

Shoshin

Within the legacy left by Yamaguchi Sensei, at the boundaries where technique and spirituality converge, resides the notion of “shoshin” meaning to “foster or to return to the spirit of our beginnings.”

At his death, at the age of 73, ranked 8th Dan in the martial practice of Aikido, Yamaguchi Sensei was an emblematic figure of the Tokyo Aikikai where he taught since 1961. He had, amongst his students, many French practitioners including Christian Tissier, Franck Noël, Bernard Palmier, Bruno Zanotti... And each year, for over twenty years, Yamaguchi Sensei came to France to perpetuate this lineage. French Aikidokas owe much to him.

Twenty years have passed since Yamaguchi Sensei's departure, and yet it is impossible to name, in any precise or exhaustive manner, all that he bequeathed to our practice. Those that had the privilege of following him know the extent to which his lessons and his person were enriching. Within this heritage, resides one message which, with experience, seems increasingly luminous ; a message which was undoubtedly a constant in his practice, in his pedagogy and in his life ; a message made even more profound because it concerns necessarily all martial arts and extends even beyond the confines of the Dojo. It is manifest in the Japanese word “shoshin,” meaning “to nurture or to return to the spirit of our beginnings.” Time and again, when speaking about generosity and openness, Yamaguchi Sensei referred to this notion. Before each seminar, he suggested to his students to practice as if it was their first time, to experiment each technique with a “new heart.” Although, Yamaguchi Sensei did not elaborate long speeches about the concept of “shoshin,” the little he did say was so clearly in keeping with his manner of being that its message could only impact considerably his students...

The crux of his message can be found in W Gleason's citation of Yamaguchi Sensei in his book entitled “The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido.” Although the text is brief, it captures the Sensei's concept of “shoshin :” At fifty-six, I am only beginning to measure the true difficulties of Aikido. It is indeed necessary to return to and to foster the spirit of one's beginnings. Mere repetition of each lesson, even with great determination, will not bring real progress. The ancient masters spoke of a form of constant training through repetition, “tanlen” meaning polishing, but they were by no means the serial mechanical repetitions. One must “go forth always with a renewed heart.” These words are to be engraved within one's mind. The ancient masters knew that it was necessary, in one's practice, to eliminate not only one's bad habits, but also one's good habits. Bad habits, whether within the practice of technique or within everyday life, are more easily recognizable, either alone or through others, and are simple enough to rectify. Even if one struggles to change, once there is awareness, bad habits can no longer cause more damage. Good habits, however, are seen as being virtuous or positive and consequently are not seen as having inconveniences. Even others do not necessarily realize their pejorative facets and so the damage, to one's self or to others, may be considerable. So, even if one is convinced as to the positive nature of one's habits, in practice it is necessary to be conscious that what one does is only the best that one can do at the present moment and therefore one should remain sufficiently humble in order to accept, at any moment, all forms of criticism.

To remain concentrated on developing one's efficiency while also fostering the spirit of one's beginnings is difficult yet indispensable for progression. A truly developing spirit remains solidly anchored, free of all rigidity and yet is infinitely open, fully consciousness of one's own being*.

Through his technicity, Yamaguchi Sensei inspired us beyond measure. But more extraordinary still was the atmosphere, through his classes and through his seminars, that he engendered on the tatamis, the rhythm and the pleasure that he created. With him, the simple words “... practice Aikido with the same attitude as when you first arrived in the dojo”, became real matter. He had the capacity at each renewed encounter to surprise us, to leave us astonished and amazed. Each year, he would generate doubt ; for there was always, in his practice and in his propositions, something new, something that, without contradicting past trainings, could sharply overturn the few certitudes we esteemed acquired. He would shake us from our routines proposing new paths of progression, forging, time and again, the formidable desire to continue practicing Aikido.

Now that he is gone, what are we to do with this legacy ? Are we capable, for our students, and for ourselves to follow the path that he frayed for us all ? The “shoshin” is both the means as well as the objective towards which one strives. However “necessary,” it is “to return to and to maintain the spirit of our beginnings” in order to make progress in our techniques ; inversely, each technique is the very means towards developing “Shoshin”. The spiritual dimension of the practice of Aikido is on level with a certain number of paradoxes that each student will need to surmount.

To maintain the curiosity and astonishment that characterize our beginnings regardless of the repetitive nature of our practice is certainly the first difficulty. Ippan geiko is the usual mode of practice, it is based on the repetition of the teacher's example, with the risk that one's practice will become mechanical, emptied of meaning and without intentionality. A routine where tori executes a technique on a partner that attacks only in order to take ukemi. It is the responsibility of each student to be demanding and vigilant so as not to denature the practice of Aikido. The teacher must instill a notion of intent in both uke and tori, a notion of authenticity in the exchange, that is to say, the very generosity so often evoked by Yamaguchi Sensei. He had the capacity to give meaning to our efforts. Often in his classes, he required us to repeat one technique for a

long period of time. Through his explanations, through the “pressure” he instilled in the dojo, through his own generosity, shomen uchi ikkyo became once again a discovery inciting each of us to return, yet again, to the space and spirit of our beginnings.

“To maintain the spirit of one’s beginnings” is to remain open to different means of practicing Aikido, without necessarily losing one’s identity. It is being able to practice in other dojos, to enrich one’s technical base with new elements without systematically dispersing or reorienting one’s initial foundations or direction. Flexibility is possible only if one remains centered and faithful to one’s origins, otherwise one becomes lost. In Japan, bamboo is a strong symbol because when submitted to winds of all sorts or bent by powerful gales, it does not break due to its deep roots. In order to “build one’s self” one needs, in the first years of our practice, to follow one clear direction. It is necessary to establish foundations that are sufficiently deep and to establish one’s acumen : the capacity to see similarities, to accept differences and to enrich one’s technique without necessarily rejecting or criticizing newness. Before being able to experience the palette of other practices, a certain maturity in one’s practice is required. The “shoshin” is finding this balance between having roots, having a reference system, and remaining open to what is unknown.

