

## Reflections on the Teacher-Student Relationship

T.J. Sullivan, 4<sup>th</sup> Kyū, Ei Mei Kan, 4 January 2006

It often happens that we focus our attention on a thing so much that we miss the important perspective offered by considering the opposite, or absence, of that thing. Together, the two perspectives (existence vs. non-existence) provide a more complete understanding than the consideration of the thing itself.

The relationship between teacher and student is acknowledged as fundamental to the study of many arts, including the martial arts, although the practice of this relationship has fallen into disrepair in many fields of learning, particularly in the West. As important as this relationship is, I believe that we often neglect the implications of its eventual conclusion and absence.

In the history of Aikidō, arguably the original teacher-student relationships were those between Ō-Sensei and his disciples. Some of those disciples have spoken of how they felt lost, directionless, and tempted to abandon their studies after Ō-Sensei's death, feeling that only he could really do Aikidō. Obviously, many of those disciples recovered their sense of purpose and continued the worldwide dissemination of Aikidō in their own individual ways, but I do not think that we can under-estimate the emotional and spiritual impact of losing someone who has been such a profound influence on one's life.

After graduating from university in 2004, I took a gap year, the majority of which I spent in Toronto, Canada. In March 2004, Mitsunari Kanai Shihan passed away in the night, having just taught half of a weekend seminar at Toronto Aikikai. A year later, while I was a student at that dōjō, a memorial seminar was held, at which some of Kanai Sensei's students related the same feelings of loss as Ō-Sensei's had done. Yet, as Chiba Sensei remarked in Boston a few weeks later, the death of one's teacher is a gift, inevitable yet tragic, a lesson in the importance of non-attachment to ego and personality.

In the progression of Shu-Ha-Ri, one eventually makes the art one's own.<sup>1</sup> To attain mastery (of any discipline, not necessarily a martial one) and find one's own way is an immense task, and the few people who have managed it unaided by a teacher are reckoned among history's greatest figures. The rest of us rely on the guidance and insight of one who has travelled the path before – quite literally, a *sensei*. Thus, in the initial stages, one follows as strictly as possible the form and path laid down by one's teacher.

There is a difference, though, between making the art one's own and making the study one's own: the second happens (or can happen) well before the first. For example, it is implicit in the exchange of thanks at the end every class that teacher and student learn from each other. I think that whenever we train, we are also receiving potential instruction from ourselves – “potential” because we can easily miss it due to our own self-absorption or fixation on our teacher as the fount of all wisdom. While the teacher lays out the path, the student walks it and learns his or her own Aikidō, which is inevitably an expression of the student's personality, regardless of the level of the student's practice.

We are often reminded that our study is our own, for instance by the Founder's own “Rules for Practice.” It seems to me that the inevitability of one's teacher's passing is

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<sup>1</sup> T.K. Chiba Shihan. *Structure of Shu, Ha, Ri, and Penetration of Shoshin*. Sansho Vol. 6 No. 2, Winter 1989.

another reminder of this important fact, and that it is something of which one must be aware even when in the closest teacher-student relationship. As the saying goes: *Carpe diem* – Seize the day: for tomorrow you, or your teacher, may die.