



## Shuji Maruyama, Founder of Kokikai Aikido

### Sensei's Story - Part One: Japan and Cleveland

By Shuji Maruyama – as told to Ebeth Haley – Edited by Nancy DeMasi

In 1945, Japan fought the U.S. and Allies for four years before surrender. That such a small country tried for so long shows very strong fighting spirit. After that, the victor country instituted many new policies in Japan. Japan was to move from the feudal system to more of a democracy. In the old system, one person owned the land and the rest would farm it and pay heavy taxes, but now things were changing: people were to be all the same and the land was owned by the people.

The occupation forces (General Headquarters, GHQ) outlawed martial arts. There had been judo, kendo, and aikido. Martial arts practice had been required in school. The prohibition was in effect for eight years (1945- 1953). I was in elementary school during this time. You couldn't practice in public. You couldn't advertise in the big city, but small, private groups in towns like Iwama, an hour and a half by train from Tokyo, out in the country wouldn't be noticed.

In 1952, Tohei introduced aikido in Hawaii. Such a trip to the victor country was like going on the space shuttle would be now: very rare, very expensive. This was so unusual, compared with nowadays, that it was on the nation-wide (NHK) radio news when he came back to Tokyo.

I had known about Tohei since I was very young: his house was a mile and a half from my house; my mother was his music teacher in elementary school and my mother's sister and his sister were classmates together. At that time, I was 15 years old, and my weight was under average: I had no special talent for sports. I was anxious to become strong, so my older brother and I joined Tohei's dojo when he came back.

The dojo was a converted rice warehouse, and the floor was wood. There was no money even to buy tatami mats. This was 1953. Everyone was poor; it was nothing like now. Most people, including me, were very hungry. The whole country suffered. That was that age. It was always tough for beginners, because the old students would give them a hard time. Shihonage, for example: nowadays we just throw, but in the old days we would take uke down all the way to the ground. When I was a beginner, I hit my head so many times – and every time I was seeing stars! Later, after I had come to the U.S., I visited an old instructor in Chiba Prefecture and I complained to him that I hit my head so many times, and he said, "That's why you've become so smart now."

Iwama winters were very cold and there was no heat. Summers were very hot - hotter than in Nagoya – and there were mosquitoes. Of course there was no air conditioning. This was Tochigi Prefecture, 60 miles from the northern part of Tokyo. It is on the Pacific Ocean side of the mountains. On the Japan Sea side of the mountains, it would be rainy and warmer, but on this side there was wind and cold. In wintertime, there would be 15 people crowded around one very small stove. I couldn't get close to it. There was a very cold river by the dojo, almost frozen over. Every year, on January first, second, and third, we had a tradition of walking in the river. It would be so cold, the ground like ice; sometimes there was snow. Senior people would walk in the river before sunrise, but I would go about 7am – so it felt even colder, because you could see the ice.

For many winters we continued this system. Even I myself would walk in the river by my house, training to be strong. But walking in the river in wintertime? The result is not becoming strong. In the future, though, it would turn out that jumping in the river helped a lot.

When walking in the river, if you think "cold," it feels much colder. If you think "hot"... it is still very cold! So, eventually, I found out the best way to walk in the river. Don't think "cold." Don't think "hot." Just walk. I understand this idea from this experience, not from words.

In the future, I would be in many frightening situations. But when there was something I had to do, without thinking, I would just do it. This is the point. For example, when I came to the States, some people had huge bodies, mean faces. It is a very uncomfortable feeling to be in the country that won the war: the winner makes the law. So usually one would be very scared, but I just came.



Shuji Maruyama Sensei  
Founder and President  
Kokikai Aikido International

“ The kokikai method has helped me on many levels. I am far more relaxed on a daily basis, I am more aware of my surroundings, and I have found an excellent support group.

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Newsletter Submissions

After training at Tohei's dojo, I came to Tokyo to enter Nippon University. I visited Ueshiba's dojo. This was an age where you couldn't just join. You needed an introduction, so Tohei's wife wrote me a letter of introduction for Ueshiba. Kisshomaru's (Ueshiba's son) wife took care of things. Maybe now she'd be called the secretary. Actually, Tohei's wife and Ueshiba's son's wife were sisters, so she was very helpful. I remember her smiling and saying, "You come from Tohei's hometown, that country place. Welcome!" So during college I would attend class at Ueshiba's dojo two or three times a week. This was still a poor age, so the dojo was dirty and smelled like sweat, and the older students would throw very hard.

