

CHAPTER 4

BE YOUR BEST IN EVERY POSSIBLE SITUATION

There is a fine line between martial arts and sports that I would like to point out here. In the case of sports, competitions, and the like, when a tournament is drawing near the competitors work hard so that they are in their best physical condition. However, in a martial art like Aikido, it doesn't matter if you are feeling the effects of a little *sake* or if you are just not feeling well. When it comes down to the crunch, you have to be in your best shape no matter when or where. Excuses such as "I'm feeling under the weather" are not acceptable in the martial arts. By way of example, let me give you a story about the esteemed Ueshiba Sensei which I find truly impressive.

I believe it was 1939, when Admiral Takeshita Isamu¹⁵ was the president of the Ueshiba Dojo. In this capacity, Admiral Takeshita invited Sensei to give a demonstration at the Saineikan¹⁶ before the Imperial Family. Initially, Sensei declined saying: "In Aikido, victory or defeat is decided in an instant. The opponent wouldn't be able to get up to come at you a

second time. If he does, then the whole thing is fake. I cannot show such false techniques to the Imperial Family.” Admiral Takeshita strongly urged Sensei to accept, however, and in the end Sensei just couldn’t say no. He ended up going to the Saineikan.

Sensei’s best student at the time, Mr. Yukawa (now deceased), and I were the two who accompanied him on this occasion. To complicate matters, at the time of the demonstration Sensei had come down with a severe case of jaundice and had spent the 10 days prior to the demonstration only drinking water. He had barely eaten anything and he was in such a weakened state at the time that he could hardly move. He needed help from the two of us to put on his *kimono* and he had to lean on our shoulders just to walk. Mr. Yukawa and I exchanged worried glances, wondering whether Sensei would really be able to go on with the demonstration in his condition. He just barely managed to get into the car which came to take him to the Saineikan. We had to help him get out of the car when we arrived, and we had to support him as he walked. After coming along a passageway, we finally arrived at the entrance to the *dojo* and as soon as Sensei could make out the figures of the Imperial Family, his eyes immediately sparkled piercingly. From that moment onwards, Sensei underwent a complete transformation. He promptly entered the *dojo* in total control.

Once the introductions were politely made, it was finally time for the demonstration to begin. The entire demonstration was scheduled to take 40 minutes. Mr. Yukawa was to take Sensei’s *uke* for the first 20 minutes, and I was to take the last 20 minutes.

Because he was concerned about Sensei's physical state, Mr. Yukawa attacked with a little less vigor than he usually employed. But Sensei's energy and vitality had reached their peak. In the blink of an eye, Mr. Yukawa's body was flying through the air. He ended up crouched on the *tatami* mat, unable to move. Without thinking I rushed up to him and, looking him over, I could see that his arm was broken. And so it was that I had the difficult task of being thrown by Sensei for the full 40 minutes!

Rather than holding back, I attacked Sensei with everything I could muster. I would go flying through the air, hit the *tatami* mat, get up right away and charge at him again. Sensei would slam me to the mat



and pin me and then as soon as he let me free I would get up right away and attack him again. And again I would be sent flying. Sensei's spirit

was extremely intense, and through pure desperation I managed one way or another to take his *uke* for 40 minutes. Afterwards, I developed an extremely high fever and was forced to take a week or so off training to recuperate.

I was absolutely amazed at what appeared to be an incredible change in Ueshiba Sensei between the time prior to his demonstration and during it. This was a good lesson for me — a true martial artist is always ready. As I have shown above, if there is an emergency, martial artists can immediately bring themselves to their best possible condition regardless of how poor their health is at the time.

In this example, we can see the difference between the intense state of readiness of martial arts compared with that of sports and competitions. The venerable Ueshiba Sensei used to always say to us, “I will be at my strongest when I breathe my last breath.” And to be sure, I witnessed this first-hand when I went to visit Sensei in the hospital shortly before he passed away. At his bedside, I could see that he had spoken the truth.

Despite the severity of his illness, Sensei insisted on going to the bathroom by himself. When four of his students, who knew that his last moments were upon him, tried to hold down both of his emaciated arms to stop him as he appeared to be getting up, he threw them all aside in a flash. In fact, he was able to generate enough power to send all four of these strong and robust students flying into the rear garden! Ueshiba Sensei was a true martial artist right to the end.

AROUND THE END OF THE WAR

One day in August, we got news that something big had happened in Japan. It was reported that the Americans had dropped a special bomb on Hiroshima and that several hundred thousand people had been killed in an instant. As a result, the reports said, Japan would soon surrender, reluctantly. There was to be an unprecedented radio broadcast from the Emperor on Aug. 15. Finally, on Aug. 15, Japan surrendered unconditionally. We just could not imagine that Japan would lose the war. We were filled with a sense of uneasiness, not sure what to believe.

“Oh, this is bad,” we thought. “The enemy will be landing soon . . . what are we going to do?”

Before long, we were ordered to assemble by Aug. 25 in Malimpung and Bantaeng, both locations in the center of Celebes Island. This area was referred to as “Death Hill” during the days of Dutch rule. We were under strict orders not to oppose the occupation forces in any way and were strongly warned not to offer any resistance whatsoever, no matter what the circumstances.

Hurriedly we all started packing our belongings. I had a number of things from my days in Borneo — 21 suits, 25 pairs of shoes, seven diamonds, various precious metals and ornaments made of pure gold. Since all of my daily chores were done for me by the native who had accompanied me from Borneo — who had the Japanese name Yokichi — he put all of my things in order for me. He was truly a trustworthy

and loyal worker and he was devoted to me. As a show of gratitude I gave him a diamond as well as a gold watch and about 500,000 Japanese *yen*. Then, I bid him farewell.

