



Shodan Essay by Sylvia Taraba

What does Aikido mean to me?

Aikido means to me, to have sufficient and effective training in both body art and weapons. And this in a conscious and appreciating atmosphere, with people who gather around a philosophy of peace, the philosophy of martial arts, the training of martial skills and the sharing of the idea of being opponents on the mat, and friends in social life. This gives me the certainty to receive what I sought for, and the sureness of being in the right company, whoever shares this company.

O Sensei said, „the true victory is the victory over oneself“. In fact, training Aikido over the years made me, have many victories over myself. Victory for me means duration, than the freedom from the need of only comforting states of body and mind, to get rid of emotions and feelings that happen to come up, or even can keep me away from training. Moreover, it is learning about my body and other bodies, their skills, their flexibility and their inhibitions. Aikido is sometimes called meditation in motion and here, I often experience presence as absence of thought. Last but not least, Aikido for me is learning to know about artistic forms, I had never dreamed of, and of special movements, to become natural movements.

In order to create my own history and to stick to my own way, I have to take a glimpse back, to remember: My personal history of Aikido is a story of thirteen years of continuity, but not a story of continual training, nor training the whole way up to now within one singular „school“ of „style.“ I had the wish to train every day of the week, but could not do this in my former dojo, so this led to the situation that I took trainings in several dojos from 1998-2003.

I trained with different teachers and schools throughout a five-year period of time. I got more or less slightly different and therefore confusing inputs about forms. Far from being „basically firm“ and „settled in a single dojo“, I got very unsure on the one side and more and more sure of my

keeping up and maintaining the training of Aikido on the other side. At that time, I met people with little commitment to what they were doing in respect to Aikido and with no idea of a martial spirit, which I got to know later. I missed this aspect, even if I did not know it really then. But I did know, that I had not been challenged and had not been demanded to give something significant, something that makes a difference.

So, in spring 2003 I felt lucky and happy to have become part of a new founded dojo, Aikikai Dornbirn, at first a „satellite dojo“ of EI O KAN Birmingham of the British Birankai. I felt privileged to have „landed“ in the middle of a friendship, which meant „heritage“, „lineage“ and „martial spirit.“ Only few people have the opportunity of learning from the best. I honour this deeply; I am always aware of it. It conducted me further onto a path, that I wanted to follow and stay on. The spirit of reliability and friendship in our dojo and the trust in my teacher Jürgen - and in his teacher Tony - helped me to overcome many breaks and getting on with it.

Aikido for me never meant the utmost priority in my life, but it was always a great and continuing inspiration. I am an author. Aikido gives mental, spiritual and practical input into the contents of my writing and a sureness towards the various implications of relationships and behaviours in the outside world. It is my growing belief, and Aikido convinced me even more, to take conflict not as a destructive, but much more as a productive quality of communication. To follow the principles of Aikido, - right distance, centeredness, connectedness, movement, go of f the line of attack, aliveness, - in every day life, makes a difference in communication.

Shoshin (the beginner's mind) is my very companion, as I can not rely on a stable foundation of basics in my Aikido - not even for the last six years in the Aikikai Dornbirn -, but rather had to go on to „unlearn“ lots of „bad habits.“ Unlearning is more difficult than learning. Being full with inaccurate and „untidy“ form, I could not really take up, what I saw then. On the other side, even here forms slightly changed and still change sometimes and make it therefore difficult for me to learn. So before anything of the new input could get fixed and automatized in my body, I was confronted with something „next“, „other“ or „new“, without being able to put the „right order“ into it, when form or technique had been „modified“.

Unfortunately, I could not build up a straight history of continual regular (not to say daily) training up to the present day. However for some periods of time, I have, and I had, the satisfying experience of what it means, to go and train every day of the week. It gave and gives me the utmost security of a conditioned body, a calm mind, stoicism, serenity, martial spirit and the strong feeling of self-assurance and growth.

I have had many breaks. There were breaks due to intense periods of writing and because of family reasons, that I could not control by better structure of time, e.g. the illness and death of my mother, the organisation of her household and later management of family heritage.

It often seemed to me, that I did not get on with my Aikido. Now, for the first time, I realise, that this „seeming“ does not matter. Actually I did get on, but not the way I thought, I would.

Aikido will not be the priority of my life in future neither, but - it has been part of my life since thirteen years. It contributes to form my character along principles that accomplish my own philosophy of living and thinking.

One day, four years ago, talking about Aikido, we asked Shihan Tony Cassells, why he does Aikido. He answered: „To become free.“ At that time, I was astonished about this answer. I trained Aikido because I thought I loved body art in connection with weapons and the philosophy of the martial arts. But actually I got aware now, that practising martial Aikido, I have eventually to become free, not only from the changing conditions of mind in general, not only subjectively from chance, fortuity, laziness, comfort, but especially from my own prejudices about myself. Why? Because I choose „That“ and not „This“.

As at last coming to take my Shodan, I feel the self-obligation to go on and aim for a but higher goal and level in my development. I enjoy the process of preparing for my Shodan because that gives me the chance to unlearn, to catch up a little and close some gaps.

