



Philip Smith Sensei Interview .

Harper Adams Agricultural College, UKA Summer School, August 2004.

Conducted by Mark Walsh.



Philip Smith, 6th dan Hombu Shidoin, is one of the senior instructors of the United Kingdom Aikikai. He teaches regularly at Renshinkan in the West Midlands, UKA national courses and at the annual Summer School. He is unusual in his early age of starting training, and wide travels with Aikido.

When and where did you start aikido?



I joined the Aikikai of Great Britain on 5th May 1968! The AGB started in 1966. I was a little boy: 9 I think. My dad [W Smith *Shihan*] and I used to go to a class in Birmingham run by Mr Martin Ryan. A few months later we stated the dojo in Old Hill, just over the road from where we are now.

The Head of the AGB was Chiba Sensei*?



I'd met him, but I'd never trained with him until 1970 when he came and did a junior course. That was absolutely incredible, he was one of the best junior instructors I've ever come across. It was fantastic all weekend, a really good introduction to it.

Chiba Sensei has a fearsome reputation?

Well yes. I think I had the best of it, perhaps because I was younger. He stopped in with Dad quite a lot and I used to sit and talk to him. I'm not sure if he'd mind me saying... I saw the other side of him, the compassionate and gentle side, if that's the right phrase: the human side. And there are lots of funny stories...[smiles]

He talked about aikido and O'Sensei a lot. His life as a *deshi** and how hard it was, and about farming. Also about Hombu, but in fact when he left Japan the new Hombu hadn't been built and O'Sensei was still alive. It was interesting.



Was the Training very different at that time?

When Chiba Sensei came to us he was 5th dan and obviously light years ahead of us, but looking back on it now it was pretty crude, our aikido in particular. It was very crash, bang, wallop. But I guess that's the progression. Chiba Sensei's training was very, very intense. There were never any half measures, even to me as a junior. He always took you to your limit, and sometimes beyond what *you* thought was your limit. But he always seemed to know when to stop. Yeah, he was hard.



Later you were a university student in Leeds?

The club was well established by Paul Kitchen, Ken Marsden* and some other original members. Paul and I were *Shodan*, Ken was first *kyu* but becoming the mainstay at that time as Paul had other commitments. We had some good times. I was there for two years; I dropped out of University but stayed with aikido [laughs].



You helped start the Bradford dojo too?



Well it was Ken's idea. He had just done some work as a joiner on the new Richard Dunn* Sports centre, so that's where we set it up. We'd alternate it between us.

You were also a bouncer in Leeds?

Yes, to pay the bills. I was 18/19. It was handy I suppose in some ways; it showed me what it's really about I guess, proved to me aikido worked, but that's about it. It was a job. What I didn't realise when I joined the nightclub is that there had been a lot of trouble and that's why they were hiring people with boxing or martial arts backgrounds. It was apparently a big Saturday night target, so it was interesting.



You have also travelled with your Aikido quite widely?

To be honest it was a way of getting cheap accommodation wherever I was [laughs]. But I have to say that the *Shihan* that I met were all really fantastic hosts. I went to America and stayed with Yamada *Sensei** several times. I had a Summer Camp job an hour and a half away. I'd do two weeks work then a get a week off and go to New York: it was really good. I also stayed a week on the way to Niagara with Kanai *Sensei**. He was very kind to me, I was very sad when he died actually.



I travelled quite a lot in Europe. I never stayed with Tamura *Sensei*, as he didn't have his own dojo until quite recently: he just travelled and taught. I stayed with Asai* I in Germany and with Tissier *Sensei** in France, who had just come back from Japan. For a period of weeks not months you understand. Asai *Sensei* had been in Dusseldorf since 1964 I think, he was well established. Both different, but impressive of course.



Have you noticed differences in the Aikido in different countries aside for the different styles of the teachers?

Yes. The most successful in terms of expansion would be Tamura *Sensei*, in part because of his demeanour, and the way he worked with the French Judo Association initially. It really expanded. When you go see him, there are 400-500 people on the mat. He has really big courses. He's friendly, open, a nice character; but a devastating martial artist!

You're a second-generation Aikido teacher. One of only two I know of in this country. *



Who's the other one?

Sensei Alex Megan, BAF 4th dan, in Southampton. Nice bloke.