“To maintain the spirit of one’s beginnings” is to accept criticism with a positive and constructive attitude. It is not however about doubting in one’s self nor about recurrently losing confidence. Inversely, acquiring efficiency and progressing in one’s technical prowess, is not about closing oneself within certain attitudes and refusing all forms of questioning. Yamaguchi Sensei would sometimes become fiercely angry finding unacceptable that students retain of his demonstrations only the name of the technique while continuing their habitual manner of practicing. Approaching each technique with a “new heart” meant for him “momentarily forgetting what is the known, in order to follow the meaning/direction of what is shown”. He found equally unacceptable that his gesture of the moment becomes the only manner of doing a technique as if there existed one definitive or final form. This attitude may explain his lack of interest in the various means of preserving his Aikido : books, photos or films.

“To maintain the spirit of one’s beginnings” is to stay conscious of one’s perfectibility. To be lucid with regards to one’s self, to try and change one’s “bad habits,” but more specifically to refuse all illusions as to one’s “good habits,” above all, to accept that the other is a mirror : a mirror of one’s qualities but also of one’s errors. The tendency towards taking pleasure with a partner that valorizes our efforts offers both comfort and ease, but also may engender certitudes rendering self-doubt more problematic. If in changing partners, one’s technique is less efficient, one may tend to first consider that the attack (and uke) is not viable. It is necessary to remain conscious of the relative quality of one’s “good habits.” There are manners of doing that one no longer does and yet, for a time, one considered them to be positive. Only later, may one realize the negative or even perverse effects of behaviors that once corresponded to one’s needs, perhaps even to certain necessities. This is certainly the case in the quest for ukemi. With the recent development of technicity for the role of uke, the practice of Aikido has evolved considerably : in the quality of attacks, the martial presence, and the manner of taking ukemi... True progress has been realized and yet it is now necessary to correct certain exaggerations and deformations. Expanding our understanding of ukemi has engendered a kind of indulgence, forms for forms-sake, stereotypical postures that today need to be reconsidered.

“To maintain the spirit of one’s beginnings” is to be generous and fully engaged as a practitioner, without being suicidal or dangerous for others on the mat. With experience, this generosity and this authenticity will become increasingly compelling, allowing one to develop a finer judgement about distance, a better reactivity for controlling one’s power in order to preserve the safety of one’s partner’s and one’s self. At times, highly ranked students display behaviors that betray a lack of “shoshin.” Condescension towards beginners, such as turning one’s back to avoid partnering, systematically refusing to take ukemi, not truly attacking or cheating in one’s attack are all situations that can be found on the tatami, revealing an unfortunate absence of generosity.

“Acquiring efficiency all while maintaining the spirit of one’s beginnings” is to develop an attitude that seeks enrichment, that “remains solidly anchored and yet is free of all forms of rigidity,” an attitude that is both firm and open, a strong center that remains supple and utilizes a minimum of physical force, these are the contradictions to which one is confronted. One will find that one’s practice will be, intermittently, focused solely on one or another of these different dimensions and that their simultaneous development is no easy matter.

With the idea of developing principles and values which may impact the very manner one has of apprehending life, Yamaguchi Sensei’s words go far beyond the sole practice of Aikido.

His emphasis on “returning to and maintaining the spirit of our beginnings,” regardless of the repetitive aspect of practice, offers an obvious parallel with daily life. So often immediacy prevents us from having the necessary perspective that might offer openings towards other venues. “Maintaining the spirit of our beginnings,” despite seemingly good habits and certitudes reveals the difficulty of being receptive, of not staying captive to norms, values and convictions. To abandon one’s current frame of reference, even for a moment, can be a real ordeal, and yet doing so may allow one to move forward in one’s comprehension of the situation before taking action. Most human beings have not fully realized the value of increasing receptivity ; overcoming the instinct to judge, to interpret or to respond at the outset, remains an effort. One is confronted to this same contradiction in the practice of Aikido : to forge the self without forging a prison

of certitudes, to construct a frame of reference that is both foundation and springboard. In my job as a consultant, I worked with companies to bring to their managers “an outsider’s vision” in order to help them redefine their professional structure. Within a business organization, being taken by habit as well as short-term pressures, makes it difficult to see the bigger picture and to anticipate. Most often managers are confronted with open-ended problems for which no perfect solutions exist. Solutions are chosen because they present more advantages and fewer inconveniences ; the best solution should never be considered a perfect solution. My role was to help managers not only to gain a wider frame of reference identifying and treating the possible inconveniences and harmful side-effects of a good solution, but also to avoid unconsciously generating other problems, possibly worse than the original dilemma. Over time even the best solutions become outdated making regular readjustments indispensable. Here the necessary strategy becomes one of remaining vigilant even with what is believed to be good solutions, good behaviors and good habits. For here too, it is necessary to “foster the spirit of one’s beginnings,” to demonstrate “shoshin.” In order to be as reactive as possible, companies need to develop this capacity. Yamaguchi Sensei may have been surprised, and yet certainly quite interested, to learn that the ideal of “shoshin” can be posited as a management principle.

Bernard Palmier

Translator’s note : In the different version consulted, Yamaguchi Sensei’s text is translated both by “beginning” and by “being” – in fact, one is held by the other : be(ginn)ing -
The 25th of January 2017 will mark the 21st anniversary of Yamaguchi Sensei’s departure...
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