

First Joint Aikido Course in Birmingham

3. – 5. April 2009



It is a cold and misty night in January 2001. I am walking up the stairs to Ei Oh Kan Aikido Dojo in Birmingham. I have never been here and do not know anybody in Birmingham as it is. I open the door with a free mind, not knowing what to expect. It is not the first time like this. I took up Aikido in 1996 when I lived in the States for a year and have been to a variety of dojos in the States and Europe. But this time it is different. As I get changed and get onto the mat I do not know this, though. We warm up as I have done hundreds of times and then Sensei starts the class. I vividly remember that moment. It is still before my eyes. It is the moment of the beginning of the end of my Aikido as I know it. The walls begin to crack. I watch this Sensei, who I have never seen before create a tension and atmosphere I have never experienced before. The back of my hair stand up and to be honest, simply being impressed does not describe it. I am scared, shocked, mesmerised and fascinated, all at the same time. And I stay in Tony Cassells' dojo, which I came across by sheer chance on the Internet, for three exciting months. What I do not know when I leave is that 1 ½ years later Juergen Schwendinger and I embark on a journey with Tony Cassells and enter a traditional student – teacher relationship.

8 years later. Juergen has been invited to teach the first joint Aikido course of O Sen Kan, a name given to our young dojo by Chiba Sensei last year, and Cooks Moors Woods Central Aikikai in Birmingham. Michael, Lothar, David and I have the pleasure and accompany him to England. When Mark Pickering, Andy Colclough and Michelle Eagles pick us up at the airport we have truly arrived. We are at home.

We go straight to Ei Oh Kan, which has moved premises 2 times since I first trained there and get onto the mat. What a great way to start this weekend. I am wondering what Tony Cassells Shihan holds in store for us tonight and will not be disappointed. It has been like this ever since we started. We never know what to expect. And this is one of the many lessons we have learned over the previous 6 years. Tony Cassells Shihan starts off with a bang. Shomenuchi Kokyu Ho, which we have done thousands of times but this time with completely different tai sabaki - feet movement. It feels awkward. I am on new terrain and it takes time getting used to it. The lesson – do not become complacent. Anything can happen at any time. If you have only practised Shomenuchi Kokyo Ho with the same feet movement over and over again, chances are you get caught unawares if somebody catches you on the wrong foot. The tone is set for the rest of the evening and the weekend. We move on to tanto work. Whatever mistakes you make, how slight they might be, in tanto work they all come to the surface. I feel like a beginner, as if this is my first lesson and I realise, once again, the road that lies ahead is a long one. Time flies. Class finishes before it has started and we move on to the 'real Aikido' as Shihan Cassells likes to put it so accurately. Our English friends know how much we love Indian food and so take us to one of the many Balti places in Birmingham. For Lothar and David it is their first visit to Birmingham and they enjoy every second of it.

The next day, after breakfast we head straight to Cooks Moors Woods Central Aikikai. An intense day of practice lies ahead of us – 3 body art classes, 1 weapon's class and then, to top it all of, a Shodan grading. We

will only have short breaks in between. I mentally try to prepare for it, but to be honest, do not succeed. After the first class I already feel drained. Juergen Schwendinger Sensei emphasises the importance of the first contact. Timing, distance and movement have to be perfect to break your Uke's balance. Whatever technique you practise, it all comes down to that sweet moment in time. After a short break Shihan Tony Cassells takes over. He picks up where he stopped the night before. More tanto work and again I am learning many valuable lessons. He uses Ushiro tenkan foot movement, moving back but moving forward at the same time. A contradiction it seems, but a very powerful foot movement when executed properly. After Mark Pickering Sensei's Body Art class, I feel exhausted and energised at the same time. Just one more weapons class to go. I hope it will be an easy one. I should not have. Juergen Schwendinger Sensei teaches the 7 Awase which he was first taught by Shihan Tony Cassells 5 years ago in Birmingham. I uke for him a couple of times. I sometimes get hit and feel my anger rise and try to control it. The mat is a perfect place to work with your emotions. Trying hard not to get overwhelmed by them is not always easy. The class finishes. We get our final short break. And then Paul Hall's Shodan grading starts. It is a pleasure to watch. I am impressed by his energy, movement and stamina. Doing such an excellent grading after such a hard day is quite something. He passes with flying colours.

That night we are invited to Andy Couglough's and his girl-friends Tracey's place. It is a great evening amongst friends. In a short speech Mark Pickering Sensei talks about the history of our dojos and the connection we have made throughout the years. I am touched, proud and very grateful for being part of all this, having kick-started it. It is the result of the actions of a bunch of dedicated people, who, led by a great teacher and mentor, have a common vision and follow it through.

The next day, after two more classes and a fine meal we head back to the airport. Our bodies are tired and our minds full of new impressions and thoughts. I can only speak for myself when I say it has been a great, memorable weekend and that I am taking home a lot to work on, polish each other up, as Shihan Cassells describes it. But I am sure that the others feel similar and am looking forward to our next seminar. The journey continues.

Wolfgang Petter, 2. Dan

Aikikai Dornbirn – O Sen Kan