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O Sen Kan / Aikikai Dornbirn

## Yondan Essay / On Aikido

Ten years ago I made a life changing decision. I met my teacher in Dornbirn Austria and he offered me to become his student. For me, the saying: 'When the student is ready the teacher will appear' was suddenly fulfilled. In 2003, Tony Cassells, one of the best martial artists I know, accepted me as his student. This decision has changed quite a lot in my life. The journey we have been walking together over the last ten years has been beautiful, challenging, inspirational and most important, has always been based on care and respect for one other. We have always had a real teacher student relationship, which in my opinion, is one of the most important things in the Aikido we practice.

Aikido has become a great journey to me. Aikido has the ability to wake us up. Just think for a moment about how often you are absent-minded? How often do you daydream about certain things? How often are we asleep spiritually and mentally? Aikido is able to teach us how to open our inner eyes to the aliveness surrounding us. I believe that Aikido is a wonderful tool that O Sensei has given to us.

Aikido has become a companion in my daily life and is with me most of the time. I am very happy to be part of Chiba Sensei's Aikido school called Birankai. Also, I feel very privileged and honoured that he named my school in 2008. He has given me a very special name and I still chew on that name and very often ask myself why he has given me such a name. However, I haven't found the correct answer yet.

I am doing the best I can to honour the name given to my dojo. O Sen Kan has become my heart and my soul and I hope that one day, I will be a true guardian of Aikido like my teacher Tony Cassells.

I believe that through hard and fully committed work and through a truthful teacher student relationship, we are able to achieve many things we didn't believe in before. I also think that through this process we have a good chance to transmit the art to the next generation. However, Aikido will only be able to survive if we get committed students.

Chiba Sensei once told a story how he sees his relationship with Aikido. In that interview he said that he had fallen in love with a beautiful princess whom he can't reach or touch. She is far away behind a silk curtain and unreachable for him. But his love for her is pure and forever. So he decided to be the Captain of her Royal Guard. He promised to protect her and that's what he did for the last 50 years. In other words, Aikido for him doesn't have its own means to protect itself. It is fragile, noble, sensitive and precious.

I think that the teacher's have to provide protection for this noble art and make sure that Aikido doesn't get bastardized. Therefore every instructor of any dojo has a big responsibility towards Aikido. The chief instructor should be the centre of the dojo. He is the example everybody will follow.

I am fully aware of it and for me, my dojo is like a beautiful circle. In order to create a circle you must have a strong centre. Just think of many Aikido techniques and how circular they are in motion and how important it is to have a strong centre while executing them. O Sensei called that 'true' centre '*SUMIKIRI*', which means *total clarity of mind and body*. I think this state is not easily achieved at all by anybody, but it is definitely worth trying. We all know that O Sensei achieved this through his daily hard practice of the body, mind and soul.

I have never done any other martial arts than Aikido. Therefore, my next statement is probably questionable to many people but I still dare to say that Aikido, in my opinion, is probably the most difficult martial art to learn. We have no contests and therefore we cannot measure ourselves, we cannot win medals and cannot participate in the Olympic Games. That is one of the reasons why Aikido is Budo, a martial art and not a sport. For me Aikido is much more than winning against someone. I believe that through Aikido we are able to connect body, mind and soul.

Aikido helps us to defeat and also challenge our worst enemy. My teacher always says: 'You step on the mat and therefore it has already been a victory!' The easiest way is not to do Aikido, but then we might not be able to learn how to defeat our worst enemy. Some of you will ask yourself who is this worst enemy? Ten years ago we chose a dojo slogan that perfectly fits with this 'worst' enemy. On our dojo pass, you will read **Masakatsu Agatsu**, which means '**true victory is self-victory.**'

Aikido asks for constant and total awareness. This continuing awareness is very important for every Aikidoka. In Japanese it is called Zanshin. Zanshin helps us to care for the attacker and we learn to have compassion for him. In Aikido, we learn to neutralize any attack and therefore we are able to show any attacker that his attack is useless. On the highest level we put every attacker down without hurting him but showing him that his aggression leads to nowhere. However, as I said, that is the highest form taught by the master teachers called Shihans. My teacher told me that in order to give a life back we have to know how to take a life. This is a frightening statement. However, if you think about it deeply you can feel the truth in it. The highest form in Aikido was expressed through O Sensei, of course, who said: 'I am the universe and if you want to defeat me you have to defeat the universe.' O Sensei was never defeated by anybody, but how could anybody defeat the universe?

Often we hear the question: 'Have you ever really used Aikido? I mean really used it ....' This is a fair question. My answer is a clear yes. I use it every day. I use it all the time. I use it at home, I use it at work, I use it while I am talking and while I am walking. Some will now say: 'No, I mean used it to fight another person.' Then it is very hard to explain that the true purpose of Aikido is not to fight, even though we learn how to fight.

Just lately I read again that Aikido was given to us from O Sensei in order to make the world a better place where fighting is unnecessary. I also believe that Aikido can make us to 'better' human beings, that Aikido is able to bring out the best in ourselves.

As a skilful Aikidoka one is able to prevent an outbreak of violence in the first place or one knows how to stop violence, which is on its way. When we are able to do Aikido on that level I think we become a much better person than someone who is not able to control the outbreak of violence and therefore has to hurt the attacker. How we use and practice Aikido is up to us, and it is always our own choice to injure or not injure somebody.

I always try not to hurt or injure my students. Nevertheless, I often challenge them above their limits. As Aikido teachers we have a big responsibility towards our students. They come on that mat and give their bodies, their spirit, their attention, their full awareness and only through that commitment we are able to connect with them. At the

moment, this contact means a lot to me in my dojo. I created a formula for myself and my students. It is an easy one to read but a very difficult one to practice.

**AIKIDO = CONTACT**  
**NO CONTACT ≠ AIKIDO**

More and more I realize that all the basic techniques we practice in the dojo only work through contact. Actually they can only be done if there's contact. Both Uke and Nage have to work on that contact in order to understand those basic techniques.

Here we realize that we both depend and need one another. Without Uke, Tori cannot do Aikido. Without students, a teacher cannot teach. That is why we should connect with our students. Through that connection we have a relationship with each other, which is totally alive and something beautiful can be created. What would Aikido be without committed students? I think it would be lost. The art of Aikido can only survive if a teacher has at least one student who is able to transmit his art to the next generation. Chiba Sensei's school has given us this possibility through the teacher student relationship, which is one of the core principles within our school.

In the relationship with our students, we feel what Ai-Ki-DO is. The teacher and the student feel the love (Ai) and harmony between each other. They feel each other's energy (Ki) on and off the mat and through a commitment to each other they can walk their path (DO).

Last but not least, we shouldn't forget one more important thing. Chiba Sensei often emphasised that Shoshin is one of the most important things in our Aikido practice. Shoshin – beginner's mind - has become an honest companion and clear mirror in my Aikido practice.

**I must admit that at the moment, I have the feeling that the more I learn  
in Aikido, the more I realize how much I am a beginner.**

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