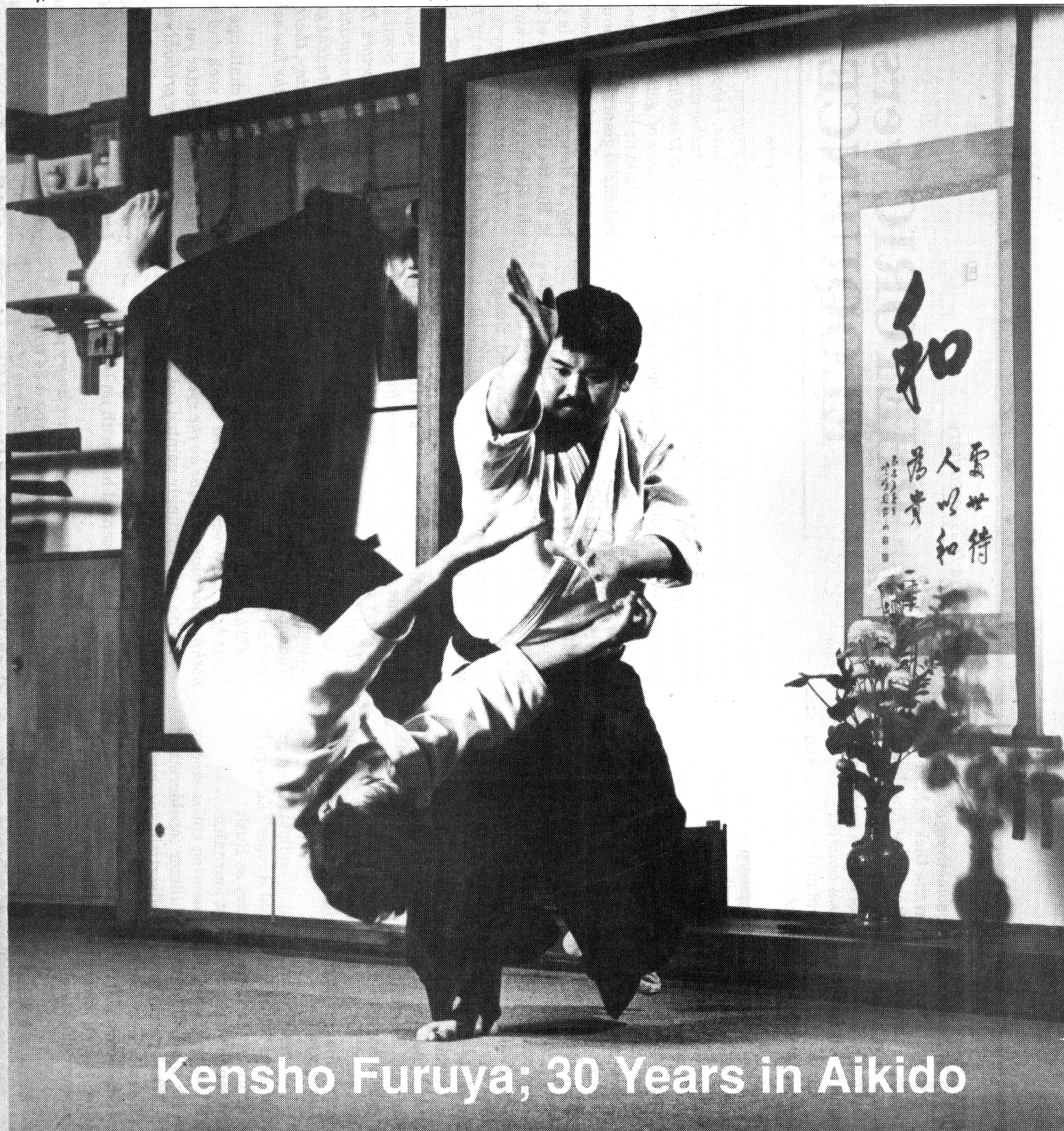


# TOZAI TIMES

July, 1993 ● Heirs to the Wealth of East and West ● 5810 East Olympic Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90022 (213) 723 - 6245 FAX : (213) 722 - 7865 ● Volume 9 Issue 105



**Kensho Furuya; 30 Years in Aikido**

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*Kensho Furuya*

## In the Traditional Way

□ By Victoria Yamashita

North American Headquarters of Soto Zen Buddhism and accompanied Bishop Yamashita to speak at the United Nations in New York. And he writes—in 1991 he published over 400 pages of text. Currently he publishes the *dojo* newsletter, a black belt newsletter, continues the “Ancient Ways” column, and does articles for the Southern California Sword Society. But he’s not stuffy—indeed, he can be a big-time chatterbox.

