

## Interview

Editor's note: This interview with Yamada Sensei was conducted at New York Aikikai in July 2011 by Piotr Burnos.

**Piotr Burnos: Sensei, You are the head of a newly established Aikido organization, Sansuikai International. What are the goals of this organization?**

**Yoshimitsu Yamada:** The main goal of Sansuikai is to support the relationship between my students and the Aikikai Foundation. As you know, not every aikido practitioner in the world has privileges with the Aikikai Foundation because of their policies. As a teacher, I am responsible for my students and such a situation is simply unfair. So the main goal of Sansuikai is to protect, support and help my students under these circumstances.

**How did Sansuikai start?**

Well, for many years I have been supporting aikido in South America, because it was way behind the other continents both technically and structurally. Thanks to many of my USAF teachers, there has been tremendous improvement technically. Aikido became popular there and as time went on, more aikido people were involved, more countries were involved, many organizations were established, and many groups created. It was natural that at some moment those groups wanted a connection to Aikido Headquarters. Unfortunately, just a few organizations were recognized by Aikikai. It was simply not fair that some people got some privileges and some people didn't simply because of Aikikai policy. Through years of hard training, those people achieved a lot and should get some kind of recognition by Aikikai. The aikido situation in South America is not like in Europe. Each country has a different political situation, which makes things difficult. However, we have been working on making it easier. That's why I started Sansuikai.

Initially, Sansuikai was focused on South America, but as time went on people from other continents, like Europe, wanted to join. Many European countries already have strong national organizations, so I do not want to interfere. Although each country has similar problems, and some groups want to join Sansuikai, I'm trying not to accept them unless there are special circumstances or my direct student asks to join. When it comes to a teacher/student relationship, then it becomes my business.

This relationship is important. People are often confronted with the choice of loyalty to an organization or to a teacher. But my philosophy is simple. I understand it is important to have a national organization, to do many big events and so on. However, the most important relationship is between the teacher and the student – everything starts from there! This is a budo principle. There is a big gap between budo principles and organization regulations.

Sansuikai is not a political organization; it is founded on budo principles. I am personally helping those people who wish to follow me. That's all.

### **Who can join Sansuikai? Are there any requirements?**

Well, basically anybody can join, but there are some limitations. You see because of budo principles and Japanese mentality – my mentality (laugh) – I don't want to offend any of my senpais. For instance in France, where Tamura Shihan was in charge, they have a strong national organization that I don't want to interfere with. Secondly, I will give priority to my direct students. When it comes to requirements for joining, it is based on my judgment; there are no written regulations, because I don't like that kind of system. It is just a matter of trusting each other. I won't automatically accept everybody; I have to judge every case separately.

Fortunately, the Aikikai understands my idea of Sansuikai, and they see that it is necessary.

### **Originally Sansuinkai was established for South America, but now there are many new members from Europe. Do You have any specific message for new European members?**

Sansuikai in Europe is gradually increasing. My direct followers have recently joined. You know, this is not a political organization and I want people to get together through agreement, not regulation. I like the word 'agreement'. Give me some time to organize it and create the structure of Sansuikai in Europe. When the time comes I will talk about it officially. For now I think the way you are doing the website is very good and very important; we will need it, so I want you to continue.

**(Thank You, Sensei)**

### **Sensei, what are Your expectations regarding Your instructors in Europe?**

Well, it is simple: try hard and be responsible! Being an instructor is something you have to earn. It is like in any other part of life. You want to teach something? – you have to try hard and be responsible.

### **It often happens that some advanced students open their own aikido schools. What is Your opinion about such a situation? How would You describe a good instructor?**

Well, of course a good instructor has to have good Aikido skills, that is obvious.

