



The Aiki Dojo

道の為、世の為、人の為、合気道

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TO BE A STUDENT

by David Ito Aikido Chief Instructor

Today, I wonder out loud if people even consider, with a sense of pride, that someone is “their” teacher. If so then the question to consider is, “what does it mean to be that person’s student?”

So many people around the world claim some sensei as their teacher, but the question is “what does that even mean?” For most it is just words, or an empty statement meant to give themselves credibility.

What then does it mean to be someone’s student? So many answers flash through my mind like loyalty, honesty, diligence, caring, etc. All of those adjectives are correct on some level but are all meaningless without integrity. Someone once said, “integrity is the trait that ensures all others” and it is true because all of those are possible to some extent. However, at some extent, they won’t be possible without integrity.

This year, I traveled to Spain for the first time to participate in the 20th anniversary of the AC Kodokai Dojo. 21 years ago, Santiago Almaraz Sensei came to Los Angeles after reading an article about Furuya Sensei in a Spanish martial arts magazine. Today, there are many that say they are honest or that they care and some are even diligent to a point but how many of those people are still that way 21 years later. Only one - Santiago Almaraz Sensei.

When I stepped into his dojo, I was amazed at what he had accomplished and built from afar. Without being a teacher or running a dojo, Almaraz Sensei’s accomplishments might be missed, gone unseen or

just written off as, “the way it’s supposed to be.”

Almaraz Sensei started his dojo pre-internet when a person had to go to the place to study and not just watch videos uploaded to YouTube, and he has done this for 21 years!

Thus, it would be justified if his students were a little bit less diligent or dedicated or if their Aikido skills were a bit deficient. After all what can a person learn in little over a month and take back with them to re-create? Those rebuffs were hardly the truth. Almaraz Sensei’s dojo and his students were of the highest caliber.

What Almaraz Sensei created wasn’t just an affectation of our dojo, it was a direct copy that so closely resembled ours that it was eerie. I half felt like Furuya Sensei himself was going to come around the corner and reprimand me for something – that is how closely the spirit of his dojo resembles ours.

The credit of Almaraz Sensei’s success is not in how he built his dojo or taught his students, but in how closely he replicated Sensei’s teachings. To create a dojo is one thing, but to produce students of such a high caliber is something almost impossible altogether. There are a few dojos around the world who boast Sensei’s lineage, but none are developing the level of students Almaraz Sensei is developing - not even me.

Thus, the question is, “what does it mean to be someone’s student?” This question can only be answered with time. In time, the true moti-



vation of a person will be revealed. Some in a few minutes and others in a few years, but in Almaraz Sensei's case it has been 21 years and he is still demonstrating such a high level of integrity that I don't think he can be matched.

This year AC Kodokai celebrated their 20th anniversary, which coincided with the 800th anniversary of the University of Salamanca. Within the dojo's festivities, I was able to meet and be honored by Paralympic gold medalists and Councilor of the Department of Sports for the city of Salamanca, Enrique Sánchez-Guijo Acevedo. The Councilor did the usual meet-and-greet and gave a short speech to mark the occasion of our visit. In that speech he said that we were now "ambassa-

dors of Salamanca." After that speech I was struck by what he had said about us being ambassadors of the city and I realized something about Almaraz Sensei.

An ambassador is a representative and an ambassador's job is to embody that which they represent. Oftentimes, the ambassador is the first person representing that organization, culture or people or in a basic sense that person is the seed.

The night of the Anniversary Celebration, I was struck by the notion that none of these people basking in the camaraderie and enjoying themselves would be here if Almaraz Sensei didn't come to Los Angeles 21 years ago. None of them would be enjoying such a high level of ability without Almaraz Sensei's high level of integrity to choose the often difficult path of being Furuya Sensei's student.

As I look inward, I think about what a wonderful dojo and great students Almaraz Sensei was able to create, and I am humbled by his character. After seeing his dojo and meeting his students, I believe that he truly is the quintessential student of Furuya Sensei.

As I think of the wonderful hospitality of the people of Salamanca, I wonder about my own life and character and if I have the integrity to stay the course in order to be worthy of being an ambassador or at least worthy of being someone's teacher. •



Probably one of the most incredible things about *budo* or the martial arts are the relationships that it forges between people despite language barriers, foreign borders or thousands of kilometers in between.

The Kodokai's relationship with Furuya Sensei and the Aikido Center of Los Angeles goes back 21 years to when I first started visiting Sensei in 1997.

Furuya Sensei is my teacher and I enjoyed his kindness and support from the first day I came to Los Angeles until the day he passed away. For the 10 years that I followed Sensei, he was there to support me through all those difficult years as I started my dojo. Sensei was there to give me a kind word or offer some advice in the tough times like when our dojo burned down in 2000 and most probably don't know this but he also supported us financially to help keep the dojo going when times were hard.

