



Interview with Morihiro Saito Shihan Aikikai 9th dan

Morihiro Saito Shihan (Aikikai 9th dan) began practice of Aikido in 1946 under Aikido's Founder, Morihei Ueshiba, at the Ibaragi Iwama Dojo. This year marks the 50th anniversary of his dedicated practice of the art of Aikido. He has published many books, including the five in the classic series Traditional Aikido, and he appears on several videos.

It seems that at every important junction in my life, Saito Sensei has been there. He was at Iwama during the years I spent as an uchi deshi under the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba. Six years after the Founder's death, Saito Sensei came, at my invitation, to a demonstration for an Aikido club on Misawa Air force base, where I was teaching - a demonstration that led to the opportunity for me to come to the US for the first time. Now, 20 years later, in October 1995, I had the opportunity to invite Saito Sensei to instruct at Aikido Nippon Kan in Denver, Colorado.

It seems like only the blink of an eye - the time has gone by so quickly. I remember experiences from the past as if they happened yesterday. I am 45 years old now, and Saito Sensei is 67. As time passes and we grow older, I think our temperament and values change, becoming more tolerant and generally more accepting. During our seminar, as I took care of Saito Sensei and watched him teach, I clearly realized just how much time had passed, and just how many memories I had.

As Saito Sensei taught, I never heard him talk about universal powers, God, auras, peace, or ki, and I never heard him make any other cosmic references. Yet in each of his movements, his body displayed the feelings that these words strive to capture. This power to touch people's hearts through the eloquence of his movements is what separates him from others. His physical technique and his philosophy are simple and planted firmly on the ground. Who he is and what he teaches is based on realism, not on illusive concepts that can deceive or confuse.

As I interviewed Saito Sensei, I couldn't help feeling that I was listening to a father getting on in years, passing the wisdom of his experience on to future generations.

Gaku Homma - 1996

The Interview...

1.Saito Shihan, you are very healthy. What do you think the secret is to your good health? :

Morihiro Saito Sensei: Now I am 67 years old. In Japan that makes me eligible to join the senior citizen's activity groups. I receive many flyers and invitations to join senior citizen activities from the Iwama town office. I don't feel I am quite ready for that, though.

What is the secret to my health? There is no secret, really. I don't eat too much meat or fatty foods. I eat foods high in fiber. Going on seminar tours is a good chance for me to lose a little weight; I usually don't eat a great deal while I am traveling. Denver has been an exception, however. Eating the meals that Homma-kun has prepared for me has stimulated my appetite. ["Kun" is a suffix indicating familiarity.]

If I did have a secret to good health, it would be to keep busy. I try to create a very busy situation for myself, keeping every day full of positive activity. My daily motto is that, with every step I take, there must be another task waiting to be completed. The same day I get back from this US tour, I will travel to northern Honshu to give a demonstration at the Tohoku Regional Aikido Demonstration.

2.Gaku homma Sensei : During the time I lived at the Aiki shrine dojo in Iwama, everyone called you Iwama's "Mou-chan." ["Mou" is short for Morihiro, and "chan" is a term of endearment.] or "Iwama's Napoleon." How did you get these names?



Morihiro Saito Sensei :: From the time I became an uchi deshi at Iwama Dojo until the Founder's death, I was a very busy young man. During the period that I was an uchi deshi, I also worked for the Japan National Railroad. The only time I had to myself was on the trip from the dojo to the train station and back. Other than that, I had no personal time. My life consisted of work and practice. I was not able to listen to music or follow the latest fads or sports like the other boys my age. Sometimes I worked the night shift for the railroads, so my days and nights got mixed up. If I wanted to take some extra time to do a personal chore - like repairing my uniform, for example - I would have to shorten my sleeping time.

The townspeople around me used to say, "Napoleon needed only three hours of sleep on his horse. Iwama's Mou-chan dozing in his clothes needs only 30 minutes of sleep before he is ready to work again." Eventually, the name "Napoleon" stuck and became my nickname. My body has not forgotten those times - I'm still busy!

