

Ki Lecture – History of Aikido in Hawaii

Curtis Sensei – Jan. 23, 2015

Good evening everyone.

We have a number of new students, “new” meaning over the last few years. So I wanted to do a re-cap of how Aikido came to be, to begin with, what it came out of, and how we experienced receiving Aikido from Japan here in Hawaii and then throughout the world, how Aikido developed in Hawaii, and then finally, here on Maui, why it is that we train the way we do today. That’s asking a lot, and I’ll make it as brief as I can.

Every body knows who Morihei Uyeshiba, is? O’Sensei, the Founder of Aikido. O’Sensei was already doing what he called “Aiki Budo” in the early 30’s. He trained with Takeda Sensei, and a few different people. He trained with weapons, he trained weapon-less, and it was all very martial, very combat oriented, strength oriented, upper body strength, tension, and clever techniques. He was very good at it, and though he was a small man, he was a very powerful man. Incidentally, he was also a very religious person. And in the late 30’s, 1937 or 1938, he had an experience, to which he referred the rest of his days until he passed away in 1969. And in this experience, he said that the Shinto gods spoke to him, and showed him the spirit of non-dissension, the way to love and harmony in the universe, and living in a conflict-free world. In addition to which, he said that it was pointed out to him by the gods that he had been selected as the only one to understand and share this with the world. And this story, along with some other details about what an incredible experience it was for him (it must have been life-transforming because he repeated it often and told many students about it over the years) and he always spoke about it in ways that were very difficult, according to his students, to understand. At that time he changed the name from Aiki Budo to Aikido, the Way of Harmony with the Universe, or with Universal Energy, Ki.

During the war, of course, things dropped away. Many of his students, including Tohei Sensei, became soldiers and had to go away and fight. He himself went to Manchuria for a long time, and then he spent the rest of his time at his country home in Iwama. After the war, he returned, re-opened his dojo in Tokyo, and began taking students. In those days, most students were uchi-deshi, which means “live-in student.” “Uchi” is “home,” so “home student.”

Like I said, he was an amazing performer. He could do this thing he called Aikido, which he said is taking the momentum and strength and intension of the attacker and turning it around and causing it to defeat the opponent, in apparently miraculous ways. A lot of films were made and a lot of foreign people that saw him wrote about it and said, “This guy’s incredible.” But when he taught it to people, and when he talked about it, he presented it all in religious terms. It was very difficult to understand. None of his students could understand.

When Suzuki Sensei first went to Japan to train, in 1956 and then again in 1959, he said O’Sensei took a liking to him. He was big and strong, he was Japanese, which was very

important in those days, at least to O'Sensei, and he was from Hawaii. So he was kind of the perfect student, in this way. So O'Sensei really liked Suzuki Sensei and right away invited him into his inner sanctum. He had a little office, or sitting room off of the dojo, where he would sit and meditate before he would come out and teach. And no one was ever allowed in this room with him, according to Suzuki Sensei. But when Suzuki Sensei arrived, O'Sensei said, "Come, come and sit with me." So Suzuki Sensei had to sit seiza in front of him in this room, and O'Sensei lectured him about the religion, about believing in God, and of course love and harmony and all the beautiful things that he was teaching. And Suzuki Sensei said he had no idea what he was talking about. But he had to sit there in seiza for one hour, and every time O'Sensei would pause, he would say, "Hai Sensei. Hai Sensei!" And when they were done and it was time for class to start, O'Sensei opened the door, rushed out into the dojo, and said to the students, "What's the matter with all you people?! This foreigner listened to me for the first time and he understands everything I say. You people understand nothing I am teaching you!" So after the class was over and O'Sensei left, these guys all grabbed Suzuki Sensei and said, "What, what? Tell us what he is teaching. Explain to us!" And he said, "I have no idea. I just said 'Hai Sensei, hai Sensei.'"

