

O-Sensei would say, “Well you aren’t a goat are you?”

A few weeks ago I was watching [Michael Schiavello’s interview](#) with Steven Seagal in which he named Hiroshi Isoyama (磯山博) as the Aikido instructor who has influenced him the most.

Hiroshi Isoyama sensei began training in the Iwama Dojo in 1949 at the age of 12 as a direct student of the Founder of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba. Over a long career in the martial arts, he has been Chief of Defensive Tactics for the Japan Self Defense Force Academy, and also instructed the U.S. Army in self-defense tactics. I still remember his comment about starting to teach Aikido to the military – “They didn’t believe that Aikido works – I made them believe”.

His trademark Ganseki Otoshi demonstrations are always a crowd pleaser at the annual All Japan Aikido Demonstration.

This is the first part of an English translation of an interview with Hiroshi Isoyama sensei that first appeared in the February 2009 issue of [Gekkan Hiden](#) (“Secret Teachings Monthly”), a well known martial arts magazine in Japan.

It was also published in a collection of interviews with students of the Founder published in Japanese as 開祖の横顔 (“Profiles of the Founder”) in 2009.

There was a short introduction to this work in the article “[Morihei Ueshiba – Profiles of the Founder](#)”.

I previously posted an English translation of the interview with Nobuyoshi Tamura sensei from that collection in two parts ([Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)).

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Hiroshi Isoyama demonstrates Ganseki Otoshi at the All Japan Aikido Demonstration (全日本合気道演武大会)

An interview with Aikido Shihan Hiroshi Isoyama, Part 1

(English translation by Christopher Li)

The Founder takes ukemi for me

Q: Sensei, you were born and raised in Iwama, in Ibaragi Prefecture, so it seems to be fate that you met O-Sensei while he was in Iwama and became his student.

A: That's right, it was when I was twelve years old, in the first year of junior high school. I became a student on June 1st of Showa year 24 (1949). I remember this clearly.

Q: What was your motivation?

A: Other people may have had lofty goals, but I was very impure (laughing). Not to lose in a fight.

Q: Did you know anything about Aikido?

A: Nothing at all (laughing). Just that there was a rumor that "a master is here".

Q: I have heard that it was difficult to become a student of Aikido at that time.

A: The time when I began was just when the junior division was started. Since this was the era of chaos after the war, it must have been the desire of the Founder to nurture the development of young people. It didn't last more than three months at the most.

Q: Didn't last?

A: The training was very hard. When we started there were about ten of us, but they all disappeared. So in the end I went to train in the adult class.



The young Hiroshi Isoyama (right) with Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei

Q: So the training was quite hard?

A: It was tough. Since tatami would be damaged if it were in the dojo, it was cleared away and from the beginning we practiced on the wood floor. Ukemi was tough, and since techniques were applied right to the limit they really hurt.

Q: Was there any kind of special training for the junior division?

A: No. O-Sensei would come in, perform some Shinto prayers, and then practice.

Q: Eh? O-Sensei would instruct the junior division directly?

A: Of course. He would take our hands one by one and apply the techniques – he took ukemi for us, too.

Q: I had heard that training with the Founder was normally a matter of a demonstration of technique followed by “do it!”, but that’s completely different. This is the first time that I have ever heard of him taking ukemi.

A: He’d say “Isoyama, come!”, and allow me to take his hand and apply Nikyo or something.

Q: What did it feel like?

A: It felt like applying technique to a large tree. However, he’d take the proper ukemi for me, and not try to struggle against me or sneak out of the technique. About the time that I was in high school I tried to force some power into the technique, but I couldn’t put any power into it.

Q: Why was that?

A: I don’t know. It felt like being suppressed while power was being drawn out by the opponent. I couldn’t apply any power. Even now I really don’t understand what happened.

Q: Hmm...

A: When he partnered with me for Kokyu-ho his shoulders would drop down immediately, and he’d be as immovable as a mountain. Before I knew it, as I struggled to somehow raise my hands, I’d find myself pushing on O-Sensei’s chest with my head. He’d say “well you aren’t a goat are you?” and instantly crush me (laughing).

Q: That’s also a valuable experience, isn’t it? (laughing) Were most of the techniques performed from a seated position (“shikko” / 膝行) at that time?

