

THE ZEN MASTER TENZAN TOYODA

by Meido Moore

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Most students of Toyoda Shihan are aware that he stressed Zen principles in his instruction. At the very least, it is clear that he considered the practice of seated meditation and other internal training to be crucial; familiarity with *meisobo*, meditation training, was even one of his Aikido rank test requirements. Unfortunately, it is the one most misunderstood and most often ignored.

Toyoda Shihan himself did not force Zen training on anyone. He simply stated that anyone who wanted to understand his style of Aikido needed to do it. "Everyone talks *shugyo*, *shugyo*," he once complained, "but no one really does it. Just coming to the dojo and sweating a few days a week, that's it for most people. But if you don't go in deep, all the way, with internal training, there's no difference between the dojo and a gym."

In Toyoda Sensei's opinion, Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei was someone with a deep realization of wisdom, obtained through a life of hard training. However, O-Sensei's personal meditation training was an eclectic blend of Shinto and other practices which suited his rather unique personality...and were not passed on in any coherent form. O-Sensei did not systematize the internal aspects of his training. The result, according to Toyoda Sensei, is that Aikido practitioners in general do not deeply engage in any sort of meaningful internal training. They speak about "harmony" and "neutralizing conflict", but their understanding is purely intellectual and emotional. They lack the solidity of physical realization, and the martial energy and power, which come from disciplined training in meditation and breathing. "Twenty-five years of training, so what!" he once remarked about one of his senior students. "Twenty-five years, just throwing people around a few hours a week. For nothing."

To understand such criticisms, we have to view training the way Toyoda Sensei did. The life or death, moment to moment awareness and struggle of the martial Way was not to him something abstract, something exotic understood from a book, or a romantic New Age notion of "warriorship" that existed only in his head. From the extreme physical severity of his own martial training, to the actual fights he had experienced, to his fight with disease and the daily suffering he endured, to his ultimate day to day fight against himself in his quest for constant self-improvement, the martial Way Toyoda Sensei walked was concrete, physical and painfully real. There was no room for sentimentality or self-indulgence. Following kidney transplant surgery in the early 1980's, he knew that any day could, literally, be his last. He lived, each moment, with this realization of his own transience. He said that it drove him inexorably forward, with the fury of a hurricane.

He often spoke of the change that came over him after his surgery. He remarked that from that day forward, he felt that he was a different person, and that he felt no fear. In the recovery room after his surgery, he recalled how he somehow got out of his bed and stumbled across the room to see how his brother, the donor, was doing. Nurses had to physically put him back in his bed, amazed that anyone in his state could stand, let alone walk. Throughout his life, he exhibited an incredible power and endurance of this sort.

The source of this great endurance, and the very foundation of his approach to training and life, he claimed was Zen. Since this aspect of his teaching is so little appreciated, and in great danger of fading away, I would like to mention briefly the background of Toyoda Shihan's Zen lineage and involvement. It is my sincere wish that students will delve deeply into this aspect of training. Then, as Sensei said, we can truly say we are training in Budo, the Martial Way, and not just what he scornfully called "monkey dancing": martial arts practiced as a distraction, as a mere hobby or exercise, devoid of deep meaning.

Early Zen Training

Toyoda Shihan's path to involvement with Zen began with his first Aikido teacher, who as many know was Koichi Tohei Sensei,

the former Chief Instructor at Aikikai Hombu Dojo and later the founder of Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido. In Toyoda Sensei's opinion, Tohei Sensei's personal emphasis in his Ki no Kenkyukai organization came to be less and less on the martial aspect of technique (a fact which Toyoda later criticized sharply) and more on the practice of a loosely defined training in "mind-body unification". In this he was influenced by Tempu Nakamura, founder of the Tempukai. Nakamura was a yoga practitioner, and some of his physical exercises and demonstration techniques eventually found their way into Tohei's quasi-religious system.

