

## TAA NEW YEAR MESSAGE—2014

Dear Takemusu Aikido Association Member:

As we enter the new year it is always good to reflect on the lives of those who came before us and who have influenced us in positive ways. In Japan the tradition of Bounenkai, a “forget the past year” party, is a way to look forward to the new year, as we do with our New Year’s Eve parties. What do we do? Do we look forward or back. January is named for the Roman god Janus who had two faces—looking forward and backward. Looking backward may conjure up regrets, and looking forward may bring feelings of hope. I think both views are necessary, and we don’t have to look at the past with negative feelings.

By remembering people who have come before us, who are no longer with us, and who have had an influence on our lives, we honor traditions which are passed on to us. Those of us who accept the rigors of aikido training are developing a sense of the traditions which developed the art.

Usually our dojos and seminars have a prominent picture of O-Sensei at the front of the hall. Even if you never had the opportunity to meet or train with him, you have been exposed to his persona through books and videos. As one who met him and trained with him, I can close my eyes and still imagine his presence in the dojo, the atmosphere of the training and even his voice. Unfortunately, I don’t have any pictures or movies to accompany those memories. The memories themselves are crystal clear to me, however.

One example is the day I walked into the old wooden dojo in Shinjuku. There was no one in the dojo, and only a young woman in the office—and O-Sensei. I knew who he was, and it was exciting for me to see the founder of the art in person. It was one of those “aha” moments in life. Without ever seeing what aikido practice might be about, I wanted to join and take the opportunity to learn from O-Sensei. The office clerk told me to come back for the next class, but I told her I wanted to enroll then and there. She insisted, and I agreed to come back which I did.

As I began training it was obvious that O-Sensei was basically retired from daily teaching. He did teach often and it was always interesting to watch him carefully. To me he embodied the cultural, martial traditions of Japan, and I was determined to train and learn to the best of my ability.

Shortly after I began training, one of my training partners suggested I attend the Sunday class and watch Saito Sensei. He filled me in on the Iwama Dojo, since he had been out there occasionally. He spoke very highly of Saito Sensei. I began training on Sundays

immediately. I was not disappointed. Occasionally O-Sensei would appear on Sunday mornings and Saito Sensei would disappear into the corner. He would be called out for demonstrations and I was careful to watch the relationship the two men had together. This was my first awareness of the importance of the teacher-student relationship and how important it was in the dojo.

Later as I began to train exclusively with Saito Sensei I began to see another aspect of the dojo culture—loyalty. Saito Sensei was extremely attentive to O-Sensei when he was alive, and I never heard a harsh word out of Saito Sensei about his teacher.

Since the dojo maintained a traditional atmosphere, I began to see, and respect, the hierarchy between junior and senior students. During my early years training at the Iwama dojo, we would generally adjourn to the kitchen building after keiko and would begin an evening discussion of aikido over drinks. In such an informal situation, the dojo hierarchy was still observed, but the atmosphere was much more relaxed. Saito Sensei would talk about different aspects of aikido with occasional demonstrations between the table and shelves. It was in this venue that I learned more about aikido, the Founder, aikido history, and local history as well (Iwama is about a 20 min. train ride from Mito which was a renowned martial arts center with some very old dojos still in existence).

Over the years I would return to Iwama often for training, because aikido was only beginning in the United States, and I wanted to keep the connection I developed with Saito Sensei. It was import to me, also, to acquire the traditions of the dojo as well. The cultural differences between the students in the United States and Japan were striking. Later, as I began to teach, I struggled to develop a balance between the two.

Overall, the experiences I had, during my first twelve years or so in aikido were the ones which changed me the most. The opportunity to train with the Founder, Saito Sensei, Nidai Doshu, and other well-known teachers, who were direct students of the Founder, has given me experiences and associations for which I am truly grateful.

Arigatai means grateful in Japanese and is considered a very important personal quality in Japan. When someone has spent a lifetime of training, such as O-Sensei and Saito Sensei, and passes that training to us, we must show the feeling of arigatai to acknowledge what they gave to us. We can best do this by honoring their spirit before and after class, by upholding dojo traditions, and by passing on quality, traditional training to all students.

In the New Year as we move forward we always hope for the better, but we should look

back with appreciation for those who helped us get where we are today, because their path was much harder and less defined. O-Sensei had an idea to build a golden bridge of aikido between Japan and overseas. He left it up to us to bring that dream to reality.

**Bill Witt**

**President**

**Takemusu Aikido Association**

**January 30, 2014**