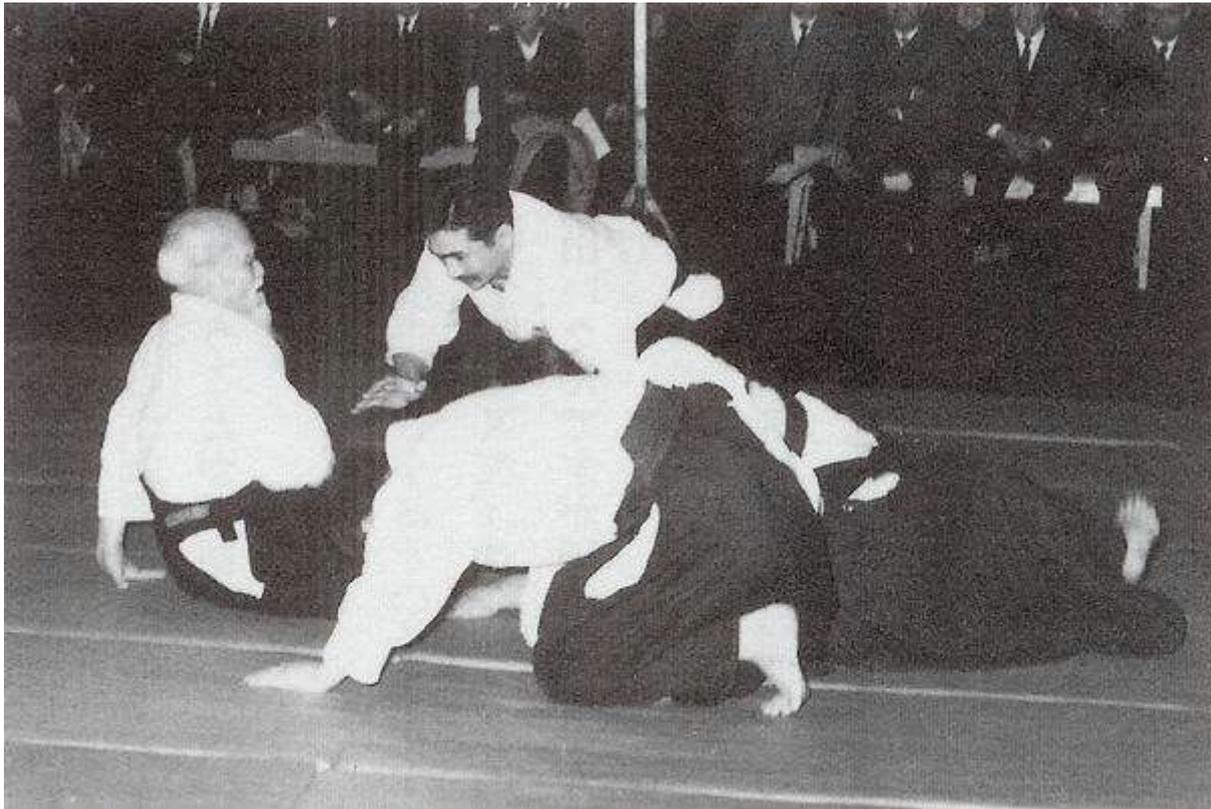
A: No, first we would do Tai-no-henko, I think that shikko training is something that was developed later. In terms of warm-up type exercises, perhaps there was only Funakogi-undo (“rowing exercise” / 船漕ぎ運動). Then we would begin techniques, and at the end would be finishing exercises (“shumatsu undo” / 終末運動) and Kokyu-ho.

Q: How were the techniques named at the time?

A: “Kyo” wasn’t used yet, we said things like “Ikkajo” (一ヶ条) and “Nikajo” (二ヶ条). I think that the first time names like “Ikkyo” (一教) and “Nikyo” (二教) were used was when they were used in the first book “Aikido” that was published by Kisshomaru sensei.

Q: However, the curriculum itself that exists today was in existence from that time?

A: That’s right, but at that time O-Sensei would decide upon the content depending upon how he felt at the time. So if he said “Today is suwari-waza!” then we would do nothing but suwari-waza until the skin peeled off our feet and left them bleeding. It was very hard.



