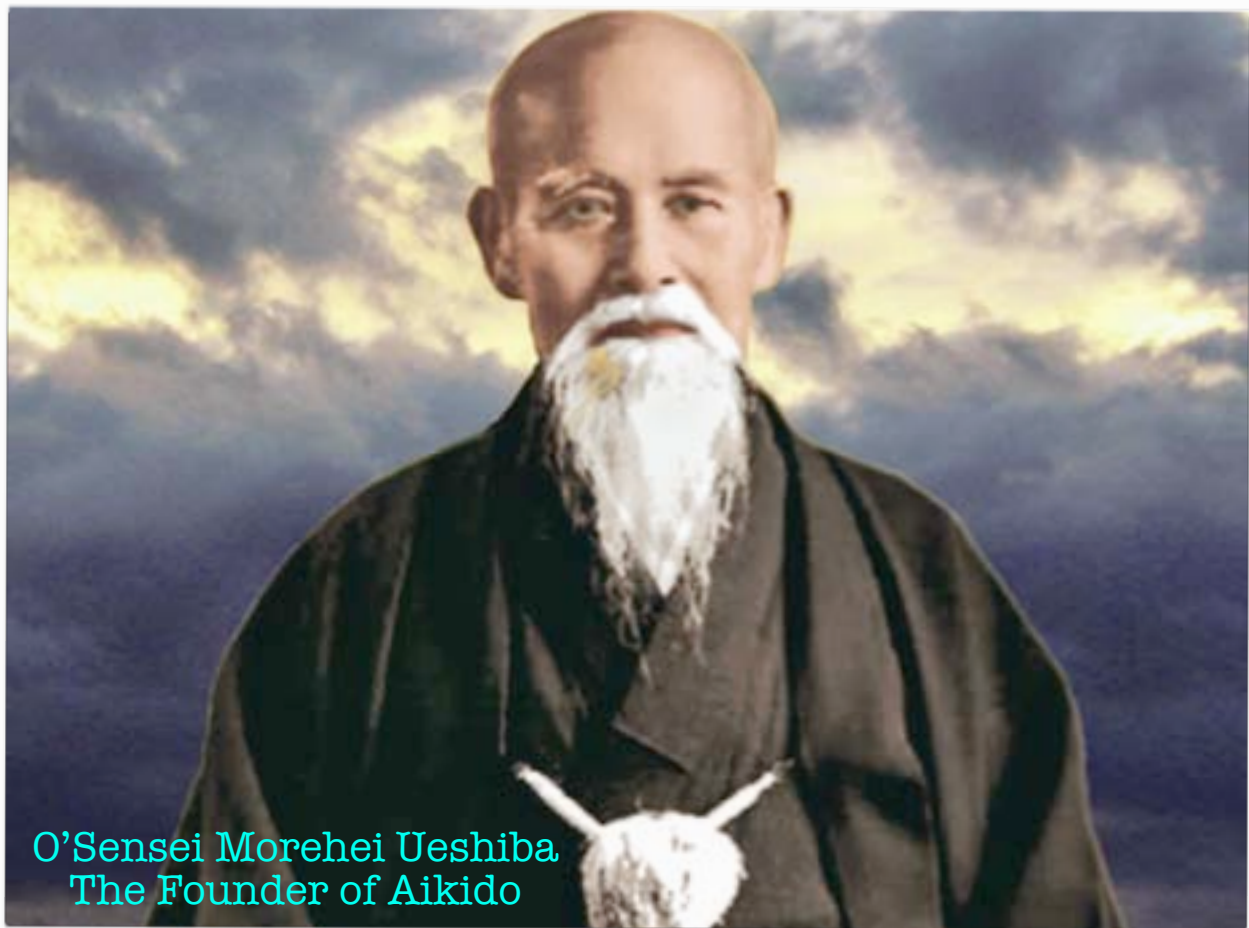


by John Turnbull

MEMORIES

of Seiichi Sugano Sensei



O'Sensei Morehei Ueshiba
The Founder of Aikido

Memories of Sugano Sensei

It was a warm spring afternoon in 1966 at Sydney's West Ryde Gymnasium. A smiling young Japanese in a deep blue *hakama* was teaching a dance-like Aikido movement when a scowling, dark-haired man entered the room. As he stood watching a sneer slowly spread over his face.

