

## "Master of masters" - Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969)

by Andrzej Bazyłko

*The cycle "Master of masters" is unusual. It achieves what in the martial arts is most important, immediate student – teacher transfer, and moreover, acts with regard to the most outstanding figures. Such figures who some would call masters. Who merits the name of master of the martial arts? It is not the instructor efficiently teaching techniques, though exceptionally competent. Nor is it the teacher caring both for the physical as well as the spiritual development of the student. The master should fulfill these conditions, but his role cannot be limited to the instruction of particular persons. He cannot, of course, exist without his students, they are an echo of his instruction. However, his work should have a meaning transcending the individual. He should have his own vision of the given discipline, his own vision of the budo. He should place his own stamp on reality. And if he brought up other masters? If he brought up very many? He then certainly merits this title.*

O'Sensei Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969) was just this kind of person. He was not only one of the most outstanding masters of the martial arts, but also a true visionary who throughout his entire life sought answers to the question of the true meaning of the martial arts and gave an answer of genius in creating Aikido.

There is a singular phenomenon with great resonance found in the work of Ueshiba. Among modern Japanese martial arts, only judo and karate achieved comparable, and even greater success. In their cases, however, they are connected inseparably with sports competition. There is no such lure in Aikido, though it lures crowds of followers. In my opinion this is because of the message which this martial art brings and the expression of this message by means of its techniques. The ethical ideal of Aikido is the avoidance of fighting, the resolution of conflict in a peaceful way. It is, however, a choice made from a position of strength. It is not something special to avoid fighting from fear. The art is to understand that victory in the fight gives as a result the desire for revenge and to avoid such situations. It may appear that such an ethical attitude is impossible to translate into the language of the martial arts. Morihei Ueshiba was an uncommonly spiritual man and emphasized many times that Aikido was an art of peace. His genius consisted in the creation of the idea of conflict resolution in a peaceful way expressed by means of techniques of fighting.

There are many reasons why it is worth introducing him to a wider circle of readers. Here he is found in the brilliant achievements of his own students. Among them there are many celebrated personalities. Minoru Mochizuki (1907-2003) was the creator of Yoseikan Budo and was first to present Aikido to the West, in 1951 to be precise, in France. Gozo Shioda (1915-1994) created the Yoshinkan school of Aikido and played a great role in the post-war rebirth of Aikido in Japan. Koichi Tohei (born 1920) is known

as the creator of Shinshin Toitsu Aikido and proponent of the meaning of "Ki" energy. He introduced Aikido in the United States (in 1953 he visited Hawaii for the first time). Kisshomaru Ueshiba (1921-1999) was the son and successor of Morihei, director of Aikikai Hombu Dojo who systematized the teaching program and contributed to the development of Aikido after the war in a great way. Morihiro Saito (1928-2002) was a recognized expert of Aikido and Aikiken, known as the closest student of Morihei Ueshiba by very many other students, a guardian of his private dojo in Iwama. Those are only some of them. If I were to mention even the most well-known of his students, those who had an essential influence on the further development of Aikido, I would have to mention at least a few dozen names from a couple of generations. Unfortunately, less and less first-hand students of Ueshiba are alive. However, his work presented by successive generations of teachers loses none of its vitality.

Before Morihei educated so many masters of Aikido, he developed under the eyes of four extraordinary persons who exerted the greatest influence on his life: Yoroku Ueshiba (1843-1920), Kumagusu Minakata (1867-1941), Sokaku Takeda (1859-1943) and Onisaburo Deguchi (1871-1948).

Yoroku Ueshiba was a rich landowner and a council member of the city Tanabe in the province of Kii (at present the prefecture Wakayama). He came from a family of samurais. His grandfather Kichiemon, founder of the Ueshiba clan, was well-known in all Japan for his unusual power. Yoroku was forty years old and had three daughters, when on 14 December 1883 Morihei was born (afterwards one more daughter was born to Ueshiba). His mother Yuki Itokawa originated from a well-known family of landowners from the Takeda clan.

