

Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th Dan Shihan

Yamada Sensei came to Aikido through his father's cousin, Tadashi Abe, who began training with O Sensei in 1942. In 1955, Yamada Sensei, who had seen O Sensei demonstrate Aikido, applied to the Hombu Dojo uchi deshi program with a recommendation from Abe. He was 18 years old and had never practiced any martial art.

A gregarious, friendly type, Yamada immediately befriended the legendary Nabuyoshi Tamura and Sadateru Arikawa. He still remembers vividly the grueling practice schedule at the unheated Hombu Dojo, class at 6:30 am, 8 am and all through the day. Besides O Sensei, the uchi deshi studied with the founding masters of Aikido: the late Doshu, Kissomaru Ueshiba, Koichi Tohei, Kisaburo Osawa, Kenji Tomiki, Hiroshi Tada, and Seigo Yamaguchi, among others. Deshi were expected to train all day, clean the dojo, help with private lessons, and perform whatever tasks were asked of them. Kazuo Chiba, Mutsunari Kanai, and Seichi Sugano also became uchi deshi not long after Yamada, forming a cohesive group who stayed in touch and worked together, more or less, over the next four decades.

Koichi Tohei, chief instructor of Hombu Dojo, had a profound impact on the world of Aikido and on the young Yoshimitsu Yamada. His technical knowledge and his character were perhaps second only in influence on the uchi deshi to O Sensei. But increasingly, Tohei Sensei was developing Aikido in Hawaii, and his absence was a cause of both disappointment and inspiration to the young uchi deshi. They missed him and they also dreamed of leaving Japan themselves. Yoshimitsu, a longtime aficionado of American music and film, began teaching American soldiers Aikido, in the process learning better English and more about American culture. He wanted to visit the United States.

An invitation to present Aikido at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City gave him his chance. Originally, Koichi Tohei was scheduled to appear, but injury prevented him and Yamada Sensei was sent in his place. While in New York, Yamada met with Eddie Hagihara, whom Yamada Sensei already knew, and who had arranged the World's Fair exhibition, and agreed to become the Chief Instructor at the New York Aikikai. Sensei remembers that he almost went to France instead. Tadashi Abe had already been living in France and teaching and Yamada Sensei assumed he would follow. However, Nabuyoshi Tamura, Yamada Sensei's friend and sempai, hurried to arrive in France first. So Yamada Sensei chose to emigrate to New York City and introduce Aikido to the Eastern United States, not an easy task.

The first years were isolating and difficult. There was no money and Yamada Sensei lived and slept in the dojo changing room. One of the only ways to introduce people to Aikido was through demonstrations, and there were plenty of opportunities to do so mostly during breaks at karate competitions. Sensei had to field lots of challenges from other martial artists, but by then, he had the support of an early group of students including: Mike Abrams, Harvey Konigsberg and Harry McCormick.

Although Yamada Sensei had been able to bring his wife and first daughter to the United States, significant immigration problems stymied him for more than a decade. Despite the birth of two more children here in the United States, deportation was a constant threat. So Yamada sent his wife and three children back to Japan and continued grappling with how to spread Aikido in America. This painful separation from his family is something Yamada Sensei still regrets.

By 1972, his immigration problems behind him and his family reunited, Yamada Sensei could look beyond the borders of the United States to spread Aikido. Introducing students to his brand of vigorous, clear and, above all, fun practice, Yamada Sensei began his role as Aikido Ambassador, a role he continues to expand, as interest in the art keeps growing around the world.

Aikido has changed since Yamada Sensei served his apprenticeship at Hombu Dojo in the 1950s. Despite this evolution, Yamada Sensei keeps trying to convey the spirit of what he learned then. He believes a solid foundation in basic Aikido is crucial for proper development and that the best path to both physical and spiritual development lies in intensive training.

Sensei has authored several books and appeared in numerous films and instructional DVDs. He is the Chairman of the United States Aikido Federation and the South American Aikido Federation. But what gives him the most pride is his own dojo, the New York Aikikai and his part in helping foster the development of Aikido by training many, many great Aikido teachers and practitioners.