



In the fall of 2005, [Aikido of Tamalpais](#) simultaneously celebrated its 30th anniversary and lost its lease on the space that had been its only home. One year later finds Tam Dojo relocated and active in Sausalito, still in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California.

In an interview that took place in the spring of 2006, Wendy Palmer sensei, chief instructor along with co-founder George Leonard sensei, reminisces about the extraordinary early days of Tam Dojo.

Wendy Palmer sensei speaks about the early days of Aikido of Tamalpais

Interview made on May 2, 2006 with Michelle Keip
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The Aikido of Tamalpais dojo really started around 1974. I was training in San Francisco with Robert Nadeau Sensei and Frank Doran Sensei and Bill Witt Sensei. A fellow student named Paul Ehrlich was teaching at Tam High School and he asked me if I would come teach an aikido class there. I was really resistant because I think at the time I was a blue belt and it never occurred to me that I would teach. He insisted that there was something I could share with his students. So I decided to do it. I taught one semester with his students, mostly sophomores and juniors. In that class, interestingly enough, there were three people who went on to make careers in the Aikido world: Jason Yin, Robbie Okum, and Lael Keen who went on to become a very strong influence in Ki Society and taught Aikido for many years.



When that semester was finished someone suggested that I teach an adult ed class in the gym at Tamalpais High and I actually was paid a nominal fee to do that. I taught adult ed there for a year or so. In the summers when they were renovating the gym we would train outside in the park. There's a student still training at Aikido of Tamalpais named Robert Gumpert who actually started with me when I was doing the adult ed class at Tam High.

The funding for adult ed dance, meditation and aikido classes stopped so we tried to find another way to make it work. My teacher Bob Nadeau Sensei had come and had helped for a couple of classes so I suggested to my students that they train with him. However, some of the students were intimidated by him and said they preferred to study with me, which I thought was very strange. So I reported that to Nadeau Sensei, that I couldn't keep on going, and he suggested that I look for a space and he would support me in having a sister dojo. George Leonard had stopped by quite a bit as well and given me some support in teaching there, and Richard Heckler had been to class several times as well. We were all training together at Aikido of San

Francisco.

So I asked George and Richard, who were my friends and much more men in the world if they would start a dojo with me and they agreed. I was still coming back into the world from being in the counter-culture. I think that was the roots of my becoming the "mother" of the dojo because they were clear they didn't want to do the paperwork or the bookwork. They would come in and teach but they were very busy in their lives and I had more time in my life.

Richard was friends with Anna Halprin and we arranged with her to use Tamalpa Institute, a beautiful dance studio in the woods, three evenings a week. We had portable mats and in the winter we would put them down in Anna's beautiful dance studio that had been built for her by her husband. In the summer we put the mats on the deck and we would train there. I think altogether there were probably twenty students off and on who were training with us at this time. They were the students who had originated from the adult ed class and then of course people always come and go in Aikido.

Richard found a place in downtown Mill Valley that had been a shop called the Sundancer which was known as a head shop where you could get your bedspreads and incense and those kind of things and it was upstairs in a wonderful old building that had been built by the Ford Company for their cars. I distinctly remember going there to buy incense. It was painted a pea green color and always smelled of incense. George, Richard and I looked at the space and it just seemed like it would work as a dojo so we signed the lease.

I remember signing the lease with great trepidation. I felt so nervous because I was the responsible party in that I had more time to deal with all of the nitty gritty details. It was for at least two and a half years and I remember thinking how will we ever last that long and what will they do to me if we can't keep it. The space cost \$500 a month and that seemed like a huge amount of money. Steve Samuels was part of our aikido community and he and a young man named Peter Lee, who I'd known since he was 9, basically created the dressing rooms and desk and the basic framework for the perimeter of the mats.

We bought mats and officially held the first class in the dojo in September of 1976. We had about 20 students to start with. George, Richard and I each taught two nights a week. It was a very exciting time. With my feeling of the mothering of the dojo, I felt responsible for keeping the dojo clean and I kept the books and handled a lot of the details. George and Richard and I had just received our shodans just a couple of years earlier. I felt very green. In those days there weren't very many shodans.

I knew that I was really a beginner in a lot of ways. So during the first few years I was always happy to invite different teachers because I wanted to learn from them and I thought it would be good for the students to have exposure from other experienced people. Teachers came in and taught for six weeks or a few months. I invited Hoa Nguyen (now Howard Newens). He was wonderful with the bokken. Rick Rowell came and taught for a period of time. Usually they would teach every other Tuesday, alternating with me.