As you can tell from the beautiful calligraphy we have on our walls here in the dojo, a lot of it brushed by O'Sensei, and the calligraphy I have in my meditation room at home, "Masa katsu a gatsu kachi haya bi," that I have talked about before and also brushed by O'Sensei as a gift to Suzuki Sensei, he cared a great deal for Suzuki Sensei and really valued the Maui and Hawaii Aikido. So much so, that in 1953 he sent Koichi Tohei Sensei, his 10th Dan number one student, who he had assigned as Chief Instructor of the Tokyo dojo, to come to Hawaii and introduce Aikido. This was in 1953, and I didn't begin until 1974, so it was 21 years before I ever began training that Suzuki Sensei met Tohei Sensei. And as I said, during those years he trained in Japan a number of times, but Tohei Sensei would come here every two years in the summer. In those days he would spend two months living on Maui and training with everybody here. There was a hotel right down here on the corner, and he would stay there. They began training in the gym across the street here, and then they built our old dojo here before we built this nice new one.

In 1961, O'Sensei came to our new/old dojo, and performed Shinto ceremonies and blessed our dojo, and that's when he gifted Suzuki Sensei and the members with this calligraphy. At that time, Tohei Sensei of course accompanied him to Hawaii, and also accompanying him was someone who became very famous later on, Nobeyoshi Tamura. He was 19 years old at the time, and recently passed away in France, where he taught for over 30 years, having been sent there by O'Sensei himself, early in his career. He was very successful as a teacher and organizer and a very nice man. I met him in France, and he was very close to Suzuki Sensei throughout his life.

So Aikido in Hawaii continued on for a number of years, and then just before I came here to begin training, Tohei Sensei left what was called the "Aiki Kai" or the "Hombu (Headquarters) Dojo" and started his own organization, in those days known as "Ki no Kenyukai."

A very important aspect of O'Sensei's teaching was this idea that he was selected, or he was chosen, to understand this teaching and pass it on. And I'm not sure he ever emphasized this, but the impression that people got when they trained with him was that you could not do what he could do. And Tohei Sensei felt very differently. For one thing, he was not religious. He wasn't involved in the Shinto religion particularly. He had respect for it, but he wasn't personally a religious person. And so he felt, from what he had learned from O'Sensei and others, that he could certainly do it, and he thought that there was a way to teach Aikido so that everyone could do this, that it was accessible to all of us. And if he hadn't felt that way, you and I wouldn't be sitting here today, because he started his school based upon the principles that he developed that he felt could help us understand and practice how to experience this spirit of non-dissension in our relationships with other people.

O'Sensei always said, you have to understand that the small mind and body is not separate from the universal mind and body. Tohei Sensei always taught us, the purpose of our training is to be one with this universal mind/body, or original mind, or *reseishin*. But in just the same way that when you come to the dojo and start training in the beginning, you spend a lot of time focused on the physicality, learning to do the movements, the techniques, in this same way, back in the beginning of Aikido, over the first 10 to 15 years, everybody was focused on learning to do their techniques. So Tohei Sensei didn't really get into the deeper level of teaching until later on, really into the 80's and 90's and then a little bit after the turn of the century. He had his first stroke in 2001, and after that he had multiple strokes and so it was very difficult for him to teach. And then finally he passed away a few years later.

So I was lucky to be able to train with him during those years when he was not just teaching techniques. He didn't have to just focus on teaching techniques, because the students had mastered most of the techniques and were ready and hungry for more, so that allowed him to teach on a whole other level. And interestingly, as he told all of us, that change actually chased away a lot of the students. Many of the students were only interested in the physical aspects of Aikido, when he began getting deeper and deeper into the real root of Aikido and what this spirit of non-dissension really means, this non-fighting mind, this love, this universal unity. What does it mean to actually experience that, not just when you are on the mat, but in all your relationships?

