

# THE KIAI

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## --IN LOVING MEMORY-- MORIHIRO SAITO SHIHAN 1928-2002

Morihiro Saito Shihan was born in March of 1928. He began his study of Aikido under the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba, in Iwama in the summer of 1946. When he passed at approximately 2 a.m. on May 13, 2002, Saito Shihan, 9th Dan, was the Ibaragi Iwama Dojo Cho and Keeper of the Aiki Shrine.

Bill Witt Shiban, head of the Takemusu Aikido Association, began his study of Aikido in the late 1960s. During that time he met and then studied with Saito Sensei in Japan. Witt Sensei's association with Saito Sensei and the Iwama dojo led a number of Bay Area Aikidoists to study with Saito Sensei in Iwama.



Iwama is a small town located approximately 2 hours northeast of Tokyo in Ibaraki-Ken (Ibaraki Prefecture). The Founder moved to Iwama before the end of World War II. There he built the Aiki Jinja (Aiki Shrine).

In the 1970s Saito Sensei came to the United States and taught seminars here. By 2001, he had given over 300 seminars throughout the country. Some of his first seminars were held at the Aikido Institute which he always referred to as the OAK-U-RANDO DOJO. A picture of Sensei teaching one of his first seminars at the dojos was taken when the dojo was located on College Avenue, the picture now hangs above the main bulletin board near the front desk.

Over time a number of students from the Oakland dojo went to Iwama to further their study of Aikido. Many of these students became teachers and are now leaders in the Aikido community.

This issue of the KIAI is dedicated to the memory of the man who was our teacher for so many years.

*We will always hold him in our hearts.*

### MY IWAMA TEACHER

In these days of instant gratification and learning for the sake of professional development, it is easy to lose sight of a time-honored way of receiving an education: the relationship between master and apprentice. In Europe, Asia, and in early America, the apprentice was bound to the master for a period of time, during which the master promised to teach the secrets of the trade. The apprentice usually lived with the master and became part of the family and shared in all of its joys and sorrows.

In Asia, the apprenticeship might be more open-ended. This would usually be the case when learning an art, the study of which might be life long, for personal or cultural development and not necessarily for a job skill. It might also be a bit more informal, with the master accepting a student/apprentice on an on-going basis and not bound for a set time. In this case, the apprentice literally gives himself to the master for training. This might be the case when entering into training for religious development or classical martial arts training. The bond developed between teacher and student during this time can develop into a life-long relationship, which is not easily broken.

It is unusual today, especially in the United States, for someone to say that they have a teacher and have studied with him for a long time. When people ask me about my Aikido, for instance, and I mention my teacher, and that I still consider him my teacher after 33 years, I often see raised eyebrows and a somewhat incredulous look. "It must be a cult," they think.

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I began Aikido in 1967, while O-Sensei was still alive. In fact he was the first Aikido person I ever saw, and I began Aikido because of him. How could someone resist the opportunity to learn from the founder of an art? Although I trained, in the beginning, daily at the old, wooden Tokyo dojo, I never really considered him my direct teacher. To me he was beyond that. He was The Founder. I always considered it a privilege to take a class from him and to be thrown by him. With many instructors at the dojo, I never thought of entering into a master/apprentice relationship, although others did. It was a stimulating atmosphere to be able to take classes from so many skilled Aikido practitioners—each with their own personalities and approaches. There was a change coming for me, however.

Shortly after I began, a friend in the dojo suggested that I attend the Sunday class. He felt the instructor might have an approach in which I might be interested. The first Sunday that I attended, Saito Sensei taught a class that was unusual, because it was so ordinary. I left thinking that my friend had perhaps misspoke. At that time I was training six days a week and, as a westerner, used Sunday as a day of rest. However, I decided to give the Sunday class a chance and rearranged my training schedule. From then on, I trained regularly on Sunday mornings and have had a fondness for Sunday morning training ever since.

Gradually, Saito Sensei would come around during practice and give correction. Occasionally he would even speak to me. I began to see distinctiveness in his approach and this resonated with me. It was not only the effortlessness with which he would execute techniques, but it was his patience and willingness to teach us beginners. He taught us techniques that were deceptively simple to watch, and showed us why it was important to do the technique in a specific manner time after time. At times he would stop the class and point out why a foot had to be at a particular point because the rest of the technique would not be successful otherwise. I was being initiated into the mysteries of a martial art.

One day it occurred to me that I was seeing something special. Occasionally, O-Sensei used to appear at the Sunday class and Saito Sensei was always deferential to him. He was respectful and became the student, when the Founder wished to lead the class. I was watching a master/apprentice, or what we call now a student/teacher relationship, in action. There was clearly a bond between the two men based on a long-term relationship. There also was obvious respect between them that flowed both ways.

About five months after the Founder passed away I returned to Japan and again took up training in the Tokyo dojo. Saito Sensei was still teaching the Sunday class. I was surprised that he recognized me. In class, for the last few minutes he was now teaching the jo. This was something I

had never seen before in Tokyo, since the Founder had forbidden the use of weapons by students training there. One day after practice I asked Sensei, if it would be possible to go to Iwama occasionally and take instruction from him there. We agreed on a day that was convenient to him, since he worked 24 hour shifts at the railroad several days a week and was not available on those days.

