

Remembering Sugano Sensei

Ruth Peyser, April 2014

I have led a modest life in most areas. I have led a privileged life in aikido. I have had the honour of having Yamada Sensei as my teacher since I began. He is still teaching his full schedule and opening my mind to increasingly greater possibilities. And thanks to Yamada Sensei I had the opportunity to study with Sugano Sensei for over 20 years.

In my early years of training I studied form, working hard on the physical prowess required to execute the movement. It took me a long time to discover that technique was merely a vehicle to study the underlying principles and to explore the maze of possibilities that give aikido universal meaning. For me learning is experiential; daily practice becomes internalized and evolves naturally. Aikido isn't limited to a set of explanations. There are endless possibilities, infinite directions, many diametrically opposed much like *tenchinage*. It is expansive just as the physical movement extends beyond the body. A series of discoveries, all of them subject to change...

Yamada Sensei has been an inspiration to me. His open-minded perspective permeates all aspects of New York Aikikai. He has created a dojo of mutual respect and diversity, and has encouraged his students to develop an individual approach to the study of aikido, selecting a variety of instructors at all levels each with their unique interpretation and style. That is what makes our dojo exceptional, as well as having the opportunity to study under Yamada Sensei himself on a regular basis. In 1987 his generous approach extended to having Sugano Sensei at our dojo. I was a young Shodan and Yamada Sensei had recently given me the opportunity to teach. It was an exciting time; everything was new.

When Sugano Sensei taught his first class in New York the excitement at

the dojo was palpable, accompanied by the nervousness that often shepherds something unknown. The Internet and YouTube didn't exist. A few of us had seen Sugano Sensei years earlier but no one had studied under him. There was an unusual quiet on the mat as we waited for the class to begin. He didn't say much during the class and when he did speak we found him difficult to understand. His visual style and way of teaching were unfamiliar, very different from what we had experienced. We were left baffled but tremendously curious.

At New York Aikikai we were used to a casual, personable relationship with each other, including the instructors. In the beginning Sugano Sensei seemed very formal and he only interacted with the students as a teacher on the mat. It made us uncomfortable which in turn, made us worry about how it would be in the long term. After a few months of regular teaching we had no more understanding of what Sugano Sensei was doing than we had after that first class. We also noticed he hadn't used any women for *ukemi*. It was a regular topic of conversation in the women's change room. We were upset and didn't know what to do. Eventually, one of the senior women, Gina Zarrilli, kind, outspoken and fearless, privately approached Sugano Sensei and discussed this with him. I was in awe of her courage. It was not something I could have done. In the next class Sugano Sensei called Gina for *ukemi* and subsequently started using other yudansha women for *ukemi* including me. I was stunned. I thought he was rigid and unapproachable. I doubt having a student approach him in this way was a frequent occurrence. I assumed he wouldn't respond well, possibly be offended. I was decidedly wrong. I had completely misread the kind of person Sugano Sensei was. It became clear to me then, that even if I didn't understand what he was teaching, it was because my mind wasn't open to it. Perhaps over time, I would slowly grasp some of his concepts and they may upend my rigid preconceptions.

After wanting the experience of taking *ukemi* for Sugano Sensei I quickly became as flummoxed by it as by everything else about him. As a fairly fast

and agile young Shodan I was frequently used for *ukemi* by many of the instructors. At that time taking *ukemi* had the sensation of “being taken for a ride.” That was not what *ukemi* was when Sugano Sensei threw me. I became discombobulated and felt disoriented and lost. I had no idea why. Slowly, over the years my approach to *ukemi* changed due to the invaluable experience of receiving from him and applying my interpretation of his teachings to *ukemi*. He would frequently say, “don’t wait.” I was studying this in relation to *nage*, how to move before someone attacks, during the technique and when *uke* is getting up to attack again. Eventually I realized it applied to way more. Changing the timing and overall approach to my *ukemi* improved the situation but never remedied it. Sugano Sensei constantly created more challenges so there was never a time I felt that there was a solution, an answer, a stopping point. At times Sugano Sensei would call me up for the same technique every class. This went on for quite a while during the *shihonage* period. There was definitely something amiss. My left elbow started hurting without actually being injured. I started to dread being called for *ukemi*. I knew it would be *shihonage*. After months of this and no change, Sugano Sensei came up to me, pointed to my left side, casually said, “too slow on that side” and walked away. That observation should have been obvious but it hadn’t been. He soon stopped calling me for *shihonage* and started calling me for *iriminage*, and so began a whole new set of problems.

It was remarkable to realize that Sugano Sensei called students for *ukemi* for a reason. He was presenting challenges to each of us as individuals, in addition to the complex challenges he offered us generally in every class. This must have been his approach to the large number of students in the many countries where he taught. He frequently asked us to be attentive, and was often taken aback when we weren’t. It was probably natural for Sugano Sensei to be attentive and he expected the same of his students.

