

# Interview with Koichi Tohei: Part 2, by Stanley Pranin

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*(Interviewed February 8, 1996 at the Ki Society Headquarters in Tokyo)*

***“O-Sensei was as solid as a rock but also very relaxed, and that combination made him extremely strong. He had mastered relaxation by completely integrating it into his body.”***

## **Mind-Body Unification (Shin Shin Toitsu) and Ueshiba Sensei**

Ueshiba Sensei was an individual who showed what it means to exist in a relaxed state, to possess true ki, and to have a unified mind and body. His posture was as solid as a rock and you couldn't budge him no matter how you pushed or pulled; yet he would toss me effortlessly without ever letting



Koichi Tohei at Ki Society Headquarters in Tokyo, c. 1996

me feel that he was using any strength at all. I was astounded that such a person should actually exist in the world.

More than anything, what Ueshiba Sensei taught me was that a relaxed state is the most powerful. He himself was living proof of that.

I don't think there is anyone these days who can truly demonstrate this the way he could. This truly wonderful quality that he took such great pains to develop, not stories about him pulling pine trees out of the ground and other nonsense, is what we should try to leave to

future generations.

### **Why Ueshiba Sensei forbade shiai (matches)**

Ueshiba Sensei did not allow shiai. In a real shiai the goal is to deprive your opponent of his power utterly and completely; failing to do that, you can't claim victory. On the other hand, modern shiai are governed by rules that have been established for the sake of safety and to preserve the lives of the combatants, and it is within these rules that victory and defeat are determined.

Such contests, however, are actually sports, and therefore are not really shiai in the true sense of the word. Judo, for example, has been designed so that players can get up off the mat after being thrown any number of times. This is possible only because judo is a sport; in reality such a thing would not occur.

In the past, shiai meant that you either tried to kill or severely injure your opponent, or at least render him incapable of further resistance. Otherwise, the match would be considered unfinished and without a victor.



Koichi Tohei throwing multiple attackers

Budo, by its very nature does not involve competitive fighting. If you examine the Chinese characters you will find that they literally mean “the way of stopping the weapon.” You lay down your own weapon, and at the same time make your enemy lay down his.

***In other words, defeating people is not the goal; rather true budo is the completion and perfection of your own self. This is what Ueshiba Sensei always said.***

To maintain our safety and preserve our lives we have to establish rules. But deciding victory and defeat within those rules automatically places us in the realm of sports. And Ueshiba Sensei was adamant all his life that aikido is a budo, not a sport.

**What Ueshiba Sensei taught**

While Sensei felt deeply about this underlying principle of budo, he never really taught us anything about it in concrete terms. When we were training he would come around and tell us to "put some power into it." And yet, when he himself demonstrated techniques he was totally relaxed! What he said and what he did, in other words, were completely different.

He also used to say fantastic things like, "The gods became like smoke and entered my body," and "In all the world, past and present, even among saints and wise men, there has never been anyone who could understand what I say, and even I myself, though I am saying it, do not understand." Now how in the world were we supposed to make anything of talk like that!?



Morihei Ueshiba applying sankyo to Koichi Tohei in a 1952 film

Sensei was as solid as a rock but also very relaxed, and that combination made him extremely strong. He had mastered relaxation by completely integrating it into his body.

If I had not been fortunate enough to meet Ueshiba Sensei, I probably would have lived my whole life without ever knowing about this type and degree of relaxation. I'm very grateful to him for

showing me that.

I never paid as much attention to what Sensei said as to what he did. You could ask him all the questions you wanted and never understand his answers. He would just show you and say something to the effect of "It's done like this."

Eventually I also met Tempu Nakamura Sensei, from whom I first heard the words, "The mind moves the body." Hearing this I thought, "That's it! That's all there is to it! It's so simple!" I started looking more closely for that kind of thing and indeed discovered that Ueshiba Sensei would move his

opponents' bodies by leading their minds (kokoro). And he did it while completely relaxed. It would have been good if he had simply taught us that, but he never did.

After thinking about it for a while I realized that for the mind to lead the body, and in order to lead your opponent's mind, you first have to be capable of controlling your own mind. I set out with great enthusiasm studying how to do that. In other words, I had discovered that unifying the mind and body is a fundamental underpinning of aikido.