He refused to leave, however, and said that he wanted to come along with me, come what may. He was quite attached to me and, regardless of the costs involved, he was selflessly willing to cross national and ethnic boundaries. I was deeply moved by the sincerity of his feelings. Somehow I was able to calm him and make him understand the situation. He was such a big help.

The Australian Army occupied Makassar. Most of the soldiers were gruff and full of tattoos. We took a boat to Pare-Pare and then went by truck to Malimpung. It was a hot day on Aug. 25, 1945, and I really felt the sense of defeat closing in on me.

Before we boarded the ship there was to be a baggage inspection, so I was prepared for this to happen. However, it was anything but an inspection. Rather, without a word of warning, they suddenly took away two of my trunks. There was nothing I could do but look on in surprise. I could not complain about it. After that, even the luggage I was carrying was taken away. I lost everything I had. Strangely enough, the only thing they left me was the bag I had with me when I left Japan — it contained one single safety razor.

The diamonds, the 21 suits, the gold, everything was taken from me. I was able to save a few open-necked shirts, some underwear and three pairs of shoes since I had put them in a different backpack. But that

was it. There were some people there who had all sorts of tricks, however, and were able to hide many of their things.

We were kept in two internment camps. One was in Bantaeng District and was mainly for navy personnel; the other was in the Malimpung area and was for the army, government officials and business people.

The area was known as “Death Hill” because it is a barren place with extremely high levels of lime in the soil. It is completely unsuited to agricultural production or the growth of any vegetation.

Luckily, however, the prisoners in the camp included a number of agricultural engineers, technical officers and scientists who had been carefully selected in Japan. They were able to improve the soil conditions enough to start growing crops. At first, they grew sugar cane and sweet potatoes. Their concern was to develop a level of self-sufficiency for the prisoners in the internment camp since we really had no way of knowing how long it would be before we returned to Japan — it might be two years from now or perhaps even three. Also, one good thing was that the army had a large supply of rice. The plan was to put this in storage and make it last as long as possible, eating only a little at a time.

Branch Director Iwata and I had experience collecting vegetables so in the camp he was assigned the task of production leader and I was ordered to be his assistant. Through the blood and sweat of the agricultural engineers the sugarcane and sweet potatoes grew quickly in the barren soil. Encouraged by their own success, the engineers were

optimistic. They even tried to grow corn! I was both amazed and proud of the high level of Japanese technical knowledge that I saw with my own eyes.

RETURNING TO JAPAN

With one problem solved it was on to the next. Once the locals found out that Japan had lost the war, their attitude toward us became quite aggressive. They would come at night to loot the internment camp so we organized a vigilante group and decided to conduct night patrols. The problem was that the locals had been trained on how to conduct nocturnal assaults by the Japanese army so they would take advantage of the moonless night and employ ingenious tactics. They attacked over and over again, without warning.

Of course, not all of the locals were bad. There were quite a few who were friendly toward the Japanese. There were those who would barter with us, exchanging food for our pieces of cloth. The occupying army strictly prohibited any exchange of goods whatsoever with the locals, but there were quite a few who, out of necessity, would come out on moonless nights to trade food for various things. As a result, I saw many people eating good quality food like butter, cheese, coffee and milk, which could not be obtained in the camp.

And so, 1945 came to an end and 1946 began. There was a sense that our lives had gradually got back on track and we were finally starting to get used to life as prisoners of war.

There was not much we could do about our diet, however. It provided poor nutrition and so the number of people who suffered from tropical ulcers steadily increased. I was no exception. I was afflicted with ulcers and I was at my wit's end on what to do with them. The ulcers would be itchy at first. If you scratched them, they would become infected and full of pus. In the end, they would be extremely painful and if they got really severe, they would result in a fever. While there was a top-notch Japanese doctor in the internment camp, without medication it was extremely difficult to recover from the fever.

This whole situation was really the result of our poor food supply so the basic solution was to improve our diet. In reality, however, changing our diet was extremely difficult. And yet, somehow or other, by putting our heads together, we were able to come up with a solution and bring some measure of comfort to our lives in the camp.

Some time around the middle of April, 1946, talk that we would soon be returning to Japan seemed to spring out of nowhere. The entire camp was buzzing. Everyone was full of anticipation. "When? When?" was all they wanted to know. Then, at the beginning of May, we heard formally that we would be returning to Japan aboard a U.S. Liberty Class vessel. We were jumping for joy as we set out to make preparations to return home. Even my dreams were filled with the return to Japan.

Our superiors again issued strict orders to us. Specifically, if even one person was caught with contraband goods, the entire group would not

be permitted to return. So we took special care to inspect our baggage closely and make sure that everyone could return to Japan safely.

Around May 10, 1946, we left Pare-Pare on a U.S. ship headed straight for Japan. There was absolutely no inspection of our personal belongings so there were many people who complained because they left things behind that they now regretted leaving. Even so, this was nothing compared with the joy we felt at returning to Japan.

The voyage home was smooth and uneventful. The Liberty Class ship was similar to a freighter, with almost no passenger cabins so everyone slept scattered about on the floor below deck.

On May 23, we finally arrived in Nagoya Harbor. Everyone was ecstatic! "Oh! It's Japan! It's Japan!" we yelled at the top of our lungs. We all had DDT sprayed over our heads until we were all white. Then we went ashore. Here too, I keenly felt the sorrow of being a prisoner of war.

I had experienced many things in my life up to this point, and I earnestly believed that my safe return home was the result of divine intervention. And so, resolved to embrace the remainder of my life, regardless of what it had in store for me, I stepped firmly back onto Japanese soil.