The nickname "Mou-chan" also brings back memories. I didn't choose for this to happen, but for some reason the townspeople of Iwama and the surrounding areas were afraid of that name. Everybody knew it, and it carried a stigma. If any of the neighboring Yakuza or local boys tried to make trouble in Iwama, the mention of the name "Iwama's Mou-chan" usually stopped them. This was a great surprise to me!

One day, just before a festival was to be held in the town of Iwama, the local boys got into a fight with a rival group from a neighboring town. It seemed that this rival group wanted to take over vending space for the festival, and they thought this might be a good chance to invade Iwama territory. They called their group together and ventured into Iwama with the Yakuza at the lead.

One of the young men from Iwama ran to me and asked for my help in fending off their rivals. At first I refused, not wanting to get involved in their personal fights. But, being young and not knowing the meaning of fear, I eventually agreed to help them. Wearing leather boots to protect my feet and a heavy leather jacket to protect myself from a knife attack, I set out to lend a hand.

I was surprised when I arrived at the scene. I had no idea how many people had gathered in the street, ready to fight! Not knowing what else to do, I walked directly between the two groups and said, "Fighting on the day of a shrine festival is not good."

The rival boss stepped up to me and asked, "Hey you, young guy - who are you?" "I am Saito," I replied, but that got little response. Then someone from Iwama screamed out, "He is Iwama's Mou-chan!" At that, the rival boss got down on his hands and knees, lowered his head to the ground, and apologized.

I told the Iwama boys who had started the fight to apologize, too. Then I grabbed the leaders from both groups and steered them into a local sake bar. Lecturing the Iwama boys, I said sternly, "Anyone who starts a fight is in the wrong and must remedy the situation by serving sake to those they have hurt. Fix this situation now!" And with that I left.

Most of the townspeople knew my nickname but not my face, since I was so busy working all the time. Because I practiced Aikido, my reputation seemed to grow of its own accord. I was often called to resolve minor disputes, even before the police were called. I'm still not sure whether my reputation was a good one or a bad one. [Laughs].

Of course, I no longer have a reputation of that kind. Those days were a lot different from today. The times were more innocent - especially in the countryside.

3. Gaku homma Sensei : It seems to me that you are still Iwama's Napoleon. During this seminar tour, in a two-week period, you have traveled to the US from Japan, taught on both the east and west coasts, and then came to Denver with no rest in between. That seems like a strenuous schedule to me.

As you see it, what makes life worth living?

Morihiro Saito Sensei: What makes me the happiest is teaching what I have inherited from the Founder. I find great fulfillment in visiting my students all over the world, being able to stay in their homes, teaching and practicing together. When I am home at Iwama, if there is a little extra time, I enjoy spending it at the Aiki no Ie [Aiki cottage], sitting around the irori [sunken fireplace] with old friends, eating and drinking together. That is a happy time for me.

On a day like that, I like to do most of the cooking. I am not a particularly picky eater, but I am particular when I am cooking. For example, I like to make my own sauce from chilies I have grown in my garden. I have a special way of blending the chilies with sesame oil. It has to be just so.

I also like to make my own udon [white flour noodles] and soba [buckwheat noodles]. I like to dry and grind the grain, knead the dough, and cut the noodles myself. My son Hitohiro runs his own soba restaurant, so I have a source of fresh organic buckwheat. I don't like to say so myself, but I think my noodles have a pretty good reputation.

I also enjoy going to the hinoki buro [cypress bathhouse] to relax. I can't describe how good that feels.

I am already a grandfather; I have 13 grandchildren. Still, I believe that for people who have their own dojos, there is no retirement. It is my destiny to continue. I feel it is my obligation to teach the Founder's Aikido to as many students as possible. When I die, a direct link to his technique will disappear.

I have been given the gift of 23 years of experience with the Founder. . . . What I have learned, I have learned from him, and what I have learned, I feel compelled to teach.