I went out to Iwama alone. I arrived at the station and did not know where the dojo was. Like all first-timers since, I took a cab. It was a short ride. We went to the edge of town. The pavement ended at Onuma's store and we were on dirt roads. The dojo looked almost the same as today. The trees, of course, were smaller. There were two lines of cherry trees at the jinja. The blooms would be a magnificent sight in the spring. However, the town had not yet grown up around it. With the dojo on the right, and the Aiki Jinja on the left, the road beyond led to open fields and pig farms. The aroma of the neighborhood was decidedly rural.

The entrance on the opposite side of the property, where the stone gate is, was the only side of the property to have houses. Hans Goto, during his stay, met a long time resident who lived in one of the houses. He told Goto Sensei that prior to the building of the dojo by O-Sensei, no one wanted to cross the property, which was wooded, because of the ghosts. The old man, who settled on the property, he told Goto Sensei, tamed them down. The deshi, when I was there used to swap ghost stories often and spending the night in the dojo alone was an interesting experience.

For those who have been to Iwama, next to the dojo was a run-down wooden building, now replaced by the Red Room, that was half-used for storage. The other half, at the time, was occupied by a 23 year old deshi of O-Sensei, and now of Saito Sensei, who had the unnerving trait of looking at new students and visitors as fresh meat. There was a bell in the room, and it was his job to attend to O-Sensei, when required. Outside his door was a makiwara. He hit it 50 times, when entering and leaving his room at any time. The shokudo, the kitchen, was almost the same as today—the same furniture is still there. It did not have a shower or hot water available. There was no heat. The bath was bamboo fired and only available to use, when several people were “in residence.” The shokudo and the shower area in the dojo were built by O-Sensei's deshi.

The Iwama dojo had a reputation in Tokyo as a tough place to train. The students trained hard and were uncompromising to newcomers, so it was said. Saito Sensei seemed to be a friendly man, however, and seemed open to having visitors. At that time the Iwama dojo was almost deserted. Because of the Founder's passing five months before, the long time regular students were not training. Saito Sensei was teaching regularly there and only had three students, all

young 3rd dans, plus a small children's class. There were two or three others who came to train sporadically. I arrived, I admit, with a certain naivete.

I went to Sensei's house to announce myself. He seemed glad to see me and we went to the dojo. After explaining a few rules, we trained. I was still a first kyu at the time, hoping to take a shodan test soon in Tokyo, and the other three students were third dans. It would be easy to guess who bounced the most that day. Class was intense and enjoyable. I earned my first "dame," a sign that the instruction had now become intensely personal. After class we went to the shokudo. Sitting around the table, Saito Sensei introduced me to the others. He introduced the live-in deshi, "This is Inagaki, 3rd dan Aikido, 8th dan fighting." The other two students, Kawakami and Komatsusaki did not laugh at the joke. I was being measured, I thought. Later, I found out that Inagaki was working his way through college as a bodyguard.

We spent the rest of the evening getting to know each other. My Japanese, I am sure, was barely understandable, and got more so as the evening went on. Still I am glad that I took an early interest in the language. Later, I learned the three students had sensitive noses to visitors who were interested in "making a name." Saito Sensei was bemused at their evaluation. During training, he usually tolerated a certain amount of attitude adjustment. No one was seriously hurt physically. Egos were another matter. Anyone who was there to learn and trained hard were helped by the deshi.

Later when I was considered "a regular," I noticed that newcomers and students on gashukus were treated with more latitude. The regular students were an inner circle and Saito Sensei was very critical during practice. Not even the smallest error in technique seemed to escape him. Several times, I am sure, he corrected my practice without seeing what I was doing.

The more I went out to Iwama, the more I wanted to stay for awhile. I still had commitments in Tokyo, but my schedule was flexible. One day a friend and I had gone to Iwama and Komatsuzaki-san asked us to help with his house-raising. We went to the site and a goodly number of local friends were there as well. The labor was quickly divided up. The men did the heavy lifting, and the ladies prepared food. Saito Sensei pitched in, as did the rest of us, under the direction of the master builder—an old man who knew every detail. We lifted beams and walls for a traditional style house. We framed the house in a day. Later as we celebrated our labors, I was struck with the similarity to American "barn raisings" of the 19th century and by everyone's cooperation and willingness to help. From this experience came another observation. Saito Sensei was a very known and respected member of the community. I found out later that he was very active in civic affairs, one duty being to run a polling place for local elections. He was active in solving

local problems and arranged quite a few marriages.

I went to Iwama more often and began to stay the night. There was evening practice, but Saito Sensei would have practice in the morning for his deshi. We would train taijutsu, and then he would ask me to go to the shokudo. He closed the doors to the main entrance of the dojo and I could hear weapons practice. Since I was just shown the basic jo katas, I was not invited to watch or take part. I had to practice kata on my own.

