
Yoshinkai—Beyond the “Hard Style” Label by “The Mirror”

"Hard style" — "martial martial art" — "action not philosophizing" — "riot police training" — "combat Aikido" — "small, devastating circles"—Yoshinkai Aikido had been described to me in fairly intimidating terms but, if I was going to research it, I needed to try it.

I knew that Gozo Shioda Sensei, Yoshinkai's founder, had been incredibly powerful and effective although he weighed less than 110 pounds and was under five feet tall. And I knew that he had been awarded a 9th *dan* in Aikido. (Terada Sensei, who had also trained with O-Sensei, helped to start Yoshinkai.)

The techniques pictured in Shioda Sensei's book *Dynamic Aikido* looked much like the Aikido that I practice. The ideas in his books sounded familiar, too:

To harmonize with the universe means to be in balance. "Aiki," *i.e.*, "harmonizing of energy," means to lose your own ego; it is the technique of submitting to the natural flow of the universe. By doing that you can effortlessly realize your own natural self depending on the situation that is front of you, and it is by developing this harmony that we find the realization of Aikido. (Gozo Shioda Sensei, *Total Aikido: The Master Course*, p.17)

But some of what I found in Shioda Sensei's book looked unfamiliar. What, for instance, is *shuchu-ryoku*, and why is the front foot turned at that peculiar angle?

The breakfall landing pictured in *Dynamic Aikido*, which allows *uke* to come up to a standing position, looked difficult, but I could see the benefit of coming up fluidly rather than landing with a splat. Could anyone get up that easily, or did *uke* need to be particularly limber and athletic?

If I attended Utada Sensei's 25th anniversary celebration in Philadelphia, would the Aikido be that much different from the (Aikikai) Aikido I practice? — any less familiar than some of what I've seen at Aikikai seminars? Trust and fear are major issues with me, even in my own familiar dojo. Did I want to wear my newly awarded black belt onto the mat with these "hard style" people?

The again, a quotation that I found at the Yoshinkai IYAF (International Yoshinkai Aikido Federation) web site didn't fit with my preconception of "hard":

These days, the differences of ideology, the confrontation of races and conflict between nations, lead to numerous problems from the destruction of the environment to economic friction. All opposition or antagonism leads to greater conflict. A premise of Aikido is the avoidance of rivalry or any form of opposition. If the people of the world would make an effort to learn how to avoid dissension

through the practice of Aikido I am sure that mankind could realize genuine unification. Therefore, we as instructors must do our best to gain this ideal.

So really, what could be so different about our "styles"?

I did not find a Yoshinkai dojo nearby — I don't think it is widespread in the South. But, luckily, I found a Yoshinkan sensei on-line who was patient with all my fumbling and often presumptuous questions: Sam Combes Sensei (6th *dan*). *Shuchu-ryoku* means concentration of power, Combes Sensei explained, and it is sometimes called "the Yoshinkan one-point. All energy is directed to one area to give the most power." As I had a hard time understanding this concept, Combes Sensei further explained that, with hips and shoulders squared, energy is directed forward and concentrated outward from the fingertips, working much like the bow of a ship. I thought I understood and likened this concept to what my sensei described as focusing and extending *ki*. "We don't talk so much about *ki*," Combes Sensei told me. "Of course it's a part of Aikido, but Shioda Sensei used to say, 'If you want *ki*, go to the temple'."

"Wear your black belt," Combes Sensei said. "You earned it, so wear it." He also told me that only the person teaching the seminar would be wearing a *hakama*. I still fretted a little about wearing my black belt. "Go, have fun," he encouraged. "Keep an open mind and an open heart, and enjoy yourself."

When I asked Combes Sensei to answer for his entire style — when, for example, I asked why the language on a certain person's web page plays on fear rather than love and harmony — he gently allowed me to discover the fallacy in my own logic. "Why don't you e-mail that person and ask *him*?" Several times he used one spare sentence to shake loose my bound-up thinking — no judgment, no lecture, no philosophy, just a simple question or statement that opened a thousand doors. I do not want to be judged by my own family, much less to be responsible for everyone in my dojo or my style of Aikido. Why did I expect Yoshinkai people to all be the same?