Finally he strode onto the mat and asked if the instructor would like to try this dancing nonsense against some karate. Seiichi

Sugano calmly signaled his students to be seated. With them safely out of the way he quietly turned to the challenger who leapt forward, his fist flashing at Sugano's face.

But the Aikido master slid effortlessly aside, spearing hardened knuckles into his solar plexus while grasping a handful of hair which he used to smash the intruder's head into the floor.

He then waited for his next move, but there was none - his assailant was unconscious. Disdainfully he sprinkled the hair over his face and strolled away. The visitor's disrespect had annoyed him, and to teach him a lesson he'd used the same dance-like move he'd been sneering at, but with blinding speed.

Seiichi Sugano learnt Aikido in Japan as a *uchi-deshi* ('inner' student) to O'Sensei Morehei Ueshiba, the genius who founded this art. At that time martial art challenges

were so common and brutal that the Japanese Government eventually banned them because of the numbers being crippled or killed.

As Aikido's fame spread, however, experts from all round the world kept coming to try it out, either from egotism or a genuine

Aikido until my Judo instructor, Ray Vercoe (taught by Ogata Shihan, 8th Dan President of the Kure Kodokan) directed me to him. He'd met O'Sensei in Japan and been immensely impressed. So I went to the West Ryde dojo and asked if I could train, just as I did at other dojos. Seiichi smiled and said "OK." I was 30, he was 25.

During those first classes he taught only basics - stance, body movement and ki extension - but his *ma-ai* and *zan-shin* were faultless. He moved so naturally that I doubt if anyone else realised he was never open to ambush. Ray was right, I thought, here's someone well worth training with.

I'd only dropped in to sample Aikido and had Judo next day, but attended another Aikido class instead. And so on next day and the next and so on. I never consciously left Judo, Jujitsu, etc, but suddenly found there was only time for Aikido!

Much later I realised how inevitable this had been, for suddenly I'd found what I'd been seeking all my life. Seiichi's proficiency in grappling, groundwork, throws, weapons and multiple attack situations expanded my horizons. Take Ki for example.

Seiichi taught in the traditional Zen method of 'direct transmission without words'. This uses ki to help students feel a thing's 'essence', unclouded by verbal ambiguities. Students may then kinesthetically absorb what's being shown them, the way children feel as if they themselves are doing what they're watching.

But one thing he did regularly mention was Ki. What he said was usually over our heads because the concept was so foreign. This frustrated him so much he would often walk around the dojo emphatically urging, "More Ki!"



Seiichi Sugano Sensei's devastating kokyu-nage

desire to discover the truth about this new art. There were Western boxers, wrestlers, Japanese sumo champions and experts from other Japanese and Chinese schools, along with stick-fighters from India and knife experts from the Americas. Aikido reigned supreme, however, and inevitably some visitors were badly injured. The one at West Ryde was lucky: Seiichi's technique might easily have snapped his neck!

As one of O'Sensei's leading *uchi-deshis*, it was often Sugano who dealt with visitors wanting to 'test' Aikido. Even in his youth he could merely humiliate most challengers without severely injuring them - O'Sensei disapproved of anyone being damaged more than necessary.

I began training with him when he arrived in Australia in early 1965. Despite many years of martial art I knew nothing about

One night he took each person's arm in turn and applied *yon-kyo*. In this the arm is held like an Aikido sword and Ki poured up it in the opposite direction to its normal flow. It's excruciatingly painful!

When he did this to me I almost yelled with the pain. Next morning my arms were so badly bruised from wrist to elbow that I couldn't lift food to my mouth - yet all he'd done physically was squeeze my wrists! It was an astonishing demonstration of ki power!