Oh yes, I know Alex.

Is there anything you would like to say about being a second-generation teacher?

Well I'm not sure... I do aikido because I like aikido, that's it. There was never any expectations or push on me to do it. I wasn't groomed to take over, and I'm not going to. There's no difference between the UKA *Shidoins* in that sense; we're all equal. I think people look from and the outside and think...well, you see it in other associations where a family member is promoted above others. We've never done that and I wouldn't be comfortable with that. I do it for my own reasons; I love it. You get to a point when you start teaching and it goes on from there.



What are some of your reasons for continuing to do Aikido after 35 years of practice?

I'm not happy when I don't do it; I get very bad tempered. A lot of it is habit I guess, but there's still so much to find out about what makes aikido tick. You see people like Doshu*,



Kobyashi*, Tamura, Chiba...some of these people I've known for years and I still can't get my head around what they do. That's part of the attraction really, there's always something new to learn.

How do you think Aikido affected you as a person growing up?

I think I'm more relaxed than I would be otherwise. We have a family trait to get quite aggressive I suppose [laughs] and it's helped me with that. But it's an impossible question to answer as I started when I was so young, so I don't know.



We could get twins and do an experiment! Keeping with the theme, you've taught children as well at Renshinkan?

Yes.

What are some of the differences between teaching children and adults?

Some people say children are harder to teach, but I don't think they are really. You've just got to get into their mind-set a bit and make it fun, which is easy as most of the time Aikido is fun for me. I just play with it really. I asked Shibata Sensei* about this as he used to take the children's class at Hombu, and he said we just play, but we play *at ikkyo*. So I try and follow that, make it into a structured game. "Who can show me what it is?" things like that.



Do you think there are any differences between aikidoka who started as children, like yourself and Cath Davies*, and aikidoka who started later?



There are differences. Your body's still developing and learning, but you don't have to put aside anything you've learnt before like Karate or Judo, you're not programmed to that path, so in that sense it's easier. In some ways it's harder though as you're not taken seriously. When I began many instructors didn't take children seriously at all, perhaps resented teaching juniors, some still do. Consequently you either got it or you didn't, there was no nurturing. It's different with Cath as I know her original instructor, but some people really didn't want to teach juniors.

Change of track now: You are a coach tutor for the BAB*?

Yes. Alan Roberts* is the UKA's BAB representative though. I teach coaching skills to aikido instructors from different organisations in the UK. The structure of coaching is very similar to any other sports coaching programme. I'm a big fan as one of the issues we had when we started, is we didn't have these basic skills. We were told teach, and we didn't have any choice in the matter.



These skills are separate from aikido technique as such?

Yes, at the moment we don't judge the aikido itself, but I would like to. One of the problems we have in aikido the world over, is that there are a lot of people out there whose standard is very poor. Because of political reasons we're not allowed to judge the standard of aikido, but I'm hoping that'll change. It'll have to change. There will have to be some assessment of a person's competence in aikido.



How would you make allowance for the different styles of Aikido, such as Ki, Tomiki, Aikikai?

I could judge competence of traditional aikido, but for instance how I'd see it working, is that lets say I took a coaching course for Yoshinkan instructors. I'd teach the coaching skills, but have a Yoshinkan instructor such as Tony Yates* or Dave Rubens* present to assess the aikido. If Tony and Dave say they're good enough, then they are; it's easy if you know the instructors. The problem as I see it, is with small independent organisations.





Now, that's not to say that just because they're independent the standard is going to be poorer, but it is the case a lot of the time. With some people you can accept their word they're competent and that's it, but with others you would have to make a judgement.

I've trained with Tomiki people, Ki people, Yoshinkan, many styles other than my own, and good aikido's good aikido, there's really no difference. For instance if you used the example of Yamaguchi* *Sensei*, his "ki" aikido was stronger than most Ki [society] instructors. On the other hand, within the Aikikai there was also Arikawa *Sensei**. Yamaguchi was very soft and you hardly felt any force from him; Arikawa was exactly the opposite: it was like a train hitting you. But they were both still aikido; they were fantastic and obviously I'm not judging *their* competence!



The BAB has come under criticism. What are its good and bad points?