Richard and I had married in 1976 and had a son, Django in 1977. In 1978 Richard and I went to Washington DC to Saotome Sensei's first summer camp. That's the first time I met Ginger Ikeda, Patty, Terry Dodson, Kevin Choate and a number of people who later became part of the core of ASU. At that point there was no ASU. Saotome Sensei was teaching and he had a number of dedicated students. Actually, the first time I saw him was in 1975, when he came through Aikido of San Francisco. Normally Bob Nadeau wasn't around when different teachers would come through. He definitely had his own autonomy in that world, and yet he actually invited Saotome Sensei. I remember Nadeau sensei introducing Saotome Sensei which is very rare and saying "this was my favorite teacher when I was at Hombu dojo". I was very impressed by Saotome Sensei that time I first saw him.

So we went to the first summer camp and of course it was an amazing experience. I connected with Terry Dobson and told him if he ever came out to California he would be welcome to teach at the dojo. And about a year later he appeared, driving his red truck from New York and basically transplanting himself in San Francisco.

I started sharing half my classes with him. Terry's aikido was amazing, as everyone knows. He was the only westerner who'd really spent extended time with O'Sensei. I was always curious to talk to somebody who would be able to tell me what O'Sensei said. Terry spoke Japanese and I didn't speak Japanese nor did most of the westerners I knew. Others talked about how amazing O'Sensei was but they couldn't tell me what he said. So I asked Terry "what did O'Sensei say?" Terry said, while making great kokyu gestures, "all O'Sensei said was love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love." Now Terry was incredibly smart and articulate. I expected him to tell me the special aikido secret. Love was the secret obviously, but nonetheless I was expecting at least a couple of sentences.

We learned a lot from Terry and there were some challenges, too. Since it was the first time we had four people instead of three at the kyu tests, sometimes it was more difficult to come to an agreement. With four people, you can have two and two and get stuck. Before with three of us, if two agreed on something the third would always just go along. Terry taught at our dojo for a couple of years.

We had a student named Steve Ives who'd been to Japan and met Steven Seagal. He said this is a really amazing teacher and I'd love to bring him in to do a workshop. I said, "OK" because we want any amazing teacher. George and Richard were out of town the first time that Seagal sensei came in to the dojo. By the time he was actually scheduled to come I'd heard his reputation as being severe. I'd even heard from one sensei that he had hurt students. So when we were introduced I said to him, "Now Sensei I want you to know that these students are raised in traditional Japanese etiquette and if there's any way that they offend you at all you should take it out on me and not them." I wanted to be sure that nothing happened to any of the students. He said, "Oh, I never hurt anybody". And I said, "Well, your reputation precedes you".

During the workshop he was very powerful and very fluid and had tremendous ki. He threw with tremendous power and I never saw him hurt anybody. He would throw me very hard and look down at me and say, "See, you're ok aren't you?" I would feel my teeth and say, "My teeth are still in my head. I must be ok." That became our little joke.

He taught off and on and stayed around for about 2 months. It was an interesting time because Terry Dobson was still around and sometimes when I was teaching on Tuesday night Bruce Klickstein sensei would come to the dojo. I think he came to check out Terry and Seagal sensei. It was a very intense time if all three of them showed up. I was so nervous about who to ask to teach that I ended up teaching. The three of them would train in the corner or sometimes they would watch, but a couple of times they were on the mat together and that was quite nerve-racking. The power those men had!



At one point Seagal sensei suggested that he could bring Abe Sensei to Tam. He had studied with him when he was in

Japan. Abe Sensei had been O'Sensei's student and also had taught him in calligraphy. Seagal sensei invited Abe Sensei and we offered a workshop called "The Sword and the Pen". It was a remarkable weekend. Seagal sensei taught bokken, and Abe Sensei taught calligraphy and aikido. Abe Sensei did some calligraphy just as a demonstration, but I managed to take one out of the pile he was throwing away and had it framed.

He taught us the breathing that he had been taught to do: you take your breath in, drop it into your abdomen, you hold it, then you pick up the brush, then you make the character, you put the brush down and then you let your breath out. I remember a student asking him what happens if you let your breath out when you're making your character and he said, "then your character dies." He said the holding of the breath is the building of the energy within your body that gives the brush its life to bring life to the character. I began to practice that breath and continue to do so to this day.

He also told us amazing O'Sensei stories and he taught us his remarkable Aikido. His Aikido was so different from anything I'd seen. I thought of him as a Japanese E.T. He had these big eyes and he was luminous. I couldn't really see his Aikido but I could feel it.

