

# Uchi Deshi Essay

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After spending three months as an Uchi Deshi at the Ann Jyou Kan Dojo in Paris, I dedicate this essay to my teacher Anne Ducouret Sensei, her assistant Fukushidoins, Jean-Gabriel Massardier and Cyrille Benoit, as well as all other members of the Ann Jyou Kan Dojo. Each of them contributed to one of the most enriching periods of my life.

Furthermore, I thank my “home teacher” Jürgen Schwendinger Sensei from the O Sen Kan Dojo in Austria, for introducing me to and forming my basis of the art and for his continuous support from the beginning of my Aikido practice. I thank his teacher Tony Casells Sensei and Mark Pickering Sensei from the United Kingdom for all the support they have given us throughout many years. Also, I thank my Aikido teachers from Germany, Jules and Leoni McGough, for welcoming and integrating me kindly in their dojo for two years. Lastly, I thank my Zazen teacher, Roshi Eran Junryu Vardi from New Jersey, who encouraged me to trust my path.

## Small Aikido – Technical Understanding

Someone new to Aikido will begin to study its form. I will therefore begin with the technical work I focused on as a third Kyu practitioner during my time at the Ann Jyou Kan Dojo.

### **Hip Movement**

In Aikido technique, there is a key emphasis on hip movement, or the movement of the gravity centre. Hip movement and the movement of the gravitational centre are integrally related. This focus on centre and hip movement were the first and second pillars of Kazuo Chiba Sensei’s work: centeredness and connectedness. In Aikido practice, the beginner attempts to use primarily arms and shoulders, i.e., brawn, or physical, muscular strength. Later the practitioner learns that when one moves from the hips, the centre of the whole body is engaged. As a third Kyu, I had already a general idea of technical forms, thus it was particularly important to focus on canalizing the energy of the centre and the whole body (third pillar) to give life (fourth pillar) to the technique. Consequently, lowering one’s gravity centre and concentrating on hip movement are essential milestones in refining one’s

technique. Relating to the third pillar, one's back has to be kept straight. This was a particular challenge for me as I am relatively tall and I often practice with practitioners who are smaller in height. For example, with the technique Shihonage, it is of utmost importance to drop my gravitational centre by bending my knees while maintaining the straightness of my spine when passing through.

### **Absorption**

Secondly, the relationship between giving and taking, release and absorption, activity and passivity, gained more of my attention. As I see it, we generally like (through cultural conditioning) to give blows, but we do not like so much to receive them. This can be seen in open-hand practice as well as in weapons work. In order to let the technique flow fluently, it is essential that every action by the Tori has a connected response by the Uke (and vice versa); in other words, two conflicting forces have to be neutralized. If this is not accomplished, there is no connection and the technique does not work. This can be seen strikingly in weapons work – blows with the jo or the bokken become hits rather than cuts when not received by the opponent.

### **Precision**

I also learned to cultivate precision and timing. We are all familiar with the sheer, uncontrollable enthusiasm of practising Aikido, and this enthusiasm encourages us to move rapidly. Frankly, in the beginning we often move too fast to be precise. Sometimes we mistake rapidity of movement for a martial spirit – a very easy mistake to make. Obviously, movements are internalized over time. Yet it is not possible to skip this beginner's stage. Precise movements, after innumerable repetitions, may be achieved at increasing speed and vigour.

## **Big Aikido – Aikido as a Path**

As written above, when someone begins to study Aikido, one studies its form. The (visible) form is the vehicle to transform the self to be immovable, vigilant, sincere and fresh-minded

as given by Chiba Sensei (Chiba 2007, p. 4). O'Sensei wrote the following about the purpose of budo:

*“True budo is not a fighting technique based on a rash use of force against another in order to determine who is stronger or who can win in a contest; rather it is a path centred on daily training with other kindred souls, mutually working together to polish and refine their individual characters.”* (Ueshiba 2013, p. 52)

Aikido cannot be grasped by focusing solely on technical form. Aikido is a lifelong path that polishes one's character. It is a way of endlessly refining the self.

### **Ai Ki Do – The Three Characters**

Aikido as a Japanese term contains three characters. The “*Ai*” character stands for “come together”, “harmonize” and “blend” and the “*Ki*” character means “energy” or “spirit”. *Aiki* was understood by O'Sensei as a universal principle that unites all things. The term connotes “integration”, “interdependence”, “interaction”, “harmony” and “wholeness” (Ueshiba 2013, p. 125). On a more individual level, it can be seen as the union of body and spirit, of self and other, and of self and the universe.

The “*Do*” character means “way” or “path” implying a never-ending route or development. Putting all letters together, *Aikido* is the “*Way of Harmony*” or the “*Art of Peace*” (Ueshiba 2013, p. 126). It is not only the practise of technique in dojo halls, but the practice of harmony within our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with nature. As stated by O'Sensei, it is to “*rid the world of aggression and to bring out the best in people, leading them along a proper path*” (Ueshiba 2013, pp. 97).

### **The Fifth Pillar**

In the first chapter of this essay, four of the five pillars of Chiba Sensei's teachings were mentioned in the context of their technical implications: *centeredness*, *connectedness*, *wholeness* and *liveliness*. I see those pillars more rooted in physical form. I see the fifth pillar, *openness*, as a “*reification of the psychospiritual virtues such as humility, receptivity, modesty,*

[...]” as expressed by Chiba Sensei (Chiba 2007, p. 7). Once again, the philosophical and moral aspects of the martial art are emphasized. Beyond mastering technique, we shall master ourselves and refine our characters. It is *masakatsu agatasu* – true victory is self-victory.