Other shihan have freedom, but I do not. There are shihan scattered throughout Japan and all over the world who, at one point, gathered at the Founder's feet to practice. The Founder understood the essence of Aikido, and he held it in the palm of his hand. Those who gathered briefly at his feet never quite grasped the gift that the Founder held in his hand - and then they left.

Iwama is for Aikidoists what, for example, Mecca is for Muslims, or the Vatican is for Catholics. Metaphorically, Iwama is a lighthouse, and it is my obligation to keep its light shining brightly. To other shihan, the lighthouse symbolizes the great undertakings and achievements of the Founder. They use this light to illuminate their way as they navigate freely in boats of their own making.

As long as this light continues to shine from Iwama, the roots of Aikido continue to exist. I believe it is very important not to forget this point. I joined Iwama Dojo in 1946. Until his death, I spent every day for 23 years with the Founder. Since his death, I have remained at Iwama, even though I hold the position of shihan at Aikikai Hombu Dojo.

Every day, I remain dedicated to keeping the light shining brightly in the lighthouse left by the Founder.

I have heard that some Aikidoists distinguish Iwama-style techniques from "more modern Aikido," calling Iwama-style traditional and even old-fashioned. In my opinion, this is a mistake. I believe that, if we deny the origins of our own practice, we negate its validity. When people say that Iwama-style Aikido is old-fashioned, they remind me of people cutting a tree branch away from the trunk while they are sitting on the branch.

I would never say that Iwama-style Aikido is the only valid form of Aikido. Each instructor has his or her own individual character that is built on his or her cultural background and environment. It is only natural that different styles and different organizations have developed. Traveling all over the world has helped me to understand this, as I have come in contact with many different people, places, and cultures. I think it is good for students to learn from many different instructors and to practice at many different dojos.

However, I also believe that it is vitally important to practice the founding techniques of Aikido. We cannot forget the source of our practice.

In people's lives, there usually comes a time when they reflect on their own roots and heritage. I think that it is important for each of us to include a study of the Founder's technique as we travel on our own Aikido journey. Our closest link to the source is the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba, and the closest link to him is Iwama Dojo. It is important to the Aikido community that more people realize that the roots of our practice lie with the Founder. **It is important to pass on the great undertakings and achievements of the Founder correctly** - even if that is done one person at a time.

For that reason, I keep the light in the lighthouse burning brightly at Iwama. That is why I have no freedom. Instead of freedom, I have my destiny - and I appreciate it. Keeping the Founder's dojo alive and well is what makes my life worth living.

4. Gaku homma Sensei : I know it was long ago, but could you tell us what it was like when you were an uchi deshi at Iwama dojo?

Morihiro Saito Sensei : I joined Iwama Dojo in 1946. That was just after Japan had lost the war, and there were not many resources available; it was a very poor time. Born and raised in the town of Iwama, I joined the dojo when I was 18 years old.

Not long afterward, a few of the Founder's uchi deshi from Hombu Dojo came to Iwama. Gozo Shioda [the Founder of Yoshinkan Aikido] moved in with his family of six (which surprised me a little). They stayed for about two years. Koichi Tohei [Founder of Ki Aikido] also came at about the same time, after being discharged from military service. I remember wondering at the time whether the war had made him tough and strong. He left the dojo when he got married. And there were two other students who became uchi deshi at the same time I did. One has since become a regional education director, and the

other is now a member of the Diet. I am the only one left still hanging around Iwama!
[Laughs]

It's hard to imagine what Iwama looked like at the time. Where you now see houses, there were acres of wild woods. None of the roads were paved, and when it rained some of them would turn to ankle-deep mud. We wore geta [wooden sandals] with one slat protruding from the bottom, since mud would get lodged between the slats of regular two-slat geta making them too heavy. One-slat geta were better for walking in the mud - and on dry ground they were useful for developing balance and coordination!

