

'SEEKING THE WAY'

Living with Master Aoki

By KEN WAIGHT

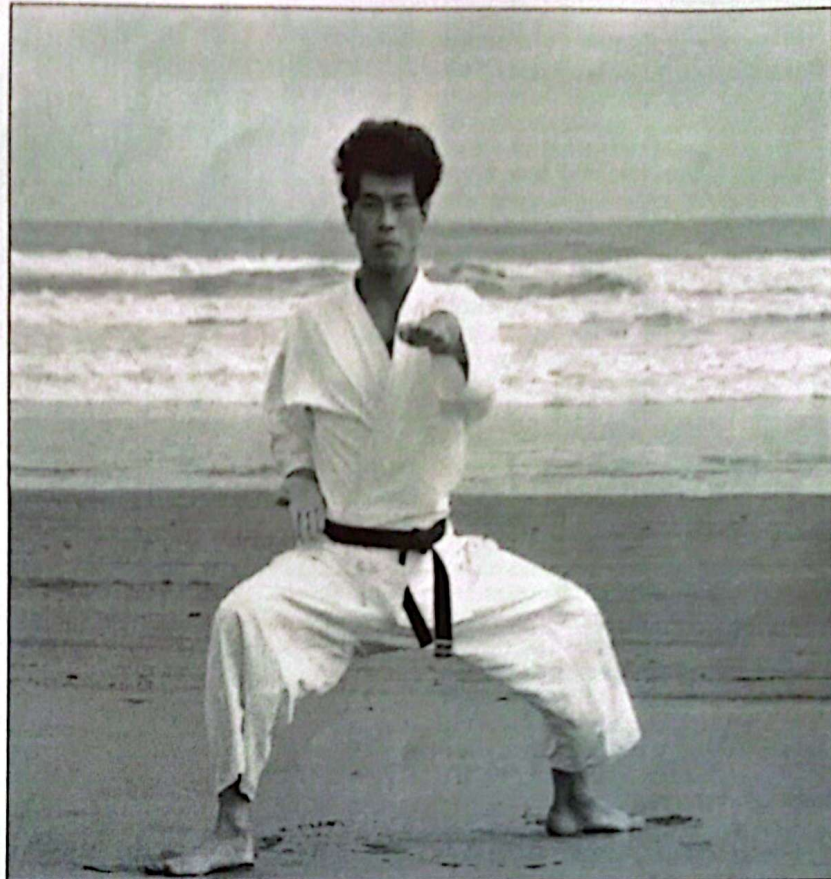
Part Three

My separation from Karate Master Mitsusuke Harada Sensei had not been an easy one. I had a deep respect for Harada and his practice and realised how much it had transformed my life. I had the fortunate experience to be a personal assistant to him for a number of years and the many hours I spent alone with him left a deep impression on me.

For some time while I was a full-time apprentice to him, Harada Sensei gave me private lessons. Afterwards we would go for a coffee or a meal and he would speak of his life and practice in Japan at Waseda University and with Shigeru Egami Sensei, and also his early life in Japan and later in Brazil. This warm and intimate side of Harada drew me closer to him. Being my teacher and mentor, I became attached to him and so the decision to leave the Karate practice left deep feelings churning inside of me.

I always think that, when a major crossroads appears in one's life, it is through a number of overlapping events of which we are not always conscious at the time. It seemed that I was being drawn to a new horizon about which I was not clear. In another way it was following the stream of destiny in life and not knowing the estuary to which it flowed. In retrospect, the brief time of four months in Japan with Shotokai, my meeting with Egami Sensei and then with Hiroyuki Aoki Sensei and his students, was an explosion in my life that was waiting to happen. Even now I can't say clearly why I had changed my life so suddenly. I had even given up a promising position as an assistant metallurgist in a research laboratory.

The impact of all this did not hit me until several months after leaving the Karate organisation. I realise now how alone I was then. My whole life, both working and private, had centred around Karate and now I was also out of work. I could see no light on the horizon, but in spite of this I felt that something new had awoken inside of me, and there was no turning back. I became inter-



Hiroyuki Aoki Sensei demonstrating kata in a photo taken from his book 'Karate For Professionals'.

ested in Aoki Sensei's new body practice, then called *Sogo Budo*, but no-one in Gt. Britain had heard of it, so there was no *dojo* (training place) at which to practice.

When I look back now, I see a wonderful opportunity to deeply re-examine my life, but at the time I was often troubled and filled with extremes of grave doubt and then great hope. I practiced in a local park, five or six times a week, often at night or early in the morning, whilst also seeking part-time work to support myself. Whenever I stood at the entrance to this park, which was bordered by trees and a river, the huge, empty space challenged me to throw off any negative feelings in favour of big, open movement. Starry nights, crisp, cold mornings, hot summer evenings and frosty days were all part of the many brilliant *keiko* (training sessions) I experienced during one-and-a-half years at my open-air dojo. Being at one

with nature helped to deepen and open my practice, and I still value open-air *keiko*, both alone and with my students, as a way of maintaining this intimate contact with natural space and energy.