Morihei was in rather poor health. His father encouraged him to exercise. This often took unusual forms. Morihei had for example the custom of carrying on his back, for the purpose of strengthening his legs, old or ill pilgrims to the sanctuary in the Kumano mountains, situated within about 80 km from Tanabe. He often participated in sumo tournaments which he usually won. The parents did not neglect the education of their son. His learning began in the Buddhist temple Jizodera, then in high school, which he did not finish, and at accountancy school, after the completion of which he took a job in a tax office. When he was 17 years old his father sent him to Tokyo, so that he could gain experience in the trade. He was employed by a family related to Ueshiba, the Inoue family. He helped raise his cousin Noriaki Inoue (1902-1994) in Morihei's family in Tanabe and in Shirataki on Hokkaido. He was the first student of Morihei. Already in the 1920s he was an assistant of Ueshiba and the only one apart from him who taught Aiki Budo, the name of the martial art which we know as Aikido. Morihei was not interested in business. By night he practiced Tenjin Ryu jujutsu under the direction of Tokusaburo Tozawa (1848-1912). He fell ill, however, with beriberi and had to return to Tanabe. After returning to his family he got married to Hatsu Itokawa.

In 1903 he joined the army, where he practiced to perfection the art of the bayonet. From his tour of duty in the army come stories testifying to the rather unorthodox approach of Morihei to training. He exercised striking his forehead many times on stone. Japanese officers used to punish their subordinates by striking them in the back of the head. Not a few of them reportedly broke their hands trying to punish Ueshiba like this. Over 50 years later during a demonstration, already over seventy-years old, Morihei was hit with a bokken with full force. This did not make the least impression on him. He claimed that "nothing could break this old skull made of stone". During his military service he practiced Goto-ha Yagyu Shingan Ryu jujutsu in Masakatsu Nakai Dojo in Sakai, in the suburbs of Osaka. For the first time he came into contact with the traditional system of fighting. He learned fighting with a sword, club and lance. In spite of the fact that his regiment was sent to the front, Morihei remained with the reserves. He requested to be sent to Manchuria, where he remained, however, at a distance from the front, serving in the military police. This was seemingly due to a letter which his father sent to the military authorities asking for protection of his son from all danger.

He spent the following years with his family in Tanabe. Yoroku, wanting to help his son, opened a dojo and asked Kodokan to send a teacher of judo. That was Kiyoichi Tagaki, later famous judoka, who was then only 17 years old. In 1909 Morihei met Kumagusu Minakata. This was a man of extraordinary learning who loved to read. As a teenager he copied in the course of 5 years 105 volumes of the illustrated encyclopedia. He studied at American universities. During his travels to Latin America he collected botanical specimens. He worked in the British Museum in London. In the course of 8 years he published about 300 articles related to botany, astronomy, anthropology, archeology and oriental religions. Apart from Japanese he could speak English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Latin, Chinese, Arabic and Persian. Morihei protected Kumagusu when he organized a protest for decent wages for farm workers, fishermen and craftsmen from Tanabe. His acquaintance with Kumagusu who believed in the unity of all people and the unity of man with nature, made a great impression on Morihei and had an influence on the formulation of the concept of the necessity of striving for union with the Universe.

In 1911 Morihei and Hatsu had their first daughter Matsuko, and just a year later in March 1912 Morihei led groups (consisting of 54 families) which went to Hokkaido and founded the village of Shirataki. On Hokkaido he attended meetings which had a key impact on the creation of Aikido. In February 1915 in Engaru, the eccentric, but outstanding teacher of Daito Ryu jujutsu, Sokaku Takeda appears in the life of Ueshiba. He came from Aizu, the famous land of samurais, and his father and grandfather introduced him to sword and lance fighting, sumo and hand-to-hand fighting since he started to walk. He could not write or read. If he had been older he would have had to commit Seppuku in 1868 after the defeat of the Aizu clan which at last surrendered to

the emperor in the civil war. Sokaku, as former masters, traveled all over Japan and had numerous victorious duels. He also conducted numerous seminars during which he taught. Morihei, having witnessed a demonstration of Takeda in a tavern in Engaru, left everything and spent the month learning Daito Ryu. He took every opportunity later to practice with Takeda till at last, thanks to the help of his father, he built a dojo on his estate in Shirataki and persuaded Takeda to live with him. Almost every morning Morihei had a two hour individual lesson, and then dealt with his teacher through the remainder of the day. Sokaku ordered him at times to substitute for him in life-and-death duels, because he felt that it was an indispensable element of learning. Probably all of these substitutions ended well for the opponents of Morihei, who being defeated were spared their life. In 1917 the Morihei family added a son, Takamori, and in 1919, a second son, Kuniharu. Also in this year they left Hokkaido, as Morihei heard about the terminal illness of his father.