One of the streams of internal training borrowed by Tohei in his creation of Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido, however, was *misogi*. The term *misogi* literally means "to whittle", with the implication that through such training one is able to shed layers and expose something new and fresh beneath. There are many of these traditional ascetic practices: sitting or standing in meditation under icy waterfalls, cold water ablutions, and other such practices are still done today by yamabushi (mountain ascetics) and others. The *misogi* urged on Toyoda by Tohei, however, was a series of breathing exercises practiced at the famous Tokyo Ichikukai Dojo. Ichikukai was founded by Ogura Tetsuju, a student of the Meiji period swordsman and lay Zen master Yamaoka Tesshu (though not considered a thoroughly dependable historical work, interested readers may read the Tesshu biography "Sword of No Sword", by John Stevens). Tesshu, who eventually founded his own style of Muto-ryu swordsmanship, was also a renowned calligrapher as well as a statesman and advisor to the emperor. And he was famous for one further thing: the severity of his training. Muto-ryu swordsmen were encouraged to undertake *seigan* ("vows"): several-day periods of training involving hundreds or thousands of kendo matches, conducted to the point of utter exhaustion and beyond. Only through such endeavor, it was thought, could the student break through to realization.

At Ichikukai, such intensity remained, and it was to Ichikukai that Tohei Sensei advised the young Toyoda Shihan to go. Training there centered on the practice of several breathing exercises, one of which, *okinaga*, is the familiar "ki breathing" practiced in many Aikido dojo. At Ichikukai, however, this exercise was done while sitting *seiza* for hours at a time, during three-day long training retreats. To aid students in "getting the air out" during exhalation, senior students would roam the hall, striking trainees vigorously on the back to the point that blood would soak through. Toyoda Shihan recalled that pancake-size layers of skin would come off his knees from kneeling so long, and that awareness was needed to insure that trainees didn't try to escape (he was fond of telling the story of a trainee who did successfully sneak out, leaving even his clothing behind; this gentleman later became a famous "conflict-resolution" expert and author, but would never, Toyoda Sensei chuckled, resolve that one conflict at Ichikukai from which he had run). On the morning of the third day, a highlight for everyone was a ration of sugar-water. Sensei recalled that nothing ever tasted so good to him.

The other training pursued vigorously at Ichikukai, as befits a dojo carrying on in the spirit of Tesshu, was Zen. At Ichikukai, Toyoda Sensei first attended *sesshin*, intensive Zen retreat, under the guidance of Bokukyugutsu Keizan Roshi of Heirin-ji monastery ("Roshi" is a Zen master). *Sesshin* is itself a grueling undertaking, being a time of little sleep or food and long hours of painful cross-legged sitting meditation. During *sesshin*, students must present answers to *koan*, questions to be deeply penetrated in meditation, to the Zen master. This training, called *sanzen*, can have the atmosphere of a life or death encounter. Toyoda Shihan once laughingly recalled the time that he physically grabbed the master during *sanzen* to test his reaction (it was calm), and the time he stormed into the *sanzen* room with an answer only to have the master frustratingly ignore him while chasing a mosquito that buzzed about.

Sensei lived for three years as *jyōju* (resident disciple) in that dojo he called "the place where there was no rest." He once said that the only way to catch a break there was to try and sleep in the toilet. Part of the high-pressure atmosphere at Ichikukai was due to the ever-present Tesso Hino Sensei, the head of training. Hino Sensei was a great influence on Toyoda Sensei. The story of a small tree that Hino Sensei wanted dug up from the courtyard and moved over a few feet was typical, and reminds one of the trials of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa: after Toyoda Sensei had laboriously dug up, moved and replanted this tree, Hino Sensei decided it should be moved again. And again. And so on several times, until finally Hino Sensei declared, "It was best where it was. Put it back, Toyoda." There were other incidents, seemingly trivial, which inspired Toyoda Shihan. Once, Hino Sensei sheepishly begged a cigarette from Toyoda Sensei. The next day, he returned exactly one cigarette to him: "Whatever I take I have to give back."

Hino Sensei, however, was mild compared to his ferocious wife. Toyoda Sensei, decades later, would get a faint look of annoyance when discussing her, even in the midst of his laughter. Her constant tirades and bombastic yelling over even minor transgressions (such as crookedly stacked dishes) were cited by Toyoda Sensei as the inspiration for some of his own methods of dealing with uchideshi! The point was, and is, the development of an all-encompassing awareness, and the spirit of always doing one's best. Whatever the intention, however, one gets the sense that it was a very long three years at Ichikukai Dojo.