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"OSU!" was all I saw when I opened one of Combes Sensei's answers to one of my e-mails. I wrote back explaining that the one word was all I received. Had an attached file been lost? "Sorry," he replied, "not a joke but sometimes a response to say, thanks, you're welcome, acknowledged, or whatever. It is like 'aloha' which has many meanings. Please don't consider it a curt or insignificant message. It carries much with it." I was fortunate to learn this, for I was e-mailing many people associated with Yoshinkai, trying to find a dojo near me, and they all answered with "OSU!" — as both a greeting and a closing.

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Eventually, I found someone who had practiced Yoshinkai and lived in my area: Gil Fitts Sensei, who had studied with Utada Sensei in Phila-

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delphia (before studying with George Leonard Sensei in Aikikai). Gil wrote,

There are really but a few things that distinguish the so-called hard styles of Aikido from the others...

The Yoshinkai is very traditional and the relationships between students and teachers are much more rigid and formal. In fact, now that I think about it, formality is a real trademark of their practice.

There is a stronger emphasis on *ukemi*, especially jumping breakfalls. Students are rigorously tested on *ukemi* as they move through the ranks and the constantly repeated philosophy is that *nage* and *uke* perform a technique together. Demonstrations are both precise and crisp. One friend told me the precision was appalling.

Yet there is that uniformity—"the nail that sticks up gets hammered down." So aesthetically it looks dynamic and sharp. A bit military. Yet having practiced that way [I find it] amazingly safe, since everyone does the techniques the same way. Nothing is more disconcerting than finding out the hard way, when you visit other dojos, that wrist turning throws, *shihonage* and *koshinage*, are times for individual expression and your wrists are taped up for a month afterward. Been there. No fun.

Consequently, Yoshinkai is the martial art of choice for Japan's specialized police units—the equivalent of our riot police and SWAT teams. All members go through a crash program to have at least a *shodan* in Yoshinkai. Pretty intense, but most candidates are familiar with Kendo and Judo from regular school curriculum.

Still, the goal in Yoshinkai is that the practice of the art itself is a spiritual method comparable to other forms of *misogi* — meditation, prayer, fasting, chanting, *etc.* Practiced with correct intent, it leads to the personal evolution of the Aikidoka through great equanimity and balance in all aspects of our lives. Sound familiar? Different road to the same mountain top.

Fitts Sensei assured me that Yoshinkai practitioners would be eager to share their style with me and that I should of course wear my black belt at the seminar. He also told me to remember that, ultimately, I am developing my own Aikido, that it will in time be as personal as my faith, and that it will mirror my heart.

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To Chris Howey Sensei of Indianapolis, who had issued a warm invitation to visit his dojo and try his style, I made the observation that

Tomiki and Yoshinkai seem to be under-represented in books and articles — maybe because we Aikikai people tend to be so verbal. He commented that some words we use turn him off, like calling our system "Hombu" without recognizing that all organizations have *hombu* (or headquarters). "On the other hand," he wrote, "[Yoshinkai people] have had a very distinct tradition of 'just doing' without too much thinking or talking. I don't think that has done us a lot of good as a style. We're a little intellectually lazy sometimes, and that is, unfortunately, taken as a badge of accomplishment rather than seen as something needing work.."

Howey Sensei agreed with my assumption that Yoshinkai is very action-centered but added that he and his wife Evelyn Dysarz Sensei have been working with their brown and black belts to generate discussion and study about the philosophical foundations of Yoshinkai. "Our techniques are based on trying to demonstrate the correct posture, balance, degree of hip and foot movement, *etc.* and we try to do it the same way every time — at least when we are teaching beginners." Because Yoshinkai has a precise physical form, what teachers do on the mat looks similar, and students may believe that what the teachers know is similar, which is not always the case.

According to Howey Sensei, the most important lessons people like Kimeda Sensei and Morita Sensei have to offer concern who they are in their daily lives. People should ground themselves in the art and learn to lead intentional, disciplined lives before they rush out to start their own schools. He also told me to wear my new black belt, that Yoshinkai recognizes other style's rankings, "a *yudansha* from another Aikido style has always been recognized as a *yudansha* by ours."

