

Xin Qi Shen

2020 Autumn

Koichi Tohei

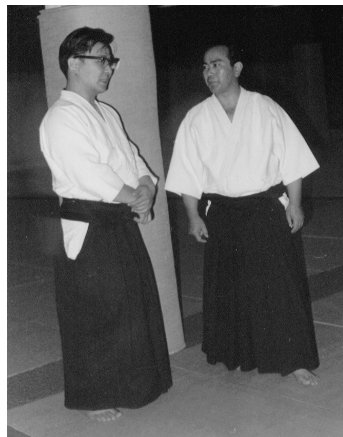


In my first year of Aikido I never thought I'd get the chance to meet Koichi Tohei (Chief Instructor of the Aikido Headquarters), study from him, and even hang around him. I had most of his books and still, my favorite is the original Aikido in Daily Life which he eventually autographed for me.

Lau sensei would show us a video he took of Tohei teaching a brown/black belt class in Hawaii around 1965. This video showed us what high-level Aikido looked like. Tohei was the first, out of only two, disciples of the founder of Aikido to be awarded a 10th degree black belt.

After my first year, Bernie had our Aikido club join the Seattle Aikikai, Yoshihiko Hirata 5th dan and chief instructor. It turned out that Hirata was a disciple of Tohei and anytime Tohei was visiting the states, Seattle was one of his stops.

My first introduction was at SeaTac Airport. Hirata had a few of us there to meet Tohei when he got off the plane. I remember a crowd of people exiting the plane, then a large opening in the crowd and Tohei in the middle. Hirata hadn't arrived yet and we were very nervous wondering what to do. Tohei spotted us and headed toward us. Right when he got there Hirata comes running down the corridor straightening his tie. Tohei greeted us all and then we headed to Hirata's home.



Tohei's charisma could be felt throughout the entire room, he sparkled. Thrown by him was like being wisped up by a gust of wind. Being around him made me feel happy and carefree.

The next day Tohei taught class! Hirata, John, Doug, Chuck, and myself were this primary ukes. It was especially fun seeing him toss Hirata around a lot. The

next day a few of us were invited to Nat and Donna Steiger's home to have dinner and visit with Tohei. (They had trained with him in Hawaii).

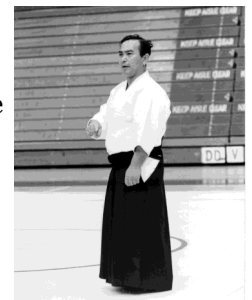
Up until that time I had heard and read many stories about Tohei. His Ki was super strong, he had ESP, he could read minds, and more. One story I'd heard from a practitioner was that during a demonstration he in Hawaii, 5 men pinned him to the mat. A calm gaze came over face and his ki threw them all off of him.



Before dinner he told us we could ask him anything, so I told him the story I had heard. He started laughing real hard. He explained that every time he'd visit Hawaii they'd try to 'get' him, trip him up. This one time they asked what if they pinned him to the mat, what would he do. He explained that as he lay there, he could do small contracting movement, getting more slack. When he got enough slack he started kicking and waving his arms. They all just jumped off. (I got to ask him several more similar questions about stories I'd heard, with equally similar explanations.)

A few times as he corrected me in class, he'd put his hands on my shoulders as I moved with the technique. Everything just felt light, effortless, and happy.

At one point he told a story of cutting a banana in 1/2 with projecting his ki through his finger. During a banquet he took a banana and did a cutting motion at it with his finger. As the banana was peeled it fell into two parts. Earlier he had an assistant place the banana, already cut, on the plate. After his performance he told Hirata to see if his ki was strong enough to do the same. Of course it didn't work. Those at the end of the table didn't hear that it was just a trick and started spreading the rumor that Tohei could project his ki like a laser beam.



During his last visit to the Seattle Aikikai he sensed some of us weren't too happy with Hirata. He said something like, "Even if a diamond is in murky water you should grab it."

At that time, 1974, I had planned to leave the dojo after Tohei's visit. That weeks classes ended with ranking tests for Hirata's students. I had come down with a cold and hadn't planned to test. I was tricked to be on the mat to uke for a friend (John Spires) taking his brown belt exam. To my, and Hirata's, surprise my name was called for black belt testing. When it was my turn, Hirata tried to make it as difficult for me as he could. Tohei looked at me and said, "I'm sending you my ki, I will help you."



I received one of the first black belt certificates of his new Aikido style and was asked to demonstrate the 8 basics at the Hec Ed demonstration the next day.

Another story I heard was that Tohei had ESP. Like a samurai he could sense those about to attack.

Again, laughing, he explained. While teaching the police in Hawaii, there was one guy always trying to get him. During a lecture, this guy tried to sneak up on him and attack. At the moment he was about to attack, Tohei spun around and threw him. Tohei said he always kept his eye on this guy. What the guy failed to notice was that the far wall had mirrors all along it. "I saw him sneaking around, then at the last moment I threw him."

Tohei believed that ki flow was vital to good Aikido techniques. Technique was not enough. In the early to late 1960's and onward, he started emphasizing his ki philosophy while teaching. The founder's son believed in techniques and didn't want to deviate from what he had learned from his father. In addition to other issues, even as chief instructor of the Hombu (Aikido World Headquarters) and highest ranking instructor, he was told to stop or leave.

In 1974 he formed his own style of Aikido: Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido (Mind & Body Unified Aikido) and left headquarters. The last time he came to Seattle was to announce, and spread his newly named Aikido style. As time has moved on his Aikido style became more of a moving yoga with minimal emphasis on the martial arts



aspects.

Tohei insisted that he didn't teach Aikido, his emphasis was to teach, how to teach Aikido. That way the art will flourish.

"A teacher *leads* the student to an understanding." "Go too fast and they can't follow, go too slow and

they aren't happy."

"Never say 'That's Wrong', say: 'Something must be wrong, let's make it better'. Though at times he would demonstrate a technique of another style (poorly) and say that it was wrong.

"The more relaxed we are the more natural we are, the stronger we are."

"Being angry is fine, but only for the moment. Then let it go."



He also didn't understand other martial arts. Aikido is based on human movements, this is natural. Why try to act and behave like an animal or insect like Chinese martial arts?

Tohei became the chief instructor of the Aikido main headquarters around 1950 after being a live-in disciple of the founder. He claimed most of his skill was watching the founder, not necessarily listening to him. The founder would talk in religious terminology that didn't make sense. Tohei said he'd verbally teach one way but would do the technique differently.

One example was he'd always insist on everyone grabbling strongly, yet he'd grab softly and immobilize you. Do when teaching, Tohei would do the same with similar results. Eventually, when Tohei started teaching he taught what he had picked up. This was the beginning of his ki-Aikido.

Wikipedia him!

Tempu Nakamura (1876-1969) an important character of many senior disciples of Aikido founder Ueshiba. It's said he was a Japanese agent sent to China. Rumored to have studied in Tibet for quite some time, traveled the world and even studied medicine at Columbia University achieving a doctorate. Hirata said he spoke and helped translate many languages. His study of yoga, martial arts, and what he encountered in Tibet led him to develop a method he called Shinshin Toitsu Do. A method of self-improvement and unification. His teachings greatly influenced Tohei and other disciples of the founder to expand their study and teaching of Aikido.