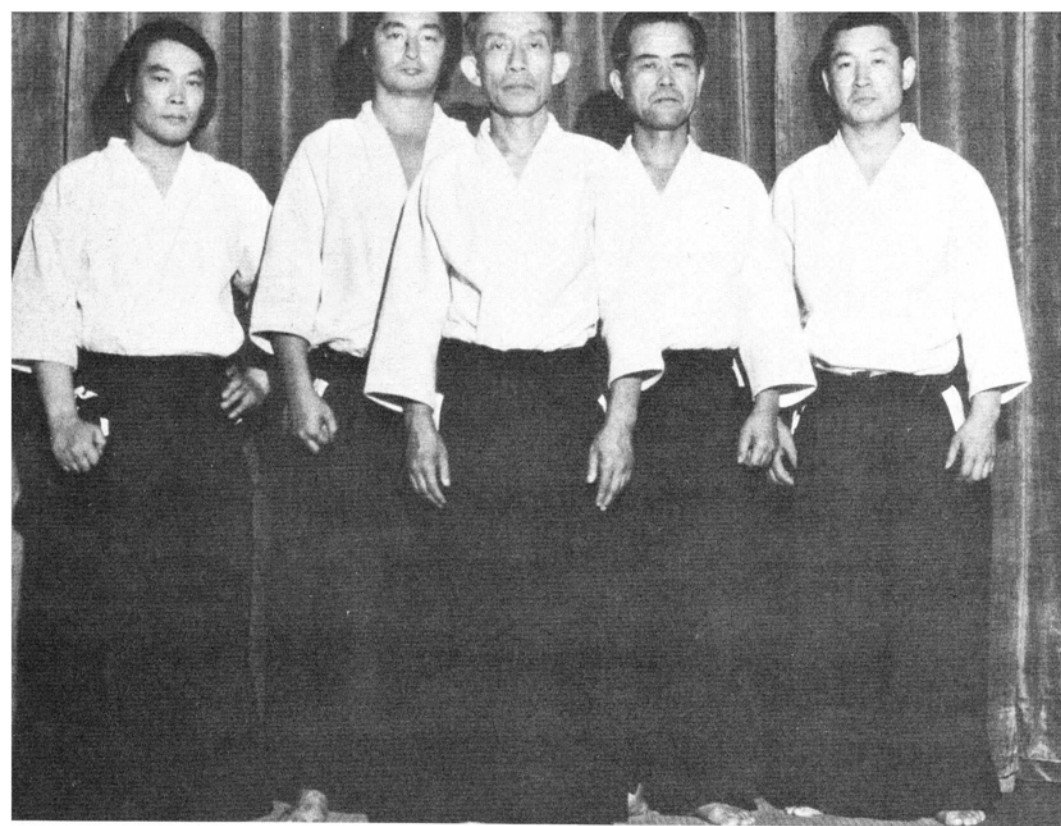
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though my trip has been short and I haven't been able to see all of the dojos, those that I have seen showed that the training here is just as it is in Japan. The only difference is that Japan had a Founder that originated the art and therefore had a head start.

"However, I am very glad to see quite a few great instructors coming over to this country and disseminating the Aikido form. More people now have recognized the true aspects of Aikido. True ways to attain such height transcends borders, transcends regional peculiarities and differences. Aikido seeks for the universal truth, the universal goodness . . . such things which have a common ground among different races, different cultures, different countries. The Founder mentioned in respect to this area that he wishes through Aikido for people to have a better communication channel established, and get to know other people and create a friendlier world."



THE DOSHU Born in Wakayama Prefecture near Osaka in 1917, Kisshomaru was the only child of the Founder. In many ways, his life has been inextricably tied to Aikido from the beginning. Kisshomaru was eight years old when his father officially founded Aikido in 1925, but the road that led to the final Enlightenment was already being traversed before his birth.

Looking back on his early days, the Doshu recalls: "It was just like an old proverb that goes, 'The child in front of

the Temple starts to recite the sutra without knowing the meaning.' It was just like that for me. I couldn't say exactly when I first started to train in Aikido."