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Geordan Reynolds Sensei of the Yoshinkan Kenshu Center in Southern California urged me to look for more than the catch-all phrases — like "combat Aikido" and "hard style Aikido" — as I did my research:

The incredible treasure that Shioda Sensei forged thanks to so many significant and noteworthy individuals, events, and occurrences... is a compelling tale. But no one knows this story. Even in the Yoshinkan sphere, there is a void. Just what is Yoshinkan all about? Those who know have yet to present what they know in a forum where this jewel of Budo can be documented... Starting at age 18 in the mid-1950's [Inoue Sensei], Kushida and their *sempai* Terada gave [Shioda Sensei] the students he needed to shape the Yoshinkan.

I could see I had much to learn!

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Because my plane to Philadelphia for Utada Sensei's 25th anniversary was delayed, I missed Thursday's classes with Robert Mustard Sensei and Takeshi Kimeda Sensei. I also missed part of the class conducted

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by Inoue Sensei, Dojo-cho of Yoshinkan's Hombu Dojo in Toyko. As I watched the last half of his class, I did not recognize as much as I had expected. Class was conducted in very straight rows and lines. Yet I did see more diversity than I had ever seen at an Aikido seminar: men, women, all ages, many races.

After class I met many friendly, enthusiastic people and talked with Samy Badawy, a senior student at the host dojo and the person in charge of organizing the 25th anniversary. Samy arranged for me to meet the next morning with Jacques Payet Sensei, a fascinating man who was *uchideshi* to Shioda Sensei for nine years.

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Payet Sensei's Aikido life began after he saw an 8 mm film of Shioda Sensei. Having seen Shioda Sensei in action, he promised himself that he would leave his home on the small French island of Reunion, go to Japan, and find this man. After one month as a regular student in the dojo, he had had no real contact with Gozo Shioda Sensei, and his money had run out. But Shioda Sensei's son listened to Payet Sensei explain how much he loved Aikido and wanted to stay. Together they went to talk with Shioda Sensei, who said that he could live in the dojo if he truly loved Aikido and was very courageous. In exchange, he would get up early each day, do chores, practice for six hours, and then do more chores. This life was very, very hard and the training was rigorous. The emphasis was on Budo and strong, spirited practice.

Later Jacques Payet Sensei had the opportunity to return to Japan and to study with Shioda Sensei again. This time he had to completely rethink the meaning of Aikido and its techniques. He said that he was lucky to see two sides of the same man—the earlier one that stressed spirited training and the later one that emphasized connection.

Payet Sensei believes that the idea of connection is important in our daily lives off the mat:

In Aikido technique, you have to find a way where, when you do the movement, you get the connection between your legs, your upper and lower body, your hips, your mind, your heart, and your spirit. When you really do the technique, you are almost empty, because physically you have the connection between your head, your heart, and your body. That's why you can do a technique without very much strength. You get the concentration, and you're able to connect. Otherwise, when you do a technique, it's only your body. And I think in life it's the same. If you have a problem, if you get everything in line, you naturally do your best. You have this... connection.

Form is very important to Yoshinkai practitioners, said Payet Sensei, but people must remember that form is just a tool, a way to get to center line. Then he told a story: Each year, Shioda Sensei would pose for pictures for calendars. Often the photographers would ask him to execute a technique, and he would admit that he had forgotten it. His assistants would demonstrate, and then he would do the technique.

"That's Aiki," said Payet Sensei. At that point, Shioda Sensei was beyond forms and techniques.

In *Dynamic Aikido*, Shioda Sensei wrote this:

From the budo that he created within himself, [O-Sensei] founded what we now know as Aikido. He taught that Aikido is not simply a fighting art (Budo), but a way of purification that has the purpose of bringing together the body and spirit (*kokoro*) in accordance with universal principles. It may be described as the Budo that has as its purpose the realization of harmony.

I entered the Ueshiba Dojo in the seventh year of the Showa period (1932) and have trained in Aikido for over fifty years; it is only recently that I have come to understand the lessons that Ueshiba Sensei taught us. (pp.200-201)

Payet Sensei believes we all have the potential to realize this ideal—that, if we practice diligently and with correct intent, we can achieve this level of understanding.