One afternoon, he was drilling me on the jo kata. We were outside among the azaleas and, when I finished, he asked me why I wanted to come out here to train. While O-Sensei was alive, a several westerners had visited Iwama so I was not the first. However, I told Saito Sensei that I wished to become his student and I wanted to train at a place that was the center of Aikido. He seemed surprised and pleased at that. He never had a foreign deshi, and Iwama, as a farm town, was quite a conservative place. I was an unusual person to his family and the neighborhood. At this time, interaction of foreigners with Japanese, especially at a rural family level, was rare. For the remainder of my stay in Japan on that trip, I visited Iwama weekly and stayed for several days at a time.

Sensei was an accomplished cook and loved to display his skill. Several generations of deshi have found his handmade soba and garlic-accentuated gyoza (pot stickers) have spoiled them for mere restaurant food. We were sitting in the shokudo, one day just after practice, and Sensei asked me what I had been doing in Tokyo. I told him that I had just been to an interesting restaurant, where I had chicken sashimi. He asked me, if I liked it, and I said I did. Without a word, he got up and left. In a few minutes he was back with holding a live rooster, a shamu, which he said was one of O-Sensei's chickens. Within 15 minutes we had chicken sashimi. Life was certainly more basic in the country, but I really think the rooster had been crowing too early for him. He noted early on that cooking was not a talent of mine. He always joked with me that he lived to eat, and I ate to live. He had a wonderful sense of humor. It made it a pleasure to be around him.

Two years passed before I took time from my work to visit Japan again. In that time I was training in the United States and working on the jo kata practices my teacher had shown me. I wrote him asking to visit Iwama again, and was surprised when a return letter showed up quickly inviting me to come. Several years later, on a subsequent trip, Saito Sensei confided to me, when I left the first time, that he thought he would never see me again. He thought that perhaps his initial instruction in jo was muri, a wasted effort. This trip seemed to change the relationship between us. I had shown a willingness to make an effort to travel a long distance, and he noted that I had kept up my practice on my own.

## A FEW MOMENTS WITH SENSEI

I was only able to take about three weeks on this trip. When I arrived, Sensei told me that there would be a full program. The first week consisted of learning the 20 jo suburi. The second week consisted of the sword suburi and a number of sword taking techniques. I had private instruction from Sensei in the morning, noon practice on my own, and regular evening practice. Some of the senior students had started to filter back. Evening practices were better attended. I still was not allowed to see certain practices. At the end of the trip Saito Sensei had me test for nidan. I must say, he was magnanimous in his evaluation. Trying to appear skilled in about 35 just-learned techniques in two weeks was a daunting proposition for me. At the end he gave me two scrolls he had written attesting that I had received jo and sword suburi techniques. He said it was an old tradition, and was it the first time he did so.

Several years and trips passed and I received 4th dan from Saito Sensei. This time we had a long talk in the dojo. He carefully explained that I was now not a member of the dojo anymore. He wanted me to go out and find my own aikido. Of course, he continued, I was welcome at Iwama any time. I was just not a member of the dojo. In class there were no more corrections and dames. Although our relationship had changed, he was still my teacher, and I was still the student. We both understood that.

At this same time also, there was a noticeable change in Sensei. He would admonish us to train carefully and take care of newer students. This change in training came about, because of a recent death of a Japanese aikido student, during practice, in Southern Japan, which affected him greatly. He did not place limitations on deshi, when we trained with each other as peers, but his time.

One day, Sensei outlined to us how he expected us to guide and protect junior students in training. The next day a college aikido club arrived for a three day gashuku, and I was training with the captain. This captain was being overly severe to the newer members, and I thought I would give him a taste of the same. Saito Sensei watched me for a minute and walked by saying, sotto voce, "What was I talking to you about yesterday?" He had a very high expectation of behavior of the Iwama deshi. That mild rebuke made a huge impression on me, and I smile every time I remember the lesson I learned.

Later when we met during his trips to California, we would sit and talk. Invariably we brought up those early days. He enjoyed talking of those times. The dojo was small, the practice rigorous, and the attention unrelenting. It was actually the closing of a traditional era. It is difficult, at present, to be in a dojo where the instruction is so intimate. We shared something personal with each other then, and the remembrance of it warmed us both and sustained our relationship for 33 years.

In 1983 Sensei made one of his many visits to Oakland and the Bay Area. He stayed at the house of his uchi-deshi, Bruce Klickstein, to whom I was uchi-deshi at the time. There was of course much to do always, and lot of activity around Sensei. One sunny morning we emerged from Bruce Sensei's house, arms full of bags, training gear, etc., to the street where we were loading vehicles to proceed to the day's events. Sensei stood in the sun admiring a gleaming black 1975 Yamaha XS650 parked in the street. For a moment activity paused while we sensed Sensei had a need. "Whose motorcycle is this?" Sensei asked. Bruce answered with just a little pride (he liked motorcycles, too) that it belonged to me. Sensei turned to me and nodded with approval. My hand dove into my pocket and came up open with the ignition key in my palm. "Onegai shimasu Sensei!" Bruce tensed visibly, perhaps imagining Saito Sensei negotiating his suburban Oakland block on a large motorcycle right when we needed to be departing for a big seminar. Sensei (and everybody) paused. Then he smiled at me and gently shook his head, and we all resumed our activity. I don't think Sensei was often surprised by people and he was genuinely gracious in small courtesies.

