

Ueshiba Morihei Sensei Hitting Instructor

Sadaharu Oh finds out what "Ma" is

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Now that baseball season has started, I'm reminded of the following anecdote from the [autobiography](#) of [Oh Sadaharu](#), a legendary Japanese baseball player who still holds the record for career home runs with 868 (sorry, [Barry](#)).

Oh is well-known for his [Flamingo Batting Stance](#), which had him [coiled and standing on one leg](#) at the plate (now with [flipbook video](#)). Less well-known is the story behind the stance, which was [influenced by Aikido](#).

In this excerpt, Oh tells how he and Hiroshi Arakawa, his batting coach, came to consult with [Ueshiba Sensei](#) for the first time:

“ One day - or rather late one night - Arakawa-san confronted me as I was about to retire. "A discovery!" he said. He was waving a book in his hand. It was by yet another actor, the well-known [Kikugoro](#). The celebrated performer had disclosed in his book that he had tried to incorporate Aikido into his own training. Specifically, what he sought from Aikido was the idea of [ma](#), the space and/or time "in between."

"This," Arakawa-san said, was the "essense of what we are looking for. All that remains is to apply it. Now you may wonder how this is to be done? Here we have a chance, because we have a living example to learn from."

He had me read a chapter of the book. This excerpt told of Kikugoro's visit to the great Aikido Master Ueshiba Morihei Sensei. Kikugoro waited around and waited around until the Sensei would speak to him. He asked, "Sir, what is ma?"

To this, the great teacher coolly replied, "If that's all you've got to ask me, you must be a lousy actor."

I was puzzled. I handed the book back to Arakawa-san, with no idea as to what I was supposed to have drawn from it. He could barely contain himself.

"Can you imagine a guy saying something like that to Kikugoro!"

I nodded, still uncomprehending. "So?"

"So, the Sensei is a living master. He is there for us as well as Kikugoro. We will go to him."

The first time I saw him, he was approaching eighty. His appearance and manner, though, were vigorous. He looked more like a fifteenth-century village elder than a master of the martial arts - that is, until he began to perform the movements he had perfected over a lifetime. When he finished his session, we spoke to him. It was Arakawa-san's turn to play the straight man.

"What is ma?" he asked, deliberately echoing Kikugoro. But the Sensei answered him differently.

"Ma exists because there is an opponent."

"I understand," Arakawa-san said. This seemed to jibe with something he was thinking. He took me by the elbow.

"You see," he said to me, "in the case of baseball it would be the pitcher and batter. The one exists for the other; they are caught, both, in the ma of the moment. The pitcher tries in that instance of time and space to throw off a batter's timing; the batter tries to outwit the pitcher. The two are struggling to take advantage of the ma that exists between them. That's what makes baseball so extraordinarily difficult."

The Sensei looked at both of us as if we were crazy men. His eyes seemed to darken, and he turned them on Arakawa-san. He remained silent for a moment, then said:

"I will tell you something, you're a lousy teacher!"

I tried not to smile as I saw Arakawa-san lower his head, bowed with almost the same words that had been heaped on Kikugoro.

"You see, you're no good when thinking of ma," Ueshiba Sensei continued. "Ma is there because the opponent is there. If you don't like that situation, all you have to do is eliminate the ma between you and the opponent. That is the real task. To eliminate the ma. Make the opponent yours. Absorb and incorporate his thinking into your own. Become one with him so you know him perfectly and can be one step ahead of his every movement."

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