

Simple as breath

*An interview with Regis Soavi,
by Monica Rossi, "Arti d'Oriente", February 1999*

Our rendez-vous is at 6:45 AM, in Milan's Chinese quarter. The place : a former garage, transformed into a traditional, spartan-looking dojo where, once inside, you are told gently but firmly to remove your shoes. The participants arrive little by little, sleepy-faced ; they murmur their greetings as though reluctant to disturb the pale atmosphere of the Milanese dawn.

I had been invited to an aikido session by Regis Soavi, during one of the periodic courses he conducts in Italy. Regis Soavi teaches and transmits the message of Itsuo Tsuda (1914-1984), a direct disciple of master Ueshiba. I had read a few of Tsuda's books ; he was Japanese and lived in France. His books are strange. They can't be classed with "martial arts" books, or as "essays", or with "stories". In Tsuda's school, we find the convergence of two fundamental experiences : Aikido and Katsugen Undo (regenerating movement). I wanted to speak more in depth of that, with Regis Soavi.

Who was Itsuo Tsuda



Itsuo Tsuda (1914-1984)

MR : *You were a direct student of Master Tsuda. Tell me a bit about him.*

RS : He was very simple. We called him Mr. Tsuda. I myself only began to address him as "Master" in his last years. He wished to be considered above all as a philosopher and writer. His quest was of a personal nature. When you met him, you realized at once that he had a strong personality, but at the same time, he seemed to be an Oriental like any other. If you were to come across him in the street, you'd never realize he was an expert in Martial Arts, he just seemed to be an ordinary Japanese. In any case, on the tatami, he was a real discovery. Tsuda addressed himself to each person individually, he never generalized. In the morning, after aikido, we would have coffee together and he would tell

stories, speaking to all who were there ; but we understood that, each time, he wished to reach certain people in particular. He was characterized above all by his simplicity.

I'm looking at Tsuda's biography : "At 16, he rebelled against his father's wish for him to inherit the family patrimony ; he left his family to wander, in search of freedom of thought. Later, reconciled with his father, he came to France in 1934, where he studied under Marcel

Granet and Marcel Mauss until 1940, when he returned to Japan. After 1950, he became interested in Japanese culture, studying the recitation of “Noh” with Master Hosada, the “Seitai” with Master Haruchika Noguchi, and Aikido with Master Morihei Ueshiba. Itsuo Tsuda returned to Europe in 1970, to disseminate the practice of “Regenerating Movement” and his ideas about the “Ki”. What did Itsuo Tsuda do during the Second World War ?

In 1940 he was mobilized and had to return to Japan, on the last boat to go through the Suez Canal. The canal was then closed. He was enrolled in the army, where he worked in an administrative capacity. He never fought. Right after the war, he worked for Air France as an interpreter. That is how he met Master Ueshiba. A French Judoka, André Noquet, came to Japan to discover the practice of Aikido, and as he spoke no Japanese, he needed an interpreter. He found Tsuda, who until then knew nothing about Aikido, but he was deeply interested at once.

Did Tsuda know Ueshiba first, or Noguchi ?

Noguchi. He was about 30 when he first met Noguchi, and 45 when he encountered Ueshiba.

What was the meaning of his refusal to accept the family heritage ?

His father came from a family of Samourai, who became factory owners and business heads at the Meiji modernization. Tsuda didn't want to work in the family business. He wanted to live his own life. At first it was very difficult ; he even worked for a time in a chemical factory. Then, when he had reconciled with his father, he decided to study in France. Tsuda was very fond of France.

Aikido



In the Respiratory Practice, a hand clap precedes and follows the recitation of the Norito. The Norito is a text originating in Shintoism, recited in Japanese. This recitation allows the creation of a certain resonance among the participants.

For you, is Aikido a martial art ?

No, you already know the answer. Aikido is a non-martial art ; it is the practice of non-doing. Master Ueshiba, in another epoch, could have responded that Aikido is a martial art. Still, if I say it isn't a martial art, then people respond, “Oh, it's a dance then”. That is why I define Aikido as a” non-martial art”. In any case it's something quite different ; That's why Ueshiba

called it ai-ki-do. The term is often translated as “The Way of Harmony”, but a more appropriate definition is “The Way of Fusion of Ki”. Two people can undergo what we call fusion. They do more than simply harmonize. From two, they become One, then two again. Habitually in martial arts, two adversaries confront each other and only one remains. But in Aikido we have the fusion of sensitivity. In our school, he who attacks, attacks ; the other becomes one with him : he accepts and absorbs the attacker and from two creates one. He acts in such a way that the other begins to be a part of him. In this way he disarms the attack, which no longer works.

