

Xin Qi Shen

2020 Summer

Shiban

Mitsugi Saotome

When I was helping cover classes for Mary Heiny, helping her get started with Seattle School of Aikido, we often talked about her training in Japan and the various instructors she had. She was definitely not a fan of Koichi Tohei sensei or his particular style of Aikido.



One of the instructors she mentioned was Mitsugi Saotome who taught at the Hombu (headquarters) and was a disciple of the founder. He was the Aikido weapons specialist at the Hombu and an 'odd duck', eccentric was a term she used.

After her school was open for a little over a year she told me she was planning on bringing him to Seattle for a workshop and thought my club would really like his style and teachings.

At the time I was the primary instructor at the Washington Aikikai since everyone else didn't want it, and had real jobs. I also had my own Aikido club at the Phinney Neighborhood Center.

At this time the Washington Aikikai had decided to go independent and stay out of all the Aikido world and US politics. We just wanted to train. Bernie was undercover so we had no contact with him. We all had been promoted to 3rd dans: John Kanetomi, Doug Tsuboi, Nat Steiger, and myself through his sensei Sado Yoshioka. We had a good-size group and there were a few we wanted to promote to shodan but we had sever ties with the United States Aikido Federation due to the chaos and politics going on.



It turned out that Saotome had split from the main Hombu since they didn't want him to teach in the US. He would have been the senior ranking instructor which upset those already here and claiming control.

Thus he formed his own organization: Aikido Schools of Ueshiba.

John Kanetomi thought it would be good for our entire dojo to go to the workshop with our dojo patches so he could see who we were and what our Aikido looked like. That way, if we liked him, I'd ask for us to join his organization.

During the workshop we were all very impressed. His Aikido reminded me of Tohei's. The smoothness, control, softness,

and effectiveness. The second day we decided we really wanted to study more with him and be part of his group. After morning class I approached him and asked what it would take for our club to join his organization. He shook my hand and said welcome, let's go to lunch. After lunch he told me to contact his wife, 'She handles all the business stuff.' We were officially part of this organization.

His weaponry was slightly different from Tohei's but similar. *(This made sense since Tohei was chief instructor of the Hombu for many years.)* His specialty was dealing with multi-man weapons attacks which he did it effortlessly.



I can't say that I learned techniques from Saotome but I did learn much from his teaching and sharing of experiences with O'sensei, his philosophy and understanding of Aikido was very inline with what I'd been taught.

We liked his Aikido to the point that the following year we scraped together enough money to bring him to Seattle for a seminar. It was interesting being around him between and during classes. Those who 'worshipped' him were treated like servants. He'd also wipe the mats with them, being a bit rougher than with the rest of us. The others were treated like adults and very kindly. An example of this was when we picked him up at the airport. He got off the plane and we started down the corridor. Running towards us comes one of the other local instructors. He bows deeply, apologizes for



being late but his new-born was having trouble sleeping. Then he says, "We show her your picture every night and she loves you." Next thing you know Saotome hands him his luggage and coat, then continues walking with us.

He started Aikido in 1955 and became a live-in disciple of the founder. Eventually becoming one of the primary instructors of the Hombu Dojo. He accompanied the found on many trips as his attendant and uke.

On this trip it was decided that Jain Rutherford and myself would play tour guide for him. Being quite an artist we thought he'd enjoy La Conner. Well, he didn't talk much, or answer! The drive was long and mostly quiet. Jain and I



eventually would chat, ignoring him. Once we got to La Conner he seemed interested and we started walking down the street. Again, he didn't say much so Jain and I continued walking. Once in a while he'd disappear! He'd go

into a shop without a sound and sometimes out the back door. We lost him a few times this way.

While we were in the U district I kept having to save his life since he didn't pay attention to the **Walk/Don't Walk** signs. Twice I literally had to grab and pull him out of the street, out of the way of a car. He said that in New York they'd stop for you. He went into a ladies boutique to find something for his wife. Kind of uncomfortable as he held up various, flimsy items asking us what we thought.

Saotome's Aikido Schools of Ueshiba drew quite a large following. Partly due to his skill and charisma, but also to the fact that the main Aikido Hombu and the United States Aikido Federation were trying to control and divide the various schools in the U.S. Previously a school would go through its chief instructor, to their instructor for promotions and were permitted to sponsor anyone for a seminar and workshop. The new structure required you to have permission from main headquarters to invite a guest instructor. The local district manager had to approve your choice. Saotome's organization was very open and inclusive. Eventually he had such a large following in the U.S. that the main headquarters 'recognized' his organization and welcomed him as a branch of the Hombu.



I really liked his teachings, philosophy, and Aikido. Like I said: his Aikido was very much in line with Tohei's to a large extent yet had it's own flavor. Eventually his organization required



attending certain summer and winter camps in order for promotions to be acknowledged, or be in good standing in the organization. As a small dojo, and non-profit, we couldn't keep up so the Washington Aikikai became independent again. Eventually this was great since most of us had other martial arts training and

included it into our classes. We welcomed various instructors from different schools and martial arts to expand on our studies. Don Angier, Aikijitsu lineage-holder was one of the guests. The art of Aikijitsu is a 'bad' in the traditional Aikido world.

As a side note, the UW Aikido club had a member join who was from the Yoshinkan Branch of Aikido (what we knew as hard style Aikido). His father was coming to Seattle to visit and see his new grandson, if we were interested he'd do a class for us. *Sure*, was our response. It turned out his dad was Terata 8th dan, one of the chief instructors of the Yoshinkan Hombu. What a treat!



Parting from Saotome's group was a little sad because he was really good. However, afterward I attended seminars he taught and saw that (*my opinion here*) as the organization grew things became less casual in his teaching and more preaching. The students I saw didn't like him, they worshiped him.

I've seen some videos since of his Aikido and evolution. I love his expansion of Aikido techniques and curriculum. Very much like some of the other gifted martial artists, he's improved on the standard and followed his own artistic and creative drive which I think has improved the art.

Side Note: The main Aikido Hombu has come down on many of the creative and high ranking instructors that tried to expand on the founder's teachings. Even though they were live-in disciples! Tohei, Saotome, Saito, Nishio are just a few who carried on the founder's teachings as they understood and expanded on it. Each was driven from the main headquarters since they wouldn't just teach the old way. All thought the jo and bokken (staff and sword) were integral to Aikido as the founder emphasized. Hombu decided they weren't important to Aikido training so they insisted on deemphasizing them. (My ranting is over)

