

Interview: Koichi Kashiwaya Sensei

December 2000 by J. Akiyama

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Koichi Kashiwaya sensei began aikido training in 1969 at Risshou University in Tokyo, Japan. He started training with Koichi Tohei sensei back in 1970. He started teaching in the United States in 1971 at the Seattle Ki Society for four years then later returned in 1977 to found the Rocky Mountain Ki Society in Boulder, Colorado. He was appointed Chief Instructor for Ki Society USA by Tohei sensei in 1983. He now holds an 8th dan in Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido, an Okuden in Ki Training, a lecturer in teaching for Ki Society International, and is a judge for the International Taigi Competition.

AW: What were the circumstances surrounding your starting up aikido?

KK: During high school, I had trained as an athlete -- mostly in track and field, running short distances. At that time, I wasn't interested in martial arts that much. I was rather more interested in athletic activities like how to use the body more efficiently so that I could run better.

I didn't really study in high school. But, somehow, I got by into college! [Laughs.] I did one year as a ronin (a year off between high school and college). I was thinking about going to a university for electrical engineers. I liked the idea and concept of electrical engineering, but I had forgotten that you really have to study mathematics and English. I liked physics, though. I think I'm more into the theoretical than the calculations; I don't care much for the formulas but I liked the ideas and the concepts in physics since I was young. Maybe that's why I wanted to go to electrical engineering school.

Since I was a ronin, I wasn't doing much athletic training during that year. I could no longer race very well because of that year off. So, I thought about going into something that wouldn't really interrupt my academic studies and leave me with some energy left after training. Now, at the recruiting day, the Kendo club found me and made me fill out a piece of paper with my name, number, and intent to join their group. I was supposed to meet them later on campus with that piece of paper. But, what happened was that I went to the wrong room! [Laughs.]

I saw some people wearing hakama so I went into that room. Obviously, some of the people came right up to me and asked, "May I help you?" Well, by the time I stepped into the room, I knew that these weren't kendo people but aikido people! Once inside, I didn't want to be rude so I stayed and watched. Still, I didn't really get drawn by the art of aikido then, but I felt like the atmosphere of the training was really nice; I liked it. I can't say it was friendly -- martial arts training in college is never friendly in Japan -- but, I felt like people there were giving each other a little bit of space. The kendo people really didn't give much space for me. "You have to do this." "You have to go here." I think most martial arts training are lead that way: military-like.

The aikido people in our university were different. I didn't know whether they weren't sure about what they were doing or that they were more confident. I let them know that I

was supposed to go to the kendo group. They told me that, "Oh, you could go at any time, but if you'd like, you're welcome to stay and watch." I liked that -- it gave me a little bit of freedom. Immediately, I said that I would like to stay. I didn't know what they were doing, of course. I don't really even remember what they were doing -- some kind of pin. But, I liked the sense of freedom. I make decisions like that at times. If it feels right, then I sometimes make a decision like that.

But, I was worried about the kendo people, too. I had told them that I was joining their group beforehand. So, I talked to the aikido people and let them know that I had already thought about joining the kendo group. They told me not to worry that they would talk to the kendo people and everything turned out to be OK; the kendo people told me that as long as I was doing martial arts that they felt it would be fine.

AW: So you did aikido all through college? What was it like?

KK: Yes, I did continue on with aikido all through college.

As far as what it was like, it was very much like the blind leading the blind. Our group really didn't know much about aikido, but an instructor from Aikikai hombu dojo would come and teach once a week if we were lucky. But we don't have a real "dojo." We would walk to this other Aikikai dojo about a 30 minutes' walk away from the university. Our group was registered with Aikikai so we had a class of our own pretty much every day, but an instructor from Aikikai only came about once a week.

What we learned from our instructor would really never be enough and it was hard to understand what they taught us. So, we had to come up with our own idea of what and how we were supposed to train. At that time, I was one of the junior students; anything that my sempai asked us to do, we would do it.

We were sparring a lot, actually. We didn't even know that aikido didn't have sparring! We would put on boxing gloves at times and really try to punch to see if we could throw each other. That's how I broke my nose...

AW: Was the training intense?

KK: I didn't find the physical training itself really that intense because I was more athletic than most. Seiza was hard, though, since we didn't do seiza in track. Everything else, I could keep up.

The first year of university training in aikido in Japan is basically just being uke. We never got to throw anybody. I could fall down and get back up many, many times without getting tired -- and my sempai liked that! They gave me a lot of attention, but that attention also got me to break my nose, dislocate my shoulder twice... The more they liked using me, the more beat up I got! Sometimes they'd even bring in shinai to see if I could dodge them! But, they were my sempai so I couldn't do anything about it, of

course. Later, I found out that that wasn't really aikido, but I didn't know any better back then.