“In the practice of martial arts, I don’t want to spend too much time talking,” he laughs. “Each class is only an hour and if I start talking then they won’t have a chance to practice. So I try to keep my mouth shut during the training. But then, the students don’t get the background material and the philosophy they need. That’s why I write the *dojo* newsletter. The ‘Ancient Ways’ column I started as a favor, I was asked to do a column on the very traditional side of martial arts as opposed to the modern.”

Sensei, despite his quick laugh and eager enthusiasm, is very much a traditionalist, almost a step into the past, considering his background.

“I was one of those after camp babies. My mother did not speak any Japanese, my father spoke a little. They liked bowling, fishing, Vegas, things like that. My going into martial arts, into Japanese history, was like a shock to them. For many people my age, our parents tried to raise us more as Americans so we could fit more nicely into American society. And I think that a lot of people of my parents’ generation almost rejected Japanese culture because it was a source of pain, a source of discrimination, a source of hatred.

“My mother almost never talked about camp. I remember before she went into camp, she said she couldn’t go into Robinson’s Department Store because they had a sign that said ‘No Japs Allowed.’ She said White kids used to throw stones at her and she was called names in school. She felt very alienated from the culture she was raised in and made the strong reaction that I should be Americanized, like my cousins. But I reacted to her reaction and became very Japanese.” Sensei hesitates and then laughs again, “I felt like quite a conformist, but in retrospect, maybe I was quite rebellious.”

The spaciousness and clean lines of the school downstairs is in almost direct contrast to the upstairs. The loft area where Sensei keeps his “office” is crowded beyond belief. A student, the young man who admitted me, politely weaves his way through the clutter, passes between Furuya and his computer and disappears through a door. The downstairs practice area and adjoining tea room are all done in the traditional manner.

“This is a traditional *dojo* and I tried to build it in a very traditional style. Especially for the Japanese Americans, for the Sansei and Yonsei, I tried to give them a feeling for their roots and culture. I wanted it to feel like a different working environment. Everything is naturally stained, no formica or polyurethane, just natural wood floors. The students’ sensitivity changes because in the outside world they’re all used to things that are scratch and dent resistant. Now they’re in a very soft environment so when they walk on floors and pound their feet, it makes noise. And if you handle things roughly they actually get hurt. I

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**E**ven before ten o’clock, the day had the promise of being a steamer. Two young men watched me parallel park in the alley with disinterest. Once parked, I started up the stairs to the Aikido Center and both young men immediately welcomed and ushered me inside. One politely warned me that the wooden lip surrounding the newly laid *dojo* mats was recently lacquered before he went back outside. The other hurried off to let the Sensei know I had arrived. Following his lead, I carelessly kicked my tennis shoes into a corner and wished I had worn something more conservative than red socks.

Kensho Furuya filled the stairway with his presence like a giant boulder coming down a mountain pass. Make no mistake—this is a large man. Yet, from the moment he smilingly led me upstairs to his crowded office, he showed graciousness and charm that far overwhelmed even his massive stature. Kensho Furuya is a remarkable man.

Sensei Furuya is a young man (well he’s 45) who wants to keep to the old ways. This image is in direct contradiction to his playfulness and sly sense of humor which are not traditional at all. He is serious about martial arts and Japanese swords with the credentials in each to give him weighty credibility—and he practices the tea ceremony. This is no Master Po teaching Grasshopper the ancient ways, this is a flesh and blood man of hearty appetite who lives and breathes his art and inspires it in his students.