Hiroshi Isoyama (complete with handlebar moustache) taking ukemi for Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei

The overwhelming speed of the Founder's movement

Q: The junior division fell apart and you entered the adult division, who was training there at that time?

A: There were a number of people. Among the uchi-deshi was someone who went to do pro-wrestling with Rikidozan (力道山), he probably thought that he was taking it easy on me, but for me it was really hard and painful. Of course, since I was a child I would start crying. When that happened he would shout, "Idiot! This is no place to be crying!", grab me by the belt and throw me out the window.

Q: It was really tough, wasn't it!

A: Then he'd say, "If you start feeling like you want to practice then come back in through the front door!". That kind of thing happened many times, it was really frustrating.

Q: Abe sensei was from around that time, wasn't he?

A: Yes, that's right. However, I was never taught directly by Abe sensei, we just received O-Sensei's training together. And then, of course there was Morihiro Saito sensei. There were many other people, but not many of them have continued.

Q: What about Shioda sensei?

A: At that time he wasn't around much anymore, so I never got a chance to work with him.

Q: How did it feel to actually take ukemi for techniques from the Founder?

A: In throwing techniques or whatever we were doing it always felt as if I were protected and could receive them in safety. There were never any feelings of fear.

Q: How about controlling techniques?

A: It would feel as if a weight were loaded on you, and you couldn't move. There are pictures of O-Sensei holding people down with a single finger – there a single point is being held down. It felt like a specific vertebrae – it was done to me many times, and O-Sensei would always smile and hold me down at the same point.

Q: I have heard that the sword was often practiced in Iwama.

A: Yes, that's right. It didn't always happen, but occasionally we did it. I was sometimes the uke, and it was extremely fast! We would begin facing each other in the Seigan posture ("seigan no kamae" / 正眼の構え), and just as I would begin to raise the bokuto above my head the tip of O-Sensei's bokuto would already have entered to my throat.

Q: Did you raise it up at normal speed?

A: Yes. At the moment that I raised up my sword his tip would enter the opening at my throat. Then, at the moment that I cut down he would perform Irimi-tenkan and the tip of his sword would cut through my neck. At the fastest there were times when he would turn in place and the tip of the sword would cut the back of my head.

Q: I had heard that he was fast, but this is faster than I had imagined.

A: He was fast, and there was a lot of pressure. There are demonstrations by O-Sensei where people are falling all over the place – there too O-Sensei's hand is entering just as they move, and they fall without thinking about it because there is no time to do anything else. His forearms were amazing too, they were like logs.

Q: He had an amazing amount of power.

A: It was superhuman strength. But it's not as if he was clenching to produce power, it felt as if it was entering him naturally. When I was feeling cocky I tried to force things many times, but he wouldn't even pay attention. We would try to do the same thing, but somehow we would always end up matching with our partner's power and the power would slip right in. O-Sensei would never become flustered. Whether we were trying to force something with all our might or we were doing nothing, O-Sensei would do things with the same power. It felt as if his Ki was draining out, but it wasn't. In that area he was completely different.



Kintarō (“Golden Boy”) wearing a “haragake” – woodblock print by Tsukoika Yoshitoshi

Q: What did the Founder do for his own personal training?

A: When training alone he would do sword cuts. He would often go shirtless in the summer, but in order to keep his abdomen from becoming chilled he would wear a “haragake” (a Japanese style workman’s apron) like [Kintarō](#) and swing a thick iron staff (“tetsubo” / 鉄棒).

Q: An iron staff?

A: He’d use various things, but I was told, “It’s important to stop firmly each time”. It’s also important to go quickly, but I was told to first “connect navel to navel” by cutting down to the opponent’s navel each time.

Q: “Connect navel to navel”?

A: Meaning that the end of the hilt is facing your own navel, and the tip is towards your partner’s navel. This develops a firm match between the line of the sword and the center of the body. O-Sensei would become very angry if we crossed swords like they do in the Samurai movies (“chanbara”).

Q: As in how you were striking at each other?

A: Yes, he’d say, “It’s not really that kind of ‘chanbara’. Engage them first with your body, not just your hands.”. When you got used to it you’d find yourself moving the sword with just your hands and running away, but that was no good – you wouldn’t be able to execute a proper Irimi. Connecting with your partner, engaging with the body and entering is the real Irimi. Today most people don’t even pay attention while they’re doing it, but in times past I think that Irimi was serious enough to be called the secret of Budo.