Sugano Sensei regularly talked about timing and distance. It seems strange when I think about it now, but I had not thought about aikido in this way

before. I became particularly immersed in studying the moment before *uke* attacks, before there is any physical contact. During a class Sugano Sensei walked by and casually remarked, "You move too late." I continued to work on it while he was on one of his overseas trips. When he returned many weeks later I thought I had made some headway and my timing was better. Once again, in his unique style, he walked by and said, "You move too soon." Was my timing so clearly off or did he remember the class from weeks earlier.

On occasion, I traveled with Sugano Sensei to seminars. He was teaching at Aikido of Red Bank in New Jersey. Sharon Silberstein, who traveled to many seminars with Sugano Sensei, was driving and I was in the back. The conversation was relaxed and humourous. Cars, aikido, ex-boyfriends, watches, ex-girlfriends, weapons. Some of these topics weren't the usual fare when I chatted with Sugano Sensei, but because Sharon had spent so much time with him, they had an ease in the way they related that I didn't yet have. We must have been engrossed in the conversation or laughing too much to notice that our exit could only be reached in the local lane and we were in the express lane. We needed to drive another 20 miles before we could turn around. Sharon and I were visibly worried. We were going to be late. Our anxiety engulfed us. Sugano Sensei, sitting quietly in the front pointed out "Seminar can't start without me." Sharon and I exploded with laughter. In addition, we needed petrol, well timed with my very full bladder. We arrived about a half hour late. The seminar had not started.

Over the years, Sugano Sensei was away from the dojo for longer periods of time. The loss of his leg sometimes caused problems that he had to attend to and he was teaching more seminars overseas. We missed his classes. We were never quite sure when he would resume teaching, so we would ask him about it before he left. It became a bit awkward as he wasn't always forthcoming, and we suspected he may not like our line of questioning. After Sugano Sensei had been away for some time I saw him walking briskly along East 17th Street. I was riding my bicycle and stopped

to say hello and welcome him back. Before I could get a word out he looked at me and said, "First class Thursday" and continued walking. It seemed abrupt, but by then I knew him well enough to take it in my stride, was amused and very glad to get this information.

My relationship with Sugano Sensei changed in the last year of his life. He wasn't teaching, he needed help as his health deteriorated. I was a devoted student. He gave me so much over the years I wanted to reciprocate. During this difficult period he continued to be an inspiration, facing each challenge with wisdom and dignity. The Friday evening before he went into the hospital for the last time, he called and invited me to come to dinner with him, Chuck Mensh and Ai Shapiro, two of the younger students who had been helping him on a daily basis. I met them at a Japanese restaurant around the corner from his apartment. It was one of those evenings where the conversation flowed freely and the laughter was uninhibited. We spoke about many aspects of aikido, our lives, told stories about amusing incidents at the dojo, laughing warmly at the ironies and the absurdities. We were connected by our love of aikido and that night, particularly took pleasure in the joy of being together. In hindsight, Sugano Sensei was probably not feeling well, but his focus was on the moment so he didn't allow his physical discomfort to intrude.

Sugano Sensei's focus was extraordinary in all situations. Because he was so focused in his classes the students were as well. When I train my mind can wander but it rarely happened when Sugano Sensei taught. It was another dimension of his teaching that was beyond technique and had a lot of meaning for me. Having the opportunity to spend more time with him in his last year helped me see how he applied his scholarly way of perceiving the world to all circumstances that arose in his life.

I am deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to study with Sugano Sensei. His teaching has had a profound influence on me. He constantly presented ideas and challenges that would upend my thinking. Nothing was

static. Everything kept moving, changing, evolving, transforming. Anticipation and preconceptions were hindrances. His teaching style was also organic, in harmony with the moment. Yet within all that was a logical system. Nothing seemed random or superfluous. His deeply thoughtful approach was accompanied by an unobtrusive way of imparting his concepts in ways that were unexpected and took time to understand. He structured his classes so that he conveyed his ideas in multifaceted ways that built as the class progressed. We could never anticipate what would be next. Would he turn the lights off, have us work in groups of three, walk around and attack anyone, move to the back and take turns doing *ronduri* in different configurations, introduce weapons training to give us a new dimension on the concept we were working on, show us multiple choking techniques, or many ways to apply *nikkyo* using different parts of the body. Head, hands, chest, shoulder. Nothing ever felt extraneous. It all seemed to fit into a concept that was just beyond what I could grasp. Of course I don't know if it is how he wanted us to interpret what he was doing. Or write about it. But I imagine he wanted us to take from it what we saw, not to wait, to keep moving, and never remain static in our ideas or our lives.