I'm not sure precisely how long it was before I received my first dame from Sensei when I visited Iwama in 1998. It was certainly not more than 47 seconds into my first class. I was training near the shomen, right beneath Sensei's gaze. He stopped class to correct me. I made certain I received his instruction attentively and without embarrassment because, well, that is how I was trained to behave, but also to demonstrate to Sensei that I was unashamed of my mistakes and open to receive from him. During my brief visit Sensei was extremely generous to me in the quantity of his dames and the quality of his corrections. Though frequent, they became less severe because, I believe, I was totally present for them. He could address the issue and we could all move on efficiently. During my last morning class of that visit I trained in a distant corner of the yard from Sensei. He sat on a tree stump, turned away from my direction, calling out the suburi to a yard full of thirty or more students. In the middle of haso-gaeshi, I saw his head turn just a degree. In that moment I felt his intention to turn towards me and repeat a correction he'd made previously to me about my kamae. My body instantly corrected to the proscribed posture. The next moment I felt Sensei's intent (or that portion of it that was directed to me), relax, like a muscle, perhaps to be directed elsewhere. He certainly was a great aikido teacher.

PETER SLOTE



## SAITO SENSEI'S LEGACY

Many of the greatest artists of all times devote all of their energy to the pursuit of excellence. That is how they became great and stood out from the fold. They would not accept students because these are impediment to their personal growth. However, there are some great artists who save some of their energy, at the detriment of their own development, to reach back and help the rest of us move forward. Not unlike the bodhisattvas in the Buddhist tradition who postpone their own enlightenment in order to save the masses. Saito Sensei's life reflects this latter ideal.

If it was not for Saito Sensei's effort in distilling the Aikido techniques that he learned from O Sensei into basic and advanced categories and if he did not care to emphasize the practice of basic techniques, then perhaps Aikido would not have enjoyed the solid hold that it now has in many parts of the world.

Saito Sensei has not just shown the world the beauty of the art that he has mastered, he has shown and taught many people the way to teach and share this art with the world. In this sense, he was not just a great artist, he was a great teacher who left a valuable legacy: the way to teach Aikido to all.

Therefore, to pay true homage to this great man, it is not enough for those who follow his footpath to practice Aikido and become strong warriors of peace. We should learn to become great teachers of Aikido and help propagate these teaching techniques.

In my view, the valuable teaching techniques that Saito Sensei left for us can be summarized as follows:

1. Understand the art thoroughly from kihon to takemusu.
2. Teach Aikido using a gradual method going from basic to advanced.
3. Constantly emphasize the practice of basic techniques.

Understand kihon and takemusu.

Aikido techniques are not rigidly cast forms but rather dynamic principles in motion. The forms of a technique change according to the situation. A variety of forms can represent the same technique as long as certain principles that are the hallmark of the technique are preserved. A good Aikido teacher should be able to identify the core form of a technique and understand it so thoroughly that she can move fluidly between the core form and the multitude variations of the core form. This understanding should be internalized and not just intellectualized. The only way to reach this level is to persevere in the repetition of the core form.

Saito Sensei has established clearly the core form (kihon waza) of each key technique. This core form is defined not so much as an unchanging physical form, but as a set of relationships among body parts, a particular mental image and

a particular set of "feelings". Those who have studied with Saito Sensei for a long time will remember these mental images and "feelings" (kimochi) associated with each of the key techniques. Therefore, the core form will be physically manifested differently under different circumstances. For example, different teachers will present the same core form differently under the same conditions, due mainly to their different physical, mental and emotional make-ups and states at that time and place.

Teach Aikido in a methodical manner

Certain Aikido teachers teach by simply expressing their own Aikido, that is, by demonstrating their techniques as they feel. These may be the ultimate physical expression of the art, but only a select few will be able to appreciate them, not the mass of beginners who are trying to learn Aikido.

The skillful teacher reaches out to the students at their level and entices them to progress by showing them the steps to the next level. In addition, the skillful teacher will help the students build a solid base by requiring constant practice of basic forms (simplified versions of the core forms). The teacher will then guide each student step-by-step all the way to Takemusu Aiki.

This way of teaching thus requires the teacher to refrain from just a display of self and to focus on the students' needs, a most difficult requirement, but one that Saito Sensei always embodied. One just has to remember how Sensei explains a technique either at a seminar or in his books.

Constantly emphasize basic techniques

Applying a methodical approach as described above is not enough. Emphasis on basic techniques means that students of all levels should spend more time and effort on basic techniques. This means that even advanced students and teachers should spend more effort on rehashing basic techniques, through either personal training or teaching others.

The ultimate expression of Aikido, Takemusu Aiki, cannot and should not be practiced. It is a natural result of all the practices leading up to it. A "practice" is a deliberate repetition. If one "practices" Takemusu Aiki in the dojo, one may enjoy it but hardly any benefit will accrue to others.