But after class when we went out -- which was pretty much after every class -- my sempai would treat us kohai really nicely. I liked that atmosphere. Maybe aikido was helping these sempai to be like this outside of the dojo? Although we may not have understood the technical side very well, maybe we were learning the philosophical side of aikido. We all kept something in our spirit from the training that we did.

I think it was a good introduction to aikido for me. If I had encountered the conventional methods of aikido, I probably would have quit right away -- it would have been too unsatisfying. Our club did a lot of crazy things like sparring. I didn't like getting punched but the craziness was just right for me; I wasn't really tired afterwards and I still had the energy to study.

AW: When did you start going to Aikikai Hombu Dojo?

KK: The group itself was registered under the Aikikai so we had the privilege of sending a limited number of members to hombu dojo every week. Of course, our sempai would always be the ones to go first, but sometimes when the sempai decided not to go or picked one of us to go instead, we would go train at hombu dojo.

AW: Was the training there different?

KK: It was much gentler than what we were doing! Surprisingly much gentler! [Laughs.] I thought, "Oh, training at the Aikikai is very nice! They're so gentle! So you don't have to kill your opponent!"

Still, I really didn't understand what they were doing. But, I was able to finally see some of the higher ranking instructors doing aikido. But, again, it felt kind of far away, watching these higher ranking people. It still appeared a bit too fake, a bit too smooth. But, I respected that.

We went to Aikikai to breathe in the atmosphere of their training. But, as soon as we went back to the university, we went right back to the rough, sparring kind of keiko.

It was about a year into my training if I remember correctly. So it was then I went to see Tohei sensei.

AW: Do you remember your first class with Tohei sensei?

KK: The first class, I do remember. My first impression of Tohei sensei didn't amount to too much. Again, he was ranked higher than most of the instructors at Aikikai and we knew that he was spoken of very highly by other instructors as well. But, I also knew that there was some kind of political conflict there. There already were feelings like "You shouldn't go to such and such a class if you're training in this person's class" at the time.

Until that time, I trained with a lot of different instructors at hombu dojo. But, as soon as I started going to Tohei sensei's class, that began to change. I started feeling pressure from some of the other instructors, basically that I was no longer welcome at their class. Now, this was only from some of the instructors and not all of them, but some of them did give me a hard time for being there. Although I was very much a nobody there, I started feeling like I was no longer welcome. I didn't tell people that I was going to Tohei sensei's classes, but I guess they must have been monitoring even college students like me.

AW: Did you like Tohei sensei's teachings in particular back then?

KK: At that time, I liked everyone's teachings -- not just Tohei sensei's. Again, all of these instructors had a very "far away" existence for me. If O-sensei were God, then Tohei sensei may have been considered the Pope or something like that -- he was way up there! [Laughs.] Obviously, I didn't have much of a connection with him since I was just a shodan out of many. So, I really didn't have any feelings like "I like his teaching." It's not like that in Japan, any way, especially at hombu dojo. If you start saying that you like someone else's teachings over someone else's, you'd most likely get banished by some other instructors.

It's a very political thing. So, if you're smart, you wouldn't say things like "I like that" or "I dislike that instructor." So that's why I really didn't put myself to go that way.

Then, slowly, I started going to Tohei sensei's class. Then he started up his "Ki no Kenkyukai." I think that was my turning point, in a way. My sensei called me and let me know that Tohei sensei was starting up a ki class outside of hombu dojo. I don't know why he called me to tell me that. But I had been taking Tohei sensei's classes and I was feeling some pressure from some of the other instructors that I was already in Tohei sensei's group. And Tohei sensei's class did sound interesting.

I was in aikido not for the martial but so that I would be able to move better. I wasn't also very interested in just aikido but something a little bigger. Just learning how to throw someone didn't interest me all that much. I thought that there was a bigger answer than that -- "why am I here" kind of thing. I was a bit confused back then about society and such and was a bit rebellious. I started asking myself questions about why I'm here and where I'm going -- to put a little bit of meaning to my life.

Aikido at that time was just for keeping in shape and being with the people. I didn't really get much out of it except for a workout. But, when I took Tohei sensei's class, I can now see that Tohei sensei was teaching and giving something else to me. I didn't know it at the time.

Tohei sensei had a wonderful children's class back then. I got invited by another instructor to watch, so I went to his kids' class. The kids are much smaller and there were only a few adults who were watching. He came up to me and asked if I were here to

watch and I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Why don't you join?" So I went and lined up with the kids in a standing posture to do some "ki testing."

Now, in his regular aikido classes, he wasn't doing any kind of ki testing. But, this was a different kind of class than the regular adult's class -- more thinking about mind and body.

I was clueless! Why is he pushing us?

