

Experience with Toyoda Sensei

by Chett Rubenstein

4/21/04

I wandered into Chicago's Tenshinkan dojo in the fall of 1991 for a 6-week Introduction to Aikido class based on an invitation from a friend. I knew nothing about Aikido, the AAA or Toyoda Sensei and I had no idea that this was the AAA headquarters dojo. Toyoda Sensei taught that 6-week class and by the end I was hooked, becoming a regular at the dojo until I moved to Connecticut in 1999.

There was a quality about Toyoda Sensei that was both captivating and endearing. The combination of his broken English, great sense of humor and dedication to clear, quality instruction grabbed me at some fundamental level. To this day his spirit lives on inside me and inspires me to do whatever I can to bring Aikido to the world.

There are a couple of things that always come to mind when I think of Toyoda Sensei. One is the wonderful way he had of reprimanding me on the mat, immediately followed by a smile and laughter to lighten the mood. The result for me was a feeling of both respect and rapport – a winning combination that few teachers achieve with their students.

The other thing about him I'll never forget was a single throw he did while I was his uke in front of one class. The technique was shomenuchi kokyunage and I attacked with all the kiai I could muster, trying to catch him right in the forehead with the blade of my hand. At the very last moment he moved off the line and the next thing I knew I was on the mat. I remember the distinct feeling of being sucked into a blackness where all sight and sound suddenly vanished. Time seemed to distort as the moment felt much longer than what could only have been a split second. I was disoriented because I went from point A (full on shomenuchi attack) to point B (landing softly on the mat) with absolutely no sense of what happened in between. The best analogy I can think of is watching a stream of video where a number of frames have been removed - the action just seems to skip.

I realized in that instant that this is what Aikido can do at its highest levels. When nage perfectly blends with uke and enters with love and compassion, the force of an attack can be perfectly and instantly diffused, leaving the attacker with a sense of peace and gratitude for not having to experience defeat or injury. This is a wonderful gift to mankind and it is the pursuit of it that motivates me to climb on the mat and train day after day. And for that, Toyoda Sensei, I am eternally grateful. Domo ariegato gozaimashita.