

Remembering Yoshigasaki Sensei

KiNewsletter#5 July 2021 – Original: <https://www.ki-aikido haarlem.nl/remembering-yoshigasaki-sensei>, (disappeared)

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Yoshigasaki Sensei died unexpectedly in February 2021, after having taught and developed Ki Aikido in Europe for almost fifty years. Since 1988 he has been my teacher and I was privileged to attend numerous fascinating seminars. In gratitude and with a deep feeling of loss I remember not only the lessons but also the many conversations we had over the years. The profoundness of his teachings deserves to be remembered, in an attempt to honor and capture at least something of his inspiring presence.

How to remember this brilliant and complex teacher and give tribute to his innovative work? A way to start is to begin with personal experience. The appeal of his teachings had much to do with my previous biography. There have been two things or, rather, practices where my immediate response after a first encounter was that I just wanted to make this a part of my life. The first was judo, which I began to practice as a young boy and continued to practice throughout my teenage years. There was no aikido in sight at the time. The second was philosophy which caught me after entering university. After my relatively short but intense judo career I practiced for many years disciplines with a spiritual background such as tai chi, zen meditation, dance, yoga, even Aikikai aikido but these activities and philosophy remained two separate domains. When meeting Yoshigasaki in 1988 I discovered that he began to speak more and more about the same problems and issues that had occupied me in my philosophy studies. But in a new and constantly changing way.

Over these years, especially during the 1990s, we have exchanged long and detailed emails about such diverse topics as empire, democracy, time, recent political events, or philosophical subjects such as ‘language’, ‘concepts’ and ‘names. During practically all seminars we had shorter or longer conversations about something he had brought up in class; the last was in February 2020 about the idea of history in ‘Lola Rennt’, Tarantino, Kurosawa and Nietzsche. I never expected this to be the last conversation, but this is typical for last encounters. What was especially surprising and fascinating in these encounters that he would always try to pose questions that no one would ask, because what’s the use of questions that everybody asks?

Sensei was always working hard to develop aikido further. It would be good to put this in a perspective in which we can appreciate the amazing steps he has taken along his path, so that we don't take his results for granted. What would need to be discussed are, for instance, the change from taigi to tsuzuki waza; the gradual development of the tsuzuki waza as a whole and the lessons that are hidden in the construction of the tsuzukiwaza. Or the changes from kote gaeshi to kote oroshi and from tenkan to tenshin. This would help younger generations of students and teachers to develop a deeper understanding of the present state of aikido as answers to certain problems. What I want to honor here is his development of the theory of aikido as a 'do', a way of life, beyond what he had learned from Tohei Sensei. This profound development began – as far as I witnessed this - in the 1990s with his questioning of Tohei's 'Four basic principles'. Yoshigasaki Sensei began to doubt Tohei's pretention to be able to give an absolutely right foundation to aikido. In the same way, he doubted the quasi-scientific approaches to aikido that had been developed for instance in the well-known book of Westbrook and Ratti 'Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere'. These doubts and criticisms about rigid foundations or scientific approaches to life led to his further development of 'Life theory versus material theory', and, later 'Line mathematics versus point mathematics'.

Being very interested in science and mathematics, Sensei's critique did not diminish his appreciation of science as an eminent way to understand materials. But he criticized what we can call 'scientism': the idea that scientific methods are the only reliable way to understand the world and ourselves in it. He often contrasted two ways of understanding reality. Science teaches us that the moon and the stars are x number of kilometers or light years away from us but this does not capture what the moon and the stars mean to us. Therefore, he often said; 'You have to discover the moon'. He warned to see nature only through the eyes of science: 'There are no straight lines in nature'; to explain this he would often point to straight lines of the building in which we were practicing and to the absence of straight lines in our bodies and movements. Or he would say that there are no circles in nature: circles are scientific constructs that must not be projected onto nature. So, the idea that some techniques would be circular is a misleading idea. Similarly, turning your body backwards does not mean that you turn 180 degrees.