So he came up to me and pushed my shoulder. I didn't know what that meant that I moved. Then Tohei sensei smiled and said, "If your mind moves, then your body moves." When I heard those words, something clicked. I started to think that maybe Tohei sensei himself or what Tohei sensei was teaching may give me some kind of answer to the big questions -- not just about aikido, but about life.

Then, Tohei sensei also had his ki class at Yoyogi Olympic center. It wasn't very big -- only about fourteen members, mostly upper executives and such. Most people in the class weren't aikido people, either; they were from outside of Aikikai. Later, I found out that Tohei sensei had spoken to Kisshomaru (Ueshiba) sensei that he wanted to teach Ki class at Aikikai but that the classes would take place outside of Aikikai.

So, I'm the only young college student there. And because I was the youngest, I felt like I should help. I went there about an hour early and helped Mrs Tohei set up. I wasn't in the role of an otomo or anything like that but I just wanted to be helpful. So then, Tohei sensei started recognizing me, too, since I was there earlier and I was the youngest and all. Occasionally, Tohei sensei would be asked to show some aikido throws and since I was the only person there with aikido training, he would throw me around. That time was really the first time I took ukemi from him.

Gradually, Ki Society added more classes and younger people started coming in from aikido -- mostly from Aikikai, some from Yoshinkan. Mostly these were people who didn't have any "ties" with any particular teacher in Aikikai.

For me, I didn't have a lot of ties with Aikikai, any way. I would go to Aikikai for practice and participate in Kisshomaru sensei's classes and some other senior instructors' classes.

It wasn't like I felt like I had to follow only Tohei sensei. It just happened that way.

AW: Do you think now that Tohei sensei's split from Aikikai was inevitable?

KK: For me, it's done and over with.

Tohei sensei usually didn't initiate talking about it. Of course, any time you have more than two human beings together, then it becomes a political event -- that's human nature.

I can not avoid politics, of course, but I also do not like hearing about it very much. To me, it's promote a kind of violence if it become over loaded.

I guess we were sort of like the a "sounding board" of sorts! (Laughs) Every kind of deshi (apprentice) has to listen to whatever teacher said! It's part of our duty.

So, for me, if Tohei sensei had something to say to me, my job was just to be there and listen.

AW: When did you come to America?

Tohei sensei asked me to go to Seattle in 1973 for two years to help out with the chief instructor, Yoshihiko Hirata sensei, there. After two years, he asked me whether I wanted to stay in the United States or come back to Japan and become his Uchideshi. I went back to Japan to do Uchideshi training for two years. After two years of being Uchideshi, I asked Tohei sensei to come back to US. He agreed and suggested I go to Boston or Chicago. I thought that anywhere was fine with me except for those places where he had already been! (Laughs)

What I meant by that is if I went where Tohei sensei had already been, it wouldn't have been good because Tohei sensei's influence would have already been there. The people who had trained with him already look up to him as their teacher so I didn't want to interfere. But, Tohei sensei can't go everywhere, so I figured my mission was to go where he hadn't been. Then maybe I could be like an agent for Tohei sensei.

I knew a judo instructor in Boulder, Colorado, who had studied with Tohei sensei before. I contacted him and he said, "Sure, come on out." So that's why I came out to Boulder in 1977.

AW: What was it like to start up aikido in Boulder?

KK: Fortunately, there was a jujutsu and judo dojo there already for me to use. But, I didn't want to take their students. I started with just one person. And, of course, there was the limitation that I couldn't hold a lot of classes because they used the dojo most of the time. Sunday and then early morning a few times a week -- that's about it.

Then, some of the judo and jujutsu students started to come, too. I talked to their instructors and said that I didn't want to take their students but they said, "No, no, no -- it's OK. They like your class. They really seem to be enjoying what you're doing." So, it ended up that about half of the jujutsu class and half of the judo class joined my class.

The classes then kept getting bigger and I didn't want to end up with any potential conflicts with the other teachers. I felt like I had enough students to move on. The judo/jujutsu place is an Alfalfa's supermarket now; the building has been reconstructed, of course, but I used to teach there -- maybe it's the meat section now or something! [Laughs.]

AW: You mentioned that Tohei sensei helped you realize what it was to be a human being?

KK: Right, right. He pointed out the fundamental things -- politeness to others, respect, how you see others. Before that, I was just concerned with learning how to throw people down. As an instructor, I thought that was what people came to learn, but I was totally wrong about that. Tohei sensei really came down strongly on that point to me all the time. It seemed like everything I did was wrong -- and, you know, it was wrong. Mostly, it was the way I thought about myself was totally wrong.

He really helped form the foundation of who I am, more than teaching me techniques.

I was only there as uchideshi for two years but I learned pretty much all of the foundation of aikido in that time.

AW: What do you think is the aim of Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido?

KK: I enjoy teaching the technique-side of aikido. But, Tohei sensei has said that Ki Society was formed to make society into a better place. And, in a way, I was given that mission when I started to teach.