Last month, the AC Kodokai celebrated its 20th anniversary and we had the wonderful opportunity to host Aikido practitioners from the Aikido Center of Los Angeles, other parts of the United States and Japan.

What I was taught by my teacher is that one's politeness and manners were just as important as one's technique because it shows one's

true nature. There is even a Japanese proverb about it, *yaiba ni tsuyoki mono wa rei ni suguru* which means "the man skillful in swordsmanship surpasses all others in decorum." So in my mind, I did nothing special short of demonstrating the etiquette and hospitalities that Sensei and the students extended to me when I was their guest each and every year. In short, I was only doing what I was taught by my teacher.

In *budo*, etiquette and politeness are what the learnt swordsman uses to keep relationships together. As with any relationship, whether it is professional or personal, there are ups and downs and it is always easier to be in a relationship when everything is going well and we see involvement and commitment from all the parties involved. However, relationships are only truly tested when things are difficult and both parties have to be united and keep on fighting side by side when things are not favorable.

When things are their most desperate, the only thing we can rely upon is the relationships we have built and the extent to which we have paid into them. I saw this phenomenon when Sensei died in 2007 and everyone came together to keep not only Sensei's memory and dojo alive but we all strived hard to keep the relationship between our dojos alive.



Upon Sensei's death, things could have changed as Ito Sensei became the Chief Instructor and Dojo-cho of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles because he had no obligation to continue our relationship and they were busy with everything that came with Sensei's passing and moving the dojo to another location. It would have been understandable for the relationship to fall apart. It was fortunate that everyone, including Ito Sensei, wanted to continue their dojo and also wanted to keep supporting ours.

This year when Ito Sensei and the visiting students came to celebrate our anniversary it was a source of pride for us because we were all finally able to return all the favor of what they all had given me over these 21 years. For us it was not very much effort, nor was it an obligation, but it was merely a small gesture of gratitude from our hearts for everything that has been given to us by them. These people may not be blood relatives but they have almost become family and this is the way Sensei and the students made me feel the first time I came to Los Angeles.

Today, in *budo* we focus less and less on destroying others or *sat-sujin* and more on the preservation of life or *katsujin*. This idea of preserving life is no more apparent than in the relationships that are formed between people during training. That it is why the person best at swordsmanship also excels at decorum. This is because it takes almost nothing to flippantly destroy something that took 10 years to build but it takes a heroic effort over years and years of trials and tribulations to keep something going for more than 20 years.

After the seminar, many people sent us messages thanking us and praising us for our hospitality for how they were treated by the people in Salamanca. All I can tell them is that it was the same friendship and kindness that I have been receiving for more than 20 years by their dojo first with Furuya Sensei and now with Ito Sensei.

It was our pleasure to host everyone in our dojo and we wholeheartedly wish for you all to come back and make our dojo your home away from home which is how I feel every year when I am in Los Angeles. I also wish to thank all of those people who go unnoticed that have supported me and my dojo, from afar, like Jacob Sisk and James Doi. I am grateful for what everyone from Los Angeles has done for me and I wish to thank you with all my heart. •



Our food adventure in Spain starts as soon as we enter the bus from Madrid airport en route to Salamanca, where we will train over the next three days at the 20th Anniversary Seminar of our branch dojo, Kodokai. On the bus, we were served hornazo, a traditional meat pie with a characteristic honeycomb grid pattern on top, stuffed with pork loin and chorizo, followed by an empanada, a flaky pastry filled with ham and a mild melty cheese, still warm and comforting, after our long plane ride. This was our first taste of Spanish food, and most importantly the hospitality and heart of our friends from Kodokai who hosted us during our stay.

As much as we trained during our visit, we ate just as much. Lunch was the big meal, we began and ended with alcohol—vino tinto, (red wine, at times cut with soda water) or cerveza (beer), during the meal, and the ever popular hierbas (a sweet herbal liquor) which came in tall shot glasses, to finish off as a digestive. The menu del dia, a set menu popular at most restaurants in Spain, included these beverages, and also consisted of a starter, main, and dessert. Cost varies from 12 to 16 euros, a steal when compared to the U.S., where a latte and a packaged salad from Starbucks will run you the same price, with a less elegant experience. One day we experienced a menu del dia at 4 Calzadas, a restaurant away from the city, surrounded by the peaceful countryside. I started with a lentil soup, hearty with chunks of chorizo, (which I was told only eaten during lunch as it would be too heavy for dinner), and I chose braised oxtails for the main, a popular ingredient which I also tried in the form of a burger. For dessert I tried natilla, a type of custard baked with a cookie on top.