Measurements work only to understand materials but not with life in the broad sense and, therefore, also not for aikido. 'Ma ai' is not a measured distance but a harmony of the space between us that must be experienced in its (in)adequacy: as too close or too far and in changing situations. The distance between Nage and Uke in formal greeting is not 4 meters, but four tatami and each tatami represents three steps. Counting during exercises should not follow the rhythm of a metronome but should follow the different rhythms of the movements. Consequently, he also opposed Tohei's suggestion to measuring the duration of a correct 'taigi' in seconds.

Similarly, Yoshigasaki Sensei emphasized that there is a fundamental difference between words and concepts on one side and whatever these concepts or words are about, on the other side. Words and concepts only refer to the world; moreover, mostly in the form of classifications: we speak about ‘apples’ but this apple is different from that apple. Words can help in a first orientation but should not interfere with, or even come instead of our subjective exploration of the world. Hence his many questions: ‘What is green?’ and his answer that there are many forms of ‘green’ – ‘Look at the tatami’s’ - that you should explore by yourself. A favorite topic was also ‘democracy’, questioning the self-righteousness of rich countries to invade poorer countries because they would bring ‘regime change’ from a superior position of being ‘democratic’ countries. Another one was his criticism of the ‘self evident’ opposition ‘democracy’ or ‘dictatorship’. Behind his often provocative remarks while teaching, to get people to think about certain subjects, he thought in a more nuanced way: he would criticize democracy for its rule that the majority should win, but would agree with democratic respect for minorities.

The fundamental point he was making is that what matters most in life, such as harmony, beauty, truth, love and justice, can only really exist for those who sincerely try to engage with them; there is no objective ground for any of this. Even our planet hangs in relations of gravity. The decisive moment is the acknowledgement that we are involved: we are all tiny and insignificant but at the same time, each of us is a center of the universe. Therefore, he also criticized monotheism; not because it would be wrong when someone would believe in his or her God, but because monotheist religions declare from the beginning that there is only one God. This means that belief in other Gods would per definition be superstition, which damages the respect for other religions and for the spiritual or religious experiences of other people. He concluded that the relational qualities of spirituality and the respect for other’s sincere experiences would be better preserved in polytheism, which is open to the idea that your God may be different from what I experience as God or Gods, but this does not include a depreciation of your spiritual experience.

Although the task to discover the meanings of love, justice, a tree, this particular butterfly or this particular technique or situation in aikido is very personal, it is not an isolated process. It is also deeply relational. This does not mean that I should agree with others or follow somebody else. Experience and understanding will differ between people, leading possibly to different kinds of tensions between people. The eminent role of aikido is that it teaches not only ways to protect yourself from danger but also to guard your own physical and mental space while remaining in relation with others. Existing in relations with others means that we are involved in them so that we cannot understand them from a distance of objectivity.

Where objectivity and the distanced observation end, subjectivity has to begin, from the beginner's mind or Shoshin. But this is not the subjectivity of countless unconnected opinions or 'points of view'. But a subjectivity that grounds in an awareness that we exist in relations and that these relations are changing. Therefore, Yoshigasaki Sensei was always changing the techniques and the ways of explaining them so that we would not satisfy ourselves with the lazy conviction that we have found and mastered the right technique. All techniques are merely didactic forms to practice this changing nature of aikido, which reflects and is part of the changing nature of life. He often emphasized that he only showed wrong techniques but not with the intention of indifference, but as specific experiential examples of different possibilities that cannot all be anticipated.

The interplay of engagement and distance is connected with Yoshigasaki's central teachings of love and respect. He approached Aikido as a 'do' – a way of life in an everyday practical reality outside of the dojo. Aikido techniques were often interpreted as metaphors of life and life's situations as metaphors of the 'do' of aikido. His ideas of harmony, love and respect had, however, a critical edge that would cut through un-reflected, badly reflected or worse, intentionally misleading ideological constructs of governments. Or he would point to everyday problems of injustice, for instance for refugees, that we tend not to see because we take our comfortable way of life for granted. Harmony is not a plaster that can be placed over a wound so that we are no longer disturbed by it. Harmony, justice, truth, beauty are not given in an unchanging form but must be regained again and again.

As his impressive presence has become the presence of his absence, we can honor his legacy, not by merely reproducing it – although much needs to be digested well – but by developing it with the questions that emerge from our practice if we are open to see them.



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