Morihei did not return immediately to Tanabe. He went first to Ayabe near Kyoto to meet Onisaburo Deguchi, the leader of a religious sect called Omoto kyo. Deguchi, or more properly Kisaburo Ueda, was a mysterious and controversial figure. Remarkably intelligent, he was educated in a similar way as Kumagusu, mostly on his own, studying literature, calligraphy and dedicating himself to painting. At school he did not get along so well with the teachers and boys of the same age. At 20 he busied himself with veterinary medicine and phytotherapy, and afterwards also music and classical Japanese dance. He learned the traditional Shinto meditation chinkon-kishin ("cleanse oneself and return to divinity") and became an outstanding expert. Knowing this was a major reason why Morihei decided to meet Onisaburo. Before he got to Tanabe, his father Yoroku died. His death was a great blow to him. To regain his bearings he decided to take the family to Ayabe for good. The death of his father was not the only blow to the Ueshiba family. Later that year both sons passed away: Takemori in August, and Kuniharu in September. A year later Kisshomaru was born. The instruction of Onisaburo had a decisive influence on the spiritual ideas of Morihei and enabled him to form an ethical vision which then penetrated Aikido deeply. The spiritual influence of Onisaburo had an equally fundamental impact on the development of Aikido, with the learning of Daito Ryu techniques at Sokaku Takeda.

Before his meeting with Onisaburo Morihei he was focused mostly on physical development, often performing incredible exercises, but his stay in Ayabe resulted in his practice entering the spiritual realm more and more. Expedition performed in 1924 with Onisaburo and three other persons to Manchuria and Mongolia, for the purpose of the creation of "Paradise on Earth", a new political system based on religious principles, had a decisive meaning. The campaign ended in disaster. Its participants were arrested by the Chinese and sentenced to death. Intervention, however, of the Japanese consulate saved them. In Mongolia one of the unusual events in the life of Morihei Ueshiba took place. Participants of the campaign were ambushed and Morihei stood face to face with a

soldier measuring him with his fire-arm from a distance of 6 metres. He fired a shot, but to his own surprise the soldier did not hit him. He was disarmed like lightning. Morihei realized that from the moment of the decision to shoot to its occurrence, a great deal of time had passed, and if the mind is quiet and pure, the moment of attack can be sensed.

In spring 1925 a famous meeting took place with a naval officer, a master of Kendo who came to Ayabe to duel Morihei. It took an unusual course, because he simply could not manage to defeat Morihei who was armed with a wooden sword. The tired officer admitted defeat, and Morihei explained to him that he had not been able to defeat him because before every attack he saw a flash of light preceding the attack. Thanks to this he knew the direction the attack was coming from and could avoid it without difficulty. After the duel he went to the garden to wash himself where he experienced enlightenment. He felt his whole body tremble and saw a light reaching to the skies and embracing all around. As he describes, "I understood that I was a Universe. I perceived the true nature of things. The way of the warrior means manifestation of divine love."

The meeting with Onisaburo Deguchi also had practical results that bore fruit with the beginning of Ueshiba Academy. Onisaburo realized at once how great the skills of Morihei were in the sphere of the martial arts and encouraged him to give this knowledge to the students of Omoto kyo. Many naval officers were students of Ueshiba Juku, among them the admiral Seikyo Asano who told of the extraordinary skills of Morihei to his friend the admiral Isamu Takeshita. This had a very significant influence on the further development of Aikido, as Takeshita became a great admirer of Ueshiba's talent. Without his support the instruction of the creator of Aikido would certainly not have had the same resonance. Admiral Takeshita organized a series of demonstrations, introduced Morihei to highly placed persons, obtained private and government funds. Thanks to him Morihei went to Tokyo, where from 1927-1931 he taught in private residences, and his students were mostly highly placed persons.

In April 1931 in Wakamatsu-cho, near where Aikikai Hombu Dojo is located today, Kobukan came into being. There were many willing to practice, but entering the dojo was unusually difficult. It was necessary to have a letter of recommendation, testimonials of two persons and a personal conversation with Morihei. He ordered them to attack him in any way and if he judged that the candidate had been insincere, he sent him away without appeal. He was of the opinion that budoka always practiced, in every moment of his life. He felt that one should never become attached to particular events or material things, because this provides a dangerous opening which somebody could be able to use. Students from outside practiced once a day, uchideshi - four times a day. There was no system of degrees, nor charges. All the students found their own ways of expressing their thankfulness to the master. In the thirties, Kobukan became known as the "Infernal Dojo" for the exceptionally intensive training which took place there. In 1942 Morihei left the Dojo in Tokyo Kisshomaru and went to Iwama. There he built the

Aiki Temple and Aiki Dojo (known nowadays as Ibaragi Dojo). In the 50's he traveled from Japan teaching, giving numerous demonstrations and lectures. It's interesting though that he was opposed to public demonstrations.