Saito Sensei always included ample time in his classes for basic techniques. Aikido is built from the core out, or from the bottom up. We discover Takemusu Aiki by practicing more irimi-nage in basic form, not by doing more jyu-waza.

Thus, in my view, is the legacy of this great being, who not only showed us the Aiki path, but taught us how to show this path to the rest of the world. He has done his work, what we are going to do with his legacy is up to us.

HOA NEWENS

## THOUGHTS ON SAITO SENSEI

I never made it to Iwama but nevertheless feel what I imagine to be the spirit of Saito Sensei at the Oakland dojo and elsewhere. It seems to me that his was a spirit of close-to-flawlessly dedicated service to Aikido and its founder. Such service is rare, and admirable.

Sometimes it is easier to think in pictures than in words. There is a photo of Saito and O'Sensei together, perhaps taking a break from training outdoors. O'Sensei's energy is so powerful and spiritualized that he appears almost inhuman, as though he might dissolve into the astral plane at any time, for a quick irimi-nage or a trip to another continent. Saito Sensei, by contrast, might be an old oak tree, so rooted that only the most furious of gales could tear him loose. It always felt to me that his work was the foundation, the root, of what was happening at the Oakland dojo, and o'Sensei's was the star for which we were all aiming. I can even feel that solidity when I train, as I do currently, in a dojo that practices a different "style" of Aikido.

Never having met Saito Sensei, I'll still miss him.

ALEX GUTTERMAN

## IWAMA HAIKU

Early one morning during the weapons class that is held out in the field behind the shokudo, I began to wonder about Saito Sensei. Was he really paying attention, or did he randomly dole out correction and criticism, just for the sake of appearing engaged. Every morning he would put us to practice on something, in this case the 3rd kumi tachi, then wander off sort of aimlessly. He'd poke his foot into the dirt around the garden, shake a bamboo stalk, pull a weed, take a shovel leaning on a tree and move it to another tree. Sometimes he would gaze up into the dappled morning sunlight as it broke through the haze, and just bathe his face in the light.

He did all sorts of stuff, it seemed, except observe class.

Hoa Sensei and I were practicing together. During one break, while we regrouped for another round, I looked over to Saito Sensei and thought, "He's not even paying attention," and turned back to Hoa Sensei to resume training.

At that moment (really, that exact moment) Saito Sensei marched straight over to us and began to issue a fusillade of specific and detailed commentary on my form. Hold your bokken this way; do the fifth suburi specifically this way; position your body in this exact relationship to your partner. Dame, dame, dame.

I was astounded. Clearly, his perception was so great, he was able to take in all the training activity ? specific details

of what was going on — and still poke around the bamboo forest or flick plums around.

The lesson for me was twofold: first, to focus on my practice and not on what others are up to. And second, just in case he could really read my mind, any time I made eye contact with Saito Sensei I thought, "what a great guy."

I wrote a poem that day:

hazy morning,  
training under Saito's eye ...  
my name's not da-me.

These are the other haiku I wrote while in Iwama:

Wood and stone jinja —  
just another old building;  
kiai echos.

Hitohiro yells,  
aikidoka look quick.  
glad it isn't me.

rain falls so no chores;  
a quick nap or couple chapters  
before evening keiko.

toban today means  
eight starved uchi deshi and  
just 2000 yen.

dried cuttlefish snacks,  
Hagan Dazs and Asahi:  
a trip to Hot Spar.

butterfiles wind dance —  
the limitless  
dojo afternoon.

Aiki spirit on  
the mat and within the beams —  
O-Sensei looks on.

RICHARD LEVITT



## SAITO SENSEI REMEMBERED

My experiences with Saito Sensei have run the gamut, from high to low. The first time I attended one of his seminars, at Oakland shortly after I had begun training, my understanding of what was possible in Aikido increased radically within a few minutes. Saito Sensei was larger than life for me then, and his level of development in the art seemed well out of reach. It still does, but not on the Olympian scale that it did then.

Over the years, as I attended more seminars, the highlight for me was always when he would address the crowd and talk about O'Sensei and his mission of preserving O'Sensei's Aikido as he had received it. I was deeply moved by his sincerity and the fact that he talked about O'Sensei as a real man, who had been like a father to him, whom he had loved and respected, and whom he missed greatly. O'Sensei was not the abstract notion of a Holy man who possessed magical powers, as others perceived him. This sincerity was a major factor in my continuing to train, as I periodically reassessed the value of Aikido in my life, and it jibed with the straightforward integrity I perceived in Kim Sensei and my other teachers.

Until I went to Iwama, my most indelible memory of Saito Sensei was an unpleasant (for me) one. When I was uchideshi back in the early '90's, we hosted Saito Sensei in Oakland, with the usual after-keiko party. As things were winding down, and there was a lull in the conversation, I thought I was being the on-the-ball uchideshi and started stacking a few abandoned plates and throwing a few items in the trash bag. I thought I was being very discreet until I hear a few words from Saito Sensei's direction. He was pointing at me and expressing his displeasure with his characteristic growl. All eyes were on me as he got up and crisply left the room. I had ended the night's festivities with a major (it seemed at the time), breach of etiquette. For some time after I responded to this situation with a punitive self-absorption as I tried to put it behind me. But the next time I saw Saito Sensei, he was cordial as ever. Over time I have come to see my selfish (however guilt-ridden) response to the situation as a bigger mistake in the long run than my original faux-pas. That episode was a catalyst for growth well beyond the parameters of etiquette.