At the end of 1971, by living a quiet, frugal life and saving my money, I had enough to return to Japan, albeit for only a few months. Arriving at Haneda Airport, I was met by Tomorori Kato, a top student of Aoki Sensei. We made the same journey as on my last visit, through the devastated wastelands of Kawasaki industrial zone. This time, however, things were to be very different, as I was to become a live-in student of Aoki at his base in Noge-yama, near Yokohama. The group I was to join, *Rakutenkai* (meaning optimism, have luck or feel relaxed in heaven, another way of saying to feel in harmony, at one with life) greeted me like a brother. The group lived together in two

large, adjacent houses which were so close, one could step through the windows from one to the other.

In order to further develop his style, Aoki Sensei had gathered around him top students from his years as a leading teacher of *Shotokai* Karate. As I have said, the style at that time was called *Sogo Budo*, which would later be changed to *Shintaido*. For most of his Karate period, Aoki had studied with Shigeru Egami Sensei, beginning his practice at Chuo University and later becoming Chief Instructor for *Shotokai*.

Exceptionally gifted at movement and possessing great technical ability, Aoki was an artist at heart who was always seeking new ways to express his ideas. Having grown up in a more open post-war Japan, there was a new energy in the air, casting off the past and working hard to make a new future. Although influenced greatly by overseas culture, the arts, music, technology and cuisine, life in Japan was still hard for most families. It was a period of change: optimism coupled with commitment to building a new future, which had not been spoiled by the excesses of the materialism to follow.

Not surprisingly this mood of change, and his conversion to Christianity, had a profound effect on the young Aoki, but his way of practising his faith was far from conventional. Many of the early *Rakutenkai* group were 4th or 5th *Dan* in Karate who had practised under the *gorei* (group training) of Egami Sensei at either Gakushuin or Chuo University Karate Clubs. All had dedicated themselves to following Aoki in his search and they were a very committed and strong group of people. By the time I entered the *Rakutenkai* it had been in existence for about 7 or 8 years, inspired by Aoki's boundless energy and commitment.

The new generation of *Rakutenkai*, of which I was to become a part, included **Masatake Egami**, the son of Master Shigeru Egami. He was a gifted person who had previously studied Aikido at Keio University, and seemed to have a lot of his father's qualities. When I first arrived, there was one other Western student, but after he left I was the only foreigner in the group. I felt totally at home and at ease with the rest of the group of about a dozen live-in students, which increased at weekends.

Life was ever-changing at *Rakutenkai*, with people visiting or staying for a few days, usually bringing gifts of food, for which we were always grateful. In order to support ourselves, some students had part-time jobs, while others sold books or gathered paper to sell. In



Sogo Budo training: Ken Waight engaged in a 4 kilometres run with two boh (long s
This type of keiko was to extend and build strong internal ki (energy).



The *Rakutenkai* group at a *gasshuku* (training camp) in Chiba, Japan, in 1973. Masatake Egami, son of Master Egami, is at the rear (with glasses)..

the evening we practiced when all the students had returned, sometimes as late as 10.00 or 11.00p.m. for about two hours. We practiced in Noge-yama Park, the highest point in the area, just a few minutes' walk from *Rakutenkai*, and on a clear day Mount Fujiyama and the sparkling coastline of Yokohama were visible. On some occasions Aoki Sensei would lead the group, which varied between 3 and 6 people, personally trying his new practice, or encouraging us to try harder — to look deeper.

After practice we would return to *Rakutenkai* for a hot bath and supper, and most nights Aoki Sensei would join us around midnight in the common room. He was a great talker and would often go on into the early hours, his words acting as an inspiration to the rest of us. Accommodation was cramped and sometimes as many as 4 students shared a small room, but since part of our training was to respect each other's personal space whilst letting go of our own boundaries, this, too, was a valuable experience, sharing space, food and duties.

Because the *Rakutenkai* did not have a dojo, I practiced 3 times a week at the *Tokyo Taikukan* in Shinjuku under the *gorei* of **Kato Sensei**, and on Sundays at *Sendagaya Taikukan* under Aoki Sensei's *gorei*. As there were only a few people attending the weekday classes with Kato it was almost the same as a private lesson. He was very thorough and had a strong, deep practice. We always had to prepare ourselves well before he arrived. He knew exactly when to enter the dojo when we had finished our preparation. He insisted we make about up to a thousand low jumps to strengthen and open our *koshi* (waist) followed by several hundred high *moro geri* (double jump kicks) or *renzuku sori*

tobi (a high opening jump developed by Aoki). When he thought our body and mind were in the right condition he would start, if not he would give us further practice to prepare us. I feel fortunate to have had this almost private time to study and absorb the practice with him, as times like these are rare in one's life. On Sundays there would be 30 or more people arriving for Aoki Sensei's classes, which were very dynamic. It took me about a 4-hour round trip from Sakuagichio station to Tokyo and back. This became a useful time to read. When I was tired I slept and it was lucky that we were on the last stop. Sometimes the guard would wake me up when I returned late at night.