Bad points first. Let's get them out of the way: I think they haven't been strong enough over the years. I think they tried to downplay the Japanese connection too much. With hindsight it would have been better, if at least initially, the BAB executive board had been made up of people from the four recognised *hombu dojos*: Aikikai, Yoshinkan, Shodokan (Tomiki) and Ki, (Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido); and that would have been enough. But the way it was structured initially meant that everybody had an equal voice [regardless of the size and background of an association] and certainly the first chairman was a little weak. The present chairman is quite a strong character who I've known for a while before he was chairman, and I think he'll be fair, but quite positive. Rather than the past chair who tried to please everybody too much.



We do need regulation of teaching, and there should be someone who if you want to do aikido regardless of style, that you can contact for information. The BAB does bring the aikido community together, and I wouldn't have had perhaps the opportunity to train in the other styles without that contact. Now I've got good friends in all of them, so that probably outweighs the bad.



We've talked about negative transfer*, are there any teaching or training methods that traditional Aikido can learn from, that you know as a sports science teacher?

Lots! I think it's one of the problems with Japanese martial arts in general. When I had my physio practice I did some work for a Wado Ryu Karate organisation; one of the things they had in common with us and all traditional martial arts, is that the teaching method wasn't that good. I'm being critical, but not in a disrespectful way I hope. The teaching method is great if you're a live in student and you're doing it every day, that's exactly what you want, but we're not. The adaptation hasn't been that great, and instead of working on ways to develop skill, it's done by repetition. Which is fine if you're a professional [martial artist] and you have the time. If you look at Swimmers, they do 6000m a week before they go to the Olympics, but they're full time, and most of us aren't. But they're good methods of coaching that can accelerate that process...though saying that, there's no substitute for experience.



Any techniques specifically?

Traditionally aikido is just taught by demonstration and copying, but you can break the technique down and *explain* to people the point you're trying to make. The older *Shihan* in particular, though it's changing a little now, if they wanted to make a point they'd do the whole technique every time. So you had to just copy and copy, until eventually you picked up what they wanted.



You are a trained physiotherapist. How has your experience in this area influenced your aikido?

Well it's probably the other way around to be honest. Aikido was probably why I chose to do physiotherapy initially as I got interested in how the body works.





So as an aikidoka, how is your physiotherapy different from other physiotherapists?

In my time in private practice I worked a lot with athletes from different disciplines and my approach was slightly different from other physios. It was more of an attitude thing, to give one example: I would always come from the approach of, "Ok, this guy's come to see me because he's injured and his priority is performing again". Whereas conventionally you're taught that the priority is getting the injury right. The difference would be, of course you want to get the injury right, but you get it right to a time scale. You may have to alter things around a bit so that they can compete, and that comes from doing aikido where you want to train and train through everything. So I can relate to that more. I've never had a serious athlete say to me, "How long will it take to get better?" I've always had them saying, "How long before I can compete again?" or, "I've got a race next week and I need to do it". That's the difference.



You mentioned before about Yamaguchi Sensei and Arikawa Sensei. You've previously called this distinction abstract and martial Aikido?

That's one terminology you can use that people can relate to. But if you contrast it in that way you are missing a big point, Yamaguchi one could consider an abstract style, you were never sure which technique he wanted you to do, as he'd adjust the technique according to the feeling he got from his uke. So he would do 7,8 or 9 techniques while he was demonstrating. People would look at each other and say, "What are we doing?" and he'd say, "*Irimi nage*," or whatever. But because his movement and contact was so good he was extremely martial. If you took ukemi for him you couldn't stand up really. He was never in front of you and you were never on balance.



Similar to the Endo Shihan's* aikido that Cath Davies is studying?

Yes I think so, but I've never trained with Endo Sensei as when he came down here to teach I couldn't train.

Do you have a particular aikido philosophy, or a way of thinking about it?

No [laughs]. You go through phases and it changes. The basis of my approach, all the time, is that it's a martial art and that it. It doesn't mean that I do it for self defence or break people's arms with it, but you have to come from that foundation. First and foremost it's a martial art. Chiba Sensei said to me once, "True compassion is being able to destroy somebody but not doing it", and I guess that pretty much sums up my aikido philosophy. Aikido gives you the ability to devastate but you don't do it, as you want to help people.