In March 1968 Morihei had a liver attack. He claimed that the gods had called him in. On 10 March he had his last training, then went to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with hepatoma. He refused an operation, but even on his deathbed he could deal with opponents without problems. A situation which occurred just before his death testifies to this. When four students wanted to help him to the toilet, he shook himself free throwing them without the least effort. He died in the morning of 26 April 1969. His last words were "Aikido belongs to all".

The life of the creator of Aikido was filled with amazing events. Morihei often demonstrated that space and time were relative. The judo captain of the University of Waseda Shutaro Nishimura, trying to see if indeed "Ueshiba is greatest living budoka of Japan", attacked him with a heavy wooden sword, but Morihei's response caused the sword to break in two. Nishimura participated with friends in intensive training sessions which took place in the forest. Though they were in solitary places with no telephone, Morihei often announced to them that in a given hour and given place somebody would wait for them and it really was so. They never succeeded in surprising him, even during sleep. As many times as they approached, so many times did he arise, but in the morning he was always completely rested.

A similar thing happened in the case of uchideshi. Morihei encouraged them to try to surprise him, but every time this happened he found them out and gave replies such as: "The gods warned me that you wanted to crown me. You would not do something like this, would you?" Gozo Shioda heard this, when he was going to strike him with a metal fan. Previously Morihei stated that he would allow him to teach if he could ever hit him with the fan. Morihei's sensitivity increased to the point that he quite often had troubles in everyday life. He often had to abandon electric rail travel due to strong headaches. He also could not bathe in water which somebody else had already bathed in (which in Japan is unusual), because he felt the spirit of all persons which bathed before him.

Shioda witnessed how Morihei did not allow a group of excellent riflemen to hit him. He stood in front of them on the rifle range within 20 metres. When they started to fire, many of them fell, and Morihei stood untouched behind them. The following attempt ended similarly. The rumble began, a strange flash appeared, some riflemen fell, and Morihei again stood behind them. Before the demonstration he signed a written agreement to participate in this test, while after this event he told Shioda that nothing had been able to happen to him because his time on earth had not yet elapsed. In a similar manner he also disappeared once from his own uchideshi who surrounded him

with bokkens and jos. Then after a moment he called out to them from the other end of the room at a distance of about 10 metres.

In 1941 Morihei had to give a demonstration before the emperor, but did not want to do this claiming that he could not present to the emperor a "lie". He felt that really executing the techniques would kill the attacker. If he only throws him, then he will deceive the emperor. He replied that he would like to see this "lie" with pleasure. However, just before the demonstration Morihei fell ill with enteritis. He was dehydrated, constantly vomiting. He ordered, however, to be taken to the emperor's palace. Extremely weakened, he suddenly recovered his powers when he entered the room in which the demonstration was to take place. Tsutomu Yukawa (1911-1942), a favourite student of Ueshiba who was first uke, hesitated in attacking, thinking that he was not as strong as usual. He went down with a broken hand and with 40 minutes remaining in the demonstration, the uke was Gozo Shioda. After the demonstration Morihei became weak again, and Shioda stayed by his bed through the next week.

The following story described by Shioda is very eloquent, especially for those teaching the martial arts. The superb dancer Hanayanagi had to perform a dance of naginata in the Kabuki theater. Morihei was introduced by the businessman Okada who felt that the martial arts had no secrets before the creator of Aikido. In actual fact Ueshiba never practiced naginata. He asked Shioda to deliver him the works of "Ushiwakamaru" and was closed with him overnight. In the morning he declared that Ushiwakamaru had come to him and taught him everything. Hanayanagi along with the students gave a beautiful performance after Morihei's lesson. A great expert of naginata present at the performance said, "What a beautiful demonstration of naginata. We still have much to learn. Who taught you this?"

One can view the man in many ways. One can admire the work created by him, marvel at unusual stories from his life, look through the prism of persons who exerted the greatest influence on him or on whom he exerted the greatest influence. Each of these views contain a small part of the truth. Together they constitute a portrait of the man. The portrait of Morihei Ueshiba is extraordinary. We marvel at the martial art created by him, admiring the effectiveness and the unusual elegance of the techniques, we marvel listening to tales of his executions. We are glad to have the opportunity to meet some of his students. Morihei Ueshiba was more than a master of the martial arts, he was a master of masters, a teacher of life. It is worth not overlooking his lessons.

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