We used very little electricity, especially in the areas surrounding the dojo. At night it was so dark that someone could walk up and pinch your nose and you still couldn't see who it was! The Founder was a prominent member of the community, and he had the distinction of having the only electricity in the area. The contrast between the surrounding darkness and the glowing lights at the dojo at night made the place seem magical. Later on, when my home was built, we pulled electric lines from the Founder's house to my house as well. At the time, this was considered pretty luxurious.

The townspeople thought that the goings-on at Ueshiba-san's dojo were a little unusual. For example, the way we uchi deshi dressed caused more than a few startled looks as we passed through town. We wore keiko gi (tattered and patched at the collar), faded hakama (much shorter than today's, about ankle length), and haori (short kimono jackets) decorated with batik patterns. We carried iron jos to make our arms stronger, swinging them and dragged them noisily behind us as we walked. The townspeople were known to say that they would not let their sons go to Ueshiba-san's home for any reason. As a threat, parents would warn their wayward sons that, if they didn't shape up, they would be sent to Ueshiba-san's. [Laughs] They used to call us a ban kara [a rough, tough looking group]. Hearing the local gossip, the Founder would warn us with a smile not to scare the townspeople too much.

A few years after the end of the war, life began to return to normal. The country was still in transition, and there were many people without jobs. Many joined the Iwama dojo looking for a new chance at life. Although we had a garden at the dojo, there were soon more mouths to feed than we could handle. The Founder put the new uchi deshi to work clearing nearby fields so that they could be planted. The fields were covered with dense groves of bamboo, whose web of tangled roots made clearing an extremely taxing job. A few of the new recruits decided that the work was too hard, banded together, and disappeared into the night. The work was hard for me, too. But, even if I had wanted to runaway, there was no place else for me to go, since I had been born and raised in Iwama. In fact, I still haven't left! [Laughs] After the field-clearing incident, the Founder did not often order people to perform tasks that were that difficult.

The area at the dojo where we now practice bokken and jo is where the Founder and his wife had their private garden. Other larger fields were planted with potatoes, peanuts, and rice. These days, I have a small garden that I tend as a hobby. Only a few selected uchi deshi are allowed to work in the garden. Actually, most uchi deshi are specifically

asked not to work in the garden. When they do, there is only more work needed to repair what they have done. [Laughs]

The last uchi deshi who worked in the gardens were you, Homma-kun, and the Founder's maid, Kikuno-san. I remember you with a bundle of vegetables strapped to your back as you left for Tokyo's Hombu Dojo to accompany the Founder as his otomo [assistant]. After the Founder's death there were no other uchi deshi who worked specifically in the gardens.

5.Gaku Homma Sensei : I remember, too. At the time, I was only 17 years old. Those days were hard. After the Founder completed his daily morning ceremony, I would accompany him to the garden to pick the vegetables for use in that day's meals or, if there were extra, to take to Hombu Dojo in Tokyo. Speaking of Hombu Dojo - I have read many articles and books on Aikido history written by Hombu uchi deshi. But, when I accompanied the Founder to Tokyo, there were no uchi deshi living at Hombu Dojo. Could you clarify this?

Morihiro Saito Sensei : At the end of the war, there were many uchi deshi living at Hombu Dojo. For the most part, those people are very old or have already passed away. After the war ended, the Founder lived mostly at Iwama, going to Tokyo for only special ceremonies or events.

Of the last generation of students to study directly under the Founder, many who say they were his uchi deshi were actually 2nd or 3rd dan shidoin [assistant instructors] at Hombu Dojo. Most received the equivalent of about two hundred dollars a month salary, lived in cheap apartments near the dojo, and came to the dojo only for practice. These kayoi deshi [students who lived outside the dojo] did not take care of the Founder. Except when they were assisting him as uke, the kayoi deshi were not allowed near him. The Founder commanded that much respect. Many now say that they were close to the Founder, but that was not actually the case. Late in the Founder's life, just before he passed away, even high-ranking shihan were only allowed to offer greetings; they were not even in the position to engage him in conversation. The Founder did not want to have many people close to him, and there were really very few who personally took care of him.