Is there anything you would like to mention about the technical side of aikido; important techniques or important aspects of training?

A difficult question to answer. I see three fundamental techniques, *ikkyo*, *shihō nage* and *irimi nage*. They're the corner stones for all the others, though other people might see it differently. I think one of the great beauties of the UKA is that we have a number of senior people who have all been doing aikido a long time, and all do it differently. It's great, and if you look at it properly it opens your eyes. There's no fixed way of doing it. That's why I think it's different from other martial arts; lets take laido, which I do as well. In many ways it's quite rigid in it's form, whereas with aikido as we said before, two different people can have two completely different styles: that's just not possible elsewhere.



Has your laido been an influence on your aikido?

Yeah, that reminds me of a funny story. I began laido with Chiba Sensei in about 1972 I think, and when he went back to Japan I carried on. Then he came to visit one year and he took me to one side and said, "I think your laido is having a really negative effect on your aikido", so I thought about this and worked at it. About two years later, he said, "Are you



doing as much laido?" I said, "Not so much *Sensei*, because of what you said." He said, "You should do more as it's having a very positive effect on your aikido!" I guess it changes as your understanding of one thing develops. I don't know what laido brings to my aikido; again, I do it because I like it. Aikido is something I have to do, I don't know what I'd do without it, but laido is my hobby. So that's how I approach it. I teach a class, but that was something I struggled with. I didn't with aikido, I was just one of the highest grades around so I did it. When I got my Shodan there weren't many around, so you were looked at as a teacher and expected to. But with laido it was different, as I feel I'm not good enough to teach yet and I do it for my own reasons.



The anecdote about Chiba *Sensei* and laido's effect on your aikido, seems quite indicative of what I've heard about studying under some of the *Shihan*. Can it be quite frustrating?

It can be very frustrating! And they're all frustrating in their own way [laughs]. They'll say something to you, and I'm sure the idea is to provoke thought, but at the time you don't see that. I remember Kanetsuka *Sensei** once said, "Why can't you do it?" and I said, "I can do it up here in my head, I just can't do it." "Why not?" he asked, and of course I couldn't answer him. But I think the point he was trying to make, was that if you don't get too attached to what's going on around you, but just do at as your thinking about it, then it probably will happen.



They're lots of instances like that. But I think as well no matter how much we ignore it or brush it under the carpet, there are a lot of cultural differences as well in the approach. Even the language barrier can be a problem, although you look at people like Yamada *Sensei* and Chiba *Sensei*, they've been in English speaking countries longer than they've been in Japan; but there's still a difference.



Where is that leading in terms of the future of the UKA or British Aikido? The generation after yourself may not have Japanese teachers, or perhaps just for a week or two a year.

Well it's happening already. Mark Vanes is a student I've had for over twenty years. It's a frightening thought really! He wouldn't say that his teacher was Chiba *Sensei*; it's a humbling thought. So it's up to us to try and create a British aikido identity, without losing the essence of what it is. That's our struggle: our mission if you like. I think we have to create a British aikido. That's not to say we have to get rid of the Japanese influence, we have to use that influence as much as possible, and even make it stronger if we can. But it will be different.



Aikido as practiced now is different from aikido that O'Sensei practised 50 years ago; it's a different style. Aikido evolves: I saw Chiba *Sensei*'s aikido evolve and change. People change because they're thinking about what they're doing. There are a lot of people in the aikido world who want aikido not to change, but I strongly feel that that is a betrayal of O'Sensei, as he created a living evolving art. If he didn't he would have made kata, and said, "Left foot here, right foot there." but he didn't. I strongly feel that if Aikido doesn't evolve then we betray him. Perhaps it's a strong word but that's how I feel.



To finish, tell me something about yourself that has nothing to do with aikido?

There's very little about me that has nothing to do with aikido! It's such a big part of me [laughs]. No, I do have an outside life and I think that's really important. I was told O'Sensei said that you shouldn't be a professional aikidoka as you should see another side of life. I have my work and family, a wife and three great children. We go to France quite often, as we have a place there; I should be there now really! I like to go out and meet people, but I have to say the vast majority of my life is Aikido.



Anything at all you'd like to add about Aikido?