In the old days, from 1974, the organization of Aikido in Hawaii was called the "Hawaii Ki Society." There were smaller Ki Societies on each island, the Maui Ki Society, the Kauai Ki Society, the Big Island Ki Society, and on Oahu, or Honolulu Ki Society and the Aloha Ki Society. So these smaller Ki Societies made up the Hawaii Ki Society. It wasn't called a "federation" in those days. And in the mid 80's I became Treasurer of this Hawaii Ki Society, so I went to all the meetings, which were held much more often than now, they were once a month, and almost always held on Oahu. And there was so much political dissension and combativeness between the various islands and their Chief Instructors that it was very uncomfortable to be at these meetings. And soon, not Suzuki Sensei, but certain other individuals were writing to Tohei Sensei blaming each other for

this condition, this political strife that was going on. Tohei Sensei tried to take care of it from afar by writing to people, but it just got worse and worse, and finally in 1991 he flew to Honolulu, called everyone to a meeting, spent one day here, had a very short meeting, all the instructors were there, and said, "I am disbanding Hawaii Ki Society. You people are acting like children. Go back to your own islands and teach in your own Ki Society. There is no more Hawaii Ki Society." That was in early 1991.

So during the next 7 or 8 years, we all basically just did Aikido by ourselves, except when Tohei Sensei, or his Chief Instructor in those days, Koretoshi Maruyama Sensei would come to one of the islands to teach a seminar. Then we would all get together. And it would be like these Ki Societies were all separate, particularly Honolulu. There they always felt very separate, and would never train with us. We were very rough, I'll admit. The Maui Boys had kind of a bad reputation for being too rough in our training. But basically what it meant was, after it was disbanded in 1991 and we didn't have a Hawaii Ki Society, we no longer had, except for these few seminars that happened every once in a while, any opportunity to train together. We pretty much did our own thing, and started drawing further and further apart, so when Tohei Sensei would see us, he would say, "What's going on? This is the teaching." And we'd have the Kauai version, the Hilo version, the Maui version, and the Oahu version.

So in 1998, when I was in Japan at World Camp, Tohei Sensei invited me to a meeting at his home, which always makes one very nervous. I had to put on a tie, because you can't go to his home in a sports shirt. During this meeting, he asked me if I would be willing to organize and establish a new Hawaii group, only this time called the "Hawaii Ki Federation" of dojos. All the individual Ki Societies would be disbanded and there would only be a Hawaii Ki Federation with a system of dojos. There would be no politics. The only purpose of this new group would be to train, and my job was to make sure everyone was training what Tohei Sensei was currently teaching. So I had to go to Japan quite often to get this teaching and bring it back.

I said to Tohei Sensei, "Well, I can't really do that, Sensei, because these folks are my seniors. Suzuki Sensei, Nonaka Sensei, Tabata Sensei, Masamura Sensei, Eto Sensei. These people are my teachers. I can't be the Chief Instructor. He said to me, "Don't worry. I want someone young. I'll speak to them. There won't be a problem." So he did, and I called a meeting on Maui and all five of them came and they all pledged their sincerity and willingness to support me in this.

As it turned out, only Suzuki Sensei, Nonaka Sensei, and the Kauai group (Masamura Sensei passed away during this period so Kuboyama Sensei took over, and also Eto Sensei passed away during this period, or very soon after) were the only ones really supporting this new effort. The Honolulu dojo fellow, Tabata Sensei, decided two weeks later that he would rather not support me, that he felt he should be Chief Instructor of Hawaii. And the group that had been with Eto Sensei also decided they didn't want to support it, for political reasons. They also apparently felt that someone from Oahu should be Chief Instructor. I was put in a very difficult position.