Now, a modern age was starting – industry, science. At one point, I was waiting at Shinjuku Station for a train to visit home. This very big, modern, powerful, electric train pulled into the station, and it was overwhelming. I felt so small compared with this train. So, where studying science felt like the future, studying aikido felt like the opposite. It was a very strange, contradictory feeling to practice still in such an old-fashioned, dirty place. But I continued, because of my drive to become strong. When I was 19 years old, I weighed 128 lbs, and I was 5'7" tall. This is a perfectly reasonable size for a professor or something, but under average especially for sports or martial arts.

It was a violent age, in Japan after WWII. When students from different colleges would see each other in the street they'd say, "What's your problem?" and there'd be a fight. Maybe someone would get hurt, but the police would never come; nobody said anything. It was completely different from Japan today. Now, the police would come and someone might sue.

Ueshiba lived in the dojo, but he wasn't leading a regular class any more. When he came to class, the regular instructors would stop the current practice and start suwari waza, and he would be very pleased. But if someone did a beautiful standing kokyunage technique, he would never look happy. I didn't understand this until I studied the last 300 years of the history of martial arts in Japan, and the lifestyle of people back then. I studied and then I understood Ueshiba.

Japan is a separate island, surrounded by ocean. Compared with Europe, we had almost never fought with people of other races. Japan was composed of many independent states – these would fight each other. So Japan is a special case. There might be battles of a hundred or a thousand on each side. This took weeks of preparation – horses, food, and armor. In the Edo period (1603-1867), when the Tokugawa family controlled Japan, there was a strict system of social standing. Samurai were at the top level, followed by farmers, then craftsmen, then merchants. Samurai didn't work; they just took a tax – maybe 50/50, even 60/40. The purpose of samurai was to support their lord come fighting time. So first and foremost, they studied martial arts. Mostly, they learned on the battlefield. This training was for samurai, not other people. Samurai, by law, had to carry two swords in public, long and short. Proof of being a samurai was the sword, and this was their most important training. If a samurai senses danger, somebody making trouble – already he would have a hand at the hilt. In his house, on his own side of the street, the long sword wasn't required, but across the street, it was.

In a modern movie, sometimes a samurai would fight empty-hand against sword. This is 100% fiction. They almost never fought empty hand – not logical. The reasons are very simple. Samurai start training with sword when very young – they are not weak! So it would not be easy like in a movie.

So, the sword is one reason that aikido developed as it did. The next reason is the shame culture. Japanese culture was honor-focused. If somebody makes trouble, we are very ashamed of him; he is very upset. It would be very bad to say negative things about your own lord, because he would become ashamed. The third reason is the Shinto religion, more than a thousand years old. Not strong, per se, but a big influence. On January 1, many people visit a Shinto shrine. But when they die, they go to a Buddhist temple. This is the Japanese style, a blend of ideas. In Shinto, there is the concept of dirty, polluted, defiled, compared with clean. This applies to the mental side as well as physical. And there is much respect for the sword. To step over one, even with clean feet, even with feet not touching it, but only near – this is already a great offense.

If you study the history, many things become clear. For example, suwari waza is for inside of the castle. In a castle, there are no chairs; everybody sits seiza. (Of course, there are special cases. In a temple, maybe a highrank person would have a chair; maybe in heavy armor on a battlefield you would need a chair. Generally, though, even high officials would have no chair.) In my opinion, this is for self-defense. The lord has a chair and keeps the others, maybe 30-40 people, on the ground. If someone stands up, the guard already knows he is making trouble. So, no chairs. Japan had many trees for wood, but no chairs.