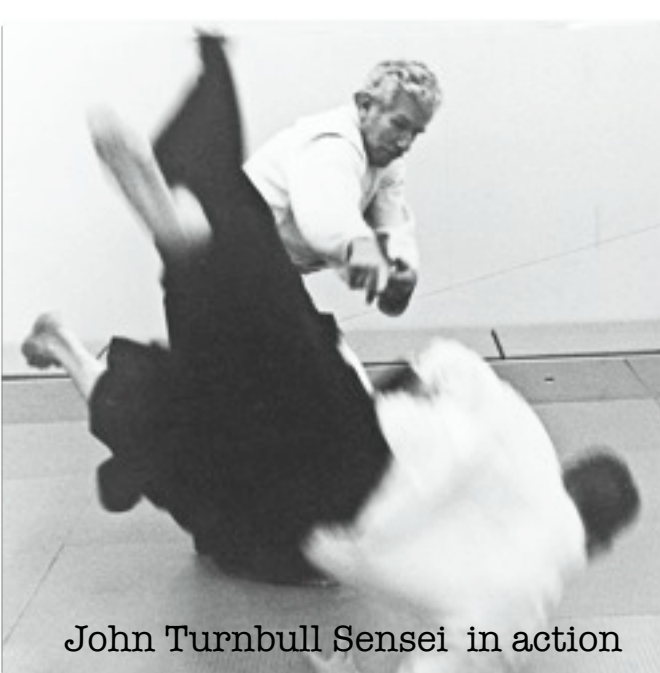
Then he did the same with my other arm. Still I didn't move. Stepping back he looked into my eyes with a slight smile and nodded. I nodded back, suddenly realising he'd shown me what ki is, even though I didn't fully understand what had happened. There would be decades more hard training before I began to truly understand, but that incredible experience was life-changing - what Zen calls "a little *satori*".

Another time I mentioned elbow pain from an old Jujitsu injury. Seiichi grunted, took my elbow and drove his thumbs into the joint. It felt as if it was being torn apart. Next day it was healed. Another impressive example of ki.

There were to be many more 'little *satoris*', for as Seiichi explained, Aikido is like Soto Zen - *satori* (enlightenment) comes gradually, step by step.

Twenty years later I walked into the Australian National University for a dinner my Aikido club was giving for O'Sensei's son, Kissomaru Ueshiba Doshu. Sugano Sensei directed me to sit beside him - an unexpected honor. I found myself on his left with Sugano Sensei on his right. On my left were two Hombu instructors. They were obviously uneasy about a foreigner being placed between them and their charge. I thought wryly of the violence that would likely erupt if anyone made any sudden moves, for obviously they were concerned about Doshu becoming a target for any idiot seeking glory by attacking the world's top Aikido master. Not if I can help it, I thought, giving my attention to my famous guest.

Suddenly a blowfly zoomed toward his plate and instantly I brushed it away with a movement very similar to a backfist strike. The bodyguards leapt up with blazing eyes, but instantly realised I was safeguarding Doshu, not attacking him. In that moment there was a meeting of minds and their attitude to me changed



John Turnbull Sensei in action

Next class he lined us up to do it again. My dread of the agony ahead was so great I almost left the mats! While waiting my turn I decided that if there was anything in this ki business then now was the time to try it!

As he took my arm I concentrated totally on visualizing ki - whatever that was - pouring down my arm! He began crushing my wrist with his incredible power, but through some process I didn't understand I ignored the pain and simply stood there focussing my mind! He looked surprised and tried again harder, and then again even harder. I still didn't move.

completely. I was accepted as one of the team.

That incident lasted only moments but had two extremely important sequels. At training next day one of my new friends solved a problem about ki that had plagued me for years. More importantly, Doshu told me the secret of Aikido. There's no point repeating what he said here, for it's incomprehensible without the training that provides the key to its understanding, and Seiichi had already given me that. But even though Doshu apparently thought I was ready for it, it would take me another decade of hard work to begin to truly understand what he meant - and I'm still working on it!



For Aikido is a never-ending path. There's no final goal to be attained and then discarded for something better, as with so many of the challenges that initially seem so important, but eventually turn out to be trivialities. In Aikido progress continues forever. O'Sensei was amazingly capable in his youth, yet continued progressing all his life. In old age many believed he had attained supernatural powers. Seiichi

John Turnbull

Sugano - a great martial artist himself - spoke of him as if he was a god. What a contrast to sport, where participants are usually burnt out by their 40s!