Nevertheless, because Sensei kept saying things like "Pin your opponent strongly" when he taught, people misinterpreted his meaning. When he died, the kind of aikido he wanted to pass on to us simply vanished.

The "Four Major Principles of Mind and Body Unification" that I teach now are actually things that Ueshiba Sensei demonstrated with his body. The Shin Shin Toitsu aikido that I teach is the aikido Ueshiba Sensei wanted to teach.

***In a great deal of aikido today, the collusive way in which people practice allows ineffective techniques to be passed off as the real thing. Such aikido will only be criticized and ridiculed. People take advantage of the fact that there are no matches in aikido and allow themselves to train in collusion. The result is that they lead themselves into self-satisfaction, conceit, and arrogance. With Ueshiba Sensei's death, true ki and the principle of mind and body unification***

## *vanished from aikido.*

### **Guiding principles for aikido practice**

Aikido is criticized as fake, especially when people go around demonstrating using only their own students, not letting anybody else try, and this is a consequence of the fact that the principle of ki has been lost from aikido.

It is a mistake to think that aikido is a path through which you match your own ki with the ki of others. Ueshiba Sensei said, "Five and five for ten, two and eight for ten." In other words, aiki is merging your power of two with a power of eight to get a power equaling ten. Or matching your power of five with another power of five to get a power equaling ten. Ueshiba Sensei said that is an essential principle of aikido. However, I have always said that aikido is matching your ki with the ki of heaven and earth, rather than with the ki of other people. There is only one heaven and earth, and if we merge our bodies with that, then all people will come to merge with us.

Our minds and bodies have been given to us by heaven and earth, and when we are able to unify our minds with our bodies, the power of heaven and earth comes surging out. This energy is inherent in everyone. What I teach is how to polish and draw forth that energy.

Aikido prohibits matches because permitting them would result in a departure from the true meaning of budo. On the other hand, almost everyone has some sort of desire to improve, as well as to compete; these are what stimulate us to make efforts and give us hope that we can develop ourselves.

Aikido prohibits matches because matches are concerned with the issue of winning or losing. There would be no problem if matches were not about victory and defeat, but rather about how much we can unify the mind that we have been given by heaven and earth to discover our fullest potential as

human beings. With this in mind I established what we call the Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido Competition, an event not for displays of circus-like techniques or other curiosities, but rather an opportunity to test this mind-body unification that anyone has the potential to attain. This event is not limited to Ki Society members; anyone can participate. But those unable to unify their mind and body won't get very far in the competition.



Koichi Tohei teaching ki principles to famous home run hitter Sadaharu Oh in the 1970s

I've taught mind and body unification to people like baseball star Sadaharu Oh and sumo wrestler Chiyonofuji. The fact is, there is nothing to lose in practicing it, no negative aspects whatsoever. The other day I was even teaching the Yomiuri Giants baseball team.

All I hope to do is teach mind and body unification. I want people everywhere in the world to have the opportunity to make their lives which, it goes without saying, they only have one chance to live meaningful through the spirit of Shinshin Toitsu Aikido.

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## **Profile of Koichi Tohei**

Born 1920 in Tokyo he moved when very young to Tochigi Prefecture where he spent his youth. Frail health during his childhood forced him to visit the hospital frequently. At his father's insistence he took up judo. Having strengthened his body to some degree, at fifteen he earned his black belt and at sixteen entered Keio University's preparatory program. He continued to practice judo enthusiastically, but contracted pleurisy as a result of excessive training and was forced to withdraw from school for a year. During that time he devoted himself to self-training through misogi kokyuhō, Zen, and other types of discipline.

At 19, he met Morihei Ueshiba and became his student. In the short span of half a year he became the founder's representative (dairi) and, having yet to receive any official ranking in aikido, was sent to instruct at the Nakano Police Academy and the private school of Shumei Okawa.

At 23 he was called into military service and learned under fire the secret of directing ki into the one point in the lower abdomen (seika no itten). Between 1953 and 1971 he visited the United States on fifteen occasions, teaching and spreading aikido and the principles of ki. Tohei received tenth dan in aikido in 1969. He served as Director of Shihan (Shihan Bucho) and Director (Riji) of the Aikikai until leaving that organization in 1974. Tohei established the Ki Society (Ki no Kenkyukai) in 1971 (recognized as a non-profit organization in 1977).