During the workshop, in the middle of Saturday afternoon, we were practicing bokken and suddenly in the doorway there appeared a silhouette of a Japanese man with a topknot wearing a blue kimono and hakama. Everybody stopped and turned. I was standing over by the side of the window and when Steve Seagal sensei turned, he was near me and said, "oh dear". I said, "What do you mean, "oh dear"? Steve was not the type to be intimidated easily. And he said, "He won't hurt anyone but me." And I said, "Well, that's ok". Not that I wanted him to be hurt, but I just didn't want any of our students to get hurt.

I believe his name was Takahashi Sensei and he was an Iaido teacher Seagal sensei had studied with. Bruce Klickstein had also studied with him, he was quite well known. I later discovered that he was also a wonderful artist who painted mystical pictures. To my mind he was a very scary guy and there were all kinds of stories about things he might have done in Japan and he had the kind of energy that made the stories seem possible. He looked like Toshiro Mifune, something right out of a samurai movie. Steve asked him if he wanted to teach and he said "no". He didn't speak any English but he got on the mat and bowed deeply to O'Sensei and said we should keep training. So we continued with our bokken practice. He would go around and stand next to someone and grunt and slap his hara and we would bow to him. Then he would walk over to the next pair and repeat the same thing. I remember going out to lunch with Takahashi Sensei, Seagal sensei, and Richard. I was very nervous that someone was going to make fun of him because he looked like something out of a samurai movie. As I said, he had a topknot and was wearing a hakama. Thankfully no one did. We had a very nice and intense lunch. It was great to see Seagal sensei have a kind of humility and respect around somebody. I enjoyed seeing his appreciation of someone that he saw as a teacher. His relationship with Abe sensei was more gentle but also very respectful.

At the very end of the day we all got to sit in Abe sensei's seat and make our final character using his brush and his fancy ink. Usually we just had practice ink and regular small pieces of paper. At the end we did it on his big piece of paper. I remember when Takahashi Sensei sat in Abe sensei's seat, he pulled open his gi top and said something in Japanese. Steve translated it to say he wanted us to watch his breathing. He took the breath and set it into his hara, reached over, picked up the brush, did the character and the rice paper just shriveled up into this little ball. Then he put the brush down and exhaled. He very carefully picked up the rice paper and spread it out. Then he held it up and he was smiling, he was so proud of his character. Abe Sensei was very polite and appreciating, while the rest of us were quite nervous.

That was an amazing seminar with the three different energies of these senseis, Abe Sensei, Steve Seagal Sensei and Takahashi Sensei. What a gift ... and I knew it, although I was still so green I couldn't absorb it at the level I could now. But it couldn't have occurred these days, either, the way politics are now I think it just couldn't happen.

Nick Scoggin came to the dojo with Steve Seagal and remained after he left. Nick was a fast and strong aikidoist. He taught every other Tuesday night for almost a year. Another teacher we invited was Koichi Barrish. He came for two seminars and he was always an interesting guy, quite amazing. He had tremendous ki. I asked him how he got the feeling in his hands and fingertips, and he said he practiced throwing an 8 lb. shot put up and catching it with his fingertips, then moving up to 16 lb. He had tremendous energy in his fingertips.



Later, of course, we started having Ikeda Sensei and Saotome Sensei come on a regular basis. It was a blessing and a gift to have these teachers come and support us and bring their amazing teaching. At that point, we were still part of the Aikido Association of Northern California. Before that I think there was only USAF. Now, of course, there are many different affiliations.

In the late 90's I went to Japan. I had seen Takeda Sensei in Canada, and spent some time in Japan training with him. He also came to do a seminar at our dojo.

Saito Sensei, Chico Xerri from Australia, Kevin Choate Sensei and Tres Hofmeister Sensei have all given seminars at our dojo. There was a fellow named Gil Evans who came from AAA - from Toyoda Sensei. He taught off-and-on on Saturdays for George for a long time. He definitely had a different way of teaching.

People have often said that training at Tam is like training at a seminar because your training partners feel so different -

different styles of ukemi, different ways of attacking, different ways of throwing. I think Tam's history has been tremendously enriched by the influence of all these different teachers coming from different places, and also by the many students who come with different approaches to the art. The feeling at Tam has always been that everyone can train the way they are.

Having a basic criteria for kyu tests was a challenge in the later years at Tam. George, Richard and I weren't attending each other's classes that much any more. We had our own lives and we started evolving differently in our own bodies. So when students took kyu tests, for example, they had to make a decision how to do ikkyo. As teachers, each of us did ikkyo differently. The joke was that they might do iriminage for me, ikkyo for George and shihonage for Richard. Sometimes students would say, "This is the third way I've been shown to do this technique, which is the right way?" and we'd always say, "There is no right way. You need to learn all three."