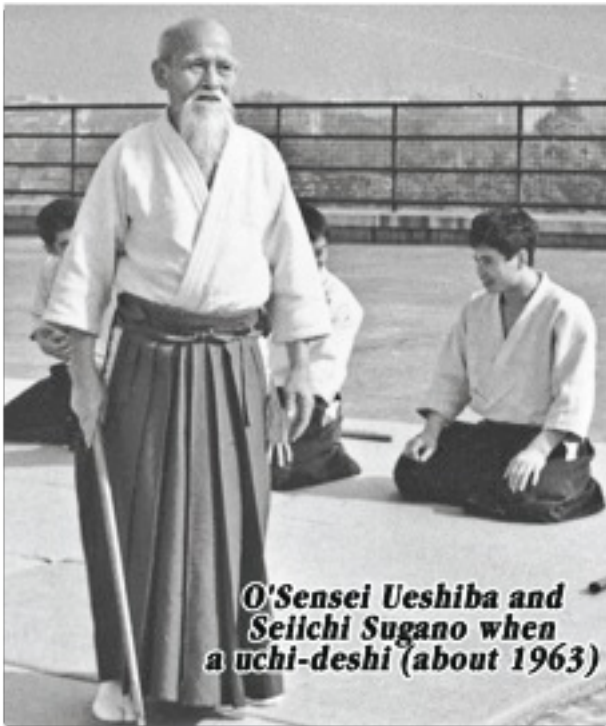
O'Sensei had instant death at his fingertips, yet was one of kindest of men, which was also true of Sugano. He made a surprise visit to me in Canberra one weekend with his two young children, saying he had come to tell me first, because I was his 'oldest' (most senior) student, that he was leaving Australia to teach in Europe. I expressed deep regret at his going, but he replied that although he was leaving Australia he not taking Aikido with him.

This was so great a compliment that it almost brought tears to my eyes, for he meant that he had established Aikido here so well that he could happily leave it in our hands. Sadly, neither of us foresaw the disasters ahead - the terrible injury that would bring me close to death and handicap me for an agonizing 15 years, or the greed and loss of vision that would drive all his earliest students away, fragment his organization and cause him enormous stress. I refused to respond to the envy, stayed out of the backstabbing and skullduggery, continued to train as best I could and eventually recovered my health.

Paradoxically it was the knowledge - 'the pointing out of the Way' - Seiichi and Doshu had given me that enabled me to recover, while the ever-increasing pressures on Seiichi led him first through a series of illnesses and finally to an early grave, just when he should have been reaching his prime with years of enlightened teaching ahead.

We talked for several hours that day, then I suggested taking our restless children to a nearby park where they could have exercise and fun. My five-year old couldn't walk very fast, and as Seiichi's older children scampered ahead he strode after

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O'Sensei Ueshiba and Seichi Sugano when a uchi-deshi (about 1963)

them. I was ten metres behind as he passed a little boy playing on a slippery-dip who froze and stared at him. Just as I reached him he pointed at the departing Aikido master and excitedly said to his mother, "Mummy, I like that man!"

There was such wonder and joyfulness in his voice that for a moment I just stared at him, for as far as I could see Seichi had not even glanced at him!

I often mention this to students to help them understand Aikido. For lethal though it can be, it is a spiritual art aimed at 'inner' progress instead of the egotistic vanity of learning how to beat up less skilled people. In O'Sense's words it is for "the loving protection of all beings".

Yet to protect we must sometimes destroy, as when threatened by a poisonous snake or a crazed killer. Therefore it must be totally effective. Sadly, what's being practiced now is a merely a shadow of its former self. Few Aikido students train against live blades or real attacks anymore, or understand that Aikido's *tai-sabaki* are specifically designed for

delivering *atemis* the way Seichi did to his West Ryde challenger.

He emphasized *atemis* over and over, teaching us that their administration is the true test of good *tai-sabaki*. If they cannot be delivered effectively the *tai-sabaki* is wrong. Without them Aikido is like a tiger with its teeth and claws removed. It may impress the uninitiated, but is of little use against skilled opponents, especially multiple armed ones.

So important are atemi that many advanced Aikido techniques are termed *atemi-nage* - strikes that are also throws. Fortunately I'd already had many years of *atemi* practice before beginning Aikido, having started boxing at nine and later learnt kickboxing, judo, jujitsu, etc. This meant I could serve as *uke* for Seichi's demonstrations - an enlightening introduction to Aikido and great fun!

We also often had fun playing Sumo and Judo after class, two sports Seichi loved. My Judo was better than his, his Sumo much better than mine - in fact I'd never done any before! Seichi had married Varelle, a lovely Australian woman, in a Shinto ceremony conducted by O'Sensei, and she had persuaded him to teach in Australia. I often stayed with them in Sydney and they visited my home in the Blue Mountains where I sometimes hosted Aikido training. We played chess, he showed me his morning ki-enhancement exercises and I took him shooting for the wild rabbits which are so hard to bag but such good eating.

