

The history of traditional Aikido

The history of Aikido can be divided in two periods.

The first period.

Takes place before 1942. At that time, Morihei Ueshiba used a powerful direct style with moves that were less fluid than the ones he was going to perfect in 1942 in Iwama. This form of Aikido is currently used in the Yoshinkan dojo which was founded by Gozo Yoshida, a former student of Morihei Ueshiba before the war.

From February 1915, Morihei Ueshiba, 32, became the student of Sokaku Takeda who was teaching Daïto-ryu Jujutsu, a martial art with complex and powerful techniques. Morihei Ueshiba spent a lot of time and money in the acquisition of this art and even invited Sokaku to live with him in order to have private lessons. Morihei became one of the best students of Sokaku and was given the Daïto-ryu scroll of secret techniques. Thus, he mastered a remarkable skill in this martial art. This instruction of Daïto-ryu consisted of several hundred sophisticated techniques based on keys and immobilizations. Sokaku Takeda's jujutsu techniques were going to be the basis of almost all the Aikido moves. Morihei really ended his training in December 1919 when he got a telegram which said that his father Yoroku was dangerously ill.

In 1920, after his father's death, he joined Onisaburo Degushi who was the spiritual master of the Omoto-Kyo sect in Ayabe. He was going to live eight years with his whole family in a little house behind the elementary school within the Omoto-Kyo sacred walls. All this time, he had the absolute trust of the master and, very quickly, with his approval, Morihei changed a part of his own house into a dojo of 18 tatami. He opened his "Ueshiba Academy" where he taught martial arts to the Omoto-Kyo followers.

Soon, the Ueshiba Academy's teaching became famous and it was said that an exceptional martial arts master was in Ayabe. But in 1921 on February 11th, the authorities decided to wipe out the sect. Hopefully, this event had no impact on the already famous Ueshiba Academy.

From 1921 to 1922, Morihei's martial art practice became more spiritual and more and more absorbed in the study of Kotodama. Thus, he left aside the Daïto-ryu traditions and developed a personal approach which is the combination of the spirit, the soul and the body.

In 1922, this combination was named the Aïki Bujutsu and was known to the public as the Ueshiba Ryu Aïki Bujutsu.

In 1924, after a trip to Mongolia, Morihei became interested in Sojutsu (spear techniques) and continued his intense training with the sabre and in Jujutsu. But he had already gone through a deep change.

In 1925, a Navy officer who was also a Kendo master met Morihei and challenged him. Morihei accepted and defeated him with little effort. He had been able to see the direction of the moves before the wooden stick touched him. This was an intense experience and a personal revelation: his satori. All became clear. He understood his link with the universe and one by one all the other Aikido philosophical principles. From that day on, he named his teaching Aïki-Budo rather than Aïki-Bujutsu. The substitution of the character “Bujutsu” for “Do” changes his teaching spirit completely: before it was “the martial technique of the Aïki” and now it was “the martial way of the Aïki”.

In February 1927, invited by Admiral Takeshita, he definitively left Ayabe with the approval of Onisaburo. He moved to Tokyo and dedicated himself to the martial arts. After two years of living in temporary accommodation, Morihei Ueshiba moved into a house near the Sengaku temple in Kurama-Cho where he changed a 28 tatami room into a dojo.

In 1930, thanks to the efforts of Admiral Takeshita who was fascinated by martial arts too, he organised a collection of funds in order to build a new dojo. Until the end of the building work, Morihei lived in Mejirodai and it was there that he met Jigoro Kano, the creator of judo. The former was very impressed by Morihei’s work and congratulated him and sent him two of his students: Jiro Takeda and Minoru Mochizuki.

In 1931, a 24 tatami Aïki-Budo dojo called Kobutan opened in Wakamatsu-Cho where the main dojo still remains. For 10 years, the Aïki-Budo knew its first wealthy period and was known as the “Dojo of Hell” for the extraordinary intensity of its training. Among the students, there were Yoichiro Inoue, Tsutomu Yugawa, Rinjiro Shirata, Shigemi Yonekawa and Gozo Shioda.

In 1941, the Aïki-Budo merged with the Butokai (governmental corps where all the martial arts are united in one organisation). Morihei designated Minoru Hirai to represent and rule the Kobutan which became the Budokai Aiki section. At that time, the word Aikido was known by everyone.

At the same time and in order to protect the Budo spirit for future generations, Morihei decided to create a new Aikido dojo in Iwama, Ibaragi.

The second period in Iwama.

This period began in 1942 when the Takemitsu Aïki concept was created. After an intestinal infection, Morihei Ueshiba moved to the village of Iwama, in the prefecture of Ibaragi where he had bought some lands few years before. There, he put a lot of time and effort into cultivating, training and meditation.

