

The Master's Apprentice

Yoshinkan Aikido's Saburo Takashima Sensei

As an instructor at Yoshinkan Aikido's Tokyo *honbu* (headquarters), Saburo Takashima Sensei regularly takes the Tokyo Metropolitan Police and riot-squad members through the punishing training sessions that are part of their year-long, compulsory full-time course. Born in 1973 in San Paolo, Brazil, Takashima Sensei moved to Japan as a seven-year-old. He has been an *uchi-deshi* (live-in student) at Yoshinkan hombu since 1997 and is today ranked 4th Dan Jokyo. Here, he talks about the art, the course and the role of an *uchi-deshi*.

When did you first commence Aikido training?

I started aikido training in December 1996. I just dropped into the dojo to observe an aikido class and by chance, the instructor knew my brother, [who] was practising Aikido. The instructor encouraged me to be a member of Yoshinkan.

Did you do any other marital arts before aikido?

I did judo and kendo at school, but I was not a serious student.

What attracted you to aikido?

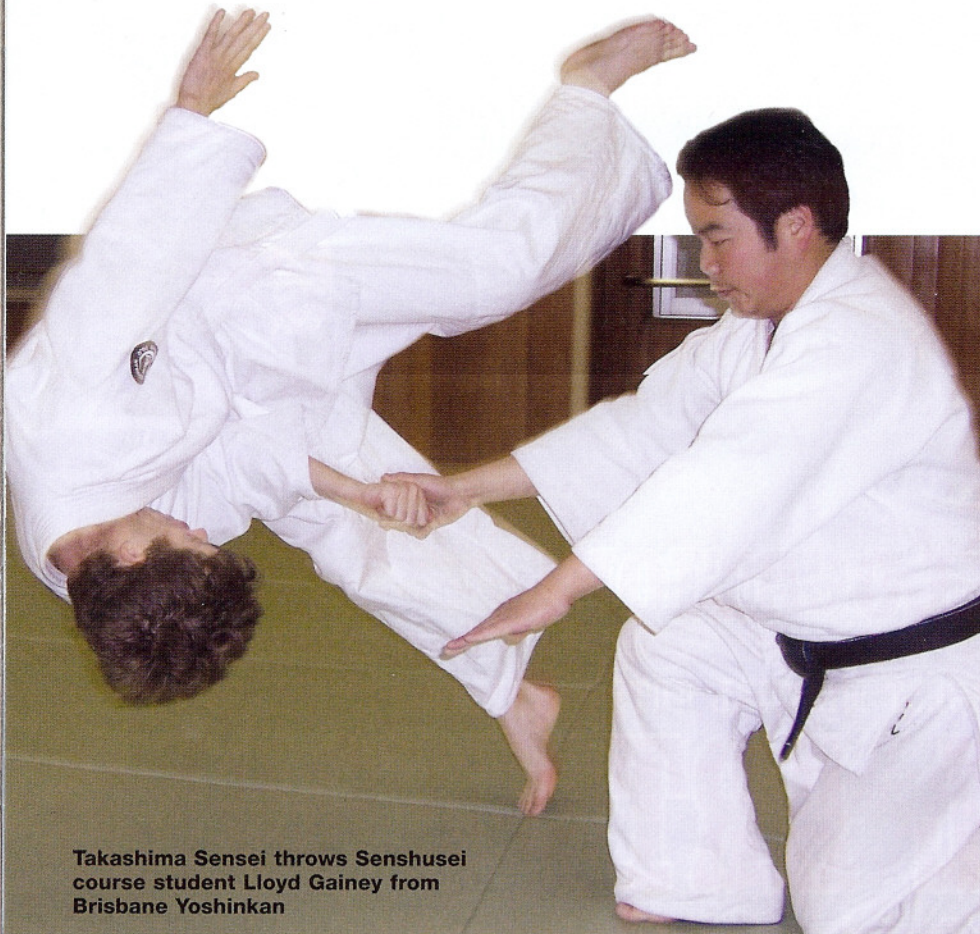
The fluid and beauty of aikido movements really attracted me. Its movements were like a dance rather than for fighting. Aikido movements did not seem to rely on muscular strength — it wasn't a competition between the people practising aikido.

You undertook the famous Yoshinkan Senshusei course. Please tell us about your experiences in that year. Is it as tough as it has been portrayed?

The Senshusei course is an intensive 12-month aikido course that was originally developed in response to the needs of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police. About 40 years ago in Japan, there were many riots and the police asked Yoshinkan to train their riot police in a short period of time. The course is now open to other people besides the police.

Because the course was originally designed for the riot police and to produce instructors for the police force, it was very hard training and it continues to be very hard training, and demanding. It is very challenging for each person and the participants as a group. Everyone is continuously pushed to excel.

From my perspective, as someone who now teaches the Senshusei course and someone who took the course, each person must continuously confront his/her limits and



Takashima Sensei throws Senshusei course student Lloyd Gainey from Brisbane Yoshinkan



push himself/herself beyond. Don't set artificial limits for yourself — you will be surprised at what you can achieve!

Did you become an uchi-desi immediately or were there some steps or stages that you had to pass through?

At the Tokyo Honbu, generally you must pass the Senshusei course first before becoming an uchi-desi. About two or three months after joining Yoshinkan as a regular student, I was encouraged to take the Senshusei course. And after the course, Chida Sensei asked me if I would be interested in becoming an uchi-desi.

The position of uchi-desi is a very special one. It is understood to be like an assistant-instructor program. Can you please explain what the responsibilities of an uchi-desi are and how these responsibilities differ from those of other staff members at the Yoshinkan honbu?

