

## **Aikido is Hard Work – Yamaguchi Seigo sensei**

by Andrzej Bazyłko

*Sometimes one meeting can change your entire life. It leaves an impression which cannot be removed to the end of time. For me, such an extraordinary event was meeting sensei Seigo Yamaguchi (1924-1996). I attended only two seminars conducted by him, of which I then understood very little. However, the ease with which he executed the techniques and the unusual beauty of the movements stirred in me an irresistible desire to follow the same path, even if I wouldn't reach very far. Till today I still do not know what purpose this has, but there is some kind of longing in me for this unusual phenomenon which was the Aikido of sensei Yamaguchi. I am fortunate to be a student of sensei Christian Tissier - one of the best students of sensei Yamaguchi. I have also met some of his other outstanding students: Seishiro Endo (born 1942) and Masatoshi Yasuno (born 1948). I wrote about this in the article "Hitch-hiking to Sensei" (Budojo No. 1).*

The Aikido of sensei Yamaguchi is present in the instruction of his students, though they differ very much. He could get the best out of all his students. He did not, however, wish them to imitate him. When they left to teach Aikido in other countries, they were not in a position to teach his Aikido. As if it were obvious. It filled them, but they were unable to produce it. They had the foundation, on which they could build their own edifice. They could only speak in their own name. He wanted them to be themselves. He couldn't stand following the crowd. He valued people who had their own opinions and were able to support them. He never leaned on the authority of O'Sensei. He said, "O'Sensei is O'Sensei, and my name is Yamaguchi". This does not mean that he did not value his own teacher. On the contrary, but he felt that one should take responsibility for one's own actions, for what one passes on to others. Constantly leaning on the authority of one's teacher he viewed as lack of maturity. If somebody wants to teach others, then he himself must first grow, to give the knowledge he received and skills to the next generations. He must know how to escape from under the care of the teacher, to see with a critical eye what he has learned. The technique of sensei Yamaguchi was not transferable, was given exclusively to him, but allowed him to build something of his own. Everyone is different and everyone practices Aikido in their own way. In order to do this, however, one must have a guide. Sensei Yamaguchi was a guide. He did not want to have imitators, but successors which follow their own path.

The relationship between teacher and student is something special, based on deep trust. Sensei Yamaguchi became O'Sensei's student in 1950. Earlier he intended to become a civil servant. He even passed the examination enabling him to work for the government. He wanted to manage public affairs or to work in the sphere of international relations. He also considered the possibility of working in a large building firm. At last he decided to leave, possibly to Europe. The most likely choice was France. Nyoichi Sakurazawa (George Ohsawa, 1893-1966), the creator of macrobiotics, who was a friend of his father, and also a close friend of O'Sensei, advised him before the trip to become familiar with some traditional Japanese forms of art. He gave a letter of recommendation to Morihei Ueshiba. Meeting such an extraordinary figure was decisive for the rest of Seigo Yamaguchi's life. He became uchi deshi of O'Sensei and decided to focus exclusively on Aikido. This was then an unusual enough choice. Those were difficult post-war times. People were not interested in Budo, only in vital matters. Sensei Yamaguchi became the first professional teacher of Aikido. He had no other occupation. Later the situation changed, because people increasingly began to practice martial arts, resulting in new clubs, and Aikido became popular. However, at the moment of decision for sensei Yamaguchi it was otherwise. It is necessary to have a vision in life of what one wants to do. Sensei Yamaguchi decided to go the way appointed by O'Sensei. Certainly the skill of making mature decisions in not taking the easy path, separating important things from trivial, helped sensei Yamaguchi's survival during the war. Near the end of the war he was in a kamikaze squad. He was called into action, many of his friends were

killed. He was prepared to follow in their footsteps. And he would have, whether the war had not ended before. The mission did not materialize, but it was not possible it didn't influence the rest of his life.