In Iwama, Morihei began the building of, what he called, the Ubuya (birthplace). It is the Aikido sacred circle building which is composed of the Aïki Altar and the external Dojo. In the Aïki Altar, 43 beautiful sculptures of goddesses which are enshrined, were and still are considered as the Aikido guardians. The Ibaragi Dojo was finished in 1945, before the end of the War. Morihei himself planned the whole structure on the basis of Kotodama.

The years spent in Iwama were essential to the development of modern Aikido. Morihei put himself through intensive training in order to perfect his martial art. He began the thorough study of the sabre and stick techniques which are called in Aikido, Aïkiken and Aïkijo. He thought that it was fundamental to know the drill well to master the bare hand techniques. Actually, he considered that a full Aikido programme should be composed of the weapon techniques and the bare hand techniques. He defined the Takemitsu Aïki concept as the spontaneous execution of an infinite

number of techniques depending on the situation. Morihiro Saito would codify the weapon techniques training in a very detailed programme, which completed the bare hand training.

The courses in Iwama are divided in 2 sessions:

- The morning lessons were for the boarding students. First, they prayed for 40 minutes and at straight in front of the Aiki Altar. Then, they were to fight with weapons outdoors when the weather was good.
- The evening lessons were restricted for bare hand training. The Iwama teaching was now very different from the one before the war. Ueshiba used to demonstrate moves without any or few explanations and the students were to try copying them. They had to do their best to “steal” the teacher’s techniques. As Sokuda Takeru used to say, “the stolen techniques become yours”.

At that time, Morihei Ueshiba spent a lot of time and effort in personal research, surrounded by his closest disciples. Master Saito used to say:

“When I think about it, the founder’s brain worked like a computer. During his training, O’Sensei taught us the techniques he had developed by that time. He used to systematize and organize them by himself. When we had to learn a technique, it was automatically the techniques of the same group. If we began by the knee techniques, we had to do only these ones, one by one. When he introduced two hand techniques, all the following techniques had to begin with two hands.

O’Sensei taught us two, three or four levels of techniques. He used to begin with the basis and then go on, level by level, until the most advanced one. O’Sensei would insist on that and every detail had to be correct for the technique to be effective. The old and the new students had to practise together. It was important that the latter had to learn the technique of falling. As soon as the old students executed a technique from the left and from the right, when it was the new students’ turn, they went on to the next technique. Because he had few students at that time, O’Sensei threw every student at least once. Sometimes, while some old students were practising with O’Sensei, we waited for him to teach us individually.

Master Morihiro Saito.

Morihiro Saito was one of the few teachers who got the prestigious ninth Aikido dan. He practised and taught during 56 years in the founder’s dojo in Iwama. From the seventies, Morihiro Saito’s teaching methods became famous throughout the world thanks to his five techniques volumes called the “Traditional Aikido”.

Morihiro Saito was one of the lucky ones who was trained by the founder himself. His methods were different as they attach importance to taijutsu (bare hand techniques) and to aiki weapons such as the ken (sword) and the jo (stick).

Morihiro Saito was the only one who mastered the weapon techniques thanks to long training with the Iwama founder that lasted many years. Then, he spent numerous years testing it and improving himself. His technique programme naturally became a worldwide standard for weapon studies in Aikido.

The study of the aikiken and the aikijo brings a better understanding of the fight distance, body position and self-centring. The student is obliged to adopt the correct attitude in order to reinforce his arms and legs which improves performance of bare hand techniques. This technique is an integral part of Morihiro Saito’s teaching and is necessary to complete bare hand training.

During the summer of 1946, a young man who worked at the Japan National Railway joined Morihei Ueshiba's dojo. Morihiro Saito who seemed to have no specific skills was to become the closest student of the founder and in every respect, his successor.

Morihiro Saito was often Morihei Ueshiba's technique partner during the training. There, he faced the founder's various techniques as well as the new ones. Indeed, Morihiro Saito's position in the Japan National Railway was a godsend for his training in Aikido. His schedule which was 2 days of work per week, allowed him to spend a lot of time in Ueshiba dojo. Therefore, he was allowed from the start to attend the morning trainings.

Nevertheless, some students had difficulties to come to the Iwama dojo due to poverty, spread in the whole of Japan at that time. Bit by bit, they gave up the training because of their professional and family duties. Consequently, there were few who continued with it. In view of Morihiro's devotion and enthusiasm for the training, Ueshiba started to count more and more on him in his everyday life. Finally, there was only the young Saito left who served the founder regularly. Even after his marriage, Morihiro's passion did not weaken. Actually, his young wife came to Ueshiba's service as well and took care of Hatsu, the O'Sensei old wife personally.

