

Homage to my Master

By Ethan Weisgard

I am deeply saddened by the passing of our Sensei, my Sensei, Morihiro Saito Sensei on Monday May 13th 2002 in Iwama, Japan. To quote Shihan Ulf Evenås: Saito Sensei has not only shown us how to live our lives, he has shown us how to die, with honor and dignity.

Saito Sensei had suffered from cancer of the oesophagus. He took charge of his own well-being, his physical and spiritual condition during the treatment of his illness. He fought his way back to health, something that most people who suffer from this kind of cancer are not capable of doing. For several years after his recovery he trained vigorously, travelling around the world to teach, and living life to the fullest. Approximately six months ago he had a reoccurrence of the cancer.

He chose to stay at home instead of being hospitalized. He was paralyzed from the shoulders down, but his mind was as sharp as ever and his spirit was strong. The students in the dojo took him outside regularly so that he could look at what he had spent so much time working on and caring for, caring just as much as he cared for Aikido: the earth. Sensei loved to work outside, gardening and taking care of the dojo and jinja grounds. Sensei took great pride in his work in this area.

Sensei told me last time I was in Iwama, "I love the uchi-deshi." The word "love" is not a word that is used lightly in Japanese, but Sensei really meant it. I could tell that his statement was not only about the people who were at the dojo at the time, but his students as a whole.

Sensei died on a Monday. People who have been uchi-deshi in Iwama know that Mondays are the uchi-deshi's day off. The last training of the weekend is Sunday morning, and then the students have a well-earned break until morning practice Tuesday. Even in death, Sensei's sense of timing was impeccable.

Saito Sensei has had a colossal influence on so many of us, his students. Sensei was not only a fantastic Budoka, but also an incredible person in all aspects of life. He treated his students with respect, warmth and also a good amount of humor. He could also be very strict, the way a good teacher must be sometimes. You were never in doubt that you were in the presence of a true master when in Sensei's presence. But he never demanded respect. He didn't have to. Respect towards Sensei came naturally, also from people who were not at all aware of his status in the martial arts world.

Sensei was a true "Sensei." When in his presence, every instant was a learning experience, and not only in the field of Aikido. The first time I was in Iwama together with my colleague Torben Dyrberg in 1984, Sensei took time to show all of us foreign students every aspect he could of Japanese etiquette and culture. He cooked for us and showed us how to prepare the dishes correctly: cutting the vegetables just so, and adding the ingredients at just the right time. Correct table manners and the right way to handle chopsticks, how to hold a rice bowl correctly- he took time to explain to us the smallest details (a lot like his Aikido training, isn't it?). We were invited to participate in important Shinto ceremonies at the Aiki Jinja and to take part in many other events that had to do with important parts of Japanese culture. We were his humble students, he did not have to do any of this for us. But for Saito Sensei, it was very important for us not only to receive the Aikido training we had come to Japan for, but also to understand and experience where Aikido came from both culturally as well as spiritually.

Sensei showed great respect towards his foreign students and for the work that they put in to reaching a higher level of understanding in Aikido. He was aware that we brought the Aikido he had dedicated his life to out to the rest of the world. He has said in public many times, both in Japan and abroad, that in the future the Japanese will have to go abroad to learn real Aikido. This is not to say that the level of training in Japan is not good. We who have gone to Japan throughout these many years have very special relationships and have the utmost respect for Sensei's closest Japanese students. Some of these students have actually had

the experience of training under O-Sensei, and some of the younger students have received that teaching as direct students of Saito Sensei himself. But the complete absorption into all the levels inherent in Aikido- the technical levels as well as the deeper (or higher) spiritual levels- seems to be more of a point of focus for the foreign students in general. Sensei was aware of this.

Several years ago at a training camp where most of Sensei's highest ranking European students were gathered, a person asked Sensei: "Sensei, what is the future of Aikido?" The person asking was referring to the question of who was to be the successor after Saito Sensei. Sensei looked around at the group of his loyal students, people who had been coming to train under his guidance for 10, 20 or 30 years. Every one of the people present with their own groups of students representing hundreds even thousands more, and each and every one trying their utmost to learn and pass on the Aikido that Sensei had given to us so generously. Sensei's answer was, as he was himself, direct, honest and last but not least, brave: "You are the future."

Morihiro Saito Sensei 1928-2002
May He Rest In Peace