Traditionally, an uchi-desi is a person who is normally chosen to succeed the art. An uchi-desi lives in the master's house or school. It is the uchi-desi's responsibility to look after the master's needs, clean the house and the school, and teach classes. The objective is to learn the character of the art by spending time with the master; to learn to think like the master and to learn to anticipate what needs to be done. He/she is responsible for daily honbu administration.

The uchi-desi is a full-time role — the uchi-desi must stay in the dojo all the time

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and be available. There was a time when he/she could not even take holidays, but this is no longer the case.

The uchi-desi role may be compared with other honbu staff members, for example, an *itaku-shidoi*, which is a part-time instructor role. When an uchi-desi's circumstances change and can no longer be full-time, he/she may be asked to assist as an *itaku-shidoi* to teach at the honbu or outside of the honbu.

Could you please give us an example of a regular day?

Typically, an uchi-desi gets up very early in the morning. I get up at 4am or 5am each day to clean the honbu, do the laundry and look after the Master's needs. When the honbu opens, I may be doing office adminis-

tration or teaching classes or assisting other instructors — it is a full day.

You are often called on to be *uke* (the attacker in a training drill) for leading aikido teachers. Is there a technique or incident that happened to you that stands out as being truly memorable?

As uke, you must always commit yourself to the attack even though you don't want to hurt your partner. Sometimes the attack is a reflexive action triggered by key words that uke responds to during an aikido demonstration, for example.

I remember one particular instance in which Inoue Kancho was talking to some important dignitaries and I was present. Kancho remarked, "If uke's attack came this way ..." and I acted reflexively, without

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Takashima Sensei

thinking, and attacked Kancho. Kancho in turn reacted instinctively to my attack and my whole body was thrown above the Master's shoulder height! It was quite spectacular and totally unplanned. The dignitaries were quite impressed. I didn't really know what happened!

In your opinion, what is aikido's place or relevance in today's modern world?

Aikido is good for developing and maintaining a good mental attitude and behaviour, and appropriate etiquette — and this is good for society, because you take these things with you outside of the dojo.

Aikido can be practised by young and old people, weak or strong. It is an art that a 70-year-old can do — it is fantastic to see a 70-year-old taking *ukemi*, uke, receiving, attacking, etc. Aikido is really good for your physical health. It is also very good for mental health; aikido can help you to de-stress as you learn to develop and extend your inner energy.

What is the best way to get insight and progress in aikido?

Shioda Soke and other teachers have said, "Be sincere and pure". When you step into a dojo to practise aikido, your mental attitude must be pure. You need to be receptive and sincere in your aikido. Let me expand: When you first step into the dojo to learn aikido, you are taught to do *kamae* (preparatory stance). As a beginner, do you understand *kamae* and its purpose? No — you do it because the master tells you to do it. The master has mastered the art of aikido, but as a beginner, you cannot understand. So you must cultivate a pure and open mind and learn to receive your master's teachings. You must do what sensei tells you to do. There is a purpose to your master's

Demonstrating *sankaijo*

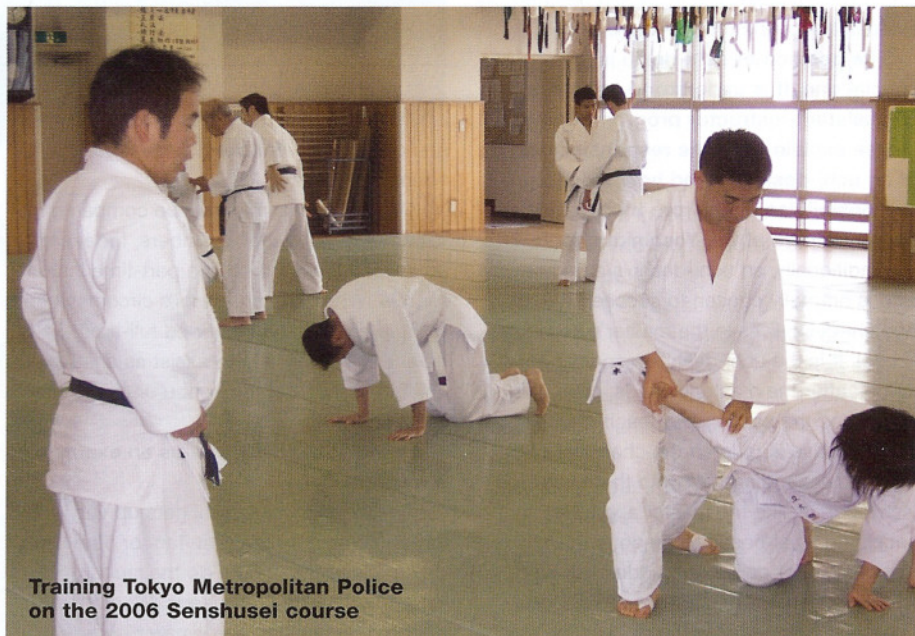


teachings and this is not always obvious to you at your level of understanding. In the past, it was understood that a student must follow what the master says. Now, some people try to discuss, argue and rationalise, "Why?" with the master.

If you were not an uchi-deshi, what would you be doing now?

I was studying theatrical arts before aikido, so maybe I would be in this field. I also thought of being an overseas diplomat. Maybe I am doing theatrical arts and being a diplomat through aikido, since aikido is like a dance and teaching aikido is like an expression of theatrical arts — and, I assist Kancho when he goes abroad to foreign countries.

Thank you for your time Sensei. We hope to see you in Australia soon. **BLITZ**



Training Tokyo Metropolitan Police
on the 2006 Senshusei course