Master Saito related: "In the end, there were only a tiny number of old students from the region and myself. But after the marriage, they couldn't come any more because they had to work harder. When Sensei was there, we didn't know when we were needed. Even if we called a neighbour to help us cultivate the rice, the consequences were unfortunate if we didn't come when he called!"

"Finally, no more students came because they had to take care of their own families. Although I worked every other night, I was able to go on training because I was free during the day. I was lucky to have a job, otherwise I would not have continued. I could live without being paid by O'Sensei because I was paid by the Japan National Railway. O'Sensei had money but for his students from the region. If they lived with him, they didn't get wages and wouldn't be able to cultivate rice to provide for their families."

"To be at the service of the founder was a very tough task, even for those who wanted to learn martial arts. O'Sensei warmed to the students who wouldn't hesitate to get their hands dirty among the crops from dawn to twilight and to the ones who also massaged his back and were ready to serve him until death. As I was useful to him, he taught me everything willingly."

The founder showed his affection and his trust to the young Saito. After Morihiro's helpful intervention in an argument about land, O'Sensei offered him a plot from the Ueshiba's lands. There, Morihiro and his wife built their house. They lived with their children and served the founder.

By the end of the fifties, the years of intense training with the founder had changed Morihiro Saito into a powerful man who also was one of the best teachers of the Aikikai. He taught regularly in Iwama dojo when Morihei Ueshiba was away. Morihiro was asked to stand in for Koichi Tohei in his dojo in Utsunomiya when the latter went to Hawaii to teach aikido.

Around 1960, Morihiro Saito also gave lessons each day in the Aikikai of Tokyo. He was the only teacher, except the founder himself, to be able to teach aikido weapon techniques. His lessons were very famous. For many years, every Sunday morning, he taught weapon and bare hand techniques to his Tokyo students.

After the death of the founder on April 26th 1969, Morihiro Saito became the main teacher of the Iwama dojo and also the guardian of the aikido sanctuary nearby. He had served the founder with devotion for 24 years and O'Sensei's death confirmed his opinion to keep Morihei Ueshiba's aikido intact.

In the seventies, Morihiro Saito's Traditional Aikido was published. These five volumes of techniques gave him the reputation of the best techniques master. The books consist of hundreds of bare hand techniques, aikiken and aikijo and all the counterattacks. There is a classification and a list of the aikido techniques. This system is used worldwide. Moreover, a series of films which complete the books were given a good reception.

In 1974, Morihiro Saito made his first trip abroad. He went to California to offer training. For the first time, a huge number of foreign students were able to see the varied knowledge of Morihiro Saito on aikido techniques. The clarity of his training programme (he deconstructed every move he made) won him the praise of all the students.

Morihiro retired from the Japan National Railway in the middle of the seventies, after having completed thirty years' service. As he was now free to travel and spend all his time on aikido, he made more than fifty trips abroad.

As the years went by, Morihiro Saito trained many teachers who spread his aikido outside Japan. It was generally called the "Iwama aikido" which put the accent as much on bare hand techniques as on weapon techniques, compared to other dojos where only bare hand techniques were taught. Many students in the world follow his programme, especially in the United States of America, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Australia, Sweden, Portugal and France.

The consequence of Morihiro Saito's books and trips is the constant arrival of foreign aikidoka from all over the world in Iwama dojo for training. They can live there and then have intense training on the ken and jo handlings. Through the last twenty years, thousands of students have come to Japan to be taught by Morihiro Sensei. In Iwama dojo, there are often more foreign students than Japanese ones.

Morihiro Saito continued to give lessons six days per week: the morning lessons were in weapons and for boarding students and the evening lessons were in bare hand techniques. Every Sunday morning, Morihiro Saito gave lessons for everyone and taught the aikiken and the aikijo outdoors when the weather was fine. Besides, he organized training sessions for aikido clubs in Japanese universities, which the founder used to do already.

As the chief of the aikido teachers, Saito owed his success thanks to his unique approach, a mix of tradition and modernism. He kept intact the founder's view of aikido and created a classification of hundreds of weapon and bare hand techniques. He also devised many training methods based on modern educational principles in order to speed up the learning process.

Nowadays, in the aikido world, the students tend to see this art as a wealthy sport and, in many dojos, the technique efficiency is quite lost. In such a context, the power and the precise techniques of Morihiro Saito are exceptions. Thanks to his efforts and those of some devoted teachers, Aikido is still considered as a true martial art.