6.Gaku Homma Sensei : When speaking of those who took care of the Founder in his private life, we can't forget your wife. Could you tell us a little about her?

Morihiro Saito Sensei : In 1951, the Founder cleared the land where my house now stands. We built the house together. In the yard there is a chestnut tree that the Founder planted.

Since I was an uchi deshi, it was understood that I would attend the Founder. My baba [nickname for wife or grandmother] was not a student of the Founder, and so she was not under the same obligation. But she worked harder than even I did to take care of the Founder and his wife. I went to work every day, and so I was not always at the dojo. My



baba worked 24 hours a day for 18 years taking care of them. She took such good care of them that, if for some reason she could not be there, the Founder's wife Hatsu would have trouble knowing where everything was.

Once Hatsu became ill and had trouble speaking. My baba understood what she was trying to say just by watching her mouth the words. That's how much time she spent with them.

I have received promotions and recognitions of achievement from Hombu Dojo, but my baba is the person deserving the most credit when it came to taking care of the Founder and his wife. Only my baba could talk to the Founder directly, giving him advice and offering her opinions.

In addition to caring for the Founder, she has also taken care of our own family and countless uchi deshi over the years. I appreciate my wife very much.

7.Gaku Homma Sensei : I remember your wife very well. She always knew when to appear with a large rice bowl filled to the brim. As you just said, if the Founder was angry and your wife would appear, the Founder's mood would miraculously change to that of a happy child. It always amazed me.

Morihiro Saito Sensei : Just before the Founder went to the hospital in Tokyo, the effects of his illness were at their worst. We all felt very sad for him, but it was difficult to get close to him. It was sad to see a great martial artist nearing his end.

That was a difficult time for you too, Homma-kun, since you cared for him privately. The Founder's temperament was unpredictable at best. If his mood was bad when you entered, you would get caught in his wrath. During the last year of his life, no one visited the Founder from Tokyo, because they didn't want to get involved. That was a very lonely and tumultuous time for the Founder. It must have been difficult both for you, Homma-kun and for Kikuno-san, since you were so young.

8.Gaku Homma Sensei : It was a difficult time. Maybe it was because we were so young that the Founder felt comfortable with us and talked with us, even near the end.

Turning to recent events, Sensei, what did you think about the seminar here in Denver?

Morihiro Saito Sensei : I was first surprised that over 300 people registered for the full

three-day seminar. That is quite a number! It was nice to see a seminar that did not draw attendance by offering "candy" such as ranking examinations, etc. That an independent dojo like Nippon Kan can attract that many students from all over the world on a seminar's own merits is very good. I understand there were students in attendance from more than 17 different organizations and from other independent dojos. I'm very pleased that so many came. I think the Founder in heaven must be happy, too.

The martial arts community, including the Aikido community, is facing a future where more and more groups will become independent - especially in the US and Europe. The Founder's organization, the Aikikai, must pay attention to this. I believe that, rather than concentrating on making stricter rules and more restrictions, they would be wiser to acknowledge and respect independent organizations. That would pave the way for stronger relationships and a more stable future.

Going beyond the boundaries of affiliation or style offers a wonderful opportunity for nice people to get together, as this seminar demonstrates. The Founder's philosophy of love and harmony was manifest at this Denver seminar. I would be happy to travel anywhere to teach at any such a gathering. That is my mission.

You, Homma-kun, are not affiliated with the Aikikai or with Iwama-style Aikido. But that is not an issue. That an independent dojo like Nippon Kan can gather over 300 people together is something that must not be overlooked. Your students should be proud of your dojo's unique structure of activities - and of the reputation it has earned through your contributions to the community. I do not think it is necessary to turn your dojo's accomplishments over to another organization.

Privately, I hope that I can continue to be an advisor and supporter of Nippon Kan. As I foresee more independent dojos in the future, I want this one to set a good example for others to follow. I have great expectations for your role as an established independent dojo.

