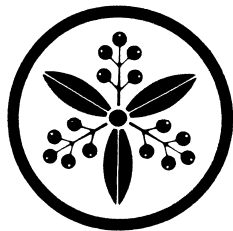


# The Aikido Center of Los Angeles



道の為、  
世の為、  
人の為  
合気道

# The Aiki Dojo

Direct Affiliation: Aikido World Headquarters, 17-18 Wakamatsu-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, Japan  
Los Angeles Sword and Swordsmanship Society Kenshinkai  
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Reverend Kensho Furuya  
1948-2007

### Letter From the Editor by Mark Ehrlich Editor, The Aiki Dojo

This issue marks a milestone, and the end of an era: our teacher and the founder of ACLA, Reverend Kensho Furuya, 6th Dan in Aikido and 6th Dan Kyoshi in Iaido, died seven years ago this month. Anyone who knew him in his later years would perhaps find his demise rather unsurprising, since he had fallen into increasingly bad health, yet, perhaps innocently or willfully, we his students simply could not fathom Sensei's death. The event launched a chapter of grief, loss, and shock, which echoed for years throughout the dojo and everything we did.

This year, however, I see us as having turned a corner. As we celebrate our 40th anniversary as a school offering traditional instruc-

tion in Aikido and Muso Shinden Ryu Iaido, we also celebrate having kept the doors open for seven years after our teacher's sudden passing – which probably extended six years and six months beyond almost anyone's expectations. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Sensei for his years of hard work to establish this dojo and develop the second generation of teachers, and we owe just as much to Senseis Ito and Watanabe for bravely carrying the torch in trust for the next generation.

All of us at ACLA and *The Aiki Dojo* hope that this year will see more fruitful growth for the dojo and its students. Yet we also hope that you who read this, our friends and supporters, will indulge us as we give a few moments to remember and honor Sensei – the man, the priest, the teacher, the legend – and commit ourselves to another year of doing our very best, every day.

### Upcoming Events

**March 8th**  
Sensei memorial

**March 29th**  
Instructor's intensive

**April 25-27th**  
O Sensei memorial seminar

**April 26th**  
O Sensei memorial service

## Strictness, Compassion

by David Ito, Aikido Chief Instructor

*If we take man as he is, we make him worse. But if we take man as he should be, we make him capable of becoming what he can be.*

– Goethe

It's unbelievable to think that seven years have gone by since that cool Tuesday evening back in March of 2007 when Sensei passed away. That night, I think, I grew up – we all had to. Since that night, I think that I learned just about as much about myself as I have about Sensei, and I came to understand him so much better. Truth be told, there was a time when I used to resent Sensei and I thought he hated me too. I just couldn't understand why he was so strict and harsh in a way that I felt singled me out. At the time, I just thought he didn't like me, but now I know that being strict and harsh was the most compassionate thing anyone has ever done for me.

In past times, teachers used to take a tremendous amount of pleasure in putting forth that their only qualification as a teacher was that they were *kibishii*, or strict. They thought that the only way students could truly reach their potential was through firm discipline. The thinking was that students naturally exhibit certain behaviors that are akin to what Americans might refer to as being headstrong or obstinate, called *iji* in Japanese. Young people often rebel against what is good for them. It is therefore the goal of teachers to direct such willfulness and turn it into something productive called *konjo*, or fighting spirit, so that students can reach their full potential.

It turns out that those teachers of old were not far off in their theory of how to inculcate students. Famed psychiatrist Viktor Frankl referred to it as “crabbing” in this excerpt from a talk he gave to a group of university students:

You know what my flight instructor told me? If you start here (pointing at the start) and wish to get here (pointing to the destination) say East heading for this and you have a cross wind you will drift and you will land here (pointing to below the destination). So you have to do what we pilots call crabbing he told me c-r-a-b-ing you have to head North of this airfield (pointing above the destination) and you have to fly that way as if you are headed in this direction. If you are headed here above this airfield then you will actually land here (pointing to the destination). This also holds for man. I would say if we take man as he really is, we make him worse, but if we overestimate him, if we seem to be idealists and are overestimating, overrating man and looking at him high here above, you know what happens? We promote him to what he really can be. So we have to be idealists in a way because then we wind up with the true realist, you know, who said this, *‘If we take man as he is, we*