The Aikido Center of Los Angeles, which he founded, is celebrating Sensei Furuya’s 30 years in *aikido*. Actually, he corrects softly, it’s his 33rd year, but they’re rounding it off. Although the Aikido Center of Los Angeles was established only in 1985, Sensei began his study of *aikido* in 1961. In between he attended USC under a departmental grant in Asian Studies, studied at the Aikido World Headquarters in Tokyo with Grandmaster Kisshomaru Ueshiba, attended Harvard, began his own *aikido dojo* in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, began a column called “Ancient Ways” for the *Martial Arts Training* magazine, served as president of the Southern California Sword Society, established the first official branch school of All Japan Battodo Federation, became an ordained Zen priest under Bishop Kenko Yamashita of the



**Kensho Furuya**

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notice people handle things more carefully now, they're learning to be more careful because it's a more easily damaged sort of environment.

"Everyday, after practice, they have to wipe down the floor, sweep the mats and clean up. This is part of the old tradition of martial arts. Monks, when they were looking for a temple to train in, or a young warrior looking for a school or teacher, would simply look at the entrance. If the entrance was in good order, they would go in. If not, they would move on. For the martial artist to have a perfectly immaculate, perfectly ordered place is essential because we have to be very focused, very disciplined. The *dojo* must be immaculate, cleaning is a communal activity and it must be done by all. But these young adults," Furuya explodes with laughter, "some of them have never held a broom before!"

But Kensho Furuya is teaching them, teaching them more than just *aikido*, but a way of life. And he's teaching them with a love for his subject that burns intensely.

"I think it's like this—we look down on the past as we gear ourselves for the future, but there's a lot of wisdom in the past. I'm not saying that all Japanese things are great, but there is a lot that's relevant to the way we live, how we move in our environment. *Aikido* is sensitive to that. Martial arts is not just a sport, but a spiritual art. *Aikido* concerns itself with how we think and act in our daily lives. The emphasis is not only the physical, but the mental state of mind."

"This is kind of a silly story," Furuya chuckles, "but I got a letter from a student's wife, a thank you letter. She said 'Thank you for changing my husband. Ever since he came to the *dojo* he has become different. One day I happened to be feeling very tired, so I sat down on the sofa to rest. Without saying anything, he went into the kitchen, did all the dishes and cleaned up.' The fact that her husband went into the kitchen and cleaned all by himself was such a shock to her. It was like a miracle, she said, the last thing she would ever expect. But it was something he learned in the *dojo*—if you use it, keep it clean, keep it in good order. And since she was tired, he did it himself. It's not so much someone giving orders, but we know if we use something, we must take care of it."

"We don't do that in this society, and that's why we're running out of water, out of air. It's not because we have too many people now, we just don't take care of our things. And when we don't take care of things, it shows we don't respect them. Without developing this respect for our things, we show no respect for ourselves so how can we respect others?"

