

Thanks my John.

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Interview with Ichiro Shishiya Aikikai 6th Dan

Ichiro Shishiya Profile

Born in 1947 in Tokyo, Shishiya Sensei started judo when he was a sixth grader in elementary school at the Sugamo Police Dojo. In 1963, when he was in his third year of junior high, he joined the Sugamo Kenshyukan Dojo headed by Noboru Ishibashi Sensei, and started his aikido training under the instruction of Shoji Nishio Shihan. In 1966, he started training at the Hombu Dojo as well. After graduating from Dokkyo University in 1970, he spent several years as a salary man before establishing his own computer system engineering company in 1979. Since then, he has been juggling work and teaching aikido. Currently a sixth dan in aikido, he holds seminars in six European cities each year, and is the head instructor of the Meisei Kai in Tokyo. He is the president of the Toshima Ward Aikido Federation, delegate of the All Japan Aikido Federation, a trustee of the Tokyo Aikido Federation, and is a standing member of the board of directors for the Toshima Ward Physical Education Association.

“There must be an instant of mutual understanding, a resonance between the teacher and the student, like the vibration of a *koto* string, in order for training and learning to take place. In that respect, I feel most fortunate to have come under the instruction of Nishio Sensei. My aikido is different from that of Nishio Sensei or O-Sensei, but that doesn't mean that I woke up one day to find that I had suddenly devised my own brand of aikido. It is the culmination of teachings from O-Sensei, Nishio Sensei, and many other *sempai* before me. I try to incorporate what I learned from these people in my *budo*.”

Sixth dan Ichiro Shishiya began training under Shoji Nishio Shihan when he was 15 years old. He speaks from the heart on his thoughts on the essence of *budo* and his experiences from 43 years of aikido.

Flexibility is supposed to be stronger than brute strength... What made you start aikido?

I practiced judo since I was in elementary school, but I didn't start aikido until my third year of junior high school, just after I completed entrance exams for high school. My reasons for starting are far from noble. Earlier in the summer of that year, I was in a judo tournament in Toshima Ward, and one of my opponents weighed 100 kg in junior high! It didn't matter whether I pushed or pulled – I couldn't budge him. When I tried to throw him with a *seoinage*, I collapsed and was pinned by him instead.

Now, I don't mind if I lose to an opponent who is more skilled than I am, but if I lose to someone just because he is bigger, I want a second shot at him! Because of that incident, I was eager and ready to learn something new.

It just so happened that around that time, I came across an article about Koichi Tohei Sensei and his activities in Hawaii in a weekly magazine. My mother read it and said,

“According to this, even Americans are no match for aikido!” When I heard that, I knew I had to try it.

As luck would have it, the Kenshyukan dojo was close to Sugamo, and they held judo practices on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, while aikido practices were on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. So that’s how I came to join the Kenshyukan dojo and start aikido. So really, I joined in order to learn some aikido techniques so I could defeat larger opponents in judo (laughs).

The head instructor of the Kenshyukan was Noboru Ishibashi Sensei, and he was trained primarily in judo, but when he was young, one of his judo friends, Nakazono Sensei, told him “There’s this incredible old man named Morihei Ueshiba Sensei. We’ve got to go see him!” and he went with him to the Hombu Dojo. When he got there, he thought, “I wouldn’t lose to this old man. I bet I could throw him.” The moment he thought that, O-sensei turned and gave him a look that seemed to pierce right through him. “At that moment, I knew this guy was for real”, he thought. Ishibashi Sensei was fifth-dan in judo at that time.

After that, Ishibashi Sensei decided to incorporate aikido training at his dojo, and Shoji Nishio Sensei was sent from the Hombu Dojo to instruct at the Kenshyukan.

As I carried Nishio Sensei’s bags...

Could you tell us about those early days with Nishio Sensei?

Back then, Nishio Sensei lived about 1 km away from my home, so on the way home from practice, we always walked together and I always carried his bags. Sensei carried his sword and walked in front. I was always thinking about things like, if I threw down the bag and grabbed him from behind, would I be able to throw him? Or if I stuck my leg out, would I be able to trip him up? But then I would think, if I put my hand out one way, he would do this, and if I stuck my leg out another way, he would do that. In the end, I never tried anything. Sensei was 35 years old at that time and I was 15.