*make him worse. But if we take man as he should be, we make him capable of becoming what he can be.’* This was not my flight instructor, this was not me, this was Goethe. He said this and now you understand why that in one of my writings once that I said that this is the most apt maxim and motto for any psychotherapeutic activity. So if you don't recognize a young

man's will to meaning, a man's search for meaning, you make him worse, you make him dull, you make him frustrated, you still add and contribute to his frustration. While if you presuppose in this man, if in this so-called criminal, or juvenile delinquent, or drug abuser, and so forth there must be a – what do you call it – a ‘spark,’ yeah, a spark of searching for meaning. Let's recognize this, let's presuppose it, and then you will elicit it from him and you will make him become what he in principle is capable of becoming.

Many readers of this article who were Sensei's students might feel as surprised as I was when I found out that every time Sensei had to be strict with someone it affected him greatly. Many nights while at dinner with Ken Watanabe, Sensei would lament about this student or that student and how

bad he felt about having to discipline them. He knew that it was the most compassionate thing he could do for us in that, without guidance, we would succumb to our own personal egos and delusions. However, that compassion for us came at a great personal sacrifice to Sensei. It took its toll on his health and only contributed to his loneliness. James Doi often talks about how jovial and friendly Sensei was before he became a teacher and that he had to become strict for the students. Does anyone ever really want to be the bad guy? I know I don't and I don't think Sensei did either.

Every once in a while a person comes into our life and changes it for the better. In my life, Sensei was that person. Looking back now, I really do think that it is true that the best teachers are the strictest. However, it is not strict in the classical, clichéd sense where the teacher has to hurt us mentally or physically in order for us to unleash our potential. It is strictness in that the teacher provides an unwavering standard of excellence and holds us accountable to that standard. Today, I really do wish I understood why Sensei was so strict with me and I can only speculate that his motives were in my best interest. I truly regret the opportunity that I lost by being so stubborn all those years. It's remarkable how much we can learn about life when adversity calls upon us. I don't know if today if I am a strong enough of a person or teacher to treat my students with that level of compassion even if it's for their own good. To think all of the people who left or misunderstood Sensei's strictness makes me sad because I was one of them. He had to endure their scorn and disdain because he was trying to force them not only to become better Aikidoists, but better human beings as well. As I grow older and hopefully wiser, I can only hope that someday I will have the strength to be strict and sacrifice for the students like Sensei once did for me.



*“To study Aikido, we must study we own heart first. If we can master or know our own heart – that is half the battle of understanding Aikido already mastered! Please think about this seriously on the mats when you are training.”*

– Rev. Kensho Furuya

## Past the Shallows

by Mohammed Anwar, *Aikido Ikkyu*

Sensei put quite a few barriers between himself and his students. More often than not, one had to communicate through the most senior students rather than Sensei himself and, aside from the meetings he would occasionally call, it felt somewhat difficult to interact directly with him. So naturally and perhaps appropriately, most of my experience with him came through the classes he taught.

Sensei's exhausting classes are much too easy to remember. Those evenings I would hear each creaking step as Sensei came down the stairs, and that foreboding sound provided a clear idea of how the rest of class would go. By the time class was over Sensei would have already vanished in exasperation, but I'd be too exhausted to walk in a straight line. Students whose skill, strength, and focus were leaps and bounds beyond my own received a lot of correction when there was already this great chasm between my progress and theirs. With countless nuances to such unconventional somatic movement, why did he always have to get so aggravated?

Well, Sensei *didn't* just yell at us every time; my surface recollection was biased. His instruction wasn't always like that and to think back on it that way feels unfair. Many classes he seemed quietly amused by clueless, short-sighted attempts at imitating the techniques or lightheartedly resigned to his students failing to discover what he wanted them to learn from his instruction. Occasionally he even paused the training, calling a time-out, as it were, to tell a quick story or briefly describe cultural and language differences between Japan and the English speaking world before telling us to pick up where we left off. And sometimes, the training felt lenient and light, where he had very little to say and merely observed our practice.

Perhaps one might say that a shallow examination of what he demonstrated for us was what lead us down those abrasive roads more than we might have wished.