Dinner during our first night at Salamanca was a memorable introduction to Spanish cuisine. It was at a restaurant in the Plaza Mayor, the main square of the city, called Meson Cervantes. We started with croquetas, mashed potato cylinders flecked with bits of pork, breaded and deep fried, a typical Spanish tapa. Then came tostas (toasts with toppings) of abundant foie gras, drizzled with a sweet fruity glaze, huge round plates of cured pork in every shape and form, all thinly sliced, begging to be picked up and eaten by hand, one after another. The

Spanish love their meat, and we ate this in every form possible, including blood sausage topped with more foie gras, and a wonderfully juicy seared beef atop a bed of fried potatoes, surrounded by padron peppers.

Desserts tend toward the milky and creamy, flan being the classic, and ice cream and variations of custards being prevalent in a lot of the places we visited. The most memorable dessert experience was whisky cake—essentially an ice cream cake with a sponge cake base infused with whisky and topped with whipped cream.

Pork is king, and its presence is felt throughout the streets of the city, with storefronts boasting stacks of sandwiches filled with slices of jamon, and legs of iberico ham hanging in every deli around town.

Every food I didn't know I wanted to try while walking around town I was fortunate enough to experience during the seminar social on the Saturday evening of the Seminar at the dojo. There I witnessed every array of Spanish tortilla (an omelette with potatoes, almost like a fritata but more moist and dense), hornazo, homemade meatballs, jamon and cheese, the best cheese from the Canary Islands, and paloma, a fried crunchy wheat shell filled with potato salad that I fell in love with. What amazed me the most was the care that was put into the food—most of which, if not all, was homemade, and how every dish was labeled and translated for the benefit of all. Another dish I'd like to mention which is special to Salamanca is farinato—basically bread fried in lard with spices such as paprika, shaped in a sausage, cut and fried with eggs and potatoes. So fatty and rich, this dish helped me keep up with the demands of the intense practice during the seminar!

If it were not for our friends at Kodokai, we would not have been able to have this remarkable food experience, and I'm so grateful to have experienced the warmth, generosity, and hospitality of Santiago Sensei and all of the students at Kodokai, who worked so tirelessly to make sure our stay was a memorable one. The food in Salamanca was certainly delicious, but what made it even more enjoyable was the act of sharing the food and our time together, really experiencing the care put into the food by our friends and fellow students, and finally burning it all off on the mat!



by Ken Watanabe,
Iaido Chief Instructor

The Spirit of Salamanca



My Spanish is pretty bad. I was an unenthusiastic student who was gifted “C’s” in high school Spanish, so please don’t ask me to roll my “R’s” or conjugate verbs. In spite of this, I’ve traveled to Spain to teach Aikido at our branch dojo, the Kodokai, in the city of Salamanca, three times already. This time, the latest and third time, I traveled with Ito Sensei and several of our senior students to celebrate the Kodokai’s 20th anniversary.

Although my Spanish made very little improvement since my first visit to Salamanca, it was nice how much the students’ aikido progressed. It was gratifying to see how their flexibility and movement improved. It was also very heartening to see that many of the students I met on my first visit to the Kodokai dojo were still practicing energetically.

Like any dojo, the Salamanca dojo has students who are talented, and students who are strong, but there are also students who might not be the most talented, the strongest, or have youth on their side. Maybe they have a harder time grasping the technique, yet they still practice regularly, and quietly try their best to catch on to the technique. These students, the ones who practice diligently without fanfare, are the best kind of students.

It is always a pleasure teaching at the Kodokai and this time was no exception. I’m positive the students inherited this eagerness to learn from Almaraz Sensei. There are not many people who would seek out a teacher, then travel across an ocean just to meet them. Then, to do it

consistently every year without fail. There are very few students who would learn a foreign language just so they could understand their teacher’s instruction. Santiago Almaraz Sensei is that kind of student, and I like to think that his enthusiasm for training is emulated by his own students.

Thanks to the enthusiasm, care, and diligence of Almaraz Sensei and his students, our visit went smoothly with few problems, the success of which is a testament to their training. Ultimately, the measure of training is not how strong we are, but how much we care.

Martial arts show us how to bring order to chaos, and I am sure that behind the scenes of the camaraderie, tending to our group took a lot of work and planning. Almaraz Sensei and his wife Susana, and all of his students, ensured our visit was enjoyable and that alone could not have been an easy task to pull off.

When I think about Salamanca, there are many things I miss, but the one thing I miss the most are the students. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn make it a joy to teach. They make it worthwhile to travel there despite my faltering Spanish. As beautiful as the city is, the Kodokai students are the main reason I always want to return there. They show the best of their city, its food, its history, and its culture, and in turn, showed the best of themselves. Despite the language barrier between us, their enthusiasm, kindness, and sincerity needed no translation. •