Q: What about swinging the sword upwards?

A: It’s Kokyu. You don’t keep your wrists straight and lift up, you close your armpits and roll your palms inward as you lift up. More quickly than you cut down. This becomes the hands as in Kokyo-ho, and I believe that this connects with everything. I think that O-Sensei must have done quite a bit of research. Also, a great deal of importance was placed on Shiho-nage. If you did Irimi-nage techniques from the beginning you would be scolded.

Q: Why was that?

A: I think that must be because it (Shiho-nage) consist of the basics. There is Tenkan (“turning” / 転換) and Kuzushi (“destabilization” / 崩し), and it is thought that the body is conditioned through that training. In later years (the Founder) liked the soft Irimi, but in our time we began first with Shiho-nage.

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Hiroshi Isoyama sensei teaching Aikido

Unspoken Teachings

Q: Usually when you speak of the Founder he has the image of someone who did not teach, but from what you say it feels as if he taught you quite carefully.

A: He didn't talk about things in much detail, but he took our hands and taught us conscientiously – this experience is a real treasure.

Q: I have heard that he could be long winded...

A: Yes, sometimes he could be. However, even if he was speaking about the Kojiki he was doing it so that Aikido could be understood, so it was nothing like a long speech about spiritual doctrine. Well, anyway, the talks on the Kojiki were very difficult to understand. (laughing)

Q: Outside of training, were there other things that you noticed while being near the Founder?

A: He was very strict about time. There was one rainy day, it was raining so hard that you couldn't see more than a meter in front of you, and when the time came for training I was the only one there. I thought "The ground is slippery today, there's no way that O-Sensei will come". Taking advantage of this chance, I took out a Shinken (a real sword) that was in the Dojo at the time and started to swing it around.

Q: That must have been a real spectacle! (laughing)

A: As I was doing that, just before the 7:00 practice time, the door opened wide and O-Sensei walked in. I panicked and shouted "I'm sorry!". (laughing)

Q: (laughing) I've heard that the Founder always left in time to make the train before the train that he actually rode!

A: However, whenever I think about it again I think that, rather than being strict about time, it was that he was strict with himself.

Q: Strict with himself?

A: No matter what happens, no matter what the weather is like, always being at practice, never being late – that's impossible if you are not being strict with yourself. I had to leave Iwama for work to go to Hokkaido, and I taught Aikido to the U.S. military police ("kanpeitai" / 憲兵隊) there. One day there was such a blizzard that I thought "Nobody will show up in this", and I didn't go to practice. Later on I heard that they had all showed up after all and waited for me for a long time. It was really inexcusable. At that time I felt the severe presence of the Founder. The Founder never said to anyone "Come on time" or "Don't miss practice". But he showed it in his actions. After that, no matter what, I was never late, and if something unavoidable occurred I would always stay in contact. More than just as a Budoka, this is an important teaching for life as a human being.



Hiroshi Isoyama sensei demonstrates Irimi Nage

Harmony Born from the Midst of Severity

Q: I've heard that you taught the American military's Green Berets while you were in Hokkaido...

A: Yes, that was just around the time of the Vietnam War, and I taught soldiers who had come to Chitose for training exercises.

Q: I would think that you wouldn't be able to use ordinary training methods.

A: They were aggressive from the very beginning. The still brought with them the attitude of a victorious nation, when you told them to grab you they wouldn't listen! They'd say "What do you do if they come like this?". No matter how severe Aikido training becomes, there is never training in destroying the opponent. However, they weren't able to understand that. They'd say "If you do that they can escape".

Q: That's very difficult, isn't it?

A: It was hard. That's why I thought "If I do this half-heartedly then they will look down on Aikido" and prepared myself to push it to the limit with no leniency.

Q: It was like a duel, wasn't it?

A: Well, everyday it was really like a battle – I started to get tired of it and think "Ahh, I've got to go again today...". When I think of it now, however, it was a good experience.

Q: What were the good points of that experience?