*"In Aikido practice, we should increase our view of the world and of ourselves, not just our wants and desires."*

– Rev. Kensho Furuya



## Finding Balance

by Dale Okuno, *Aikido Shodan*

Staying balanced – the longer I live, the more I appreciate how important this is. In Aikido we know the importance of keeping centered and balanced. Leaning over in an unbalanced way shows poor form: it diminishes our power and mobility and makes us vulnerable. Having our feet squarely underneath our center plays a vital role in effective Aikido.

But to maintain physical balance, we must have balance in our mind, thoughts, and emotions as well. I'm sure Aikido scholars have written much about the mind/body connection (I'm not one of them!), but this makes sense. After all, our thoughts drive our movement, and our emotions, in turn, greatly impact our thoughts. Negative thoughts and emotions such as arrogance, anger, or fear reduce our effectiveness because they unbalance and distract us – they take us off our center. To be effective in Aikido, we need to become quietly centered (I call it our calm mind) mentally as we apply our technique.

What's cool is that the calm mind that improves our Aikido is the same mind that helps us deal with the people and situations we encounter at work and at home. With a calm mind we can assess and respond more effectively to situations that confront us in our daily lives, and reach better outcomes.

Has anger ever made you say the wrong thing? Has fear ever interfered with any of your plans? Has an arrogant person ever brought out the worst in you? I think we'd all have to admit the answer is yes, and that as a consequence, we got worse results. As in Aikido, when we let negative thoughts or emotions get the better of us, we get pushed off balance, teeter off our center, and consequently we become less effective in managing our personal and business relationships.

In my own experience I've seen improvement in the way I've managed a few situations by thinking, "Stay balanced!" I know that the more balanced I become, the better my life becomes, and Aikido helps me practice achieving that balance.

## The Dichotomy of Sensei

by Paul Major, Aikido 2nd Dan, Iaido Shodan



*Sensei lecturing on one of his passions, the Japanese sword.*

Training and working in a school that strives to provide an authentic atmosphere for students often raises so many questions. We seem locked in an everlasting struggle to keep the facility our dojo uses open without compromising the values of a traditional environment. The administrative staff, a handful of us filling in the job of what our teacher once did alone, sometimes muse about how to create an environment inviting to prospective students without ‘selling out’. Invariably we resign ourselves to remain true to the teachings Sensei left us and keep busy with training and

the practical tasks at hand.

That one man created a sort of martial arts ‘oasis’, a place where training takes paramount importance and politics and capital gain are kept at bay, has always impressed me. The level of dedication shown at such a young age by Sensei seems like a rare occurrence these days.

There are so many tasks that must be executed to keep a school functioning, so much time and energy devoted, that I wonder what life must have been like for Sensei. I only knew him over the course of about two years, but in that time I formed the impression that he experienced a sort of deep inner world that was his own. Of course this is true for all of us, but this quality seems most pronounced, to me, in those that have chosen a lonely path.

And teaching and operating a school alone is a lonely path indeed. Many in our time do not understand, in a fundamental way, the benefits of resisting economic temptations and political pressures. Sensei had to deal with all of this but still live a life of his own.

Given his extensive library, and in addition to his scholarly pursuits, he certainly spent plenty of time in solitude when not teaching. With no living family, my impression of him having a sort of lonely life seems accurate. He once wrote that he was happiest when up in his office able to hear the sound of students practicing on the mat – students who came and went. Even with training offered seven days a week, each class lasts only an hour, so the bulk of each day found the dojo steeped in quiet; a quiet place for reflection, writing, reading, watching entertainment, but also for being alone. Sensei was human, and while I’m sure he enjoyed aspects of his later life spent in the dojo I feel that he would have

liked companionship on a level that many of us prefer.

Much can be made of Sensei’s ability and his colorful personality. The timing, spacing, and martial sensibility he developed was a lesson in how far we can go with the proper dedication. He was a sensitive man and this came across in various ways, from his quick admonishments to his sudden and, in a way, innocent laughter. But I think it’s important to understand that there was a deep contrast in his life to all of this. He was also a man who, I suspect, wanted the same things we all want and who chose to sacrifice many of those desires to give something he valued to others.

And that’s how I remember Sensei, as a complex man who had made a very unique set of choices in the heart of a modern and progressive city. A man who simultaneously wanted connection but would shun getting too close to others – a traditional means of teaching others in a way he felt was most appropriate. I have a deep gratitude for the way in which his choices as a teacher offered me a glimpse towards a rich and remarkable path, and at the same time I wish he had nurtured himself well enough, as a man, that he could still be with us in person.