But there are many other elements. For example; for my organization I have a motto I call “the four F’s”: Friendliness, Fairness, Freedom, Flexibility.” These four qualities are also needed for an instructor. We are dealing with different people on the tatami. Ten people have ten different personalities, and as an instructor you have to know how to deal with each of them. Of course, an instructor is also just a human being and naturally likes some people and dislikes others. It is easy to deal with people that are very nice to you. For them it is an opportunity to be close to the teacher they like. But there are also some people that keep some kind of distance from me, and I think this is my responsibility to approach them. Recently, I had such an experience in my dojo. I noticed some student with a bad attitude; I know he was talking badly about me. But when I approached him to correct his technique, I observed that his attitude changed. So maybe that was what he was missing – he needed some attention from me. So it is my responsibility to not let students distance themselves from me. Maybe I should approach them? Of course there are some people that you can’t reach no matter what you do. But at least a teacher should try. And what is more, each teacher should take care of his students, just like in any other relationship. You have to care for your students. I think that is most important.

### **Who should decide who may teach aikido?**

If it’s my dojo, I decide because I’m the person responsible for technical aspects.

### **So the dojo-cho is the responsible person and may decide who may teach?**

Yes, because he knows his students' ability. For instance you have a dojo, and students, but I don't know who they are. So I cannot tell You: "Hey, you should ask Mr. A. or you should ask Mr. B to teach, he is much better." I cannot say that.

**Yes but sometimes students break away from the school and just want to go their own way and just want to teach.**

Yes, that's true. If something becomes popular there is always a down side to the development. Aikido is very individual, very free, very personal. Everybody can practice aikido, and there are as many points of view as there are practitioners. That is good about aikido. But it's also a problem. Because there is no specific way to describe aikido, some people create their own style (I hate that word). For example, some people don't focus on the physical aspect of practice. Maybe they are lazy or don't have any physical skills – they still can practice. And he or she can be a teacher, too! And some people might like this person as a teacher. What can I do? In aikido anyone could open a dojo. In judo if you are weak, you don't get students. It is obvious who is good, who is bad, because it is a sport. In aikido you have so many ways to look at it that telling the difference between good and bad is a problem. So everything that is good about aikido, unique and different from other martial arts is at the same time a problem. It is a very touchy subject. You can ask me more questions about it next time, Peter...

**Before we go to the next part of the interview there is one more question about testing: What are the rules about testing in Sansunkai? Which instructor may conduct kyu and dan tests?**

I don't have any regulations yet but we have agreements. Now in Sansuikai are the same rules as in the USAF. If you are 4<sup>th</sup> dan or above you could test your students up to 2<sup>nd</sup> dan. But sometimes a teacher is not even nidan.

**But there is a need for tests...**

OK, let me speak about South America. Usually I go to teach a seminar once a year and I conduct the dan tests. Sometimes I ask other qualified instructors to go and test. That is similar to what the Aikikai does. If some country has no qualified instructors, Aikikai will ask me or ask their teachers to conduct tests during a seminar.

**Sensei, don't You have the feeling that sometimes, especially during the seminars, You don't have "control" over the people who you are testing? Often You don't know persons who are taking the test, they are recommended by their instructor.**

Well, I have to trust instructors, their recommendations. Unfortunately, sometimes I don't agree with the recommendations.

**I'm asking, because the situation in Europe has recently changed...**

I know, for example, look at the situation in Germany. After Tamura Sensei passed away people were driving Jochen crazy, asking him about the testing during the seminar in Bernau. Many of those people have never showed up for my classes and never had an interest in my seminar. They are only coming now to take a test.

**Yes, that is what is going on right now...**

Well, I will refuse them! I have some rules. For example, I have never accepted any French people because of respect for my senpai, Tamura Sensei. So I don't test in countries like France or in Italy, where Tada Sensei was involved. I don't want to create any conflicts with my fellow teachers. It makes no sense.

I have to be very careful with tests and again I have to use my own judgment. Unless there is a recommendation by a teacher I know or by the organization, I won't accept people for a test. Not everybody can step in to take a test. A seminar is not for giving a test. A seminar is a seminar and the main purpose is training. I understand that there are some people in unfortunate situations, and they need my help. But they have to show up and attend my seminars two or three times, and then maybe take a test. They can't just come and ask for a test.