I study the anatomy (in the way of studying the functioning of the bones and joints and wrists of my partner in private life) and take time to think about which functional physical law a particular form of Aikido follows. In this short period of utmost concentration, I have developed a new admiration for O Sensei, because of the beauty and multitude of refined and cunning FORMS he

developed in order to control and disarm an enemy. Furthermore the experience of Chiba-Sensei's mental presence in our trainings and his impressive personal presence in our Dojo at our Austrian Summer Camp 2008, gives me deep respect. The honour of our dojo being given a name by Chiba Sensei - O SEN KAN - gave me an idea of the trust that Shihan Tony Cassells and T.K. Chiba put in my teacher, our chief-instructor Jürgen Schwendinger and in his co-instructors Wolfgang Petter and Michael Schwendinger. This relationships encourage me to aim for an even deeper approach.

Through Chiba Sensei and Shihan Tony Cassells I was able to see outstanding examples of martial artists of advanced maturity and legendary mastership, and the admiration of what there has to be achieved: T.K. Chiba has established a strong movement of outstanding pupils (and pupils' pupils), keeping up Aikido as a martial art in the spirit of their teacher, the founder of Aikido, also for western people. My teacher, and my other instructors as well, strive to live up to this in their own way. I love this spirit of serenity and of passing on a heritage. I feel it to be an obligation to come closer to my limits and overcome former inhibitions.

Getting to know Chiba Sensei's own lifelong study of the form of Aikido - in the way of his own development -, this gives me the commitment of an outstanding mind. I learned to know and to see the awakensness and the liveliness of Aikido in person. Watching Shihan Tony Cassells personality throughout the many occasions during these six years, his intense work on form, his wonderful way of teaching it to us with impressive metaphors, passing his martialness over to us, also his untiring telling and talking about Aikido with us, I am proud of my teacher Jürgen who fully trusts his teacher and he trusts in him.

Watching them, and also the paths of our own instructors, I learn - in my own way of Aikido - how Aikido has to be worked out from the roots of its basic movements. I learn that the difference between the Principles and Form is there, only to bring both together into one – and this again and again and again, - on different levels. I began to study Chiba Sensei's „Shu Ha Ri“ - text from 1989 some time ago – and I might find myself doing Aikido much longer than I could ever have thought. It gives me a surplus of mental strength in daily life and creates a bodily and

physical expression of self-confidence on the one hand, and the idea of its depth and possibilities of my development on the other hand.

Actually Aikido gave and gives example and completion to my own philosophy of the paradox. „Violence is love“ Shihan Tony Cassells said one evening to us „girls“ in 2004, when we were all sitting together in my kitchen after the training.

I have been thinking about it often ever since. I thought out for me, what this (by all means!) could mean. I think to comprehend its meaning for life in general more and more - and I understand what it means in the way of Aikido, even if I personally am not „martial enough“, not even a „great physical talent“, - able „to take life, in order to give life back“ (the very vision of a martial artist in the street, in order to create peace). I think I understand its essential meaning for the contents of the Aikido-movement and the meaning of its metaphors for the very idea of peace: To keep up peace means that you first have to gain the ability to fight for it, in fact by learning to be able to kill. This is a paradox. A martial artist is a person who has made earnest with peace in his own mind. By training effective martial skills that prevent him from making a „wrong peace“ or „foul compromise“ (e.g. out of fear for his life, or out of indifference about his own integrity of mind). He trains physical skills, that give him physical competence, to end a fight effectively with a clear physical or mental statement (either physical, or in his mind, or between two minds), but without shedding blood, killing or hatred. Such a trained mind subsequently grows the mental competence to avoid confrontation at all, but aims at turning a conflict into a solution, that is into a constructive or creative moment. This I took into my thinking and into my life.

The physical skills that I learn in Aikido – one by one, more and more conscious –are also mental skills. By doing the physical practice, - to get to the right timing, to find the right distance, to perform a natural movement, to keep connection, to stay centred, to practice with aliveness, maybe to reach wholeness -, I train the mental ability to keep up peace. To even only think these points, is a privilege in life, which I am aware of.

I am glad to be part of this special gift of friendship between EI O KAN, Birmingham and O SEN KAN, Dornbirn, - between Shihan Tony Cassells, his wife Stella, his Birmingham friends (Mark Pickering Sensei and all the other friends and guests that come to visit and teach us) and our teachers, and the grown agreement of being part of T.K. Chiba's Birankai-Family. I am proud of our Dojo. Our instructors are very young, but I can see their continual personal development and despite all the highs and lows of life I trust them, to lead all of us along a good path of practice and our Dojo O SEN KAN into a future which will remain in the sense of the founder. I think all these are outstanding qualities, which Aikido can teach us. However this special connection is thanks to the spirit, confidence and courage of my teacher Jürgen Schwendinger Sensei und thanks to the visionary power of Jürgens teacher Shihan Tony Cassells. It needs the personality, the experience, the commitment and a vision, to make a great idea to become true and it needs outstanding pupils, as my teacher is, to be willing to take up such an extraordinary challenge, commitment and responsibility and keep up to it. As for me, I happen to be the pupil of a much younger teacher. I have been watching Jürgen's development for thirteen years. I appreciate very much what I have seen. This made me trust him, therefore I followed him into his new Dojo six years ago and stayed with him up to now.

In these years I experienced that trust and confidence in one another is the core of the teacher-student-relationship. Trust is the energy and motor of the „heart to heart transmission“ that Shihan Tony Cassells and Jürgen Schwendinger Sensei are able to create. This creates the atmosphere and the space for a martial art, for a good dojo, for high quality trainings, for respect and last but not least for friendship.

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Aikikai Dornbirn – O SEN KAN