Later years brought a University education at Waseda, followed by the assumption of responsibilities for management of the General Headquarters of Aikido in Tokyo. Then in 1969, the Founder passed away and Kisshomaru succeeded him as Doshu.

In the years since then, Aikido has experienced a tremendous upsurge in popularity along with other martial arts. More and more dojo have opened around the world, and even the art itself continues to grow. "Of course, the Founder originated Aikido," the Doshu explains, "and yet, as he passed away after leading a full life, he didn't say that's the end of Aikido, or that he accomplished something. He truly accomplished great things, but he was striving all of his life—he felt that even after he passed away there wouldn't be any end to it. He was always humble, because as he developed more and more, he saw the vastness of the universe. As knowledge expands, the boundary between the known and the unknown also expands.

"I don't claim that I have contributed new ideas like religion or philosophy to the art," the Doshu continues, "but I have been working at my own level and very humbly do my part. As for technique, I don't see any limitation to the further development of technique, for there can be infinite variation and such things are born every day through practicing. In general, I feel this possibility is the result of the absence of rigidity in technique and in form, and is a great contribution of the Founder. I would like to keep that tradition alive.



"On a more concrete level—that is, the organization and spreading of Aikido—I feel that I have accomplished something. I believe that Aikido should be spread to as many people as possible, that the art should be shared by all. Still, I don't want to change the basic in order to mass produce it here or anywhere else."

Currently, Aikido practice in the United States is concentrated near the major urban centers. New York City is the center of practice on the East coast, Chicago in the Midwest, and Los Angeles for California and the West coast. Numerous schools also include Aikido in addition to regular curriculums of Karate, Judo or other arts. At last count, Aikido was regarded as one of the fastest-growing martial arts over the last few years.



THE WAY "My father started out as a young man to become strong, to be good in martial arts. Then he ran into a wall, through which his goal was changed, and he sought the prosperity of the mind."

Aikido is a way, not a technique. For each practitioner the goal is to find that way towards spiritual harmony and oneness with the universe. Each Aikidoist reaches his own level of attainment, his own understanding of the way, using only himself as a guideline. There is no competition in Aikido, nor any relative comparison of "skills;" for achievement comes from within. "It has never entered my mind to compare things such," explains the Doshu when asked if he had reached his father's level of "skill." "I am doing my best and working hard, but one doesn't function at that level of competing in Aikido.

"Aikido is a very new art. Of course, there are many elements of traditional Japanese art involved in the development of the forms, but the spiritual limit is



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endless. It is related to the limits set upon a human being—there will always be someone stronger, someone stronger than he, and so on. Therefore, to become totally strong, the physical limits must be transcended. To become absolutely good, absolutely strong and in a winning position only occurs in the time when you do not have any enemies. In that sense only."

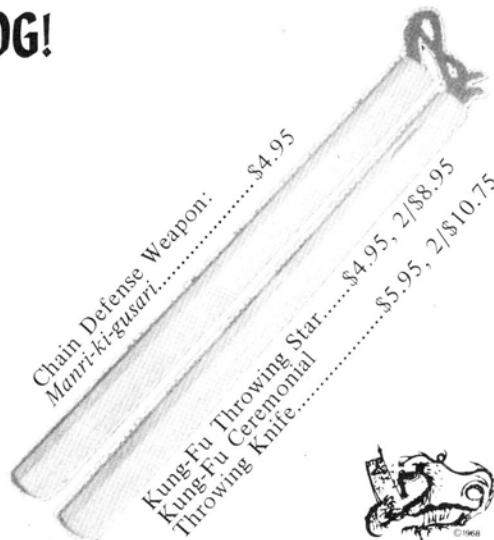
However, the Doshu hastens to add, this should not be misinterpreted as license to become stronger merely to do away with one's enemies. Rather, the concept of "enemy" should be eliminated from one's mind. This, he emphasizes, is the harmony of Aikido envisioned by the Founder when he wrote:

"There is no enemy for Ueshiba of Aikido. You are mistaken if you think that budo means to have opponents and enemies, and to be strong and fell them. There are neither opponents or enemies for true budo. True budo is to be one with the universe, that is, to be united with the Center of the universe."



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