

Passing of Shimamoto Katsuyuki Shihan

Shimamoto Katsuyuki

1937 to 2025

Aikido 8 Dan Shihan

Dojo Cho Toyonaka Shosenji Dojo

Master Shosenji Temple

Patron Aikido Shoryukai

I was on a trip to China when I learnt that our teacher Shimamoto Katsuyuki Shihan had died on 11 May 2025. Managing to breach the firewall to access social media had been somewhat fortuitous, but the outcome was receiving this devastating news. Shihan was of advanced years and his health had been in decline, but it still came as something of a surprise.

I had visited Shosenji, only a couple of months earlier and Sensei was well enough to take class and was in good spirits. I had another trip planned to Osaka, and was looking forward to showing him photos I had taken during a tour to the Shaolin Temple and the Longmen Grottoes that featured thousands of Buddhist statues carved into the river bank.

Stuck in my hotel room in China, my thoughts turned to Sensei and the time we had spent together.

Visiting Japan for the first time in 1993, I trained a few times at the Tenshin Dojo in Osaka, it being the only aikido dojo advertising in the English newsletter, Kansai Timeout, (bear in mind we're talking pre internet). Anyway, I met an English guy there who offered to take me to a dojo another stop further along the Hankyu Line, located at a Zen Temple, the teacher was a Zen Master whose son had recently returned from Hombu Dojo, where he had been a live in student for a couple of years. Say what? It sounded too good to be true.

I didn't know it at the time, but going to Shosenji turned out to be one of those sliding doors moments in which your life changes.

Shosenji Dojo turned out exactly as promised, the atmosphere was fantastic and welcoming, with Shimamoto Sensei giving a dynamic class. I remember distinctly being invited for some drinks with Sensei and his family afterwards. Fortuitously, the next class I attended coincided with an after training beer party in which blue plastic mats were laid out on the tatami and beer served on tap. Very professional.

The beer might have been talking, but I got ahead of myself and asked Sensei if he would like to come for a visit and teach in Australia. He agreed. More importantly, his wife, Mama san agreed too.

The following year, true to his word, Sensei made his first visit to Australia, Accompanied by Mama san, his son Tamayuki, and a group of students. They took a great seminar on the Gold Coast, socialised with the locals and made lasting friendships.

Sensei and Mama san were to make many visits over the following 25 years or so. Exactly how many times, I can't really remember. In addition to taking aikido seminars we would take side trips to various places, Noosa, Fraser Island, Tasmania, Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef. During this time Sensei was also busy teaching elsewhere abroad: Europe, Canada, Israel and Singapore. I was always aware that in other countries Sensei attracted big attendances, rock star like, fitting of his status. Whereas in Australia it was more low key, given our relative numbers of students. We had the privilege of having Sensei unplugged. This never bothered him, he was happy teaching anywhere.

On one of his early trips, we went to Warwick, a town a couple of hours drive inland from Brisbane. Not the outback by any stretch, but the countryside was pretty removed from downtown Osaka. Sensei taught a class at the local aikido club with a dojo which was literally a tin shed.

Every Japanese place has its own meibutsu, something it is famous for. I remember Mama san asking what Warwick's meibutsu was and being lost for words. Hoons in hot cars doing laps of the main street perhaps? Anyway Warwick obviously left a lasting impression on Sensei. 30 years later I'd turn up to training at Shosenji and he would make a point of introducing me to the class never failing to mention how I had taken him to Warwick.

On the flip side, I was to visit Osaka and stay at Shosenji many times. I recall the first time I stayed there not knowing what to expect. Shosenji being a Zen Temple and all, I went to bed half expecting that everyone would be up at 4am for Zazen or Prayers. It was nothing like that. Everyone woke up at a civilised hour and gathered for breakfast in the kitchen and Mama san's ritual viewing of the NHK Morning Serial on TV.

From the outset, I always felt as though I was part of the family.

I became sick a few times while staying there, and Mama san would take care of me with an assortment of genki medicines until I got back on my feet.

Naoko and I also stayed together at Shosenji several times. On our daughter Emiko's first trip to Japan our first stop was Osaka where we stayed at Shosenji.

Shihan and Mama san attracted people, and there always seemed to be something happening. There'd be some project in the garden, building a new shrine, or a kid's festival. Every April, Shosenji would host a Hanami party under the cherry tree next to the temple which would attract an eclectic group from near and far.

Groups of us came from Australia to attend 30th and 40th Anniversaries of Shosenji Dojo.

To be honest, I have trouble adequately describing Sensei's aikido. He was clearly influenced by his teacher Osawa Kisaburo but unique just the same. Perhaps the most striking thing was his posture, even right to the end he stood upright and perfectly straight.

When teaching, he always had a theme he wanted to explore, and expressed it with large circular flowing movements, sometimes interspersed with speed and atemi. Taking effective ukemi for him, could be challenging. It was like back in the days when he would give you a lift somewhere in his car flying around the back streets of Toyonaka, you just strapped yourself in and hung on.

Mama San and Sensei were an inseparable team, she kept him grounded and was his number one supporter. They travelled the world together and Mama san would be at the side of the mat, without fail watching on at Sensei's seminars. I initially thought she might be bored and tried organise other things for her to do while Sensei was teaching, but it became apparent that she wanted to be with him and supporting the training.

Mama san passed away in 2019.

As it turned out, this was to be followed relatively quickly by the Covid Pandemic which meant that training and international travel were suspended. A pretty tough and no doubt lonely time for Sensei.

I made it back to Japan just as it started to open up in September 2021. Pretty much my first port of call was Shosenji. I was happy to find Sensei teaching and that he had a support network in place to take care of him. There were a few changes however, the pace was slower and he spoke more softly. As I mentioned before, he did have health problems that necessitated some extended stays in hospital. All in all though, he was remarkably active and alert.

I started Bayside Budokai as an independent Aikikai Dojo in 2007 with Sensei's support. Over time other clubs commenced on the Gold Coast, Brisbane Northside, and Canberra. In 2024 we were honoured when Sensei agreed to our request to form Aikido Shoryukai Australia to provide some structure around our relationship with him, Shosenji Dojo and Aikikai Headquarters.

This was along the lines of other Shoryukai groups that had been established over the years in Europe.

We were unable to attend Shihan's funeral but did manage to arrange a small gathering to pay our respects and gratitude to Sensei in our own way. We conducted a training session in which we displayed his calligraphy for Fudoshin and reflected on some of his favourite themes that he had imparted to us over the years.

I visited Osaka about a month afterwards. I arrived at Shosenji Dojo for the regular Saturday evening class, with some trepidation not knowing what to expect.

I arrived a bit early and was surprised to find that the dojo was already full, with Tamayuki Sensei teaching a class for a group visiting from Singapore. It was explained that we were still in a period of 49 days after Shihan's passing, in which according to Buddhist tradition, the soul of the deceased person is in transition to the afterlife. So In a sense he was very much still present. After training, Tamayuki Sensei led us to the temple where a memorial to Sensei was in place. Tamayuki Sensei recited prayers on our behalf and we each offered incense in Shihan's memory.

I couple of days later I returned to the temple alone and took a few moments to say a final goodbye and thank you.

With Shihan's passing change is inevitable at Shosenji, but thankfully we have Tamayuki Sensei and Shihan's other senior students to continue to guide us.