*“As soon as we say to ourselves, ‘I think . . .’ we open up the gates of either heaven or hell.”*

– Rev. Kensho Furuya

### **Mahalo, Sensei!**

by Heraldo Farrington, Aikido 3rd Dan  
Aikido of Hilo, Hawai’i

*Mahalo*, Sensei, for always encouraging us to train, daily. To penetrate the surface and to seek the deeper meaning. To treat every moment as if it mattered, because it is all we have.

*Mahalo*, Sensei, for always reminding me to “Seek the heart of the mother.” And yet to never forget: “The edge is sharp!”

*Mahalo*, Sensei, for making the time and taking the energy to mentor us all, especially those of us who knew you only through the tenuous flicker of a computer screen as you strove to communicate deeply with us online. You affected so many *budoka*, across the globe, and I know that many of them remember you still. *Mahalo nui loa*, Sensei, for befriending me when I came to visit your dojo and for sharing so much time with me off the mat during my short visit.

I think of you, daily, and while I miss you dearly, I always smile and breathe more fully. And I am grateful that I was able to share this Path with you, if only briefly – your footsteps remain, strong and deep, hidden here under the leaves.

**Editor’s Note:** *Mahalo* means “thank you” in Hawaiian; *mahalo nui loa* means “thank you very much”.

## The Songs of Old

by Shaun Menashe, Aikido Shodan, Iaido 2nd Dan

When we reflect on Sensei's life, we see a traditional practitioner reminiscent of the old masters. In the past, martial artists developed a passion for practice derived from extending their own lives, coping with the inevitability of death, and surviving the agonies of their era. Yet, despite the comforts and conveniences of the late Twentieth Century, Sensei continued to reach new levels as a martial artist and amassed knowledge and insight. He not only studied hard but also embodied the ideals of his subject to the best of his ability. This truly set him apart from his contemporaries.

We might understandably feel somewhat daunted should we think to replicate the intensity and dedication Sensei manifested in his own life. We live in a country where nearly everything is readily available and this quite naturally curbs the amount of effort we will invest in our own learning. It certainly feels difficult to push past comfortable, yet Sensei modeled a commitment to his studies unaffected by this modern trend and proved that there is never a "good enough".

In 2010, I came across a *tsuba* depicting the *biwa* (琵琶 or びわ), a Japanese short-necked, fretted lute. Interpreting Japanese iconography requires placing the image into its martial, religious, and socio-historical context and we must reference and cross-reference various sources, especially if we work in English.



Throughout most of Japan, the *biwa* was considered a more effeminate instrument and was often associated with entertainment. However, in Kagoshima, the center of the Shimazu clan's Satsuma fiefdom, *samurai* were encouraged to master the instrument, which was considered manly and virtuous. According to legend, the Sengoku period *daimyo*, Shimazu Tadayoshi, became inspired by a monk's use of *biwa* music for sutra chanting, and commissioned songs celebrating justice, loyalty, and filial piety. In a translation of *Seiyuki*, a popular travelogue written in the 1790s, Tachibana Nankei observed that in Satsuma:

All young *samurai* play the *biwa*. They



This calligraphy, brushed by the Zen layman Teshū, reads as follows:

The pure, rich tones of a *koto*  
The quiet sound of a cool breeze in the pines  
We love to listen to the old tunes  
But few today can play the melody

he applied to this kind of research.

Presently, we have a scroll hanging in the dojo's *tokonoma* brushed by Yamaoka Teshū. He, like Saigō Takamori, was a famous *samurai* during the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate and enjoyed a reputation as a highly accomplished swordsman and calligrapher.

It is quite touching to have this scroll hanging in the dojo this month. In its translation, we see that Teshū urged his students to seek the same experience as that of the ancient masters and not to be contented with simply maintaining their legacy. If we strive for the same breakthroughs as the masters of the past, perhaps, one day, we too can create beautiful music like the distinctive *sawari* of the *biwa* or the rich tones of the *koto*.

hike up their trouser skirts, adjust their long swords and night after night stroll and play the *biwa*.

Their playing is correct and their singing is refined. It is utterly unlike the *biwa* of other regions.