Now, say a samurai is sitting, and a crazy guy with a sword comes to make trouble. You can't stand up, but you can't do nothing either: to get even a scratch would bring shame, and your lord might take your house. You cannot use a sword in the castle: when entering, you leave the long sword at the door. The short sword you never leave - for decoration, and need it to cut stomach if necessary. (There is an old story dating back 250 years ago, in the middle of the Edo period. Asano-san, for many reasons, attacked Kira with his short sword in Edo Jo. Then the next day, the government told him to cut his stomach. He had his own castle back home – the government took it all, because he'd used a sword inside the castle.) So you cannot stand, cannot use sword in castle, but need self-defense if someone crazy comes when you are drinking tea. Samurai children eat, drink tea, study – all seiza. It is the easiest way to sit on the ground with good posture. So seiza was a very big feature of the Japanese world, unique to Japan. That explains suwari waza.

So, in the Edo period, suwari waza was the most important part of everyday practice, after sword. After that, maybe, standing technique against tanto or spear. There was almost nothing like judo or karate. In Chinese martial arts as well, weapons were the main focus of fighting. If you read old Chinese stories, fighting is always weapon vs. weapon, always something like a special sword vs. a spear, never empty hand. So, maybe, empty hand is very recent in China, too. Common sense. Also, armor was part of the fighting system of the time. Very heavy armor covered everything, so it was very hard to kill by sword. One might use the opponent's leg to take his balance, in order to get at an area with no armor, like under the arm. There was a special dagger just for this purpose.

About 140 years ago, the Tokugawa family was gone and Japan became liberated. The feudal system was going away; Japan was becoming a modern country. In that time, there was a law against walking with a sword. A sword wasn't necessary as the samurai were gone, and although not 100% equal, everybody was much closer to equal.

Kendo, with rattan sword, was still practiced in school because it was good for developing fighting spirit. The country needed it. Martial arts, though, were slowly changing: moving from sword to empty hand, or empty hand vs. weapon (tanto tori, bokken tori). After the Edo period, many different styles were growing, but they didn't reach the public much. Since there were many different states, there were many different fighting styles in Japan. Ueshiba learned one: Takeda's daito-ryu. If you read a book about it, you see many hold techniques: katate tori, ryote tori – almost all holds. Techniques against holds are also good for women, but less so for men, so there must be another reason why they were so popular.

If someone has a weapon, a hold is for keeping him from using it. There were 300 different states, each with its own laws. It was very difficult to move between states, to run away to another state. People there would not welcome strange new people. So, if you kill someone, it would be very hard to run away. Also, in the Edo period, there had been a system of vengeance. If someone kills my father, I have to kill him. Otherwise, I am shamed. We have many stories about a son looking more than ten years for the killer of his father. If you cannot catch him, the government takes your estate. If later you find him, they give you someone else's. So then the best way is to catch him instead of killing him; then ask your lord to judge him. The lord's word is law; his decision is final. So, given this history, hold attacks are very logical. So tsuki is different from jab. If you kill someone, you already know you will have to cut your stomach; so tsuki is a very headlong, committed attack.

But this age is very different, especially in the culture of the U.S., which comes from all over the world. In the U.S., there was not the assumption is that the primary attack is grab and hold, so Japanese-style martial arts were useless, maybe don't work. Ueshiba learned very old martial arts. Old martial arts were about armor and seiza, so there was almost no movement. His best contribution is that his techniques have lots of movement. Ueshiba adding this made aikido. He was still subconsciously full of old ideas such as suwari waza and hold, though. Seven days a week I saw him; for a long time as I lived at Aikikai Headquarters, and never saw a technique against kick. Always his uke would help him. Also, there was much use of sword. Why? You have to understand the background, before the end of WWII (that was the end of an age).

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1966 – March 20. I remember very clearly. I was invited to the U.S. by the Ohio Judo/Karate association. I had tried very hard to go. We were so fascinated by the movies and music that we didn't have. For a young Japanese person, America was a dream country, almost heaven.

In the 1960's, the Vietnam War had already begun. If someone under the age of 25 applied for a green card, he would be drafted into military service. But still we wanted to go. Hirada, the Chicago aikido instructor, got his green card before age 25, and served two years (in Korea, fortunately). We were so fascinated by the U.S. It was such a big adventure. That's what it was like. Also, already in my mid-20's my salary from Ohio Judo was to be \$250 a month plus room and board – that's all. But that was ten times what my college-graduate friend was making in Japan. That was another big difference between Japan and here.