**There are countries where there are more than one national aikido federation. What is more, sometimes there is competition between those federations. What is Your opinion about this situation, Sensei?**

That is the biggest problem Aikikai is facing because of the regulations it has made. Those regulations were made about forty years ago. Many organizations that got

recognition thirty, forty years ago don't even exist anymore. That is why I keep telling them that Aikido society has changed in the last 40 years, it is much bigger and many more people are involved. It's a very touchy subject.

Most practitioners don't care about recognition. They are interested in whether they can register their dan with Aikikai. That is all that they want. So the recognition system as it exists causes problems.

### **The system is just one of the problems, but another is people's aggressive mentality...?**

Yes, I didn't want to get into this, but I will. This kind of mentality is characteristic of insecure persons. They use aikido as a tool to get a better position in society. Unfortunately, most of these people don't practice hard on the mat. And unfortunately, because of the nature of aikido I discussed earlier, they can even teach others. Very unfortunate.

As I said before, what is good about aikido is also the problem of aikido. I don't call aikido 'budo' anymore because what makes Aikido so popular is its flexibility, lack of competition, no physical requirements. Anybody can practice. That is a good part of aikido. I'm always happy to see people who have a physical problem that would prevent them from practicing other martial arts enjoying themselves with aikido. That is the beauty of Aikido. If Aikido were pure budo, it wouldn't be so popular. But unfortunately some people use aikido's popularity in the wrong way, to build their own power.

### **Maybe because these problems exist, we should adopt more rules from budo?**

This is a dilemma. Do you remember the Combat Games in 2010 in Beijing? Forget about these combat games! We should avoid that because in Aikido philosophy there is no place for competition! Aikido doesn't create any competitive mind. That is why aikido became so popular. And because certain people are interested in competition they agreed to take part in the Combat Games. I'm talking about the IAF – International Aikido Federation. They ignored others' feelings and attended the Combat Games. But Aikido doesn't belong to IAF members only, aikido belongs to everybody. It was not fair.

**It seems that we are facing a lot of problems. What is the Hombu Dojo and Doshu's point of view on this situation? Are there any plans to change it?**

Doshu doesn't want to see any fighting. But every leader has a responsibility, to do something or listen to others' opinions and advice. Unfortunately, after the passing of Tamura Sensei and Sugano Sensei there are not too many of us left who have wide international experience and can provide a constructive point of view.

**Sensei, if You agree, let's talk about Hombu Dojo. What do You think, what is the Hombu Dojo strategy in terms of Aikido development in the world?**

I don't think Hombu Dojo has any specific picture. They are happy that the number of members has increased. In my opinion, the time of spreading aikido to the world is finished; now we have to focus on quality. That is another suggestion I gave to Aikikai. Aikido is already very popular. For instance, in New York Aikikai, we don't have any advertisements. Of course, I understand that each dojo needs to be advertised, but there should be some limits. Don't focus only on the business part. You have to keep a balance between that and the pureness of aikido. It is very difficult.

**What is the Hombu Dojo point of view regarding the high ranks?**

Well, the ranking system in aikido is another headache. I personally disagree with this system. A teaching certificate is okay, a black belt is okay. But after that, no numbers, no shodan, no nidan, etc. People know who is good and who is bad. The dan ranking system creates a competitive mind, because people judge others – "oh, he is sixth dan, but he is not good, this guy is much better..." It is very difficult to judge in aikido. It all depends on how the examiner interprets aikido. Again the good things about aikido – flexibility and individuality – are also a problem because there is no standard of judging tests. In judo it is very different; if you don't win, you don't get a rank.