It was at Ichikukai that Toyoda Sensei first met the famous Omori Sogen Roshi. Omori Roshi was a Jikishinkage Ryu swordsman, calligrapher, and Zen master. He was also the president of the Tesshu Society (Tesshukai), and lived in Yamaoka Tesshu's old house. Author of *Ken to Zen* ("The Sword and Zen"), *Sanzen Nyumon* ("An Introduction to Zen Training", recently translated into English) and other such works, he was a person who tirelessly promoted his conception of the true martial Way as a unity of Budo training and Zen. For those who are interested in the life of this extraordinary figure, a biography has been written by his successor, Dogen Hosokawa Roshi, entitled *Omori Sogen: The Art of A Zen Master*. Omori Roshi apparently had gone to Ichikukai to see a number of calligraphic works by Tesshu which are preserved there. Toyoda Sensei often commented on the significance of this brief meeting, which would become clear much later.

Chozen-ji and Tenshin Tanouye Roshi

After relocating to Chicago in 1974 at the request of Tohei Sensei, Toyoda Sensei's instruction included not only Aikido training, but also the misogi and Zen practices he had learned at Ichikukai. At that time he had no formal ties with a Zen teacher. In fact, his involvement with Zen was one of the points of friction that developed with Tohei Sensei. Tohei, in his effort to establish his own system of "Ki" training as a unique movement, was not favorable to Toyoda Shihan's increasing involvement in any other type of internal training. As the Ki element of Tohei's system came increasingly to the fore to the exclusion of all else (including Aikido training) Toyoda Sensei said he became increasingly dissatisfied. All of this, he felt, helped fan the flames that would eventually lead to their break, and to Toyoda Sensei's establishment of a completely independent, American Aikido organization: the Aikido Association of America.

In 1977, a connection with Omori Sogen Roshi again arose: through a mutual student, Toyoda Sensei was introduced to Tenshin Tanouye Roshi. Tanouye Roshi, a Hawaiian-born Japanese-American, had himself sought out and followed his own martial Way. Upon hearing as a youth the great Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki speak on Zen and the Ways, he felt himself called to follow such a path; as he relates it, it seemed that Suzuki spoke directly to him. A school music teacher by profession, Tanouye Roshi traveled to Japan each summer for many years to study martial arts, particularly Kendo and Judo.

Tanouye Roshi was known for his demon-like intensity and devotion to training. And as he saw the state of the martial arts in Japan, he noted the absence of what he considered to be very many true masters who could match his intensity. It seemed to him that the samurai spirit had disappeared in modern Japan, and it was with this frustration that he confronted Omori Sogen. Upon their meeting, Tanouye immediately scolded Omori Roshi for the sorry state of affairs he had found in his travels and Omori Roshi, amazingly, bowed and apologized. Tanouye was given a copy of Omori Roshi's book *Ken to Zen* (The Sword and Zen), and upon reading it was amazed to see the same sharp criticisms voiced in its pages.

Later returning, he was shown the Hojo sword forms of the Jikishinkage school, which Omori Roshi felt contained the essence of the martial Way. Agreeing, Tanouye Roshi asked to be instructed, relating that he had only three days left to stay in Japan. Omori Roshi laughed, telling him to return when he had several years. Tanouye persisted, however, and was allowed to train. Within those three days, because of his long years of past training, it was later said that he was able to grasp the four Hojo kata.

The dream of Omori Roshi and Tanouye Roshi was to spread the teachings of Zen and the Ways out to the world. Having found in each other the means to do so, Tanouye Roshi made a request in what would be a historic exchange. He asked Omori Roshi,

"Give me five years of your life." "For what reason?" was the reply. "There are many reasons, but basically it is to bring *shugyo* to the West." Omori Roshi agreed.