As I listened to Payet Sensei's laughter throughout the interview, I sensed the joy O-Sensei wrote about finding. Still, he was also very humble. At one point, when we were talking about universal concepts, he laughed and said, "Universal concepts, yes...but universal concepts are very high and I am not at this level."

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On the mat that afternoon, I found Tony Fitts Sensei (Gil Fitts' brother), Geordan Reynolds Sensei, Chris Howey Sensei, and many of the people I had been e-mailing but had never met. Finally, I had the chance to try the Aikido I had been reading about.

Contrary to my expectations for "hard style" Aikido, I did not find anyone with an excessive ego. In fact, "hard style" wasn't really hard at all—although it does look more rigid and feel "stronger." Gil had been correct; I felt absolutely safe and comfortable. Every partner I had was warm, encouraging, open, and helpful.

To be honest, I never got my back leg straight or my front foot at the correct angle. Still, when we went slowly—*ichi, ni, san*—I could do a passable Yoshinkai technique. However, when we sped up, the techniques seemed so familiar that my body remembered the way it was used to doing them.

I was surprised to find that specific movements were expected of *uke* in response to each step of a technique. Sometimes I was sprawled out and flopped over when I should have been on one knee or in some other prescribed posture.

I kept thinking about one of my best friends in my dojo who had quit

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and gone elsewhere. He always said he was a technician who liked to break Aikido into little parts and analyze them. Often he would talk about the physics of movement. Most of us in my dojo never saw Aikido the way he did; we couldn't. Maybe, if he had found a Yoshinkai dojo, he would have felt less misunderstood.

I also remembered reading in several sources that O-Sensei had stressed different aspects of Aikido to different students, depending on their personalities. I assume Shioda Sensei was very organized and orderly. Although I lack both of these qualities, I would find incredible safety and comfort in the forms if I were a beginner in this system. I am not a visual learner and do not pick up new movements easily, but what I did on the mat felt very natural and somewhat familiar.

Besides, it was fun! Even though uniformity is expected and I've always been the kind of person whose ragged edges hang outside the box, my partners were tolerant and patient. I enjoyed myself immensely the entire three days of very intense training.

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I met a young man named Rob Carey, a police officer who had earned a brown belt in Yoshinkai and moved to Texas where he could not find a Yoshinkai dojo. He's been practicing on his own for several years and attending seminars whenever he can. Bless his heart, no matter where he or I moved all over that huge gymnasium, whenever we did *shihonage*, he and I would end up partners. If I rarely had the opportunity to practice my Aikido with partners, I would not want to do every single *shihonage* at a seminar with someone unfamiliar with my style. But, each time, he would smile, and we would bow, assume our stances, and practice. I found that attitude all over the mat, from the white belts to the tattered black belts.

Before I left home, Sam Combes Sensei had told me to look for Nelson Tan, a student of his who now studies with Morita Sensei. During Amos Parker Sensei's class I was struggling with an unfamiliar pin when a black belt working beside me stepped over to help, saying he was familiar with that pin. When I asked whether he studied with Parker Sensei, he said, "No, with Morita Sensei." "Oh," I said, "are you Nelson Tan?" He looked at me incredulously and said, "How on earth did you know my name?" For me, it was an aiki moment — and other, similar connections seemed to happen all weekend.

Evelyn Dysarz Sensei and Chris Howey Sensei's dojo adopted me and took me out to dinner. I felt very welcomed and included. One of the students told me he had been standing behind me in class when Inoue Sensei came around and tried to help me get the correct front foot position. After about the fourth try, I whispered, "*Sumimasen*. Aikikai, Sensei." The student laughed while telling me he had overheard me. "Of course you're Aikikai," he said. "Anyone standing behind you knew that!" I realized then that my back leg had never gotten as straight as I thought it had.

As soon as I got home, I e-mailed Gil to let him know I had met his brother Tony. I commented about the diversity of the participants at the seminar. Gil replied, "In my travels, [I saw that] Yoshinkai had more minority participation than any other branch of Aikido." He told me Utada Sensei had studied with Kushida Sensei, an amazing *shihan*

who had taught at a dojo in the ghettos of Detroit. "[Some]of the senior Yoshinkai people in the states have been black," he wrote. "One of [them] was still doing incredible *randori* when he was in his mid-70's....Amos Parker was a black Naval officer stationed in Japan for 30 years. He trained the entire time directly with Shioda and his top *shihan* [Noguchi]. Parker is, who is 8th *dan*, is one of the highest ranked [Non-Japanese Aikidoka] in the world."