There's a lot of talk about the history of aikido in Britain at the moment, as next year is the 50th anniversary of Kenshiro Abbe's* visit, when he first introduced Aikido. But a lot of people have built up their own part. I think my father's contribution to aikido is overlooked, and overlooked deliberately by a lot of people. When he first joined Chiba *Sensei*, it was under opposition from the people he trained with at the time. He made a decision and made it for aikido reasons and that was something that has created the aikido we see in the UKA today. The people he was with didn't want anything to do with Chiba *Sensei* or the Aikikai. We see it now, people fall out, and leave. He didn't do that, but he also managed to retain the links and the friendships. His contribution has been sadly unrecognised in some aikido quarters because they don't want to acknowledge that anyone else contributed to aikido. There are people who would wish him out of history and only mention Chiba *Sensei* in passing. For ten years Chiba *Sensei* was a huge influence and still is! Let's be honest, I still think of him as my teacher and a friend. I saw him two weeks ago and it was really good to see him. But you can't deny that his legacy for aikido in Britain is immense, and second only to that, really on a par with that, is Dad's influence as well.



Thank you very much.

That's ok.





Notes.

*"Desh": an *uchi deshi*, or "inside door" student. A student of martial arts who lives with their teacher, in this case O'Sensei, assisting them in daily life and practising intensely.

*Ken Marsden is now a 5th *dan* BAF *Shidoin*, whom the interviewer owes a debt of thanks for introducing him to Aikido at the same university. Cheers Ken.

*Kazuo Chiba *Sensei*, 8th *dan Shihan*, currently head of the USAF western region based in San Diego. Instructed for 10 years in the UK, and still visits regularly.

*Richard Dunn was a famous local boxer who fought Mohamed Ali.

*Yoshimitsu Yamada *Sensei*, 8th *dan Shihan*, Head of the New York Aikikai.

*[Mitsunari](#) Kanai *Sensei*, 8th *dan Shihan*, Previously head of the Boston Aikikai, died 2004.

*Katsuaki Asai *Sensei*, 8th *dan Shihan*, head of the German Aikikai.

*Christian Tissier *Sensei*, 7th *dan Shihan*, student of Yamaguchi *Sensei* amongst others, head of a large French aikido organisation.

*The interviewer has since learnt of more since this time, and even one "aikido grandson".

*Yukimitsu Kobayashi *Sensei*, 6th *dan*, Hombu *Shihan*, a recent UKA Summer School visiting teacher.

*Cath Davies *Sensei*, 5th *dan* UKA *Shidoin*, began training aged 13, now teaches at Ren Bu Kan in Solihull, West Midlands.

*British Aikido Board. The Sports England governing body for aikido in the UK. An "umbrella" organisation, covering the majority of aikido organisations and clubs in the UK.

*Alan Roberts *Sensei*, 5th *dan Shidoin*, UKA General Secretary.

*Antony Yates *Sensei*, 6th *dan* Yoshinkan instructor, Principal Coach of the British Aikido Yoshinkai.

*David Rubens *Sensei*, head of the Meidokan, Yoshinkan Aikido Association.

*Seigo Yamaguchi *Sensei*, 1924-1996, 8th *dan* Aikikai Hombu *Shihan*, noted for subtle technique.

*Sadateru Arikawa *Sensei*, 9th *dan* Aikikai Hombu *Shihan*,, deceased. Noted for physical, powerful technique.

*Negative transfer is the term used in sports science to cover difficulties encountered in learning a new skill, caused by knowledge of another skill. For instance, learning aikido being more difficult if your body already knows Judo or Karate.

*Seishiro Endo *Sensei*, 8th *dan* Aikikai *Shihan* noted for subtle technique.

*Minoru Kanetsuka *Sensei* 7th *dan Shihan*, technical advisor of the BAF. Philip Smith often travelled and trained with Kanetsuka *Shihan* when they were both students of Chiba *Shihan*.

* Kenshiro Abbe *Sensei*, 1915-1985, normally credited with being the first to teach Aikido in the UK. Also a famous Judo competitor, and Karate and Kendo teacher.

He was commemorated at a large aikido gathering at Crystal Palace 14/05/05, which brought together many styles of aikido, and including a class taught by Philip Smith, who representing the UKA and the Aikikai.