The result of this was the founding in Hawaii of Daihonzan Chozen-ji, the first Rinzaï Zen headquarters temple in history established outside of Japan under canon law. Omori Roshi had received the *Kaido* ceremony, naming him as Archbishop of Tenryu-ji in Kyoto and empowering him to establish a completely new line of Zen. Reportedly to the chagrin of some Japanese, he chose to do so in Hawaii. Tanouye Roshi, later named one of Omori Roshi's Dharma heirs, would eventually become Archbishop of this monastery.

It was at Chozen-ji that Toyoda Sensei, upon meeting Tanouye Roshi, became his student in Zen. They were well suited to each other, both exemplifying the ferocity and physicality of the martial Way. Also at Chozen-ji, Toyoda Sensei had the chance to once again meet Omori Roshi. At that time, Omori Roshi spoke to him about Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei, commenting that he was a true martial artist "with no *suki*" (openings, vulnerabilities). Toyoda Sensei mentioned this often with appreciation.

In 1977, the first sesshin was held at Toyoda Sensei's dojo in Evanston, Illinois. A brutally cold winter combined with a lack of heat in the dojo made for a difficult sesshin. "I will show you this weekend how to use *kiai* [energy]," Tanouye Roshi told Toyoda Sensei, proceeding to conduct the sesshin in below-freezing temperatures with no noticeable effect. Toyoda Sensei was impressed, something not easily accomplished.

In those early sesshin conducted by Tanouye Roshi, Toyoda Sensei himself took part and underwent *sanzen*. Some senior members still recall one session during which he had broken through to an answer for a koan. In celebration, he ordered a pizza for all the participants, something normally forbidden during the strict training of sesshin, but apparently tolerated in this case (of course, being the host of the sesshin, he no doubt had a certain amount of say in the schedule of activities). On another occasion, he once related, Tanouye Roshi had suddenly swung his *shippei* (a wooden stick about two feet long) at him. Without thought, Toyoda Sensei instantly blocked it. "Now you are ready to start your own school of Aikido," Tanouye Roshi commented.

This new alliance produced new growth: the establishment of a *betsuin* (sub-temple) and a branch of a lay organization, International Zen Dojo in Chicago, eventually headquartered in the same building on Belmont Avenue that held AAA headquarters. A regular weekly sitting schedule was established, and sesshin became a twice-yearly event. Dogen Hosokawa Roshi, another successor of Omori Roshi who later went to Chozen-ji to serve as abbot there, eventually began traveling to Chicago for this and began to build a solid core of students. He and Toyoda Sensei also became close friends, sharing a similar vision for the future of Zen in the United States. The relationship between Aikido and Zen continued to flower under the direction of these two, with Aikido students forming the initial backbone of the Zen organizations. A few senior Aikido students eventually became ordained Zen priests, leading instruction and meditation at several locations.

Receiving Transmission

Throughout all of this, Toyoda Sensei adamantly insisted on remaining out of the Zen spotlight. Committed to Aikido and to his position as an Aikido teacher, he allowed his students to assume roles of Zen leadership. However, behind the scenes, he was always the driving force. Communicating often with Tanouye Roshi and Hosokawa Roshi, he engineered the dynamic spread of Zen training and instruction throughout the already strong network of his Aikido organizations. Chozen-ji to him was a center for training, but one that had little effective outreach and was unfortunately located far from major population centers. He therefore developed the intention to create a web of Zen dojo in the mainland United States that would support Chozen-ji and provide outlets for Chozen-ji style Zen training. This was effectively accomplished with the establishment by Toyoda Sensei of the International Zen Dojo Sogenkai, a lay organization founded with the permission of Chozen-ji. Sogenkai, named for Omori Sogen Roshi who had passed away after a long illness, set about organizing Zen training for laypersons into a structured curriculum. The group was responsible for special seminars and other training opportunities that complemented, and were often scheduled in

conjunction with, the formal events such as sesshin and zazenkai which Chozen-ji oversaw.

It was during this time also that Toyoda Sensei's efforts to support Chozen-ji led him to offer several "Zen and Aikido Retreats" at Chozen-ji itself. Drawing dozens of participants from the mainland, these were formal training camps in which both Budo (Aikido) and zazen were instructed. The beautiful environment of Chozen-ji, the hospitality and excellent cooking of the Chozen-ji staff, and the exciting instruction of Toyoda Sensei combined to make these retreats extremely memorable.