However, there was someone else on Oahu, and that was Clayton Naluai Sensei. During all of this past strife, he had pretty much stayed outside of it. He had a big dojo on Oahu called Lokahi Dojo. He didn't train with Tabata Sensei of the Honolulu Ki Society and he didn't train with Eto Sensei of the Aloha Ki Society. He had his own thing. And when we established Hawaii Ki Federation, he wrote me a note and said, "I want to be a part of this." So then he became the center of Ki Aikido in Honolulu on Oahu. And that's why all of our seminars on Oahu happen at the Lokahi Dojo because that's his dojo. He is semi-retired these days. He is a Senior Advisor to Hawaii Ki Federation, and Charles Boyer Sensei is the Head Instructor of the Lokahi Dojo now.

So that's briefly how this all came to be here. And when Tohei Sensei first asked me if I would be willing to do this, he said, "I don't want any politics, and I don't want you to just teach techniques. I want you to teach them the truth of this practice."

So that's what I have been endeavoring to do over the past 15 years. It began in the year 2000, so it's been 15 years that we have been practicing together. I think it has been successful in the sense that we are finally all together now. Maui Ki Aikido is still the biggest part of Hawaii Ki Federation, just as it has always been the primary dojo in Hawaii. We have more students here, a very nice big dojo, and we have a lot of people who are very sincere, long time practioners, like most of you here tonight, and who are the reason why we have been able to continue to operate on the kind of level that we do. Other dojos are not automatically like this. They are generally smaller, less cohesive, the organization can be more scattered, there can be more difficulty, even dissension. But here on Maui, and pretty much throughout Hawaii, at least from my perspective, everyone is getting along very well, training together, and the sangha, or the group, is very strong. Of course this makes me extremely grateful. AND, more importantly, you allow me, and even encourage me, to fulfill the promise I made to Tohei Sensei, when he asked me not to just teach techniques, but to teach what the techniques arise out of, and what the meaning of non-dissension is in our practice every day.

So that's what we are practicing. Of course, we are practicing techniques and all the exercises, Ki Breathing, Meditation, Kiatsu, and everything. But all the while we are doing that, that's keiko. The shugyo practice, the real practice we are doing, is constantly learning to bring ourselves back to the present moment and living in the present moment with full awareness. Which allows us to experience what Tohei Sensei calls being one with the universe, not being separate. When our mind or our attention is distracted by the past or the future, we leave the present. We leave our vulnerability behind. We speak from our history, or our hopes of the future and how we think it should be. We judge others and we kill the spirit of non-dissension in ourselves and discourage it in others. Every moment that we spend truly practicing shugyo, we do that not just for ourselves, but for everybody in the room with us. When people walk in this dojo they inevitably say, "Wow, this dojo feels amazing. Most dojos don't feel like this." That's because of you people. That's because of this practice that we do, that we share. That's the feeling they are feeling. They may not know it. They may have other words for it, but that is the experience that they are picking up on. And when you think, "Maybe I'd rather stay home tonight, have a beer and watch TV or go to a concert or do something else," if you

don't do that, the reason you don't is because that speaks to you. The little, quite, stammering voice speaks out for itself and overwhelms the excuses that you are making.

So it's that spirit that enhances and preserves our experience here together. So this is sacred, this is what it's all about. Of course we continue to do all the exercises and techniques and that keeps us relatively good shape and it's a lot of fun, and it keeps us older folks a bit more flexible, which some of you have experienced and some of you have not yet.

OK, so thank you for being here and being a part of this. That's my introduction. Do you have any questions or comments about what I have said?

Student: Sensei, since you are starting out a new kind of talk session this year with these "Ki Lectures," can you tell us what kind of topics you plan to cover? And will you be putting them on your blog for those who are unable to come, so they can read the transcripts?