I think most gardeners would agree that when working in the garden, their sense of time changes. To work the soil and tend plants is to be aware of standing on the earth beneath the immense sky, and to feel synchronized with the continuous rhythms of the planet. The abstract imperatives and schedules imposed on us by our corporate/bureaucratic

order, and our enslavement by tv- induced dissatisfaction can be seen to be the falsehoods that they are. We're spiritually rejuvenated in the garden. I think Saito Sensei shared O'Sensei's belief in the spiritual importance of farming and gardening. Training at Iwama takes place in this context. One of my favorite memories of Saito Sensei is of the day when all of the uchideshi were summoned to rake up the piles of previously cut grass and weeds, pile them in the van and deposit them in their assigned compost heap. Watching the Head Uchideshis, Tristan and Takume, harness the assorted individual egos into a phalanx of worker ants seemed to be a source of entertainment for Saito Sensei, observing and occasionally directing with a look of bemused satisfaction.

The morning of my departure was an overcast, cool day. Everyone was anticipating the typhoon that was on its way. Tristan came to us and said, "He's in his garden now. You should say goodbye to him now. Follow me and make sure not to step on any seedlings. He gets very angry when students step on his plants." Leif and I successfully negotiated the rows and said our farewells. Sensei's smile was at its brightest and most peaceful, and he exhorted us to return soon. I feel very fortunate to have been able to say goodbye to him when he was in his garden.

DAVID DELONG



I don't have one good story, just a miscellaneous bunch of memories. His correcting Ute when eating noodles, because she wasn't slurping; the new uchi-deshi dinner at his son's restaurant, and his showing the gaijin how to eat sushi properly; his announcing that the rainy season had begun, and the rain obediently beginning to fall. The way he'd test new deshi at the dojo by giving a public correction to see how they took it. He was always kind and polite to me, and I miss him.

ALBERTA HANKENSON



## MY SENSEI

What makes someone unforgettable? What makes a great spirit? What makes a superb teacher?

Since Saito Sensei passed, I have been recalling memories and experiences of him. Personal memories as well as images of him teaching and doing Aikido. I revisit the things I saw and felt while studying with Sensei, marveling how a single moment that occurred so long ago can still exist so vividly in my mind.

Sensei had an ability to create a direct, personal connection with people of all countries, of all cultures, of all languages, of all shapes and sizes, and with both men and women. He taught with a clarity and precision that made the complex accessible to all. A language barrier never seemed to exist for him even though he always taught in Japanese, a language many of his students could not speak.

Lately I've been remembering his voice, especially his kiai, which at times seemed to originate in a profound subterranean labyrinth and then rapidly ascend through a tightly spiraling staircase that opened onto an as-yet-unconquered windswept Himalayan peak.

When passionate, his voice boomed forth loudly and reverberated throughout the dojo. "Budo dakarra..." [Because it is a martial art...] he would admonish us as he became furious with someone who was not attacking with full commitment or who was not applying the technique sincerely.

His voice when he taught a complicated technique was calm and clear... "Kantan-desu" [it's easy] he'd say as he demonstrated how first the hands and arms moved in *jujigarume* and then how the hips moved and then how they all worked gracefully together. Watching him demonstrate, the movements became clear and distinct in my mind. I not only saw the technique, I saw the extension, the *ki*, and the timing. When Sensei demonstrated a technique, aikido became possible for me.

I often found it hard to speak to Sensei. We were separated by culture, by language, and by role. Even though I was frustrated when I tried to speak directly, I felt connected to him, I felt he understood me and cared that I understood what he said and that I grasped what he taught. My attempts to speak with him directly were almost never satisfactory, but the times that we connected without speaking were always amazing. I remember trying to do a *kokyu* technique during one of my first classes in Iwama. When grabbed in *katate-tori*, *nage* extends through the back of the wrist and controls *uke's* arm eventually throwing *uke* in a backward/forward roll. I was having trouble and Sensei came over to demonstrate the technique to me. When he had my arm extended, he began to laugh. I could feel his laughter

beginning in his *hara*, traveling through his arm into my arm and then into my center. I began to laugh too... We were both laughing. It was a strange, powerful connection.