**Because judo is a sport.**

Yes, it is a sport, so they allow competition. But aikido denied that, we don't have competitions. OK, assume that we keep the ranking system; that is fine. But let me judge! I don't need to conduct a test to judge my students. I understand that people need that kind of opportunity to show their accomplishment, but it is not necessary for me. I know their quality. I know their daily attitude, commitment, etc. I'm very

sorry to say this, but if you are a good dancer, good performer, you still have a chance to pass a dan test. If a person has a good uke, he or she may pass the test. So this system is not fair. Of course with my eyes I can see the inside, not only the surface, but this is difficult unless you are a professional teacher. But even then it is difficult. Let's say a person I don't know comes to take a test. He is a good performer, he has a good day, and he passes. And then he goes back to his dojo, to his daily bad attitude on the mat. So I ask, what happened there? That is why I'm against this testing system.

I respect my instructors' decisions. Your judgment is more important. I don't have to test your students.

Besides, I don't think that O-Sensei agreed with that ranking system. To him the number doesn't matter. Once when I was giving him a massage he said to me "Mr Yamada, what rank are you?" I answered: "I'm shodan," and he replied: "So today I'm giving you sandan." [laughs] Nobody believed that. I knew his personality and I didn't take it seriously. I just answered "Thank you very much." That is what happened.

### **What a story! Was it often the situation in those days?**

Yes, it is a true story! That was often the situation. There was a teacher and everybody complained that he was promoted to 10th dan. And believe me, I liked him and it was nothing against him but I know technical aspects. He was way below Tohei Sensei or Saito Sensei. But O-Sensei treated him very well, and gave him 10th dan. If O-Sensei gave me 10th dan I wouldn't believe it. I just would say "Thank you" and wouldn't make it public. O-Sensei didn't care about ranks. I think today kendo doesn't have ranks.

### **So, what do You think Sensei about the shihan system?**

I don't know how this system started but again because of this system, Aikikai has a lot of troubles. Shihan is not a title. It is a different way of saying "Sensei" in Japanese, but with a little more respect. So you could be a Shihan to your students. If you were a little bit older, and your students respected you a lot, they would call you a shihan instead of a sensei. That is all! It is not a title. That is why it is the only certificate that Aikikai doesn't charge for. It is free. [laughs]

But again Aikikai has a problem accepting applications. Basically the regulations are: six years after fifth dan you may get a sixth dan, and apply for shihan. That is a qualification. But even though the rules are clear, there are a lot of contradictions. If



I recommend one of my students as a Shihan teacher, they may reject it: “He doesn’t have enough experience...” So I’m asking: How do they know? This is my student. It is not a record in a computer, she or he cannot be judged by a number. It is my recommendation!

A shihan is assessed not only on technical skills, but also on their attitude as a human being. You cannot judge a person by numbers, for example how many years he or she has been practicing.

I know the Aikikai needs some regulations, but they should be flexible. That is my opinion. Whoever I recommend, they shouldn’t reject. That insults me. I know my students. They shouldn’t judge by numbers. Let’s say that you need 4 years of practice for another rank. What does it mean? Some people practice every day for 4 years, and some people only once a week for 4 years. Should we treat them the same way?

**At the end of interview I would like to ask about Europe. After Tamura Sensei and Sugano Sensei passed away, you seem to be more involved in the European affairs. Is this just temporary or do You have a concrete plan for Your activities and presence on the old continent?**

I hope it is temporary. Physically, I cannot do it. But because of my respect for Tamura Sensei, I will try to help as much as I can. I have been spending more time in Europe this year. Maybe I will do one more year, but gradually I have to refuse. I’d like to put more time and more effort into my own organization, Sansuikai,

**Sensei, is there anything else You want to say?**

Well, please stop minding other people’s business! Aikido has many different ideas, different points of view, different translations. And you cannot say who is good and who is bad. Of course, there are unforgivably bad people involved, bad instructors involved. But just ignore them, forget about them. Stay with what you believe, what you are doing. Just don’t fight. I know it is difficult; human beings always seem to be fighting. Just take care of your own students. Your students are your treasure.

**Thank You very much, Sensei.**

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This interview has been published in the San Sui Kai website at the address:

<http://www.aikido-yamada.eu/index.php/sensei/interview/>

The replication of this interview has been authorised by Yoshimitsu Yamada Sensei.