I think for beginning students it was more challenging to train at Tam because there was no right way to do it. I used to say that in the end this would make them much more flexible, and be better aikido students. It would help them be able to go to a seminar and learn and absorb from any teacher that they wanted to. So we really had a very wide variety of - I'll call it styles, I really don't like the word - different ways of doing Aikido at the dojo. I think it's been a great gift to most of the students that they have more flexibility and can absorb from different teachers.

Some of the changes that occurred: Let's see, I don't remember which year, but Richard had moved to Petaluma. He started a dojo there, and it became more and more difficult for him to commute and to hold both places. So he decided to just teach at his dojo up in Petaluma and to stop teaching at Tam. George and I each taught three classes then. I took on more responsibility at the dojo. Being the mother, I had mostly taken care of all the domestic issues, scheduling, keeping it clean, doing the books, interior decorating. George & Richard had been more involved the sort of "political" part, taking care of the dojo was out in the world in relationship with other teachers and dojos. So I started to take on more of that.

Growing up in Aikido, my original teachers, Nadeau Sensei, Doran Sensei and Witt Sensei were what I'd call very yang. They were very powerful, very amazing, very strong men. Nadeau and Doran Sensei were my greatest influences in the beginning. They were ex-cops, marines.

When the Doshu came in 1973, it was the first time I ever saw Aikido that had a balance between yin and yang. It was the first time I saw Aikido and thought I could shape my body like that and I wouldn't lose my femininity. It was a different kind of power. Later I saw Saotome Sensei. He had an incredible balance between yin and yang, and I realized I could really watch and take on the energy the way he ran it and I would be able to retain my femininity. Whereas before, I felt like if I was going to continue to train with my teachers I was going to have to grow hair on my chest (laughs).

Over a period of time I had been connecting very strongly to Ikeda Sensei and going to more camps with Ikeda Sensei and Saotome Sensei. I began to be more deeply influenced, by Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei. We were fortunate to be able to have them come to Tam every year for seminars. My connection with them became stronger, I'd always been impressed by Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei. I realized that I was really starting to feel like their student. Then at one point I had a conversation with Doran Sensei about my future in Aikido and he suggested that I affiliate with Saotome Sensei. "Because the truth is," he said, "that Saotome Sensei is really your teacher, you're following him, not me." Doran Sensei had been very gracious when AANC got big and went to three divisions in inviting us to be a part of his division, and he was being very gracious again here, encouraging me to align to Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei.

So I spoke to Saotome Sensei, and his first comment was, as I knew it would be, "You can't leave Doran Sensei." And I said, "Well, it was his idea." And so it was that we affiliated with ASU.

That was a huge change for the dojo, and it was a wonderful change. We started learning ASU weapons, and I got to be a beginner again. It was very nice to feel I had teachers who were really attentive and looking out for me; who were willing to give me some direction and support. AANC had always felt like "we're all in this together," we were all very friendly, but I didn't feel the kind of direction and support that I got particularly from Saotome Sensei. It was actually the first time for me to formally have a Japanese teacher. Before my teachers had always been gaijin, westerners. I remember having a conversation with a friend of mine who had early on affiliated with a Japanese teacher. My friend said, "Oh, you don't have to do that. We don't have to be under these Japanese teachers." And I said, "Well, you see, I've spent 25 years not being under a Japanese teacher and now I'm ready."

So Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei have been more formally holding the space for us and supporting us and looking out for us for the last - I think about - eight years now. I'm very grateful for my connection with them and the support and the teaching. It feels nice to be connected, in this way, with a teacher who trained so closely with O'Sensei. I have always had a very personal feeling about O'Sensei. As you know, there's a picture of him in every room of my house. I consider him to be my teacher, even though I never met him. I'm very, very affected by him. So it's great to be training with Saotome Sensei who had such a strong experience and was affected so deeply by him. He's able to bring through a certain aspect of O'Sensei's teaching that I resonate with tremendously.



Saotome Sensei's feel is really remarkable to me. Something that I always feel when he interacts with me on the mat is this feeling energetically, that we're in it together. I never feel he tries to dominate me - ever. It's such an amazing experience. Even when he generates a lot of power it feels very clear that the message is - we're in this together. I believe that that's really part of what O'Sensei's intention was - that we are training together. Dominating each other, even if we do it beautifully or fluidly, is very different than being connected in a larger environment together. So, I'm very grateful to Saotome Sensei's teaching and his "feel" to know that's possible.

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