While the dojo was always filled with the concentration of intense training, it was also at times filled with laughter. Sensei had a great sense of humor. He not only said things that were hugely funny, but he also had an impeccable sense of timing. One night my *dohai*, Art Ward, who had been living in Iwama for a year, was taking falls for Sensei. Art spoke some Japanese. Sensei would often demonstrate techniques and then stop class by first saying "omoshiroi, omoshiroi.." [interesting, interesting...] and then start in on a story to illustrate the technique or to explain some aspect of Aikido. He would then complete his story and say "omoshiroi?" [did you find that interesting?] The answer was supposed to be an emphatic "zenbu omoshiroi-desu, Sensei!!" [completely, entirely interesting, Sensei!!]. I guess Art had taken too many falls that night because when Sensei asked "omoshiroi?" Art responded in his loudest *onegai-shimasu-voice* "ZENZEN OMOSHIROKUNAI, SENSEI!!!" There was an awkward silence as the realization hit that Art had just shouted something like "ABSOLUTELY NOT INTERESTING, SENSEI!!!" in his loudest and most sincere voice... a long silence... and then Sensei with a slight tilt to his head asked Art softly, "zenzen?" [not at all?] and then the whole dojo, *gaijin*, *nihonjin*, Sensei and even Art were laughing loudly.

Even if Sensei was staring out the window during class, you felt he had his eyes on you, that when he turned to look at the class and give a general correction, that that correction was really meant for you alone. If you had a question in your mind, it seemed that Sensei would answer it before you ever spoke it out loud.

And Sensei seemed to be learning from you, just as you were learning from him. He watched and absorbed how you executed the technique. With so many different students, he must have seen new mistakes everyday. Having watched you completely without ever seeming to stare, he could imitate you superbly, pointing out to the entire class just why what you did would not work. Sensei could always explain the 'why' of a technique.

I always loved Sensei's demonstration of *awase*. He'd take a *bokken* in each hand and swing them back and forth discordantly so that they struck each other. Then he'd swing them back and forth in time with one another so that one followed where the other had been, never striking each other, always in tune. Sensei could surprise you with his ability to *awase* when off the mat.

I was in Iwama during Chanukah and I made a make-shift menorah out of pieces of wood. I lit the candles one night on my homemade menorah and placed it in the middle of

the shokudo table. Sensei came in soon after. I was standing with a soto-deshi by the menorah as Sensei came over to look at the candles. The soto-deshi translated for me as I explained what the candles were. Sensei especially liked the part about the “shamash,” the servant candle that lights all the other candles and is honored during Chanukah by being placed higher than the others. (I think anyone who has ever been uchi deshi likes that part.) Sensei left the shokudo and a few minutes later I left. Later I learned that another deshi had come in and seeing the candles had quickly snuffed them out, muttering things like: ‘what fool did this’, ‘open flames’, and ‘Sensei will have a fit.’

Thinking back there was every reason to expect that Sensei would have been upset with the candles. But he had seen my attitude and spirit towards the candles and as he approached, he blended with that.

Towards the end of my stay in Iwama I fell ill and had to be taken to the hospital in Tomobe. Sensei and his wife drove me. When we arrived at the hospital Sensei wheeled me in a wheel chair to the admittance desk. He stood behind me while the admittance clerk took my name and other details. When the clerk asked why I was in Japan, I said I was studying Aikido. Here I sat in a wheelchair with my 8th Dan Sensei right behind me. The clerk looked at me and said “Aikido?” and then he said something like “oh the one that’s like dance?” and then he did that disjointed hand and arm movement that people do when they think they are imitating a martial art but really look like they are controlled by some deranged puppeteer.

I was speechless. This guy was saying Aikido was like dance and my sensei was right there. I turned to look at Sensei expecting the clerk to hear him reply in that voice that still thunders “Budo dakarra. . .” in my mind, but Sensei just stared out the window.

Now I can see that staring out the window when someone is talking foolishly can be a form of awase.

Before Iwama I would bow to my teacher and say “thank you, Sensei.” I had the form. But after Iwama, bowing to Sensei had so much more meaning. It was as if the shell that had been formed in the States was now filled in Japan with true meaning.

In America, deshi learn to take care of their teachers, to get them drinks for a kampai, to fold their hakamas. But the essence of the word ‘Sensei’ and the respect, honor, and love that goes with it eluded me until I studied with Sensei in Iwama. Maybe it was because he had served as a deshi for so long himself, but it never felt that he asked you to do something he hadn’t himself done at least 500 times more often in his own life. When I bowed to thank Sensei, I was really bowing to thank him with my whole spirit; my bow had both form and content.

Sensei honored and respected his deshi in little and large ways.

Early after I had arrived, I went to Tokyo to the Iwata company to order a gi and hakama. With my halting Japanese, I was able to place my order and when the lady there understood I came from Iwama, she asked me to take a hakama back to Sensei. He had ordered it as a present for one of the uchideshi.

It was a Sunday evening when I returned from Tokyo and I stopped at Sensei’s house to deliver the hakama. With my body language and repeated use of the words “Iwata” “sensei” “hakama”, he picked up on what had happened and thanked me profusely. I went on to the shokudo. It was a dark autumn night with a chill setting in. I was relieved that no one was in the shokudo, I needed a rest from the other deshi. As I began to pull together something to eat, I heard footsteps on the gravel and then the door opened and Sensei came in carrying a big pot.

He made it known he was bringing me dinner. He started heating the pot, told me it was ok, to sit down and relax, but I kept standing, trying to be polite and helpful. He finally made me sit, set a steaming bowl before me, and then left. Alone in the quiet autumn evening, I sat at the table and ate. He had made delicious chicken soup.