Once a month there was a special *gasshuku* (training camp) with Aoki Sensei, which was usually held at Kuju Kuri beach on the Chiba coast, although sometimes we went to the Izu Peninsula or the mountains in

Nagano. The *gasshuku* was a monthly highlight for the dozen or so young *Rakutenkai*, whose number were usually swelled on these occasions with outside students, and all were expected to work hard. Often we would practice long into the night, jumping many kilometers along the beach or cutting and running with *boh* (long staffs) or *bokuto* (wooden swords), and on many occasions I landed in the sea as a result of over-zealous swinging of the *boh* or *kumite* (sparring).

After practice we would return to our accommodation at the local inn for a hot bath and a chat, looking forward to a large helping of good, home cooked food, consisting of fish, sashimi, seaweed, pickles and various vegetables to satisfy the voracious appetites of young, healthy bodies. Alcohol was not on the menu, as all of the *Rakutenkai* were tee-total. We would try to retire before midnight, since training usually began about 5.00a.m. the next morning, and I remember the wonderfully relaxed feeling of waking on my *futon* (straw bed) in the large room we all shared which overlooked the ocean. Perhaps because of his age — and his type of energy — Aoki Sensei did not seem to need much sleep, as he would sometimes want to talk until 2.00 or 3.00a.m. Despite this we usually returned to Yokohama at the end of our *gasshuku* feeling refreshed and re-inspired.

Two of Aoki's students owned restaurants in Yokohama's Chinatown, and occasionally we would be invited there to eat. The Chinese food was very welcome, since the fare at *Rakutenkai* was fairly sparse, due to lack of funds. After a hearty meal we would often visit the downtown *centos* (hot baths) used by late-night taxi-drivers and bar workers. This could often run as late



Master Aoki (left) counters a *bokuto* attack with his *boh*, at a *gasshuku* in the mountains (Asama Yama), 1974.



Practising bokuto with Haruyoshi Ito Sensei on the beach.

as 1.00 or 2.00a.m. and I can still picture in my mind the hot vapours rising from our bodies as we sat outside in the small garden bordering the baths to cool off with a drink, before returning home to fall into a deep, deep sleep.

Time seemed to stand still for me under the influence of *Rakutenkai* and the years slipped by almost unnoticed. But nothing remains the same, and one day Aoki Sensei hinted to me that after ten years the live-in period at *Rakutenkai* was about to come to an end. He suggested that I should return to Britain, re-find my roots and open a group there, and shortly after my return to Britain, in 1973, I heard that the group at Nogyama had been disbanded.

I believe that Aoki was exhausted by the effort and intensity of his

devotion to *Rakutenkai* and the antagonism and criticism from sources within classical Martial Arts and particularly the *Shotokai* group he had left to form *Rakutenkai*.

However, Aoki was, as they say in Japan, 'kao hiroi' (wide faced or well-connected in many fields), and knew many people in the field of art to whom he turned for inspiration. He sought to reinvigorate the Martial Arts, to rid them of heaviness and symbolism and allow the movement to speak for itself. He gradually created his own movement based on both old and new forms, which, whilst having a profound philosophy of life, would allow practitioners a deeper experience through movement, without necessarily having to practice Martial Arts.

He had severely punished his body during the ten-year *Rakutenkai*

period and needed to rest, taking up many interests and hobbies. He travelled extensively both in Japan and abroad, and perhaps as a result of this gradually lost interest in the Martial Arts, practising less and less as he got older. He worked a great deal with older people, using movement as a source of healing, but for his students it was a confusing as well as illuminating time. The changes he had made to his practice proved too much for some students and they left, while others longed for the old Aoki whose superb Karate technique was so much admired. Changes are not always welcome, and coupled with his strong personality and total commitment to continuously evolving his art, many found it too much to handle. When I left Japan for the second time I had practised Karate for nearly seven years, and Aoki's *Shintaido* for another four. The intensity of the *keiko* in the latter period had left a deep impression on me and this was to have a profound effect on my future dreams. I did not know what lay ahead for me back in Britain, which seemed far away, and knew almost nobody there nor had any contacts to help me. So, with my young Japanese wife of several months, I set off for the unknown with my mind and body filled with a life of practice which had reached fulfillment at *Rakutenkai*.

Contact:

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