

On Returning from Japan: A Letter to Aikido Friends, from Linda Holiday April 2018

Dear Aikido friends,

Each year when I return from my annual pilgrimage to Japan, I am astonished again by the beauty of the coast of California. All the trees, the bright sunlight and blooming flowers everywhere, the shining expanse of the Pacific Ocean right next to our neighborhoods in Santa Cruz. And going back to my dojo is a joy. It has been lovely to connect with many of my students this last week, to practice together as I attempt to share what I so recently experienced in Kumano, with my teacher Motomichi Anno Sensei, who I first met there in 1973.

Kumano is an ancient place of pilgrimage and shugyo (ascetic spiritual practice); Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei, who was born and raised there, described it as his spiritual home. Even after he moved away to seek his fortune, in Hokkaido, Ayabe, Tokyo, and Iwama, he always returned to Kumano, to teach and to do pilgrimages. And what a beautiful place to return to! Each time I go to Kumano, my spirit is enlivened by the steep forested mountains, the turquoise river gorges, and the places of pilgrimage that have been held sacred for over a thousand years. To make the journey, even just from the big cities of Japan, to the countryside of Kumano is to feel transported to another world.



“How was your trip to Japan? Did you have a great time?” The questions are natural, but the reality is that for me, taking a “trip” to Japan, to Kumano, is more like going home. It is returning to the place where I lived for some formative years in my youth, where I met my deepest teachers, where I struggled and persevered, where many people have known me since I was twenty years old! The teachers in Kumano inspired me by their example to embrace Aikido as a lifelong path. And it was in Kumano, decades ago, that I resolved to organize a community dojo back in Santa Cruz. So I think of Kumano as not only O-Sensei’s roots, but also the spiritual roots of Aikido of Santa Cruz.

This time, I spent about a week in Kumano, training at Funada Dojo. In addition to Anno Sensei, Hine Sensei, and other Japanese Aikidoists there (including students who have trained with us in Santa Cruz – Ueno San, Naka San, Nakamura San, and others), it was a gathering of sincere Aikidoists from the US and from various countries in Europe. Everyone had a story, a reason they were there, something they were seeking. Some were students of Aikido teachers who

had trained in Kumano. Others had read my book *Journey to the Heart of Aikido* and were inspired to make the journey to Kumano....I was happy to hear about that! I myself was journeying with two Swedish friends who were experiencing Japan for the first time. Juerg Steiner Sensei (longtime student of Hikitsuchi Sensei and Anno Sensei) was there from Switzerland, with his wife Noriko and a group of students; he expressed his delight about coming to Santa Cruz this July for our Summer Retreat. So many positive connections in the “Aikido World Family”...

And three enthusiastic young Aikidoists (one Hungarian, one Swedish, and one Japanese) came down from Tokyo to meet and interview Anno Sensei, who is one of the few remaining direct students of the founder of Aikido. Anno Sensei graciously agreed, and spoke at length after class about O-Sensei, and the philosophy and deep practices integrated in Aikido training. The lead interviewer had read my translations of Anno Sensei’s teachings in my book, as preparation for the interview; and he expressed to me what I have heard from many places in the Aikido world, “We don’t have access to these kind of spiritual teachings where we are. We need to hear this.”



Each morning, 87-year-old Anno Sensei would arrive at the dojo to continue to share the heart of Aikido’s teachings as he experienced them with O-Sensei. I have so many vivid memories of Anno Sensei from the 1970’s, physically vigorous, inspired, and moving like the wind. These days, Anno Sensei usually wears a simple gi and white belt, no hakama, and moves more slowly. Sometimes he gets on the mat to demonstrate the physical techniques of Aikido. Due to the increasing pain and weakness in his body, though, he often sits in a chair and directs class through his comments. It is really poignant for me, after all these years, to see him become so frail. But his presence is still powerful and uplifting, and his verbal teaching is a treasure that touches us deeply. As I practiced under Anno Sensei’s direction, as he presented us all with various challenges and exhortations, I felt the mysterious process of change and new growth stirring within me.

I was fortunate this year to arrive in Kumano when the *sakura* (cherry) trees were in full bloom. The Japanese people have long cherished the *sakura* blossoms as a symbol of life, death, and renewal. The pale pink flowers have a luminous and ephemeral beauty, bloom only about two weeks, then release their petals and “die” as they float to the ground. Then there is a rebirth, after the tree has endured another winter.

The *sakura* tree in front of Funada Dojo was like a giant pink cumulus cloud, and another cloud rose in back of the building. One morning, Anno Sensei exhorted us again and again to expand and “bloom” from inside, as we practiced kokyu-nage. And then, halfway through class, delicate petals from the trees outside began to float into the dojo on the spring breeze, through the front door and the open windows. We continued our practice of “blooming” as we opened ourselves to Anno Sensei’s resonant words, and trained with cherry blossoms in the air around us and under our feet. Unforgettable!

My memories of living and training intensively in Kumano in the old days are not all beauty and light. There were plenty of hard times, on and off the mat. When I reflect on that, and as I learn directly from Anno Sensei again, I am reminded that we students were taught in Kumano to approach Aikido – training, and life – as “shugyo”, as a deep spiritual process that was arduous as well as transformative. Struggle and hardship were normalized; perseverance, self-reflection, and purification were essential to the Aikido journey. And always, the reminder: “Gambatte!” -- Keep going and do your best, for the benefit of All.

These teachings are of such deep value. Who among us does not encounter hard times, individually, in our families, and in the tragedies and injustices of the world around us? Aikido training, and Aikido dojos, need to foster deep personal work and consistent training, and the strength of spirit that results from that. In O-Sensei’s words: “Even beneath a wonderful towering tree, in its roots lies a structure of struggle and perseverance.” And in Anno Sensei’s words: “Keiko, keiko, keiko! [Practice, practice, practice!] Polish and purify yourself through continuing your training; transform hardship into joy; and become a person who gives joy to others.”

Thank you for reading these reflections on my recent journey to Japan. Of course I saw many beautiful and interesting things in Japan, and if you are on Facebook, you can see my photos and comments from the journey. But what I especially want to share with everyone now is the gratitude I feel for the depth of Aikido practice, and for my teacher Anno Sensei and the long history of Aikido, and Kumano, that has led to the existence of my dojo today. I am thankful for the whole sincere, persevering, and joyful Aikido community!

I look forward to seeing you on the mat.
Gambatte!!

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