Soon after his arrival he asked me to suggest a place for weekend mountain training. I showed him three beautiful locations: the picnic ground where Windsor Road crosses the Colo River; a wilderness location further upriver and Mount Banks, west of Windsor. This soaring mountain overlooks the spectacular Grose Valley, and was his choice.

In those days it was a long, tough walk through thick bush to the mountain's summit, so eventually we selected a site closer to the road. It's now a picnic ground with a road into it. An eastern vista further up the slope is ideal for sunrise meditation. Training there was always intense - genuine attacks by multiple attackers, naked blades and intense za-zen - things rarely practiced today.

and when alone in the mountains - insights into the source and nature of ki.

He also emphasized how correct *tai-sabaki* enables weapons to strike the same way *atemis* are delivered. Millions of years ago our ancestors began walking on their hind legs, freeing their hands to use weapons and tools. Seiichi showed how the proper use of weapons only occurs when *tai-sabaki* and *ki-extension* are correct.

This brings the weapon alive. Back in the 60s it was my habit to rise early and run through a forest, up a long hill and back home with my jo (fighting staff) before work. Along the way I'd practice the beautiful techniques Seiichi was teaching. (He told me jo *suburi* is twice as valuable as sword *suburi* for learning *tai-sabaki*.)

One morning a strange thing happened. Instead of me trying to make the jo do what I wanted, it suddenly began moving as if by itself. I simply hung on, elated by the beautiful movements and awesome power! It was as if I'd become part of a wonderfully creative force.

This is ki, the creative energy that sustains evolution and generates life. It naturally flows through weapons that are used protectively, just as it does through an enlightened artist's paintbrush. It cannot be forced, but arises naturally in people who are honorable, compassionate and just. In swordsmanship it's called *the essence of the sword manifesting itself* and is why the Aiki sword is called *the life-giving sword*.

I never told Seiichi about this experience, but he knew. At the next grading he promoted me two grades.



Sugano Sensei in the Blue Mountains in 1966 with the sword O'Sensei gave him.

Seiichi emphasized the importance of *za-zen*, the mind-training meditation introduced to China 1600 years ago by the Indian sage Bodhidharma. It develops the mind, strengthens the spirit and leads to the *mu-shin* and *zan-shin* essential for advanced Aikido. I had some extraordinary experiences with Seiichi during meditation

How these things happen takes us into realms of psychology and human spirituality for which there's no room here. We need to understand, however, that *ai-ki* can be translated as 'harmony with the forces of Creation'. Which brings us to the question: "What exactly is ki?"

The Nobel prize winning author George Bernard Shaw called it 'the life force'. It's called 'chi' in Traditional Chinese Medicine

Sugano Sensei in the mountains



where it's considered the cornerstone of all effective health policies. The Hindus named it 'prana'; the Hawaiians 'mana'; the ancient Greeks 'pneuma'; the Egyptians 'ka' and the Arabs 'ruh'. It's pronounced 'ki' in Japan and is Aikido's empowering force.

But it cannot be transmitted in the mercenary manner now so common. Seiichi never let me give him money so I sought to repay him in other ways and am still doing so. It can only be truly learnt by unselfishly striving for *misogi* and *satori*, the steppingstones to *ai-ki*. Seiichi's teaching has now been largely lost, just as live blade training is history, for razor-sharp blades are too perilous without proper ki training. And who teaches that now? He poured his heart and soul into those earliest Australian classes, emphasizing ki as the core of everything, along with *ma-ai*, *tai-sabaki*, stance and the *yin-yang* principle.

It's 47 years since I began studying Aikido with Seiichi Sugano. I never thought of him as a god as some have tried to make him out to be. He wasn't - he was a very



Turnbull Sensei in Za-Zen

human being who realised his frailties only too well and steadfastly confronted them as best he could. I loved and admired him as a friend and a fellow martial artist, and have many fond memories of him and his family. One of my happiest is of taking him skiing not long before he left Australia, and seeing him playing in the snow like a joyful child.

He practiced and taught O'Sensei's Aikido with inspiration and confidence. He was particularly concerned about what is true and right in contrast to that which is merely selfish. From his personal understanding of The Way he found his solution to those most personal of all questions - how to live honorably, how to face death, and when to die.

I urge those who knew him to honor his memory by seeking to make the world a better place by becoming better people, just as he did.



Seiichi Sugano's power-filled calligraphy for "Aikido".



Seiichi Sugano Sensei during sunrise meditation in the Blue Mountains