Nearly all *samurai* boys in Satsuma, including Saigō Takemori, one of the most influential *samurai* of the Bakumatsu Period, attended neighborhood schools called *gojū*, where they honed their skills and were encouraged to master the *biwa*. Each *gojū* was even expected to function as a military unit in times of war and emphasized honor, courage, and rectitude. Without this anecdote, proper thematic understanding of this piece would be incomplete. A *tsuba* depicting a *biwa* in the North may have entirely different connotations in the South. The feeling is not the same and we may assess an opponent or *koshirae* differently based on this understanding.

Today, this knowledge seems insignificant and, to most, not worth the effort. Complex designs like these may take hundreds of hours to decipher and call for painstakingly translating old Japanese characters. They also necessitate years of martial arts experience to unlock their secrets. Few remain today who possess the skills of both scholars and practitioners. Sensei's vast library remains a testament to the ferocity



"It is easy to enjoy something. It is a little harder to study it. It is much harder still to master it."

— Rev. Kensho Furuya



## Sensei's Lessons

by James Doi, Aikido 5th Dan, Iaido 4th Dan

Seven years after his death, Sensei still teaches Aikido to me.

I know that if Sensei ever heard this sentence, his ghost would rise from the grave, hunt me down, and “rip me a new one”. The reason I am so sure of this is because he had a finely tuned BS detector and would have gotten very angry over a self-serving platitude like this.

Americans tend to think of education as knowledge transfer, like buying and selling a commodity. A skill or a set of techniques gets presented to the student by the instructor and the deal is done. A *sensei*, or teacher, has more responsibilities, in that the transfer of the skill or set of techniques gets checked or tested to ensure that the student has really learned.

Teaching Aikido is difficult because of the difficulty of Aikido itself and because it seems difficult for most people to learn how to learn it. Sensei spent a lot of time thinking about each of his students and how best to teach them. He treated individual students quite differently depending on his evaluations.

I knew a student that studied Aikido at ACLA (and other places) for several years and kept a solid, regular training schedule. One day, he fell into somewhat of a rut with his practice; although he knew many techniques, he never improved. One night, he forgot to bow before stepping onto the mat. During class, Sensei called him up to the office. He stayed up there about ten minutes, clearly getting chewed out for his breach of protocol. He came back down, did the proper wait for permission, bowed in, and started working out. It was amazing: his movements improved 100%. Up until that moment I did not think it possible for anyone to improve that fast.

Once, a senior student told me how Sensei kept warning him that his ego prevented him from doing a technique properly. He swore that he was not fighting Sensei, that he was genuinely trying to do the technique, and that it had nothing to do with ego. I think he misunderstood the term “ego”. “Ego” in this sense has nothing to do with, “I’m so-and-so and I’m not going submit to Sensei’s will,” but rather the little “voice” or feeling that says, “I can’t do that because it’s obviously physically impossible.” That little voice is constantly telling us what to do, and is usually right; however, in the case of Aikido, it has no frame of reference.



*“Black belt is a special honor and a great privilege as well as a big responsibility. Part of our training as a black belt is to always put our best foot forward in everything we do. It is, of course, not only for the sake of the other students who look up to us and will imitate everything we do, but for ourselves as well. In everything we do in life, work, at home, at play, let’s always put our best foot forward. . . .”*

– Rev. Kensho Furuya

This little voice feels so powerful, it becomes necessary to go to somewhat extreme measures in order to break its hold. When Sensei became ordained as a Zen priest, he told the story that when the bishop, his teacher, said that black was white and white was black, Sensei had to believe it with all his heart.

If our ego’s “little voice” tells us something and our teacher tells us what we think is the opposite (or at least different), we cannot experience what our teacher is trying to teach. What we experience and learn is completely different than what our “ego” thinks it is.

One night (in the late 1990s) out of the blue after class one day, Sensei pointed to a group of us and said, “You, you, and you are going to start Iaido.” I had resisted joining Iaido because according to my wife, I already spent too much time at the dojo. Nowadays, though, I would say that Iaido seems essential even to begin to understand Aikido. The physical experience of Iaido (or Kendo) feels unlike anything that most people would call familiar.

This relationship reveals a huge lesson; however, Sensei never formally said anything like that. The “meaning” of these lessons came to me only in the last couple of years. The events took place during Sensei’s life, but the perceived meanings of these “lessons” only surfaced recently. The question is, have I interpreted these lessons correctly, or not?