I would ask stupid questions like, “Which is stronger; judo or aikido?” Sensei would usually answer by saying, “They both have their good points.” One day, as we were walking home, I noticed that Sensei’s feet were always parallel, and pointed straight ahead. My feet, on the other hand, were splayed 90° as I walked. I thought, “First, I have to walk correctly!” It took me ten years just to get that down properly! I carried his bags until I was 25 years old, and I learned a lot during all those walks home.

Also, Sensei’s students would often stop at his house, and we would drink and talk about things other than practice. It was a dojo outside of the dojo in a way. If I hadn’t learned about Nishio Sensei’s philosophy of life during all those conversations, I’m not sure whether I would have continued to practice aikido.

You’ve been with Nishio Sensei ever since, for around 40 years now.

Yes. As a *deshi*, we all want to catch up and surpass our teacher, but no matter how hard we practice and learn new techniques, Sensei is always far ahead of us. That’s only natural because we only practice when we’re at the dojo, but Sensei is always thinking about the techniques, and by the time he teaches us a technique at the dojo, he has already perfected it. In the process of trying to catch up, before I knew it, all these years had gone by.

I feel very lucky to have had the good fortune of being able to study under a teacher like Nishio Sensei, who has a very clear philosophy about martial arts. I want to be able to take what he has taught me, the influence he has had on me, and teach a technique like *shihonage*, for example, and not just teach students how to do the technique, but convey what the technique should be teaching us. These thoughts were with me as I helped Nishio Sensei write his book, ***Yurusu Budo, Aikido: The Irimi Issoku Principle***.

At the Hombu Dojo

About how many years did you spend at the Kenshyukan?

About 20 years. My *sempai* at the Kenshyukan were a really remarkable group of people. There were 6 or 7 whom I particularly respected: third and fourth-dans in judo and karate, and even a fourth-dan in sumo. Every day, I used to get thrown against the walls, and get my face rubbed into the tatami mats. The president of the Edogawa Aikido Federation, Ishii Sensei, used to practice with me all the time, and my techniques and movements started to look so much like his that people used to call us *kyodai* or “brothers”. And after practice was over, I would sit with both of my senseis in the inner tatami room of the dojo, and chat over a cup of tea. I learned a lot from those discussions and have many fond memories from those days.

When I entered university, I joined the university aikido club, but at that time, I was already a second-dan, and I came from a dojo where it went without saying that the *sempai* were better and stronger than the newcomers. To make a long story short, things didn’t go so well with the university club, and after a while, I wasn’t allowed to practice there (laugh). I was young, and reckless. I’m afraid I must have caused my *sempai* at the university a lot of trouble.

The instructor at the university club was Nobuyuki Watanabe Sensei, who was from the Hombu Dojo. It was because of him that I decided to practice at the Hombu Dojo. So in May or June of 1966, when I was in my first year of university, I started going to morning practices at the Hombu Dojo.

I practiced with many teachers at the Hombu Dojo, but I especially felt “flow” from the Doshyu at the time, Kisshomaru Sensei, and I felt “Wa” or “harmony” from Kisaburo Ohsawa Sensei. I attended Ohsawa Sensei’s practices for one and a half or two years.

O-Sensei didn’t teach regularly scheduled practices, but during morning practice, he would sometimes appear without warning from behind the sliding door to the left of the *tokonoma*. He would often call on one of his *uchideshi*, Shimizu-san, to take *ukemi* for him, and talk about *kotodama*, or the power and soul found in words and language. He would then look up at the heavens and whirl a wooden staff around vigorously. O-sensei passed away when I was in my fourth year of university, but I remember him coming to the dojo right up until the final days of his life. I was able to meet many different teachers during the time I went to Hombu Dojo, and because of that, I realized that there were many ways to think about aikido, and that aikido was broad-minded enough to accept all those differences. As a result, the philosophy of aikido appealed to me more than ever.

Finding one’s true ability through teaching

Back then, I was young so when I was grabbing someone to take *ukemi* for *shihonage* or something, I would be thinking about reversing the technique and throwing them instead.

At the time, I thought that victory and defeat were central to *budo*, but now, I've finally come to realize that *budo* isn't a contest, and that winning or losing is but a small part of it.

How did that change in your thinking come about?

Of course, that's mostly through training with Nishio Sensei, but my thinking also changed once I started teaching aikido about 20 years ago. Once I started teaching, I had to think about what I wanted to convey most to my students, why we move the way we do, and how to get that all across to them in a way they could understand. It's really a lot of trial and error!