Sensei Yamaguchi had a photographic memory. He could easily repeat any movement he observed. O'Sensei did not explain the techniques, he simply showed them. Everything has to be discovered on one's own. It is certainly much more difficult, but it remains in us forever. The movement is not forced by anybody, it becomes our own movement. Sensei Yamaguchi grasped everything like lightning. Just after two years he began to teach. He went his own way, but maintained the strong bond with his teacher and deep respect for him. He himself became a very popular teacher, and had very many students not only in Japan, but also outside its borders. He conducted numerous training sessions in Europe (first of all in France in Paris, but also in Germany in Mannheim, in Great Britain in Oxford, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark), in the United States and in Canada and South America (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay). From 1958-1961 he taught Aikido in Burma. In Aikikai Hombu Dojo in Tokyo he conducted special classes for persons of high degrees. Nobody could understand his techniques. Even teachers from Hombu Dojo with the highest degrees were not able to figure out how without the least effort he was able to execute any technique regardless of the kind of attack and the person attacking. In the eyes of most students of O'Sensei from the second generation he was considered a genius of Budo. It seldom happened that teachers from Hombu Dojo attended their own classes. Some of them came, however, to classes conducted by sensei Yamaguchi, which was a sign of unusual respect. They included among others: Masando Sasaki (born 1929), Mitsugi Saotome (born 1937), Yoshimitsu Yamada (born 1938) and Kazuo Chiba (born 1940). Many persons felt that sensei Yamaguchi, due to his great popularity and unusual techniques, should create his own school of Aikido. He did not do this, however. He considered divisions to be useless. He was faithful to the memory of O'Sensei.

Sensei Yamaguchi had unusual charisma and a great gift of instruction. He was a true master of the fighting arts. Until one meets a man like him, one cannot know what this truly means. This is often attributed to various famous figures from the world of the fighting arts. Many times these are fair evaluations, but are based on legend rather than reality, which remains unknown. At times we also bestow this name on living teachers. Perhaps because of the gap which divides us from them in technical respects, in respect of experience in the given sphere. It happens, however, that we label somebody like this naturally, as if this were something obvious which nobody could possibly doubt. This was the case with sensei Yamaguchi. Nobody contemplated what grade he was given. The important thing was that it was sensei Yamaguchi. Some were fascinated by the unusual effectiveness, though it seemed that there were no reasons beyond this. It looked as though in executing the techniques of Aikido he obeyed no rules: he did not control the distance, had a high center of gravity, seemingly moved awkwardly, leaning. He did all of what beginners are asked to avoid. To the outside observer it seemed that the techniques were not executed in reality, Uke imitates and all action consists of the game between attacking and responding. Many times I heard such opinions, even from Aikidoka sitting in on his training sessions. Yet it was otherwise. Everyone who ever had the honor of attacking sensei Yamaguchi was convinced of this. Regardless of power, speed, movement, moment and any other aspects of the attack, the result was always the same. Landing on the mat quicker than one could possibly imagine, often not even realizing how it happened. Sensei Yamaguchi never corrected the attack. Every attack was accepted. And attacker. This was full of harmony, in adherence to Aikido. The attack of the master was not obvious. There was often anxiety of the results of the attack, which will reach the attacker. Sensei Yamaguchi in the dojo seemed to be powerful. Outside it, he blended into the crowd. He who was lucky enough, however, to attack him many times had no anxieties. He knew that sensei took care about everything. Only somebody who has felt the effortless execution of a technique in reply to their best attack, perhaps could understand what an unusual fighting art Aikido is. Few

Aikidoka can boast of such an experience. Students of sensei Yamaguchi had this good fortune.

The master of the fighting arts teaches throughout his whole life. The teaching not only takes place on the mat. His art fills his entire life. He has a rich individuality and is strongly connected with his students. Sensei Yamaguchi had two lusts: coffee and cigarettes. With the first he managed to give up, but with the second unfortunately not. He sat all days in cafés. Often he would turn up there after the morning training and remained until the afternoon. And with him, more often than not, his students would show up. Sensei Yamaguchi was a man of learning. His father was a manager of a public school and had many books which his son loved to read. History, literature, philosophy – these were his areas of interests. He could very entertainingly talk about these subjects. If then some student made up his mind to join in the conversation, he then had to be sure of himself, not to look foolish. These conversations substantially shaped and molded students of sensei Yamaguchi. Conversations with the master, his tales over coffee, had for them at least as much meaning as that which was learned on the mat. For all who spent time with him it was clear that what he most valued was meeting with people, being in the company of others. We often reflect on the things we have done in life which are the most important, what we will leave behind in this world. We remember different facts and events, but often we find that what really matters are the people we were lucky enough to meet. Sensei Yamaguchi did not care especially about the material conditions. He always, however, found time for meeting others.