Sensei’s teaching always came imbued with an element of anxiety. We always felt a fear of criticism, a fear of failure, and oftentimes a physical fear. Life has these elements, classes had a bit more, and these were martial arts classes after all. The monthly early morning intensive class brought out a sort of dread heightened by the early morning, the darkness, the cold, and the fatigue. The one skill everyone learned quickly involved how not to piss off Sensei. We all had to figure that out for ourselves.

My learning criterion was not, “What would Sensei do,” but rather, “Would this piss Sensei off, and why?” That is to say, what Sensei taught me was not so much a set of formal criteria to judge and evaluate proper technique and ideas (which he actually did), but rather the intuitive tools to reject bad techniques and ideas (i.e., “Don’t do anything that would make Sensei mad.”).

Like I said: even seven years after his death, Sensei still teaches Aikido to me.



### Untitled

Win or lose, there is no need to chose,  
 Wrong or right, there is no need to fight,  
 Weak or strong, there is no need to wrong.  
 In Aikido, there is no enemy,  
 Only the enemy within, within one's mind and soul,  
 Train hard each day, to follow those masters of old. . . .

**Editor's note:** Sensei posted this poem on Aikiweb's Aikido Haiku forum on October 19, 2003.

### A Tradition of Giving

by Santiago Garcia Almaraz  
 Chief Instructor, Aikido Kodokai  
 Salamanca, Spain

Through these lines I would like to share with you my brief experience of Sensei in the years I was fortunate to know him.

My impression of Sensei upon entering the ACLA dojo and meeting him for the first time in 1997 was that I had come to the right place and met the right teacher. And from that day to this, I firmly believe that Sensei was an exceptional person. If anything could characterize Sensei, it was his gratitude, humility, and dedication to his students, teachers, and friends in exchange for very little.

Sensei's relationship with his students seemed, from my point of view, quite a traditional thing. I appreciated it, although I must admit that sometimes it felt a little stressful; I have seen many students pass through his hands since I met him, and I think that many may have left without ever understanding or perhaps making the effort to put in themselves in his place. Some merely complained about how demanding he seemed or how hard his approach felt to them when it came to understanding Aikido.

For me, I feel lucky enough to have experienced Sensei's teaching. He was demanding, but yet very honest with his students. He told us what we needed to hear, which helped us progress, although we often didn't like what we heard; Sensei was not one to say things just to stroke our egos or make us feel good about ourselves.

His demand was simple: practice, practice, practice. And this implied full attention during class: students had to be not only physically but also mentally awake and responsive during practice. And I can assure you that although it may sound easy, it was not at all.

On the other hand, class did not end just because we left the dojo; Sensei always shared a detail, a sketch, an idea, or a phrase that made us think. For me it was a privilege to share in the hours of talks; through Sensei and Aikido, we learned to become studious

people who liked to talk but mostly listen, listen to learn and understand different cultures and people.

Going out to lunch or dinner with him was an experience. Sensei knew many, many restaurants and always aimed to go for something new or amazing. He also knew most of the tastes of the teachers who came to the dojo to visit him.

Sensei's relationships with his teachers and friends was exquisite: he always had a kind word for Christmas, a postcard, and perhaps a little gift to let the recipient know he was by their side in spirit. Personally, I think that I am neither an important teacher nor is my skill any better than other black belts, yet I have to say that, incredibly, from the time I first met him, Sensei treated me like a son and he and his students gave me support and instruction that helped me find my way in this difficult race that is running a dojo.

Sensei taught me never to offer money, gifts, or any other type of donation. My money, my gifts, my thanks to him came down to only one acceptable form: I had to give myself completely, as I said before, every single practice. So when I came to visit him and when I returned to Spain I always tried hard to do my best. This sounds easy, but I guess there were times in class when Sensei's black belts did not make it easy for me; I thank them for that, because their hard training forced me to try a little harder for the next class and reaffirmed my decision to follow Sensei's footsteps and start my own dojo. I think those people who stayed on the road following Sensei never complained about the hard training; they overcame not having enough patience or perseverance to get up, shake off their ego, and go one step farther than the day before.