I want my students to do their best on the mat first.

But, maybe people won't get anything else outside of techniques from what I teach. But, if there's something "right" about it -- even if one person understands what I make me happy.

AW: A lot of people think that the Taigi in Ki Society is competition and that competition is a bad thing in aikido. What would you say that the role of Taigi competition in Ki Society?

KK: My personal understanding is that Taigi was not originally formed as competition. Tohei sensei designed the forms as a gift for his instructors so they wouldn't "screw up" [laughs] during a demonstration.

At the time, most of his students were pretty young and going through training kind of like in a military boot camp. We learned a lot from Tohei sensei in a short period of time and we were able to do the techniques pretty well -- one by one. But, in a situation like a demonstration, because the range of techniques were not that "well digested," it became difficult. Tohei sensei gave us a tool -- the taigi -- for us to use as a sort of guidance so we wouldn't feel like we were getting lost. With this repertoire under our belt, we would feel more comfortable giving a demonstration.

The people he was teaching was really close in training with him -- we understood the basics really well with him. We were able to see him doing these forms at demonstrations

and we started noticing patterns that he was doing. He formalized these forms a little bit later.

Later, he watched his students carefully and found that his students were not doing the forms correctly. That's why he came up with the idea of competition so that we can polish what we were doing so we didn't just plainly look alike.

A long time ago, companies like Honda were content at making passenger cars for people like you and me to drive. But, they then started entering auto racing like the Formula One. This was not due to their wanting to make their passenger cars be able to drive at a high speed like 200 miles per hour through the city. Rather, they used the racing track as a sort of laboratory or a polishing stone to create better technologies that they could then put back into their passenger cars to make them into safer, higher efficiency, more ecological cars.

In a way, the taigi competition is like a Formula One racing track. The students are not there to just "win" the competition but to use it as a way to further polish his or her techniques. Tohei sensei always paid close attention to how people were competing -- what was working and what wasn't. Shallow practice would show up as people just having technical form only. But, through taigi, people could refine their mind and body coordination.

What goes on in the Taigi are not necessarily "street" applications. Tohei sensei did show us those kinds of things -- arresting techniques or how to deal with a very aggressive person. But, that's not necessarily what we have to teach but for us to know in case we need to teach it. We, as teachers, are expected to deal with a wide range of students with different backgrounds. I may end up teaching a police officer or a prison guard. But that's not something, I think, that needs to be taught to everyone. A police officer may need to know something that a civilian does not. A prison guard may be restrictions on what they are able to do, so they may be taught something else.

In regular practice, there's no need to focus on any specialized way. Regular practice is mainly geared toward mind and body coordination.

But, there's a difference between teaching, say, a baseball player and teaching a sumo wrestler. Teaching these kinds of people was to Tohei sensei a sort of a personal hobby. [Laughs.] He's not teaching baseball to a baseball player or sumo to a sumo wrestler. When he would have time and they would ask him about things, he would teach them about mind and body coordination.

AW: Where would you like to see Ki Society in twenty years?

KK: Oh, I hope I live that long! [Laughs.]

To look ahead so far, I would have to go back twenty years ago, then. Back in 1980, it was still a confusing time for Ki Society. We were still trying to organize ourselves into

an organization, really. Ki Society was not quite ten years old at the time -- it was still a young age for an organization, and a lot of things still needed to be done.

Twenty years ago, Ki Society in the United States really felt a lot of pressure from Aikikai. Ki Society had to become defensive somehow. Twenty years from now, no one aikido to dominate, but to coexist -- not mix. We have to continue with each style. At least, that's my general idea about any thing. For exaple, if American tried to mix too much Japanese tradition with what is here-- It will get confuse, even misunderstand. If American can appreciate the roots of Japanese tradition but understand with separate languages and such as well, then we can coexist and communicate. I'd like Ki Society to be the same way. Maybe we won't mix with any other style but feel comfortable with our own style so we can communicate.

Twenty years later, now, we definitely have a much better organization that I can see.

Hopefully, Ki Society will continue to improve over the next twenty years. In the whole organization of Ki Society, we only have a few thousand people in the United States. It's still not a large organization. It's really hard to predict twenty years from now, but I think it may not be very "visible" in the public, but I think it will integrate well with society in that time.

Ki Society now has a generation change coming up, too. All of the senior instructors are getting old. So, naturally, the next twenty years will be a new generation of instructors. So, I think the new generation people need more "practical" things than older generation. I understand the way Tohei sensei talks well, of course, but maybe his language is a little bit too old fashioned for the younger generations. I think Tohei sensei's generation had some ideals in mind and pursued them. We appreciate all their efforts, but also we have to apply their Ki to a new generation.

I think it has to happen because the generation is changing.

AW: Thank you very much, sensei, for your time.

KK: Thank you.