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New Year Message 2013

Dear Takemusu Aikido Association Member:

A New Year is upon us, and I would like to extend to everyone my best wishes for a happy and prosperous New Year.

It will be 40 years ago this year that Saito Sensei wrote and published his first book: Traditional Aikido, Volume 1. I was asked to provide the English Text, since he felt that it was important to reach a population of non-Japanese who were sincerely interested in aikido, and who were beginning to come to the Iwama dojo to practice.

After the book was published, a local Bay Area instructor was sufficiently taken with one passage to make a very elegant poster of the quotation to hang in his dojo. The passage reads:

*“Progress along the way (Do) is one of hardship resulting in everlasting joy and cherished human relationships. These are special rights given to students, and it is the duty of the student to accept the hardships of ken, jo, and taijutsu practice to actively further himself along the way.”*

At the time, I was not literate in Japanese and needed the assistance of David Alexander’s wife, Takako to help with the translation. I recall struggling with Sensei’s Japanese and trying to find the right English words to capture his intent. As I look at the passage today, it seems overly simple, crudely written and really doesn’t convey Sensei’s meaning well.

Another Bay Area instructor who saw the poster with the quotation said, “What the heck does that mean?” Well, he really used stronger words than that, but I took that statement to heart and have thought about it over the years.

Last year in September my wife and I made a trip out to Iwama to see the dojo and meet old friends. My sempai at the dojo, Inagaki Sensei, told me that they had planned an “old-timers” party in the evening. All of the old-timers did indeed show up. There were also a group of Brazilians visiting, Ulf Evenas from Sweden, Ethan Weisgard from Denmark, an instructor from Portugal, and another brand new shodan from Argentina. It was probably the best party I have ever attended in my life. Iwama is still somewhat of a country town and is part of a newly created Kasama City. Everyone in attendance at the party had a great time. I was especially taken with the older Iwama residents who were perfectly at home and relaxed with all of the foreigners present in spite of occasional language difficulties. What Saito Sensei began 40 years ago, the attraction of foreign students to study in Iwama, had affected the Iwama resident dojo members as well. Most of them had never traveled outside of Japan, but yet they were comfortable with visitors from outside of Japan, because everyone was sincere in sharing the type of training done in Iwama (the hardship of training). We really were one family, united by the aikido

experience, and cherishing our meetings and training with one another. We were bonded together. As I sat at the table there, I kept thinking about my clumsy translation of Saito Sensei's book and that passage in particular. This special evening was a much more elegant translation of Saito Sensei's thoughts than I could ever put down on paper.

O-Sensei kept referring to the use of aikido to make the world a better place. In one way, the act of getting people of different cultures and languages together through training was a very radical idea for a Japanese person in a land still recovering from World War II. Some people think O-Sensei was trying to unite the world in a mystical, philosophic manner, but I have a simpler explanation. I will leave to others to explain O-Sensei's words as they see them. I prefer the simple act of grabbing another person's wrist in training. If we are of different language and culture it might be difficult to understand one another for a long time. However, that simple physical contact gives us a basic common ground to appreciate each other as two human beings interested in the same thing. Those of you who go to international seminars know the warm feelings that last after training with people with whom it may be difficult to communicate. We begin to make friends for life based on that simple contact. We also do it two training partners at a time. When we train enthusiastically in this manner, aikido begins to expand rapidly.

When I first came back from Japan in 1969, there were two dojos in the San Francisco Bay Area with perhaps 40 students at most. There were dojos in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The United States was an aikido desert. Today, students of students in these original dojos have spread out and developed dojos of their own. It is now becoming difficult to go somewhere and not find an aikido dojo. Aikido has been spreading through the joy of training just like O-Sensei intended.

I want to ask everyone to keep training enthusiastically and to help the newer members in the dojo. After 45 years, you too will look back and cherish all of the friends you have made all over the world and will understand how much you have helped spread O-Sensei's ideas.

Happy New Year everyone!

Best regards,

Bill Witt

President

Takemusu Aikido Association, Inc.