## **Two Poles**

What is the source of Aikido or of any martial art? Where does *Ki* originate from? Chiba Sensei describes it as a dialectic of two opposing forces. It is the self against the other, it is to dominate or to be dominated, to kill or to be killed, life or death (Chiba 2007, p. 8). What eventually emerges depends on where the weight is placed – on harmony or on conflict. When two opposing forces meet, “*mutual recognition of co-existence can be realized*” (Chiba 2007, p. 9). However, the encounter between these two forces must be resolved in a creative and constructive manner in order for conflict to be avoided and harmony to emerge.

## **The Teaching – *I Shin Den Shin***

I also learned the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student. This is stated in the phrase “*I Shin Den Shin.*” “*I*” means “by” or “through”, *Shin* means “heart”, “mind”, “spirit” and *Den* means “to communicate”, “to pass on” or “to transmit” (Chiba 2007, p. 7). *I Shin Den Shin* thus could be translated as “to transmit from heart to heart”– to transmit without the use of words. The “heart-to-heart-transmission,” to apply the term used by Chiba Sensei, is of utmost importance, in particular to the Birankai school. As an Uchi Deshi, I enjoyed having a particularly close relationship with my Sensei. Moreover, assisting in and sometimes giving children’s classes myself gave me my first experiences of being in the teacher-student role.

## **Student-Teacher-Relationship**

The basis of the student-teacher-relationship is trust and respect. To trust your teacher’s intentions requires you to let go of your ego whenever it resists. Often, the willingness to learn comes into conflict with the desire for recognition and self-esteem, but the self must be empty of these obstacles in order to absorb the teaching. By emptying oneself of knowing the technique, of knowing what comes next, of being right or having to prove something, by

being fresh-minded, one can absorb the teaching. As Chiba Sensei pointed out, *shoshin* (beginner's mind) is needed by the student to follow the teaching (Chiba 2009, p. 4). It is the trust in your teacher that allows you to follow his or her teachings even in times when they are difficult for you as a student to accept.

Conversely, it is the responsibility of the teacher to understand the fine line between pushing the student to his or her personal limits and inflicting harm. The teacher must find a balance between demand and support in order to promote the growth of the student, without crushing the spirit of the student.

Interestingly, the classic Japanese teaching system is completely hierarchic. Some North Americans and Europeans do not view this hierarchy in a favourable light. They view this hierarchy as a form of inequality, when in fact is an integrated system of mutual respect between teacher and student. This point is very often overlooked: not only does the student need his or her teacher, but the teacher needs his or her student. After all, what is a teacher without a student?

### **What Makes An Aikido Teacher?**

One approach to answer this question may be to think of a list of beneficial character attributes of a teacher: clarity, consistence, sincerity, intelligence, patience, empathy, authoritative, serenity, discipline, dynamism, light-heartedness, humour, etc. Each one of these traits may be analysed critically in reference to the teacher. However, to see those traits in context with each other is to see the whole picture. Most importantly, as I learned from Anne Ducouret Sensei, to be a good Aikido teacher is more than simply attaining pedagogic skills. When you teach, you have to be yourself. You cannot try to be someone else or to fulfil as many of the traits you imagine you have to have as a teacher. Aikido is self-expression and teaching Aikido is not different.

Once more: What makes an Aikido teacher? O'Sensei's answer is straight to the point: “[a]bove all, we must be good examples. We must walk the talk” (Ueshiba 2013, p. 76). This is the essence of teaching. As a teacher, you are a role-model. You must strive to refine yourself, like the student, to be a good teacher.

Related to the issue of “walking the talk” as a teacher, is to “[p]ractice first, and then listen to explanations” (Ueshiba 2013, p. 96) as a student. A teacher may “explain and explain” but in

order to understand one “*needs to practice, to experience Aikido*” (Ueshiba 2013, p. 96). After all, like the form being the vehicle for big Aikido, our body and body movements are the vehicles for our spirit and mental learning.

## **Dojo – “Place of the Way”**

*Dojo* is the place where the way is practiced. The Ann Jyou Kan Dojo is part of the Dojo-School “Dojo-École de l’Est Parisien” and very special in terms of the many different disciplines that are practiced there. Apart from Aikido and Iado, other martial arts are taught (Karate, Kendo, Kinomichi, Kung Fu Wushi) and courses working with energetic body movements (Qigong, Tai Chi Chuan, Feldenkrais, Pilates, Respiration) take place every week.

### **Ann Jyou Kan**

In 2007, Chiba Sensei named the dojo *Ann Jyou Kan*, meaning “a house of peace and prosperity”. The permanent dojo is spacious, having one hall with tatami and one with wooden floor. The common kitchen is well equipped and above the kitchen there is a small living space for Uchi Deshis. The dojo is furnished Japanese-style, and upon entering the dojo one senses a lively community character. Indeed, the dojo speaks of care for and of its members. It is a place for retreat, sincere work, walking and practising the way. Everything flows together to create a certain atmosphere of peace and prosperity.

It is apparent that the Ann Jyou Kan looks back on many years of work and continuous development. As I have learned, initially it was anything but easy to establish the place it is today. One may say, the dojo had its path too and has refined itself over the years. Today, the rules of the dojo are internalized in the hearts of all senior and intermediate students. They build an extremely strong backbone on which junior students and newcomers can rely on when they arrive at the dojo.

As an Uchi Deshi I not only committed my time to and worked in service for the dojo, but I lived in the middle of it, perceiving and realizing that the dojo is also a social community where people help each other and participate to create something bigger. Yet, while feeling something beyond the individual, everybody maintains his/her individuality. The dojo thrives from its very heterogeneity, its various activities and numerous different members, each

member having diverse talents and contributions. It is indeed a vivid “house of peace and prosperity”.

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