What's important as an instructor is to always pose questions to yourself. Is this alright the way it is? Or is this other way better? Through this process, you find little fragments of the puzzle, and then one day, all the scattered pieces come together and you can see the overall picture. By repeating this process over and over, I am where I am now.

Nishio Sensei always used to say, "You only really start to understand *budo* once you start to teach it." The significance of his words didn't really sink in until I started teaching on my own.

The spiritual backbone of the samurai – Bushido As a teacher, what do you want to convey most?

I would have to say martial spirit. *Budo* is based on the spiritual framework of *bushido*. I believe that this spiritual framework is deeply ingrained in the Japanese people. I feel that this is a uniquely Japanese philosophy, quite distinct from the code of chivalry practiced by knights.

The samurai who appeared towards the end of the Heian Period were unable to subjugate themselves completely to the teachings of Buddhism. In Buddhism, Buddha is absolute, so people must show devotion to him. It's a spiritual master-disciple relationship. However, for a samurai, the master he serves is his one true master. Showing devotion to Buddha would be tantamount to deserting his master. In a battle, a samurai had to be willing to give his life for his master. I think that the contradicting needs for spiritual salvation and devotion to only one master gave rise to *bushido*. *Bushido* uses Confucian philosophy as a base and changed with the times by incorporating aspects of Zen Buddhism, and became a code of conduct used exclusively by the samurai.

In the middle ages, knights were enlisted to fight in the crusades, but unlike the samurai, one wasn't born into knighthood. To be a samurai, you had to be born into that class. In the 11th century, several armies of Crusaders were organized and sent to Jerusalem to escort pilgrims, but by the 14th century, these armies were gone. Followers of the Code of Chivalry were not afraid to die in order to protect their honor or for the glory of God, so the aspect of faithfulness and loyalty bear a strong resemblance to *bushido*; however, the way in which the two philosophies originated, and their spiritual frameworks are very different.

In *bushido*, one chooses death as proof of their faith in life. This means that a samurai would do what they believe to be correct, even if they know that that action may bring about their death. This extreme form of logic can be found in the book *Hagakure*. It's not

about loss and gain. There is a unique purity of thought, and it is the manifestation of a pure heart that is the essence of *bushido*.

For example, when the invasion force of the Satsuma han returned from their expedition to Korea, they erected stone monuments for the Korean dead. They did not kill them because of personal hatred. In *bushido* there is sympathy and consideration for the defeated. This is an essential part of being a victor in *bushido*. Without that, *bushido* becomes a mere facade.

This aspect of sympathy and consideration disappeared once we entered the Meiji Era. The fact that *bushido* was used as a means to raise military fervor saddens me to no end. When I think that the true spirit of *bushido* was still alive when Saigo Takamori was around, I can't help but have a special place in my heart for the Satsuma and Aizu clans.

We need to get back to the original spirit of *bushido*. I'm collecting articles from **Heisei Bushido**, but there's one article in particular which I think was entitled, "What I discovered from applying *bushido* to life" which made a big impression on me. The articles in **Heisei Bushido** emphasize the importance of living peacefully with others. The kanji character 「武」 *bu* from *bushido*, is comprised of 「戈」 (meaning weapon) and 「止」 (meaning to stop), but I believe the meaning extends not only to stopping conflict but to avoiding armed conflict altogether. Nishio Sensei interprets this as meaning "Stop conflict before it starts." By this, he actually means that one should no longer feel the need or desire for violence and conflict. I agree with him completely. By studying the way of the sword, I've come to realize the importance of valuing each moment in life – not only my own, but the lives of others too.

They say that a Japanese *katana*, the epitome of art and function, takes only 0.1 seconds to cut through a body. The difference between life and death is but 0.1 seconds. Our existence between the boundless past and infinite future is but an instant, but it is by continuing to live each moment that we make a life for ourselves. There's a famous poem which goes something like: *I will have no regrets if I die while I am seeking the truth*. My concept of *bushido* involves the constant search for truth, and living each moment fully.

Lessons passed down from my predecessors – teachings (kun 「訓」).

So you believe that bushido is based on teachings?

Yes. All religions have a founder, but there is no sole founder for *bushido*. The wisdom found in *bushido* and the customs of samurai society were established over many years through experiences both joyful and tragic. At the heart of all this were teachings known as *kun*. This included family mottos and constitutions passed down from generation to generation, and instructions left by fathers to their heirs.