Does that mean that one learns to take responsibility for the other as well ? Or to put it differently, in a relation between two people, does the will of one of them suffice to modify the quality of that relation ?

One learns to take one's own responsibility. In our school, the attacker will help the other who is not yet able to create the state of fusion ; he makes it possible. If he were to attack brutally, the beginner would be unable to create this fusion ; but if he acts as a guide, he helps the other rediscover his own capacity for movement. He already has that capacity. If, when crossing a street, a car suddenly arrives, we jump to the side. It's the art of avoidance. These capacities manifest themselves spontaneously, in certain exceptional circumstances. Here, we reintroduce them, so that they become more natural, so that they are present in every moment of our lives.



You practice early every morning. Why ?

Master Ueshiba practiced early in the morning, Master Tsuda as well ; I continue to practice early in the morning. That's the first reason. The second reason is that only those who are very determined, very well motivated, come in the morning, because to be here at this time, you must get up at around 5:30 AM. In the morning we are fresher than at the end of the day and it's easier to practice “non-doing”, at least for beginners. We are also more “involuntary” - still a bit half asleep, we are not yet entirely into our “social being” that we use during the day, to encounter others and go about our work : smile when we should, or not; say “thank you”, etc. In the morning we arrive at the dojo still clean, not very structured yet, and there is something more authentic there.

How is your Aikido different from that of other schools ?

There is no difference, it is Aikido. I don't know what is done these days in other organizations, at Aikikai for example ; I left them 20 years ago. I do believe that certain things have been forgotten ; for instance, the first part of the “Respiratory Practice” that Master Ueshiba did every morning, and that we have preserved. In other schools, some forms of this have been maintained, but a large part has been lost. I think that those schools have adapted themselves more to Occidentals and to our epoch ; as for myself, I prefer to remain more

traditional.

In our Aikido sessions, there is a first part, where we practice alone for about 20 minutes, and a second where we practice in pairs : one partner attacks, and the other executes the technique. The techniques are the same as those practiced at Aikikai or with Master Kobayoshi, or any other master. The difference is in our approach, which gives much more importance to the role of the partner. We take the other person completely into account, and for that, I feel that our practice of Katsugen Undo has played a fundamental role.

The Regenerating Movement



Itsuo Tsuda, photographed at the beginning of the 1980's.

What is Katsugen Undo ?

In our school there are two practices, united through a common spirit : Aikido, of which we have just spoken, and the Regenerating Movement, which Tsuda learned from Master Noguchi- a “movement that permits a return to the source”. This is what allows us to better understand the aspect of “non-doing” in Aikido.

Often, when people arrive from other dojos, I see that they “possess” a technique : they respond to the attacks in a certain way, but there is no spontaneity. Everything is calculated, inculcated, schooled, and ordered.

The regenerating movement is supposed to bring the individual back to a state of spontaneity ?

Yes, it is the art of spontaneity par excellence.

It is derived from the “Seitai” of Noguchi, if I have understood correctly ?

Yes.

What does Seitai mean ?

It means a “natural condition” ; “Seitai Soho”, for example, is a technique used to “Seitai-ise” the individual, that is, to give him the possibility of a return to a natural condition. Katsugen Undo, on the other hand, is the movement of the extrapyramidal motor system, the involuntary movement that is activated spontaneously, and that, in itself, acts to take us to a condition of seitai. It is not a method of acquisition, on the contrary, it is a Way of detachment. We don't acquire greater flexibility ; rather, we free ourselves from rigidity. We acquire nothing ; rather, we lose things, we free ourselves from what hampers us. This is important in Aikido as well. Aikido is not a Way of “acquiring” techniques, or of “obtaining” results, but rather a Way of coming back to simple things. On this subject Master Tsuda spoke of “becoming a child again, but without puerility.”

Did Ueshiba know of Seitai ? How did Seitai and Aikido come together ?