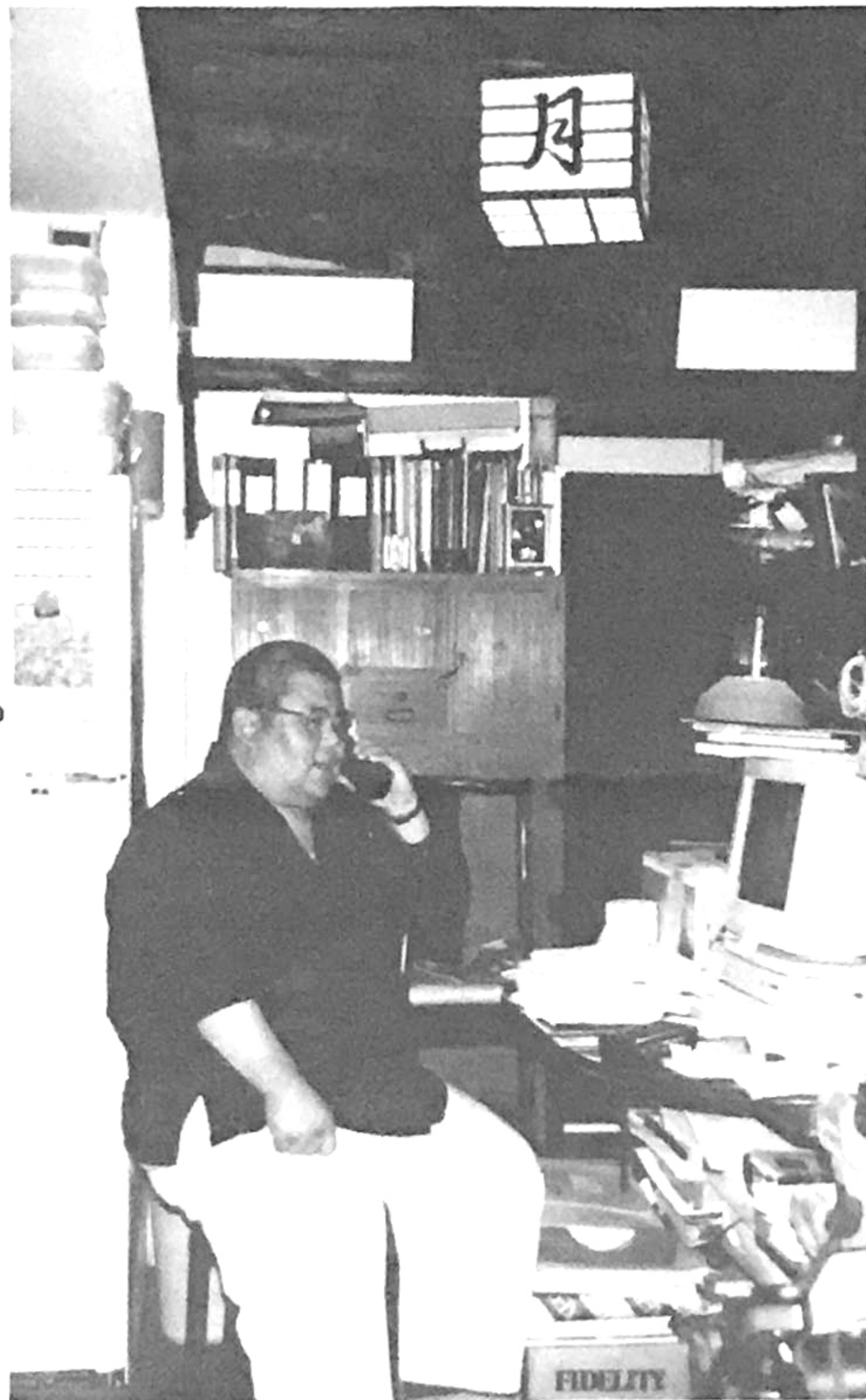
The very old-fashioned traditional ways are precisely what attracts students and instructors from Japan. Some have said that Sensei's school is "more Japanese than Japan," a comment that tickles him no end. With his living quarters on the third floor of the school he smilingly states that as much as possible, his ideal is to live in the manner of the old martial arts masters of the feudal age. Still, he sits in his crowded office and notes with childish glee that ancient martial arts teachers did not have the advantages of his computer, state of the art fax, photocopier, video recorders and postal machine.

"All I need is a jacuzzi," he giggles. "Well, I need a washing machine, but there's no place to put it. All my washing is done by hand—in the manner of the ancient ones. I used to send the heavy cotton jackets out—they take a long time, days to dry. I do it in the bathtub. I have to hang everything in the bathroom, so even my underwear has to be very conservative. Someone

offered to donate a small washing machine but there was nowhere to put it. It was suggested we take out the women's dressing room (he indicates a small, closet sized space), but the women said (his hands go to his ample hips and he mimics a sassy high pitched voice) 'If you do that, we're going to quit.'"

Furuya laughs, as does the young man, Kenny, who has emerged from the doorway. Now attired in a neat shirt and pants, he tells Sensei he is off to work and will return later to continue work on the floors. Affectionately, the student smiles as Furuya repeats that everyone sees his underwear. I smile too, picturing the Sensei, in the way of the ancient ones, washing his clothing in the bathtub and occasionally taking up a needle and thread to sew. "I sew, but it never lasts very long. It comes apart," he sighs, "plus, when I sew, everybody recognizes that I did it myself."