Finally, in 1997, during a visit to Chozen-ji, Toyoda Sensei was informed that he was being named as a dharma successor to Tanouye Roshi. Somewhat surprised, he reported that he told Tanouye Roshi "I'm not asking for this, I don't need this." "No, Toyoda Sensei, you have it," was the reply. And so he did.

Upon this recognition of his status as a Zen master, he was given a new name: Tenzan Gensei Rokoji. "Rokoji" literally means "old layperson", and is the title indicating his Zen master status. "Tenzan" is heavenly or universal mountain; the character Ten is taken from Tanouye Roshi's name, "Tenshin" - universal mind. "Gensei", as described by Toyoda Shihan, contains the same "Gen" as Omori Sogen Roshi's name, and (with the kanji "Sei": life) carries the feeling that "Sogen lives." Toyoda Sensei was also secretly pleased that this "Gen" is the same character as that in the name of the famous Sengoku-era warlord, Takeda Shingen.

Unaffected by his new status, Toyoda Sensei simply continued to go about his work of spreading Aikido and Zen. He didn't put on airs. "I'm a Zen master," he once said with a mug of beer in one hand and a handful of peanuts in the other, "but I'm not going to lead sesshin or do those priest things. I'll stay a layperson. I still like a layperson's impure life too much!"

But there were big plans. Recognizing that the power and activity of Toyoda Sensei was best allowed free reign, Tanouye Roshi granted permission for the eventual founding of a new temple, Kozenji. This was to be done on the mainland, under the joint guidance of Hosokawa Roshi and Toyoda Sensei. Envisioned as a center where Zen, martial arts and fine arts could be practiced together in a unified manner, in the tradition of Omori Sogen, plans called for its location to be near Chicago, in the heart of the American midwest.

On July 4, 2001, this and many other plans were suddenly swept away with Sensei's sudden death. His posthumous name, Tenzan Gensho Rokoji, is now entered into the lineage charts as one link in many, tracing the transmission of wisdom back through the centuries to the time of Shakyamuni, the Buddha.

However, looking back over the incredible training history and accomplishments of this man, we realize that such a "rolling snowball" of energy and activity, gathering momentum over the years and increasing in size, can't stop simply with his passing. The Zen teachings of Tenzan Gensho Rokoji, which were expressed through his unique style of Aikido technique, will continue. His Aikido, which is the unity of Aikido and Zen, continues as long as those two streams of training are sincerely practiced in the manner he intended. Toyoda Sensei's senior students who maintain this tradition, some of them Zen priests who practice Aikido, some of them Aikido teachers who practice Zen, continue to work together through Shinjinkai and Daiyuzenji temple to insure that this vital tradition is not lost. And the plans for Kozenji continue under another name, with the establishment of the Korinji Foundation, dedicated to founding and maintaining a rural Zen temple and retreat center in the Chicago region.

There are many other anecdotes regarding Sensei's Zen involvement, including his opinions and sayings regarding training in Aikido and Zen, which can be recorded at another time. I hope this brief article will give students a sense of the incredible richness of our lineage.

As we reflect on Toyoda Sensei's passing, I often remind myself of an old Buddhist analogy illustrating the rarity of coming into contact with the true teachings that lead to wisdom. It is said that, at the bottom of an ocean of cosmic size and depth, there dwells a single ancient, blind turtle. Once every eon this turtle slowly rises to the surface, and for one moment pokes his head

above the waves, only to disappear again. Now, if one were to float on the surface of this massive ocean a hoop of straw, and if, somehow, that turtle were to exactly rise to unwittingly put his head through that hoop, it could be said that an incredibly rare and improbable thing had happened. Just as rare, it is said, is the chance of meeting a true teacher, and of having all the factors one needs...the chance, the inclination, the ability, the health and resources...to follow such a person and receive his or her teaching.

As we consider the many conditions and people which came together allowing us to know him, many of us feel shocked to realize that we were there when such a rare thing, for all too short a time, showed above the waves.

Reflecting with wonder on our incredible good fortune to have known this Aikido and Zen master, the time has come to get on with the work he left us.