

Meeting Kancho Shioda Gozo

When I reached the Yoshinkan Hombu Dojo that day, a young black belt was standing outside in the parking lot. He seemed in a good mood and greeted me in English with: "Hello, how are you? My name is Shioda. What's your name? Where are you from?" He was eager to speak English with a gaijin. As it turned out, I was talking to Yasuhisa Shioda, the youngest of Kancho Sensei's three sons. He was planning to go to England in a year or two to teach Aikido and was learning English and trying to socialize with non-Japanese. Unlike the other instructors, he was a casual and easygoing type of person. When he happened to ask me about my plans for the future, I could not help telling him the truth.

"I came to Japan just to study with Kancho Sensei," I explained. "I love Aikido and would like to stay a long time and master the art. Unfortunately, all my money is gone and I have to go back home."

I must have looked really hopeless, since he seemed concerned and after a brief hesitation, asked me to follow him. Once inside the dojo, he knocked on a door and took me directly into his father's room. Kancho Sensei's office had a big desk in a corner, a white sofa and three armchairs. A small table sat in the middle. In front of me I could see a framed picture of Ueshiba Sensei, the founder of Aikido; a picture of a big hawk and a majestic-looking deer head trophy fixed on the wall behind Sensei. Shioda Gozo Sensei was seated in an armchair when we came in. His son probably introduced me to him since he stood up, shook my hand, smiled and greeted me in English saying, "How are you?" I noticed that even though I was pretty small, I was a full head taller than he was and my shoulders were much larger than

his. His son continued to talk to him while he went back to his seat. After what seemed like a long time to me, Kancho Sensei stood up again, looked me straight in the eyes, asked his son to translate and said: "Is it true that you love Aikido and that you came so far just to study it?" His words went straight to my heart.

"Oh yes, I do love Aikido and my only purpose is to study Aikido with you. I am very sad to have to leave because I spent all my money."

"Well," Kancho said to me, "if you are courageous, if you are not afraid of hard work and you really love Aikido, I will give you a chance. You can stay here starting today. You will sleep in the dojo, get up early in the morning to help with cleaning and other dojo chores, train in all the classes and pay a small fee for your tuition and use of the dojo facilities such as electricity and water and so on. We will test you for three months and see if you can stay longer and maybe become a true uchideshi!"

I could not believe my ears! I thanked him with all of my heart and assured him that I would do my best to deserve his trust. I was stunned by the fact that the course of my life could change so dramatically in just a few minutes.

Taking a deep breath, I followed Yasuhisa-san into the main office next door where all the uchideshi and dojo staff were. He explained that Kancho Sensei had given me permission to stay at the dojo. In the office, there was a group of four desks facing each other. Further down at a strategic spot, facing the main entrance to the corridor and one step from Kancho Sensei's office door was the senior, and chief instructor, Takeno Shihan. To the right of him and in hierarchical order was an instructor by the name of Chida, whom I had noticed earlier had the bearing of a Buddhist priest, and next to him a tall

instructor named Sakurai. Facing these two instructors were Muguruza, the French instructor, and Nakano, a former Oberlin University Aikido club student. In the back corner was an older man in a suit. I learned later that he had retired from the police and was now taking care of all dojo administration matters. It was he who set up the amount I would have to pay to stay at the dojo. “You will pay ¥20,000 every month and later on, according to how you are doing, we will revise this amount,” he said.

I still thought that was quite expensive, but after a quick calculation I realized that I would have no travel expenses and that this sum would be only a quarter of what I paid last month for my rent and training fees combined. I thanked him and asked whether I could move in the next day and pay at that time. I also thanked Yasuhisa-san for his help and he asked Muguruza to take good care of me.

I was relieved when we left the office. There was an undefinable and heavy kind of ambiance in there. Everybody was relaxed and smiling, but it felt like anything could happen without notice and at any moment. It was like some kind of crackling energy ready to explode. I had never felt such pressure before.