As I'm doing aikido, I always think that my aikido is so different from Nishio Sensei's. It's also different from O-sensei's. But that doesn't mean that suddenly, one day, I had invented my own brand of aikido. I am where I am because of what O-sensei taught me, Nishio Sensei, many other *shihans*, *senpai*, and co-workers. In other words, I am who I am because of my predecessors. I also learn from bad examples as well.

A father telling his children to live in a certain way because "this is our family policy," is passing on knowledge that has been gained from his own experience which he believes

will benefit his family and future generations. This is the essence of family policy and family tradition.

I think of family policy as one's grounding principles and strongest beliefs. When I read written versions of these principles, I feel as if I can hear the dreams and expectations our ancestors had for us.

In the beginning of the Edo period, the Yagyu family's writings on military strategy, or Musashi's "The Book of Five Rings" have a strong emphasis on martial arts techniques, but in the middle of the 18th century, Muro Kyusou's "Meikun kakun", the Matsushiro-han's "Higure suzuri", and Uesugi Youzan's "Denkoku no ji" display philosophy which exhorts the highest principles of service to family and country. I believe that these works are at the heart of the birth of Japanese democracy.

Works such as "The Book of Five Rings" and "Hagakure" are very popular amongst people practicing aikido in Europe. Because of this, I often include discussions about these aspects of Japanese culture in my European seminars. Discussions are not limited to simple explanations of technique.

Training and learning does not take place if there isn't a moment of resonance between the teacher and the disciple.

This is something you try to teach to your students through aikido, isn't it?

Yes, it is. Unless you learn through actual experience, it becomes mere book learning. Without experience, you're nothing more than "a learned fool". This is at the heart of the belief that it is important to become accomplished in both the martial and literary arts. This is quite evident in the early Edo period work of Nakae Tohju entitled "Okina mondou" which advocates both literary and martial training. At the end of the Sengoku period, it was necessary to rethink the samurai's role in society, and up until the time of Yoshida Shoin, and the end of the Tokugawa era, many of the great ideologues were also swordsmen.

Before the Meiji period, there wasn't an education system with teachers and schools. There were "Terakoya" schools. There was an attitude that you were learning from your predecessors. But now, it's a world of "How much is the monthly fee?" From my perspective, the fee is a sum collected only to pay for the expenses of running the dojo. So if a student comes up to me and says, "I want to study aikido, but I have no money," then I'll tell that person to come anyway. "Your future success will be payment enough". But most people won't accept that offer. I even get some cases where a prospective student will ask, "I can only come once a month. (Let's say that the monthly fee is 4,000 yen). Is it alright if I pay 1,000 yen for each time I come?" I laugh and tell them I'm not just teaching techniques. There's much more to aikido than that, and it's not a matter of money.

But now, we've got an education system which basically says, "Come on in. We'll teach you." Then we test the students to see how much they understand. If the students don't understand, then we say that the teacher was bad. So now, the system is geared towards making students understand.

On the contrary, in the days when students came knocking at the doors of Yoshida Shoin in Yamaguchi, or Sakuma Shozan in Edo, people heard of these great people and asked if they could be given the privilege to learn from them.

Also, back in those days, nobody said, "I am a teacher". People taught because someone came to learn something they happened to know. It's that simple. The teacher was also in search of the truth and greater knowledge.

Whether we're talking about academics, or practice, unless there is a moment of resonance between the heart and mind of the teacher and the student, then nothing has been learned. Whether we are talking about practice or studying, the relationship between the teacher and the student is most important. From that standpoint as well, I was very fortunate to meet Nishio Sensei 40 years ago.

So, why aikido now?

They say that from long ago, Japanese had an ability to read each other's feelings. We're not talking about telepathy or ESP, but the ability to sense what a person feels or desires without having to give a lengthy explanation. For example, there's the famous story of Saigo Takamori and Katsu Kaishu when Edo Castle was handed over to the new imperial army. The negotiations between the two enemies in the last days of the Meiji Revolution managed to avoid a final bloody battle, but there were surprisingly few words exchanged during these crucial negotiations. Both men realized that they were both trying to do what was best for the nation, and that aside from the fact that fate had put them on opposing sides, they really were quite similar in their thinking and their values. Things have changed completely between the Meiji period, and the Showa bubble years. People have changed from living based on philosophy and principle to living for the sake of profit and economic gain. We've lost something very important along the way, and someone has to sound a warning about these changes.