He's wonderfully modest about everything—from doing his laundry to teaching his students. "I never think that I'm doing anything that is absolutely my own, I always feel that I'm carrying on what I learned. I'm passing it on to my students who will someday pass it on to



their students, so they can get the same benefit. There's a lot of pleasure in that. *Aikido* is like a fine sword. It's not what I can do with it or how I can modify it, but I want to preserve it so the next generation and the next can appreciate it in the same form. I'm so proud when people say that this *dojo* teaches *aikido* the same way it has been taught for generations."

In this day and age, Furuya recognizes that as much as he loves the ancient ways, he cannot expect to pass the *dojo* on to others the way it is. "This is the way I want to live, but you can't expect that of others. I live by myself, but most people need a wife, a family, want this and that. I'm willing to sacrifice a lot of things, but I can't expect that from others when I pass it on. This *dojo* is something I've always wanted to pass down to my students. I really didn't build it for myself, I want to give it to some deserving student so he can build on what I've established."

**In Celebration**

The celebration of Kensho Furuya's 30th (well, actually 33rd) year in *aikido* takes place August 9th with a demonstration celebration and 30th anniversary party, but the Aikido Center is open seven days a week with numerous other events ongoing. A brief rundown includes:

- July 3—Black Belt meeting.
- July 10 & 11—Lotus Festival, *Aikido* and *Iaido* demonstrations at Echo Park in Los Angeles.
- July 17—West Covina Community Center *Aikido* demonstration.
- August 6—Hataya Sensei and group arrive from Japan. Welcome party at the Empress Pavilion.
- August 7—Rehearsal for Nisei Week demonstrations.
- August 8—Nisei Week *Aikido* and Martial Arts demonstration at the JACCC.

**Ongoing**

Kenshin Kai Swordsmanship Classes (*Iaido* Japanese Swordsmanship, L.A. Branch All Japan Battodo Iaido Federation)—Wednesday (8:45p.m. to 9:45 p.m.), Saturday (9 a.m. to 10 a.m.), Sunday (7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.).  
 Rafu Token Kai (Los Angeles Japanese Sword Society)—First Friday of the month from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. (meetings will not be held until after the Nisei Week demonstration in August and will resume in September)  
 For more info, call the Aikido Center of Los Angeles at (213) 687-3673. Please try to call early as Sensei's patience with the telephone wears thin in the afternoon.

"Oddly enough, my greatest goal is to become a stepping stone for the next generation—not to become the mountain, just the stepping stone."

"Even now I worry about the bills, students are out of work, no jobs, no money. But it's a shame that they have to stop practice because they have no money, so they still come to practice and if they help around the *dojo*, that's fine. But," he smiles ruefully, "I can't ask them to sweep the front steps of the Department of Water and Power in lieu of payment for our bills. I'm used to it but I can't allow the next generation to suffer like this."

The students, and the classes, Sensei is delighted to report, have changed since he first opened his doors. Five years ago, the classes were 80% to 90% White with very few Japanese Americans and no Japanese nationals. Furuya notes that today his students are now mostly Japanese and Chinese American. He reflects that many of his generation were too busy getting their professional lives together, going to school, getting the degree and creating the career to be interested in the martial arts and only now are starting to come back to their cultural roots. Many older students who dropped out of classes are now sending their children to the Aikido Center. Furuya's youngest student is five, his oldest is 72.

"For the children we emphasize the discipline and the etiquette, agility, balance and coordination. In Western sports, the emphasis is more right handed, but in martial arts, the emphasis is balance—whatever you do with your right side you must do equally well with your left. The emphasis is not only the physical but the mental state of mind. When I watch sports I notice that people are very skillful in their sport and make millions of dollars, but when they are interviewed they seem so ignorant and arrogant—even uppity. In martial arts, that would never do. No matter how good you become or how elevated you are, you must always remain humble, quiet and live a serious life. My students are wonderful, but I can't tell them that too often. There are a lot of sacrifices you must make to gain the respect of the students. This is not a flashy lifestyle."

"Ahh, but a jacuzzi would be nice," sighs the man who does his laundry in his bathtub.

As Kensho Furuya graciously walked me out, I noticed that my tennis shoes, which I had kicked into the corner by the door were now neatly lined up with their heels touching the edge of the mat. ☐

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