In the dojo in New York, there was only aikido and in Chicago, likewise. They had an easier time. But in Cleveland at the Judo/Karate Association there were karate, judo, kung fu, and self-defense. It was one big building, divided, with this here and that there. This school was run as a business.

When I arrived, the first day I just watched. The second day must have been Saturday, I think, because there were so many people there. There were 20 or 25 karate and judo black belts invited there on the mat. The owner said that everyone trained lots and could take ukemi so there was no problem – please throw! But, no, it was a big problem. I thought I had come to teach aikido, that they would learn from me. We had treated Ueshiba like a god – everybody would bow and think how to best take ukemi for him, never thinking of beating him. It was not a competition at all. Because of these assumptions, we were never thinking about fighting other martial arts. Here, every dojo has a hero, some big guy. So, this big karate guy came with a powerful kick. Oh my god. We never practiced kick. Next, I want to throw somebody kotegaeshi, but uke kept his hand very tight – can't throw. Then kokyunage, but they resist, never lose balance. I had no karate, no punch or kick, so I had to throw only with aikido technique. Almost nobody would move. So I came here thinking I would teach aikido, but students came thinking they would challenge me. I never had such an experience like this in Japan.

Once you were a member of the Cleveland Judo/Karate Association, it was only \$10 more to take a second class. So an aikido student could take karate, a karate student could take aikido. So, many people in aikido class had just been practicing karate the hour before. That made it difficult to teach movement. One more problem was that I couldn't communicate in English. I had almost none. The other Japanese instructors who came to the U.S. had the same problem. I could not explain in English so I had to show students, fight with them. Now, I can explain movement and our ideas and assumptions. When those karate beginners didn't believe in losing balance, I had no English to explain, so I would do only irimi. Tohei had taught katate tori tenkan movement a lot. I was very mad, because I wasn't so good at that. This was a challenge, and I had to beat them. But my weight was 130 lb; to throw over 200+ lb people: that is not easy. So it was at that time that I started real aikido for myself. What there was before that was just like dance.

One feature of Americans is that you have to see things yourself, by your eye, and then try them yourself. They ask, "Can I attack you?" I throw. Then they believe. Americans always need proof. In Japan, the most important thing is authority. So, if one family has taught this art for 200 years, the founder's family, his son and grandson, already we half-believe him. In the U.S., we don't have such a thing as a 200-year history. So what! Only real ability is important. If there is real power and

strength, then we believe. Say the father is strong. Then we believe the son is also strong? No, only if the son is strong.

So, in the beginning it was a very hard time. I was so anxious to come to the U.S., but after a few weeks, a few months: oh, I want to go back. That is what I was thinking, in the beginning. Then, slowly, we became able to communicate with each other, a few of us, and that is why I continued teaching there.

One year later, I took part in a demonstration in Chicago. It was three young girls and me. I took ukemi for them. People liked this so much. Then they came to my town and I had no uke, so I used Chicago students, and did all irimi techniques. Even for a running- in attack: still irimi – so there were bloody noses; some were very upset. No kotegaeshi, no big falls, only irimi: that was Cleveland. So I had lots of experiences like this. A little later, there was Bruce Lee – but this is before that. In the U.S., people would be very crazy for Bruce Lee, but not yet.

So I changed my eye, my viewpoint, my thinking about aikido – a lot! First of all, I had to become strong in self-defense. Many different attacks would come, and I would have to throw. Strong was the most important thing. Today I teach you Kokikai Aikido – aikido is like this, aikido history is like this – but, back then, I was first and foremost a self-defense instructor. If I had stayed in Japan, maybe I never would have organized Kokikai. But I have had lots of special experience. Even so, I still had lots of hard times. Even after two years I hadn't become strong yet. But that is the history of it. Rome was not built in a day.

This was about 20 years after the end of the war. Many of my students had been soldiers and fought in the Pacific; some had lost friends. But soldiers have respect for each other; so, after war, sometimes they become friends. This is how it was for us, in that time.

Then my two- year contract in Cleveland was over. They gave me a very big party, more than a hundred people. I still have the good-bye card. I met so many nice people. Nice friends – lots of girls... It was very sad to say goodbye.

Then I came to Philadelphia – Arch St. dojo. We have many, many old members, but all started in Philadelphia.

This is the end of part 1. Please await part 2.