



Meeting the Masters: Nobuyoshi Tamura (1933-2010)

Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

It was unusual for the New England Aikikai to sell anything except uniforms and *hakama*, but there it was on the display case, just in from Paris—Nobuyoshi Tamura’s *Aikido: Methode Nationale*. I bristled a little since I am not in favor of a nationalized method for any martial art, but the excitement of having a book by an *uchi-deshi* of Ueshiba O-sensei that few others would own overcame my philosophical objections. The book illustrated a few differences from what we had been taught by Kanai Sensei, but no more than the differences between Kanai, Yamada, or Chiba Sensei. Little did I know that only a few months later, I would be training in his Aikido Summer Camp classes.

I liked the fact that Tamura Sensei could explain things pretty well without speaking a great deal. He broke the waza into segments so that we could check ourselves, something I much appreciated because, with 300 practitioners in the huge gym, it was unlikely that he was going to get around to tutor us on details.

Something I did not notice in the book, but that stood out to me in practice, was his method of performing *kaiten nage* (rotary throw), which he referred to as *uchikaitennage* (inner rotary throw). I suspect the “inner” came from the under-*uke*’s-arm entry, but I was in no position to inquire. When he threw his uke without stepping forward to press him, I shook my head. “You can’t get any pressure on uke’s arm that way,” I said to myself, figuring that this was just another episode of Sensei not having to do a perfect technique because uke was so willing to show off his falling skills. Then I tried it. At first, my suspicions were confirmed since with my weight back and no step forward, my arm extension was too short to press uke’s arm diagonally across his back, off-balancing him. I cannot remember if it was later that session or weeks later in my own dojo that I realized what Tamura Sensei had been doing. This was a perfect example of what Soke Don Angier called “Back Pressure”. Tamura Sensei simply rotated his hips such that his arm extended briefly in a form that looked somewhat like the back stance reverse punch from Heian Godan.

Tamura was about Kanai Sensei’s height but much slighter than Kanai, a physical characteristic emphasized by his high cheekbones, but he was throwing much larger American uke around like it was choreographed. I was there, so I knew it was not. I especially enjoyed his relaxed, almost nonchalant execution. He would move smoothly but stay close to the ground, an idea, also used in t’ai chi, that I had termed, “quick as a fox, heavy as an ox”.

Sometimes you learn things from teachers that they did not intend to teach. Training with Tamura, who was just a little different from the Aikido sensei with whom I was familiar, made me both question the validity of aikido techniques, which are too often imitated without being earned, and simultaneously made me trust the skills of the master instructors who taught them, instructors that through imitating the techniques of O-sensei did not need any cooperation from uke.