Thank you, Sensei.

DEBORAH MAIZELS



## DARN KIDS!!!!!!?

If you do not already know, this past weekend of June 7th and 8th we held our annual “Kid’s Overnight.” This is a celebratory event in which the kids train Friday night, have dinner, play games, watch movies, sleep, wake up, have breakfast, clean the dojo, jog, train again, pack up, train again and have a picnic. It’s an incredible affair of 10-20 7-15 year olds running everywhere. It’s an incredible affair that would have any uchi deshi, sane or insane, scared out of his or her wits!

I would like to relate the Kid’s Overnight to an experience I had with Saito Sensei in Iwama and how both of these lessons make me want to shout all the more emphatically, “Darn Kids!”

It must have been the 2nd or 3rd day I was in Iwama and for some reason we had a noontime class in the dojo. I’m thinking it was a Saturday or a Sunday. Attendance was not abundant, but while waiting in a bowed position, I could hear Saito Sensei making his way towards the dojo with his

short stuttering gate. We bowed to the kamisama and then to Saito Sensei, and then, I could not believe what happened. This little kid got up and grabbed Saito Sensei's wrist!

Now this runt must have been just 6 or 7. Yet, I'll admit...he had a good hamni and even held his extra hand up. Saito Sensei did a couple Tai No Henko's and then had the kid demonstrate it to the class. The whole time, Saito Sensei had the sweetest grin on his face, a relaxed, playful body posture and an incredible young gentle air about him. "Hai dozo." It was everybody else's turn to train.

A big part of me was so completely jealous of that kid. More accurately, I had controlled anger. Here's this kid getting to take ukemi from Saito Sensei, getting all of this attention from Saito Sensei. Me? Well...I got a few dame's that day.

The saga continued. I watched Saito Sensei and the kid do morote dori kokyu ho, shomen uchi ikkyo omote waza, shomen uchi ikkyo ura waza, and on and on and on. Looking back in my Iwama journal, I wrote, "That darn kid took ALL the falls for Saito Sensei."

While we were training, I looked over and saw Saito Sensei training with all the kids in class. For each one of them, he got on his knees to attack them. Maybe the two of them would fall down laughing and hugging. Maybe Saito Sensei got pinned. All the while he grinned. Saito Sensei really had so much love and gentleness for these kids. Like I said, for them, his tired heavy body became light and buoyant and alive. Here I was training 5-10 yards away. Not only did I want to stop training and watch, I wanted to go grab my camera. The experience, I imagine, is what it would be like to watch Albert Einstein play with his grandchildren.

I will give you a few reasons why I think Saito Sensei was so excited to train with the kids. They were his grandchildren (maybe)! But beyond that, Saito Sensei knew that kids are the future. They are gems in waiting. Just take a look at examples of people who started when they were kids: Hitohiro Sensei, Kayla Sensei, Geoff Sempai and Julian James come to mind. Recently, Kayla Sensei said that, when she was a teenager, Saito Sensei used to call her a "monster egg." Kids have such incredible potential. The few main foundational Aikido concepts they learn as children really stick with them the rest of their lives.

There is not a better example of pure potential than the group of kids that we have now, as evidenced this past weekend at the Kid's Overnight. They trained seriously, maintained focus. They played hard and slept relatively peacefully. All of them cleaned the dojo well. All the kids had fun. It was incredibly civilized. Saito Sensei would have been

proud.

"It takes a lot of discipline and focus to do Aikido as a kid. They really need our support and attention to keep Aikido strong in the future. These kids have amazing character, so I would like to take a moment for some awards, The Uchi Deshi Appreciation Awards. Forrest Riley, red belt, wins Best Leader award. He shows up early for class, knows the moves, and is an excellent leader by example. The Gonzo Award goes to Javier Uno-Peake. This kid just got his first belt promotion to yellow belt, but I've never seen anyone willing to take more risks on the mat than Javier. Best Kiai goes to Maya Rhodes. You can see the projection of her ki. The Hardest Head Award goes to Richard Huynh. He's taken a few brutal accidental falls and walks away like Mr. T from a helicopter crash. The Best Training Partner Award goes to Megan Holm. Her ukemi is extremely fluid and graceful. In class, she is always present and listening. The Most Respectful Award goes to Anthony Singh, Best Footwork: Zoe Guy, Best Listener: O'Hanna Berry, Best Jumper: Nathu Abraham, Best Shikko: Tam Li, Best Enthusiasm for Weapons: Jack Taylor, Most Athletic: Girma Moges, Biggest Heart: Khalil Smith, Most Persistence: Nathan Wornian, Most Improved: Forrest Yeast, The Natural: Noah Mittman, Valentina Pena-Vivas: Best Learner. I would also like to thank Leif Branson for being such a great inspiration and teacher to the kids. He's incredibly patient, innovative, energetic, hard and soft all at one time. To the rest of you, don't be afraid to come help in the kids class. Invest in AI's future and come witness some gems. Saito Sensei did it. Darn kids."

JR RICHARDS