

Featured Dojo-cho, November 2001



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Division 1

I started training in spring of 1984. I heard about Aikido in the mid-seventies but there was no place to train close to the small town where I lived. Early in '84 my wife got pregnant and my response to the nesting instinct was to find a way to "protect my new family." I started checking dojo near my work and found all of them lacking for one reason or another. They were either too violent, too expensive, or just too weird. To my surprise a place called Tamura Judo Institute was close by and offered Aikido classes on Friday nights. The instructors were Norman and Ann Fotasjek, a husband and wife who taught as a team. He was about 5'6" and weighed 230 lbs. She was almost 6' and weighed maybe 110 lbs. It didn't surprise me that he could move me all over the mat but I was mystified that she could do the same. I was hooked.

A year or so later Norman and Ann Senseis moved to Hawaii. The senior student, Jon Ayers, took over the dojo, expanded the class schedule and started exposing me to as many seminar trips as possible. We discussed the relative merits of each of the styles we experienced and he helped me see the common thread between them. When Saito Sensei started his video weapons course we were intrigued.

Ayers Sensei suggested I try it. It would be great information to bring to the dojo and we were just curious to see if the experiment would work.

In 1988 Ayers Sensei suggested I teach a beginners class at a local community college. At the end of the course four of five of the students didn't want to stop so we found space at a YMCA and continued training. Shortly after that Jon Sensei moved his dojo out to a small town about 30 miles away and stopped teaching Aikido. Tamura Sensei asked me to take over the Aikido classes at his dojo. The "Y" eventually figured out that aikidoka were clean freaks and fired the janitorial company. We decided that was a good time to look for a new home. We found it above a 90 year old feed store in a little farming town north of Dallas called Allen. That was in 1990.

About the same time I found out that Pat Hendricks Sensei was certified to teach and test in Iwama weapons so I called her with some questions. She invited me to a workshop that was being held at her dojo. I showed up the weekend of the workshop only to find it had been postponed but Sensei invited me to come anyway and she spent most of two days working with me personally. I not only found the answers to my questions but a new instructor. Over a decade later I remain her student and am still amazed at my good fortune.

The feed store was sold and we moved to a smaller space down the road and started looking for a place to build a permanent home. We recently bought 8 acres and plan to start construction soon. We usually have about 50 adults and 25 kids in our dojo. We have classes six days a week. There are 11 Aikido classes and 8 yoga classes throughout the week.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

The thing I would call my most memorable Aikido experience was my brief stay in Iwama. Just the knowledge that O-Sensei walked the grounds, trained and taught in the dojo and prayed at the shrine put the stories about him into geographical and cultural context. But mostly the place continues to resonate with his presence. I am grateful to Saito Sensei for inviting me and to Hendricks Sensei for encouraging me to go.