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Geordan Reynolds Sensei had told me that, to understand Yoshinkai, I must first understand Shioda Sensei. According to several accounts, he was shy, unassuming, and uncomfortable with the religious elements that O-Sensei introduced into Aikido.

Payet Sensei told me that Shioda Sensei came up with the Yoshinkai style because he had trouble learning Aikido without a system. He constructed it to help himself learn and later to help others teach. (As a school teacher myself, I would guess that Shioda Sensei and O-Sensei had personalities of different types and that they therefore had different learning preferences.)

According to Payet Sensei, Shioda Sensei told him that, to learn from O-Sensei, he had to steal by watching O-Sensei's body, how he moved, his muscles, and the way he kept his feet under his weight.

All of Shioda Sensei's life he was concerned with the idea of all the straight center-line and with keeping this line when moving. He was so incredibly quick and his Aikido was so powerful (said Payet Sensei) because he could maintain this center line throughout his techniques.

Sam Combes Sensei said Shioda Sensei had visited his dojo in California twice. The last time was not long before he died, and at that point in his life he didn't generally take *ukemi*. Combes Sensei had a very small, adolescent yellow belt in the dojo, and Gozo Shioda Sensei came on the mat to be *uke* for him. Combes Sensei is not sure the boy realized the honor that was paid him — but, for Combes Sensei, it was a moment he will never forget.

Shioda Sensei developed his *waza* by studying goldfish, Combes Sensei explained. "He would tap the bowl and watch how they repositioned themselves. Later in his life someone videotaped from above and observed how similar his movements were to those movements. ... [T]hat is part of his legacy."

Shioda Sensei also seemed to have an ascetic side. "Yoshinkai is nothing if not spirit — the spirit to do one's best, to endure the unendurable," wrote Geordan Reynolds, who went on to describe a 10-day course of 7am classes that takes place at the Yonshinkan Hombu during the coldest and hottest times of the year.

Rather than seeing these times as disadvantageous (he continued) we look at them as ascetic opportunities to stretch ourselves to our limits. Shioda Sensei said that it is up to us to find a way to test ourselves, and it is only then that we find out what this art and ourselves are all about....

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There is a secret beauty in the training methods that [Shioda Sensei] developed....It is the austerity that defines Yoshinkan.

Shioda Sensei certainly had a reputation for rigorous training, but he took ukemi for a small boy and allowed Payet Sensei to move into the dojo when he had been practicing Aikido for only one month.

I hope more Yoshinkai students decide to share their stories about him and about their art.

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"Why don't we share our Aikido more often? How do we expect Aikido to unite the world in peace if we fight with each other?" I lamented to Combes Sensei. He then told me about an event called the Osu! Festival. "Each year we gather as many sensei and students as we can and have a sharing clinic. This is done as close to April 26 as possible to memorialize O-Sensei's passing. It has been a lot of fun and very enlightening."

Both Payet Sensei and Sam Combes Sensei told me how Shioda Sensei and Kisshomaru Ueshiba Sensei were great friends with much respect for each other. Combes Sensei told me that, when Kisshomaru Sensei would visit Shioda Sensei at Yoshinkan's Hombu Dojo, he would bow to Shioda Sensei because he considered him to be his *sempai*. "He didn't have to do that," Combes Sensei commented. "He was Doshu for all of Aikikai."

Maybe all of us could learn a lesson from Kisshomaru Sensei's respect and his humility.

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"The Mirror" is a collaborative column written by a group of women who describe themselves as:

We comprise mothers, spouses, scientists, artists, teachers, healers, and yes, of course, writers. We range in age from 30s through 50s, we are kyu ranked and yudansha and from various parts of the United States and styles of aikido. What we have in common is a love for budo that keeps it an integral part of our busy lives, both curiosity about and a commonsense approach to life and aikido, and an inveterate tendency to write about these explorations.