Do you know when I discovered what I would speak about tonight? A very short time ago, like 24 hours. I think I told Lynn at dinner last night. But I had no idea before that. This is not easy for me, you know. In my business, I am an obsessive planner. I am a landscape contractor, and I plan the whole job. I design the thing elaborately with pages and pages of instructions of exactly how to do it and everything is planned out. In Aikido, that does not work for me. I have learned the hard way, that if I get up and try to give you a planned lecture, it's kind of boring. See, he's nodding! So I try to leave it open. I will make an effort to let you know ahead of time, so you know whether you want to come or not, as I did this time. I think I can swing that. But I don't know yet what the subjects will be. I'd like to take suggestions. You know, I can talk about anything, believe it or not, so I just might talk about anything. So if there are some things that you would like me to address, some aspect of our practice, for instance, or the five principles of something. Not just to come up with something, but something that you genuinely are wondering about. So, you know, if you have any suggestions, we are doing this every month, and if you have any suggestions, you can let me know. Do you have any suggestions now?

Students: I think that if you don't get other suggestions, choosing relevant Five Principles would be useful.

I agree with you. That's a good suggestion. I was going to do the Five Principles of Aikido tonight, if nothing else came up. But then, I think Tracy suggested that there might be new students who could benefit from a history lesson. But then, those new students are not all here.

Student: So I see you are recording it. Does that mean you are going to put it on the blog?

Yes, so I'll do a transcript and Glenn will assemble it and Tracy will put it on the site, curtissensei.com.

Student: So Sensei, I really like the historical perspective, and we have some very historical archived movies. Are we going to do a "movie night" sometime soon?

Ah yes. We always do a movie night in the spring, and when I read the Annual Report recently I was reminded that we have not yet scheduled a movie night this year, even though we have scheduled the 3-hour meditation, the Ki Lectures, and everything else. So maybe one of the Wednesday or Friday night in February, we will pick a night, get together, turn on our ancient television set here, and run through some of our DVD that we have. We have quite a collection of movies of O'Sensei, Tohei Sensei, Suzuki Sensei...

Student: Aren't there also films of you, Sensei?

Well, we probably won't need to watch those, but we can watch the other ones.

Student: Sensei, we all like that picture of O'Sensei up there on Haleakala. Could you tell us something about how that came about?

It's the photo?

Student: Yes, I remember it was in color and I turned it into a black and white. That's now what you see everywhere on the internet and so forth.

I see. Yes, that is a very famous photograph. All I know is that in 1961 he was here, blessing the dojo, and he wanted to see the top of Haleakala mountain, so they all went up there for the sunrise one morning. I remember Suzuki Sensei told me that someone said, "Where's O'Sensei?" Of course you don't want to hear a question like that. And Suzuki Sensei looked over and he saw him standing up on that rock, overlooking the vast chasm of the crater praying. He was chanting. I don't know what he was chanting, but somebody snapped that photo. It was actually Nobeyoshi Tamura, his otomo, who snapped the photo. And that photo is everywhere in the world. It's a famous photograph, and it happened here on Maui.

Student: I think we should go up there and try to find that spot.

I did once, with Suzuki Sensei. Suzuki Sensei showed me where he was standing. That's why I know. See, the Visitor Center is not in the same place as it was then, so if you go to the Visitor Center now you'll never find it. It was a little further along, a different road.

Student: So he is in a hakama. Did he just cruise around in hakama and gi?

That's correct. He did not own any western clothes. He never wore a suit. All his students did. They would wear a coat and tie when they were with him. But he always

wore a kimono. He is not in a gi and hakama. That's a kimono. He wore kimono everywhere, and when he taught he would wear a white kimono. Purity.

So I never got to meet him, but Suzuki Sensei has some really wonderful stories about what he was like.

When they were here on Maui in 1961...I told you earlier about how religious O'Sensei was...and Tohei Sensei could do all of these things that O'Sensei could do, like unraisable body and so forth. But O'Sensei attributed his ability to do that to the gods. And he knew that Tohei Sensei wasn't religious. No only was he not religious, he was kind of a rascal when he was young, by O'Sensei's standards anyway.