It was Tsuda who united them. I don't believe that Ueshiba knew of Seitai. However, Master Noguchi once went to see a demonstration by Master Ueshiba, of which he said, “It's good.” In Japan, that is sufficient.

The ki

Did Noguchi create the discipline of Seitai, or did a tradition already exist that he perpetuated ?

No, he created it. Initially, Noguchi was a healer, until his “discovery” of involuntary movement. One day, he realized that people fell ill, and came to see him ; he would allow the ki to circulate, they would recover and go off. Then they would fall ill again and come back to see him.... Any other therapist would have been happy to observe that, as they would be guaranteed a steady clientele. But Noguchi started from a different point of view : “What good is it to heal them since they just fall ill again ? Every time they fall ill, they depend on me.” To him it was absurd. He had discovered that, with Katsugen Undo, there was no more need for someone to heal us. The body doesn't need anyone, it does everything all by itself.

Can we say then, that our ki heals us ?

No, ki doesn't heal us. Ki activates the vital capacities of the individual, but we are already full of ki ! If our body works normally, we need nothing else. If I have some microbes in my body, the body creates a fever and produces home-made antibiotics, antibodies, etc. Noguchi did nothing but activate the life force, when the individual was too weak. What is even more interesting is that the individual can activate his life force on his own, with no need for another person, no need to ask someone else to do it for him.

Does this method work to cure people ?

We are not cured. If we break a bone, once the bone is back in place, what makes it knit back together ? It's not medicine, it's not doctors, and it's not the ki either. Even if we do nothing the bones knit, simply because we are alive ! If we find this capacity again, the whole body will function in this way.

And with cancer, what happens ? Is it more difficult to find a normal function when the cells have gone crazy ?

In the case of cancer, it's a matter of a certain corporal laziness : the body is so damaged that it is near death. But there are people who survive a cancer. How does that happen ? That is not my domain, as I am not a therapist ; I don't attempt to cure people. But it is clear that there are people who haven't allowed their bodies to do their work normally ; for every little problem, they take medicine. Today, that's how it is as well, for giving birth and for pregnancy. From the beginning of life, we are medicalized, hospitalized, even though these are natural events, where life manifests its workings in us.

Can we say then that it is our ideas that have become ill ?

Not only our ideas. It all goes together. But what is new with Noguchi, is the possibility to awaken oneself if one wishes it . It's not a question of awakening each person at any price, nor of proposing a great new method that will cure everyone. It can be useful only to those who wish to go in a certain direction. The others, the lazy ones, don't belong here. In this society, there is already an infinite number of specialists to take care of them : doctors, priests,

psychoanalysts, gurus, etc.

As for me, I prefer to live my own life totally. I prefer that no one need to take care of me.

In our magazine, we have begun a discussion about the ki, about the way each Oriental discipline interprets and uses it. It would be interesting to hear your point of view.

Ki is an untranslatable word today. The ki has a thousand forms ; good ki, bad ki... it is indefinable. When we enter a certain place, with a certain atmosphere, one can say we feel a certain sort of ki. But what seems a pleasant sort of ki to some can be quite disagreeable to others. In Aikido, there is, effectively, the ki of the attack which is to come. Sometimes, walking along the street, we can feel something at the nape of the neck. We turn, see no-one, but then notice, up on a roof, a cat observing us. We have felt the ki of the cat's look. How can we explain that ? We can observe it, but as for explaining it... "To be in harmony with the ki." But which ki ? It's not simple.

I remember one of your conferences where you said that when something hurts it is natural to put one's hand on the painful spot. For example, if we have a headache we naturally put our hand to our head, and that is already a way of using the ki.

Yes, the "laying on of hands" is yuki. When you have a headache, you put on your hand, and the ki circulates. In this way, the ki is concentrated. The ki is already there, it circulates already, but we concentrate it. When we have something wrong somewhere, we lay our hands on the spot without thinking of it, it happens spontaneously. When, on the contrary, we do yuki with someone, it adds a certain concentration, a direction.

So in your school you do yuki with each other ?

When we practice the regenerating movement, we also practice the exercise of yuki. All the same, rather than "doing" yuki, it is a matter of a rediscovery. We come back to something everyone already knows, from when we were children.

The translation of yuki ?

"Joyful ki".

The perception of the sacred dimension



Meditation before the calligraphy "Tenshin",
heart of pure sky.