He treated Aikido extremely seriously. At one of the training sessions conducted for persons having at least 4 dan, after a couple of exhausting sessions, he asked the participants what Aikido is. Various answers were given: the philosophy of life, the art of movement, the way of resolving conflict, the art of fighting, or even the way of self-development. Sensei Yamaguchi declared, "Aikido is hard work!" In each answer was a small part of the truth, but sensei wanted to emphasize that the only way to search for the answer was intensive training. Aikido is the language of the body. It cannot be understood theoretically. Conversation is important, but work is the most important. It does not depend, however, completely on effort. The thing is not only getting tired, but also, and perhaps first of all, to always be ready to accept something new. Constant concentration is necessary not to repeat old movements, but to learn new ones. Usually we do not hear what is said by the teacher and we do not see what is shown. It suffices that we hear some well-known catch phrase and the rest we fit into what we learned earlier. We rest on old habits. Sensei Yamaguchi fought this type of attitude which was common among Aikidoka. He demanded attentiveness. He constantly repeated that exercising "should have the spirit of the beginner". He always perceived lack of concentration of students. Everybody present at his training wanted to be caught as Uke, asked to the presentation of a technique, or rather set of techniques, because the master would seldom perform only one technique. In Hombu Dojo at his training sessions there were many persons and sensei Yamaguchi usually had two or three of the same Uke. Usually he performed techniques with sensei Yasuno, who was a quarter of his age. If, however, somebody stopped paying attention, he was at once called out by sensei to the center. Potential Uke were almost always ready, yet sensei Yamaguchi asked them at the moment when they were not ready. His training sessions were full of passion. Not only in anticipation did one have to be attentive, but also in practice. Sensei Yamaguchi did not distinguish techniques, did not analyze them. It was rather a process, a conversation of two partners, than a set divided into techniques, constituting one whole. One technique flowed smoothly into the other. The previous technique determined the opening for the next. Sensei did not try to be spectacular. The technique was not for him the aim itself. It served communication with the partner. This was exercise in constant contact. Every movement of one partner caused a reaction of the other. The conversation cannot be broken.

Sensei Yamaguchi was very strict with his best students. From them he demanded most of all. They had to work the hardest. He could be hard on them, but he thought about their future. Sensei Endo

related that after ten years of training Aikido he had a serious contusion of the right shoulder. One day he met in the cafe sensei Yamaguchi who asked, "You have exercised Aikido for ten years, but now you are able to use only one hand. So what will you do?" Moved by this question, sensei Endo began to practice almost exclusively under his direction. Only then did he understand that sensei Yamaguchi practiced completely differently than other teachers, and that was exactly what most suited him. The master said to him, "Even if you do not understand what I suggest, trust me and sacrifice the next ten years". Ten years seemed to be an eternity, but sensei Endo trusted him and his Aikido was submitted to a complete transformation. The most important place, apart from Hombu Dojo, where sensei Yamaguchi taught was dojo Zoshukan in Shibuya in Tokyo. It was intended for kendo, so there were no mats there. Only the most important students practiced there. The lack of mats meant that even during the practice of breakfalls it was necessary to maintain complete concentration. Nonetheless, the techniques were performed at full speed. There was only lack of acceleration in the throws. This allowed the Uke to bring the action to a stop at the last moment and complete the usual breakfall. This way of working meant that every moment of action was essential, concentration could not be broken even for a moment. The common hard work produced deep ties. Even the greatest teachers of Aikido earned little, so at the end of the year the closest students of sensei Yamaguchi collected money for him. This was a symbolic gesture, but with a material dimension.

One result of sensei Yamaguchi's regimen was intestinal ulcers. His doctor recommended an operation and affirmed that he would be able to remain active for another twenty years. Sensei Yamaguchi believed, however, in the natural order of things. He did not decide on radical steps. He felt that he would cope. Supposedly on the eve of his death he participated in a demonstration of Aikido. Three Uke attacked him. After the demonstration sensei had trouble with respiration and felt bad. He returned home on foot. There he died in his sleep on 24 January 1996.

His Aikido, though fleeting, had a great influence on many outstanding present day teachers, on today's image of this martial art. He was one of the pillars of modern Aikido, though not universally acknowledged to be. His achievements are considerably greater than his popularity. We do not know the author, though we often become acquainted with him through his work. After all, his techniques seemed impossible to pass on... Why did they not die along with him? Because they left a permanent mark on those who were lucky enough to come into contact with his art.

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