So when they were here, Tohei Sensei was scheduled to do a demonstration at the old fairgrounds over on Puunene Avenue. And the night before, O'Sensei said to Tohei Sensei, Suzuki Sensei, and Tamura Sensei, "Don't you boys go out drinking tonight, because the gods don't like that. That is impure, and Tohei Sensei you will not be able to have unraisable body tomorrow morning at the demonstration. The gods may abandon you." Of course, they went out drinking anyway, as soon as O'Sensei went to bed, and stayed out till four in the morning.

And the next morning they are at the demonstration, and O'Sensei knows that they went drinking the night before, and so he is very nervous. Suzuki Sensei told me there was a stage that Tohei Sensei was going to demonstrate on, and the some screens, and behind the screens O'Sensei was marching back and forth, because he was afraid that Tohei Sensei was going to make a fool of himself, and by extension a fool of him, and not be able to do this unraisable body. So Tohei Sensei called the biggest kanaka in the crowd, and of course Tohei Sensei did it easily, and gave a great demonstration overall.

And understand, Suzuki Sensei didn't say this to diminish O'Sensei in any way, but just remind me, or clarify for me, the difference between O'Sensei's approach and Tohei Sensei's approach. It's not that you should go out drinking the night before you do a demonstration. But Tohei Sensei's whole point is that this is not something that comes from the outside, something other than you. It may be that it comes from a "you" that's much more inclusive than the "you" that you are use to thinking of as you. So actually they were not that far apart. In fact, they were doing exactly the same thing. It's just that O'Sensei saw it from a religious perspective, and Tohei Sensei saw it from a secular perspective. But they were actually doing the same thing, if you can call it "doing." Each of them were opening themselves to the same universal truth, or universal condition, the same state of unification.

Student: Is it true, I heard that O'Sensei's only trip to the west was Hawaii, and then from then it spread to the rest of the world?

Well, yes, it's true that this was his only visit to the west, outside of Japan. But that was in 1961, and by then Tohei Sensei had been to Hawaii, to the United States, and maybe even his first trip to Europe. But Aikido was already going everywhere by the time O'Sensei came here. He came here, and there was also a dojo on Oahu, the Waianae

Dojo, to bless this dojo and that dojo. So it was both of these dojo, not just ours. He came to support the Hawaiian scene, with all of these rascals over here.

But do you know that Hawaii was Tohei Sensei's favorite place? I heard him say that again and again. And you could see, when he and Suzuki Sensei got together, that they were the best of friends. He had other friends in Japan, but not a lot of close personal friends, and when we were at Aikido functions in Japan, he always wanted Suzuki Sensei sitting right next to him. And because of that, because of his fondness for Hawaii, (he loved to do the hula at parties), and of course his general fondness for the Japanese people here made for a great connection to Japan. The cultures are so intermixed. And because of this fondness for Suzuki Sensei, let's just say that it made things very nice for me, because I always got to sit in on the meetings. I was Suzuki Sensei's otomo, so he would say, "Chris, you come with me. We are going to sit down and talk with Tohei Sensei." So I got to always hear them talking. Or even when there was some kind of business meeting, I'd get to go and listen. So because I was always with Suzuki Sensei, Tohei Sensei got to know me, and even often I would go to Japan on my own to train. So Tohei Sensei began to trust me, and he knew that if Suzuki Sensei has selected me to be his guy, then I was probably OK. He did say to me, however, the night that he asked me to be the Chief Instructor of Hawaii, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'm really sorry that I wasn't able to find a Japanese person in Hawaii to be Chief Instructor. Unfortunately, no one but you did the work, so I had to select you." I simply said, "Thank you, thank you." What else could I say? That was pretty funny. He was just being honest with me. It's perfectly natural that he would want that to enhance the connection with Japan, maybe someone that actually spoke Japanese well, which as you know I don't. So that's always been a hindrance. When he spoke to me it had to be in English and his English was pretty bad and got worse as he got older. Or, often someone had to translate for us. He would have this fellow Yoshigasaki Sensei translate for us in private meetings, so that we could talk and understand each other more freely.

So that's the way it was, and we're out of time.

Thank you very much.