9. Gaku Homma Sensei : Thank you very much, Saito Sensei

Morihiro Saito Sensei : Over the course of the seminar I heard people saying, "Iwama-style Aikido is a lot more user friendly than I thought it would be. I thought Saito Sensei's style would be more strict and severe."

My motto for teaching is to have a happy practice that clearly demonstrates the day's lesson, so that students can understand fully and take it back home with them. Of course, I always want a safe practice with no accidents or injuries. While I am teaching, if I feel my explanations are going to be lengthy, I ask students to sit comfortably. If the room is crowded, I ask people in the back to stand up so they can see. I try to move around the room, so that everyone has a chance to see clearly. I make my explanations slowly and clearly. I'm not interested in just throwing ukes wildly into the air.

This year alone, I have traveled overseas three times. All in all, I have taught seminars in

outside Japan over 50 times. I honestly do not know how long I will be able to continue teaching all over the world. If my health continues to be good, I feel I must continue my mission as a testimonial to the Founder.

It makes me very happy that I have wonderful students actively teaching and practicing in the US and all over the world. **I trust my students to carry on my will and philosophy. Because of their efforts, people from all over the world travel to Iwama to train as uchi deshi.**

On rare occasions, I have heard of students who have trained at Iwama and then returned to their own country only to cause problems with other Aikido groups. This concerns me, because these people obviously did not completely understand the training they were receiving at Iwama. They perpetuate their misunderstandings by misrepresenting Iwama-style Aikido to others. This has never been my intention. It is important, as a first priority, that we work smoothly with others within the Aikido community on a friendly basis.

These days I travel with my otomo, but there have been times when I have traveled by myself. Once, when I arrived in an airport in the northwest US, there was no one there to meet me. Since I can't speak English, this was a problem! Luckily, a group of Japanese tourists passed by, and I tagged along with their group to get out of the airport. [Laughs]. I can't forget the many times I have carried my rice cooker in my bag, cooking for myself as I traveled. I never imagined I would be sitting at Homma-kun's house eating Japanese food in Denver, Colorado.

10.Gaku Homma Sensei : It has been an honor and a pleasure, Sensei. Thank you very much.

Epilogue...

After his arrival in Denver, one of the first questions Saito Shihan asked me was "What techniques should I teach this evening?" After every class, he asked whether the lesson was adequate and whether a certain series of techniques would be appropriate for the next class. I was impressed by his earnest and professional manner.

After practice in the waiting room, Saito Sensei thanked everyone in attendance and offered them fruit and refreshments. It was a pleasure to see such warmth and kindness offered by a man of his dignified position. A mood of generosity prevailed around him during the entire seminar.

During the closing Thank-You Party, we accompanied Saito Sensei to the rest-room and waited by the sink to hand him a towel to wipe his hands. I was touched as I watched him carefully tidy up the sink that had been splashed by others as a courtesy to the next user.

I accompanied Saito Sensei, his translator, his otomo, and other guests to San Francisco

to see them off to Japan. Before the plane landed in San Francisco, I watched as Saito Sensei removed the air-sick bag from the pocket of the seat in front of him. I was concerned that he was not feeling well. But he merely asked all of us in his escort whether we had any trash to throw away, collected our napkins and wrappers in the bag, and then tucked it back neatly into the pocket in front of him. He said that this would help make the job easier for the person who had to clean up the plane.

Saito Sensei made sure that his otomo was well taken care of, even offering him a portion of his own meals. He also took care of one of my students who acted as driver in San Francisco, grabbing his hand and discreetly depositing a token kokoro zuke [thank-you payment] into his palm.

Saito Sensei's position as a leader in the global Aikido community has been built on a lifetime of hard work and effort. He is a real bujin [martial artist]. His humanity, kindness, and thoughtfulness remain imprinted in my memory - where they remind me of the private side of the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba.

As we walked through the crowded airport terminal, my mind switched back to an occasion when I walked with the Founder through a crowded station in Ueno, Japan. The way they walked was very much the same.