The majority of the time we talk about Sensei, we do so from the point of view of students and often do not stop to see that behind the image of Sensei was a person, a human being like most of us; someone who certainly had his hopes, longings, fears, and frustrations, as we all do. His life was ultimately devoted to giving each of us something in a way we could understand. So today we cannot help but care for and protect what Sensei left us: a tradition of giving and enjoying the true spirit of Sensei reflected in his students.



## The Aikido Center of Los Angeles – Celebrating 40 years (1974-2014)

### What's So Great About A Baked Potato?

by Ken Watanabe, Iaido Chief Instructor

I asked Sensei a question many years ago: “What’s so great about a baked potato?”

A long time ago, after practice, we had dinner at Monty’s, a now-defunct Pasadena steakhouse. It was my first time there, and Sensei mentioned how great their baked potatoes were. Back then a baked potato from Monty’s – a la carte – cost something like \$6.00; a lot of money (I thought) for something like a baked potato. I hadn’t the slightest idea of why anyone would get excited over something so simple as a baked potato. The baked potatoes I knew were these starchy little tubers wrapped in foil that came out of the oven, and later for convenience sake, nuked in the microwave. Then, they were topped with a pat of butter – hardly the highlight of my meal and nothing to be excited about.

What came out to our table was like nothing I ever encountered: a potato maybe three or four times the size of the “normal” potatoes I’d find in the produce department. The server asked us what we wanted on it and Sensei told me to get it with everything – butter, sour cream, and chives. The server then began to shovel pats of butter onto the potato, way more than a person should have in one sitting. I thought, “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! That’s way too much!” Then, she heaped on sour cream and spooned on a generous helping of chives.

My first thought was, “Oh my, what did I get myself into?” But, after a bite of that baked potato, a REAL baked potato, I was a convert. It was the most amazing thing I ever had; nothing like the sad little side dish my mother nuked at home. It totally changed the way I looked at baked potatoes. All those years I’d been eating something that was called a baked potato, and technically WAS a baked potato, but nothing even close to a real baked potato – a potato grown especially for baking, then properly prepared, with more butter, sour cream, and chives than anybody should eat in one helping.

Likewise, Sensei told me his Italian food story. He was at an Italian restaurant with a friend, who ordered a pasta dish for Sensei. When a dish of flat, wide noodles covered in a white, creamy sauce arrived, Sensei balked. Until then, Sensei told me that his experience with Italian food was pretty much canned spaghetti; like something from Chef Boyardee or Franco-American. Italian

food isn’t supposed to be white and it certainly shouldn’t have green peas and bits of ham in it. This dish, fettuccini alfredo with green peas and prosciutto, was nothing like those canned spaghetti dinners. Sensei told me that when he tried the pasta it was one of the most delicious things he’s ever eaten. So THAT’S what Italian food tastes like!

Many times, our idea of what is real or authentic gets clouded by our experiences, or lack thereof. In our own training, it’s important to look beyond what we know. Delving deeper into any art requires years of study, but like anybody who tries to expand their sphere of knowledge, it begins with (much like these food stories) simply being exposed to something that is real, or authentic. When we limit ourselves, close our minds, or both, our understanding becomes small and our choices become limited; Italian cuisine becomes nothing more than Franco-American Spaghetti-Os; baked potatoes become nothing more than a sad, pathetic starchy side dish out of a microwave, and a martial art devolves into a type of glorified calisthenics or performance art.

In our training, it’s important to delve deeply into our practice. An art like Aikido is almost unlimited in its profundity – so long as we master the basics, that is – yet, at the same time, we have to realize that Aikido is more than just throws and pins. Many other kinds of techniques (like strikes and kicks), as well as techniques involving weapons (such as sword, long staff, and dagger) are also part of the art. Like Italian food and baked potatoes it’s important to be aware of what else comprises the art outside of our own small, limited ideas. Nobody starts out wanting to practice the Spaghetti-Os version of their chosen art, so what would be the best way to keep this from happening? It is not Google and it is not YouTube. The best way to see all the possibilities in our chosen art is to find a good teacher, and we should consider ourselves very, very lucky that we did.



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We are a not-for-profit, traditional Aikido Dojo dedicated to preserving the honored values and traditions of the arts of Aikido and Iaido. With your continued understanding and support, we hope that you also will dedicate yourself to your training and to enjoying all the benefits that Aikido and Iaido can offer.

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