Muguruza took me to what would turn out to be my room and home for the next five years. In front of the main office door in the corridor, a sliding Japanese paper screen revealed a large room with a piece of carpet covering the same green mats that were covering the floor of the dojo. Facing the door were sliding windows and on another wall were built-in cupboards full of futons and blankets. Dogis were hanging all over the place, just as they were in the training space of the dojo. Muguruza told me that I could use the small desk close to his along with one of the metal lockers to store my clothes. I was going to

share the room with him until somebody else joined. The room reminded me of my army dormitory except that there were no beds. “It can’t be much worse than my army life in Reunion,” I thought.



The sleeping area for the uchideshi.

I took a quick tour of the first floor of the Hombu Dojo building. Another sliding paper panel took us to an adjacent room, similarly arranged but smaller in size. This was the home of Sakurai and Nakano. Adjacent to this was another similar room — the quarters of Chida Sensei, the senior uchideshi. Takeno Sensei, who was married, left the dojo by 10:00 p.m. every night to go home. He returned every morning by 9:00 a.m. or so.

We left the sleeping area on the left side of the corridor, passed the two offices on the right, the instructors’ and administration office and

Kancho Sensei's office, then two washrooms. One, I learned, was exclusively reserved for Kancho Sensei, the second was for the dojo personnel, which included me. The Japanese-style bathroom was next, followed by the kitchen, where I was told I could use a small part of the fridge. At the very end of the corridor was a vast dining room with a big rectangular table with chairs as well as a television set. There was glass all around letting in a lot of sunlight. Muguruza told me that on a nice day in the morning we could see Mount Fuji from there.

I excused myself from training on that day. I could not wait to tell Chiyo the great news, and I wanted to be early at Jun's place so that I could talk to him and try to get him to forgive me for leaving with such short notice. As expected, I could see that Chiyo was very happy for me. She knew what it meant for me to stay and fulfill my dream, and she wholeheartedly congratulated me. Jun was cooking when I reached his room. He seemed in a good mood and asked me whether I wanted to share his dinner, consisting of some fried rice with miso soup and some strange-looking vegetables. I was hungry, as usual, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to fill him in on my plans. I offered to help wash the dishes and set up his small table. I tried to control my hunger and eat slowly, but Jun's food was so good. "I am getting worried about you," he suddenly said. "You never cook and I have never seen you eat anything since you arrived here. You are going to be sick. Eat everything today!" This made me feel more uncomfortable. Jun was not the kind of uncaring person I had thought he was. He had a heart, but simply did not show his emotions to me until now.

I started to tell him how appreciative I was that he kindly let me stay at his apartment. I tried to explain to him how important it was for me to stay in Japan in order to study Aikido but that my limited budget

would not let me stay long. When I told him of the proposition made to me to stay at the dojo, I felt that he was annoyed and I offered to pay one-month's rent so that he would have another month to find somebody to replace me. The next day when I gathered my meagre belongings and went to say goodbye, Jun said he would quickly find somebody to replace me and handed back half of the money I had given him the night before. "You will need it," he said. "Good luck and keep in touch." I would never see him again.

Life at the Yoshinkan Hombu Dojo

The morning train was busy. I could hardly get on with my luggage and an employee from the station had to push me hard to allow the door to close. It was difficult to move even one finger and I could not see outside to look for the name of the station. At each stop the crowd wanting to get off would push forward and spill out onto the platform taking everybody standing before them along for the ride. Soon afterwards, the crowd wanting to get on would push even harder on their way in. It was a human sea moving with the tides at each train stop. I was particularly worried about one tiny old lady in a kimono — even though no expression appeared on her face, I was sure she could hardly breathe. "Daijobu desu ka?" ("Are you all right?") I asked. I was happy that I would not have to commute any more.

I arrived at the dojo on time for the 10:00 a.m. class. Muguruza took me to Takeno Sensei, the chief instructor. He humbly asked permission for me to train and stay at the dojo to pursue my Aikido