One of the characteristics of the Japanese is a permissive attitude towards other viewpoints, while suppressing individual desires in favor of living peacefully with others. This is the principle of harmony. We're basically a nation of moderate people who believe that all's well that ends well. European society tries to live in peace while stressing individuality. As a result, there have been frequent wars. It's a "winner takes all" philosophy.

Of all the martial arts, it is aikido that most clearly advocates the path of harmony. Although kendo and judo originally had such qualities as well, once they became a sport, winning and losing became important. One's self worth becomes tied up with whether they win or not, and that becomes an obstacle towards the path of harmony.

So what's wrong with the idea that being strong is good? For example, in the national high school baseball tournament, out of 2,000 or so high schools, there can only be one final winner. In that case, all the other players in the other schools have to experience the bitter taste of defeat. In judo, you see the winner jump for joy, and the loser striking the tatami in bitterness. Why can't the winner praise his opponent? And why can't the loser show more respect towards the victor? That's what you get once something has been turned into a sport.

When it's time for testing and grading the children, I tell the parents that I don't care about whether their child is better than one child or another. I'm not worried about whether they are skilled or not. I want to recognize them for the effort they have put in and the improvements they have made since the last testing. I ask the parents, why can't they praise their children for that, rather than comparing them to the other children around them?

As human beings, we are bound to have conflicts; however, there is also reconciliation. If you're fighting with a lion, there's no reconciliation: it's eat or be eaten. But between people, we can make peace. After a conflict, we can agree to move forward peacefully. This is true wisdom, not knowledge. Having the courage to move forward peacefully is at the heart of *budo*. Making the first move towards peace is so important. This is the *hanpo* or half-step that Nishio Sensei always talks about. Even a half-step is enough, so make the first move.

Even if you undertake ascetic training like the *yamabushi* monks to discipline your spirit, it's nothing more than self-satisfaction, or at worst, empty pride, if you don't put that experience to use somehow. One needs to come down to earth from their ivory towers, feel the ground and share their knowledge and labor with everyday people. Sharing in the resulting bountiful harvest and helping to create a vigorous nation should be the ultimate goal of these pursuits.

I believe that *hanpo* or taking the first half-step is like coming down to earth. Aikido only comes to life when you put its philosophy to use in everyday life.

In Search of Identity

So some people may wonder, "Why aikido?" Isn't judo just as good for promoting the kinds of things aikido does? But for myself, I'm very saddened by the transformation of all different *budo* into sports.

After the Meiji Revolution, European sports which were intended as a means of play and recreation were suddenly being used to teach moral and intellectual education. They were also seen as an effective means of providing physical training for the armed forces. So that's how physical education got its start in Japan, and that's why we have things like *rajio taiso* (radio exercises) where everyone lines up, and does calisthenics to the count of 1, 2, 3, 4. Everyone does it together as warm up exercises. There's no autonomy, everyone does the exact same thing, so one's individuality isn't given a chance to grow.

Individuals with absolute power seem to control everything, and live lives of contentment. I really wonder what the future of democracy has in store for us. I think that being like a *bushi* is one of the few ways in which an individual can keep their sense of identity. When a *bushi* commits *seppuku*, he has to make the cut by himself - he is doing what he believes to be correct right to the very end. At the very least, a samurai had his sense of self. He had a calmness of spirit which allowed him to write and recite poem, even while facing death. It's this ability to maintain one's composure, and not lose yourself in your circumstances that I want people to grasp through bushido.

When I was in junior high, I thought up a crazy "human body parts transplant theory". If you were blind, then you should be able to get eyes from someone who died. You could replace a lost arm or faulty heart. I thought it would be neat if you could collect body parts from several different people to make one person. Really, it was a stupid idea! Then, one day, I read an article that said someone had died because the person's body had rejected a transplant. I wondered why the body would reject something that was meant to save it. I figured that there shouldn't be anything wrong with having another person's kidney. But the body is honest to a fault, and it will reject anything that doesn't belong there. Looking at it

the other way, it's because of this immune system that we can survive. For example, it prevents mold from growing inside our bodies. This is a life and death matter.

As I thought more about this, I think I made an important realization about one's spirit. If your body was made completely from other people's parts, where would "you" be? Would you really be able to say that this person was you? Even if you've got a physical disability, isn't it valuable to make the most of what you've got and live life to its fullest? A person is only a person if they have a true sense of identity. And I think that when you truly become thankful to your parents for the life they've given you, then you become a real human being. I think that this search for identity and self is what the path of *budo* is all about.

Thank you for your time.