The bow.

Does Seitai contain a reference, close or remote, to a religious tradition, as does Aikido ?

Neither discipline adheres to a religious belief.

But Ueshiba was so deeply influenced by the sect Omoto-kyo (a Shintoist religious group), that in his thoughts, Aikido and his religious practice are not always easy to distinguish.

But Aikido in itself is not at all religious. It does fit into a sacred tradition, that yes. Ueshiba had without doubt a very strong relation to what is sacred. Master Tsuda also considered the dojo to be a sacred place. After all, what is the dojo ? It's a place where we practice the Way. And the Way is represented in Japanese by the ideogram of Tao. One doesn't practice the Way just anywhere. A place consecrated to that practice is necessary.

But what is the sacred dimension for you ?

I can't give a precise definition. People do say, "The sacred dimension, yes, but religion, no !"
One particularity of our school is that we don't practice before a picture of Ueshiba or of Tsuda, but before a calligraphy. The calligraphy that hangs in this dojo, for example, is "Mu", the Void.

Is it the same in each dojo ?

No. In Toulouse, there is a calligraphy that signifies "The dragon emerges from the pond, where he had been asleep." At Avezzano the calligraphy signifies "Bodai", that is, the state of illumination.

What is the meaning of this custom ?

To practice before a calligraphy creates a different atmosphere than would a picture. Personally, to stand before a calligraphy that signifies "The Void", gives me a feeling of plenitude. To practice before a picture of someone, even if he is the founder of the school, seems to me to indicate a religious attachment or devotion. Ueshiba didn't practice before a photograph. A calligraphy is by nature "void". Also, I find it important that those who come to the dojo to practice, understand the sacred aspect, but at the same time, that there are no gods to venerate here.

We are not concerned with peoples' religious or political beliefs. At the same time, this space is not only physical. It's not a gymnasium, where one trains, sweats, and showers. It is a permanent dojo, where we practice only Aikido and the regenerating movement.

I think that people are also interested in the cultural, philosophical and religious origins of the discipline they practice. In the Chinese tradition, for instance, the classical martial arts were born, or in any case, greatly developed, in the Buddhist and Taoist monasteries.

Everything began in religion. Art in Europe began in religion. Today, it's publicity which gives its' impetus to art. Publicity is the new religion.

Ueshiba himself said that Aikido is not a religion, but that it sheds light on religion, allowing a better understanding of it. In fact, he himself recited the "Norito" before a little altar, either Buddhist or Shintoist, or even before an image of Jesus.

Why do you recite the "Norito", a Shintoist invocation, before each session ?

It is not Shintoist. I don't know what it is. I say that it is not Shintoist because it is something older, something which has since been adopted by Shintoism. Master Ueshiba spoke in this case, of “Kotodama”. What is “Kotodama” ? It's a resonance.

Like a mantra ?

If you like. Shintoism has its source in ancient traditions, in the same way that Christianity has integrated earlier traditions like Easter (originally a Hebrew celebration) and Christmas (the Roman “Saturnalia”, the Celtic and Nordic “Yule”).

What is the “Norito” exactly ?

It's a short text. It takes just a few minutes to recite.

Do you teach the meaning of the words to the participants ?

No. What is important is the vibration, the resonance.

And people accept participating in something they don't understand ?

Yes.

But do you yourself understand the meaning of the text ?

No. It's my inner sensation that is important to me. We do so many things that we feel, but don't understand.

Each person already knows what he needs



Some moments of Aikido at Mas d'Azil (France) during the summer course of previous years.

Of the person who begins to practice a martial art, a great deal of confidence in the master is always required. The disciple supposes that one day he will understand, and that he will



obtain some results. He hopes to see some visible effects, the proof that what he is doing works, even if it's perhaps not immediate.

We always behave according to reason. We do something, then we understand, then we change, etc. But with Master Tsuda we discovered something different. I practiced Aikido with other masters before him, I have known different forms, different schools, but with Tsuda, I discovered the “non-form” : in fact, the form exists, but it is very vague. With Tsuda, the orientation changed. In the practice as he taught it, one comes back to oneself. The sensation of coming back to myself is what led me to abandon the other things I did ; federation Aikido, Jujitsu, etc.