A: However you say it's like a real battle ("shinken shobu" / 真剣勝負), on this side you are in the teaching position. You can't just charge ahead recklessly at the same level as your partner. Even if something angers you, or something unexpected occurs you just have to handle it without letting it show on your face. I learned how to move intuitively while exerting that kind of control over myself. Of course it's important to train with partners who control their temper, but the intuition that is born in the moment that you face the pressure of a partner who is not like that is also an important part of Budo.



Hiroshi Isoyama sensei with Ni-Dai Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba

Q: That must certainly be true.

A: For that reason, when I teach overseas I partner with the local practitioners as much as possible. Large people, small people, strong people, weak people. That is the best way to further my own training.

Q: That's Shugyo (修行), isn't it?

A: There is one thing that O-Sensei said that I remember well. When one of the students asked, "Sensei, are today's Irimi-nage and yesterday's Irimi-nage different?", he answered, "Idiot! Aikido is a matter of steady progress." (日進月歩). I think that is the truth. For myself, when I recall training with O-Sensei, in my junior high school years I can remember nothing but the pain, and in my high school years whether holding a sword or working empty hand the

techniques were very severe. This has become transformed to a kind of smoothness as I have reached these later years.

Q: In other words, it is similar to the transformation from “Kaisho” (“block style writing” / 楷書) to “Gyosho” (“semi-cursive style writing” / 行書) to “Sosho” (“cursive style writing” / 草書). Within that range, isn’t Iwama Aikido legendary for its hard training?

A: Rather than “hard”, I would say that it is devoted to basics. However, I myself was not conscious of that transformation occurring – I was surprised when people told me “Isoyama-sensei, you have become rounder”.

Q: You weren’t aware of it at all?

A: Not at all, but I wonder if that is really the truth. When I think about it, in the beginning there was a time when I mistook physical strength (馬鹿力) for Kokyu strength (呼吸力). As the years passed my strength disappeared and I began to use the opponent’s strength to do the same things instead. In other words, Irimi, Tenkan and Tai-sabaki have become natural for me. Thinking in this way, perhaps as one ages it is natural to use strength less wastefully and become closer to the ideal.

Q: On the other hand, some people aim for the ideal of “strength is unnecessary in Aikido” from the very beginning.

A: I think that this is one method. However, doing this without a foundation in the basics will not result in effective techniques, and as Budo I don’t know if this method can result in power in the really important situations. At least, when I am teaching students I say, “Do it with all of your strength. There will come a time when you become aware that you are using your strength wastefully, but until then throw all of your strength into it.”.



Hiroshi Isoyama sensei teaches at the 9th International Aikido Federation (IAF) Congress

Q: "Using your strength wastefully?"

A: If you fail to exert your strength, even when you are able to, some part of you will remain dissatisfied, and you will stop believing in Aikido. I believe that it is because you have the experience of doing it with all of your strength that you can understand that strength is not necessary.

Q: But when you think about the "Budo of Peace" there must be some place in which you match with your partner, isn't there?

A: No – conversely, I believe that the harmony born from the midst of the clash of forces is the real one. Isn't there some part of a "harmony" that is born as the result of giving in that is false? It is especially important to pursue this while you are young. On the other hand, there is no need to do such a stupid thing when you're sixty or seventy! (laughing)

Q: This isn't just for Aikido, this is a very important lesson, isn't it?

A: I think that it is possible to come to understand by doing something wasteful. I think that it's no good just mimicking outer appearances.

Two Images, Two Glances

Q: Sensei, have you ever thought about quitting Aikido?

A: Of course! I had those thoughts when I was teaching the U.S. military and teaching was not going as I envisioned. I especially had problems when teaching children. However, there have been many more times that I am grateful for. Making many friends through being invited to instruct overseas, good training, delicious Sake. (laughing) That was all thanks to O-Sensei. The experience of applying technique to O-Sensei that I spoke about in the beginning, and all of these experiences, are treasures that I have received from O-Sensei. I cannot keep such treasures for myself alone. For that reason, communicating the experience of O-Sensei to even just one more person through training is my repayment.

Q: What is the image of the Founder that comes first to your mind?

A: There are two. One is inside the Dojo. Sharp, with eyes that judge a person's heart. The other image is outside the Dojo, a gentle glance. With those two sets of eyes I remain connected to the times of my youth. This is truly the treasure of my life.