One no longer needs explanations. I think that those who come here feel that. They rediscover sensation, and don't need one to explain that we do this for this reason and that for that reason... They feel, they see, they understand deep inside, they discover ; that's what counts for them.

In any event, today, the consequences of knowledge are harmful. The more things we discover, the more problems are raised. I don't want to say we should know nothing, or learn nothing, but we must have confidence in what is instinctive for humans : in women's intuition when they care for their newborn babies, for example. When a woman takes a newborn into her arms, she doesn't wonder, “Is he hungry, is he wet, is he sleepy ?” She already knows what the baby needs, intuitively. She has always known. When she was a child herself, she didn't need to use that knowledge, but when she becomes a mother, she uses it, that's' all. People do feel these things, but generally this sort of perception stops at the unconscious level, and doesn't emerge into our consciousness. So, officially, we say, “I don't know”, but deep down, we already do know it all.

Individual responsibility

How can you define what Master Tsuda's school proposes ?

Simply, to provide, for the individual, a place where one can discover oneself to be autonomous and responsible. For example, here in Milan, the dojo is named Scuola de la Respirazione , and it is the members who manage it and share all the responsibility. Naturally, there are people who come to the courses looking for solutions to their problems, but that isn't what we propose- just as we don't propose an ideal model that one can copy to lead one's life. That's why our practice of Aikido is suited to individuals who are very different one from another ; it's not at all a matter of “one style, one school”. We are all different individuals who practice together, to return to what we have at the deepest level inside us ; he who comes here, doesn't come to be taken care of by others. He comes to discover something which must be of service to him in his daily life, and which, otherwise, would be of no value.

Some concrete examples, of the way your practice can come into play in daily life ?

The individuals find themselves less stressed ; they take more time for themselves and are more concentrated. Attention, it's not a “miraculous” method, that makes everyone become handsome, intelligent, rich and generous. It can serve you at work, in your relations with others, in your relationship with your own children, but it's not a panacea.

There are those who begin to practice martial arts to become stronger, but then discover something else, other values. One can, for example, learn to give way instead of responding aggressively to an attack, as in Tai Chi. To take the example of Tai Chi Chuan, one lets the adversary "enter" instead of opposing him in a block, and then one goes in the same direction, taking advantage of his movement. This attitude can also be applied to human relationships outside of the gymnasium.

Certainly, instead of having aggressive relationships with others, we can enter into a certain harmony with them, and so find something more authentic. Today, relations among people are too superficial. We don't take care of our children anymore : we put them in child care centers, then in school, then they do their military service... To get back in touch is important- or to return to the pleasure of working, doing work because it interests us. That doesn't mean we should all act in the same way. For each of us, different things are important. We must respect each person's rhythm. Some take a hundred years to discover the simplest things ; others find them right away, but without putting them to use : they hastily discover piles of things, then disappear.

The important thing is that it has been useful to them.

The important thing is that there exist places like this, where those who are seeking something, can come to find it.

But perhaps what is even more important is that, once one has found that something, one begins to give. Once having found it, one can then serve someone else.

I agree, but there are so many people who live only to give : they give, and they give. In the end, the others can't take anymore. It's like feeding a baby : "here's a spoonful for mama, a spoonful for papa, a spoonful for little sister"- the baby finally bursts out crying, he can't take anymore. Parents do that "for our own good". But dictators also do things "for the good of the nation". What can we do for the good of others ? Piles of things.

It's an expression of egocentrism.

Certainly. There are also people who give to others to avoid doing things themselves, or for themselves. I'm rather mistrustful of that. But it's true that when one gives in the right way, a balanced way, we can feel that, and then it's something authentic.

That is why in certain martial arts influenced by Zen Buddhism, one seeks to eliminate the ego...

But it isn't possible to eliminate the ego. One can say that we shouldn't be egoistic, or egocentric. However, the "little me" represents the unity of our personality. The important thing is that it not become the "boss".

Once the session is finished, the participants at the Scuola de la Respirazione set up a large, low table, around which they breakfast together, seated on tatamis on the floor. Although it is now well past 8 o'clock and everyone is wide awake, their voices remain quiet, as if they

wished to postpone for a little bit more, the entry into the daily rhythm and hullabuloo of the town, to keep in themselves for as long as possible, that other rhythm, interior and peaceful.