

Meeting the Masters: Mitsunari Kanai 2

Over my 50+ years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.



Years after I stopped visiting the N. E. Aikikai to train, I found that the etiquette that had kept me from training with Aikido black belts (because I felt I should not approach Kanai Sensei to ask for the privilege) had not been exercised in vain.

I had started training in Aikido mainly because there were no senior aiki-ju-jutsu people in the area and, although I taught aiki-ju-jutsu twice per week, I did not have the opportunity to further my own training. I was not seeking rank but experience moving with different body types and a different technical perspective than the one I had learned in Hakko-ryu, Kamishin-ryu, or judo.

I spent a summer attending the early morning class at the N.E. Aikikai even though Kanai Sensei was not there, just to get additional training. On weekends when I wasn't teaching, my girlfriend and I would drive into Cambridge (about an hour away) to get a Friday night, a Sunday afternoon, and occasionally a Saturday class into our schedule.

I told my aiki-ju-jutsu students that, although the "feel" and details of our style was different from Aikido, if they wanted further training on the nights that we did not hold class, they should drive into Cambridge, mention that they were my students, and pay a mat fee to join the Kanai Sensei's class. Luckily, their own proper etiquette allowed them to be well received.

Years later, the Aikikai was tightening up its acceptance of non-Aikido students so paying a mat fee to attend class was not something outsiders could take for granted. Judy and Jim decided to take their chances and drive to the Aikikai on non-aik-ju-jutsu-class night. They had trained there before, but it had been quite a while. Our dojo had moved from one town to another and Kanai's dojo had moved from Central Square to Porter Square. Judy and Jim introduced themselves as students of Bushido-kai under Tony Annesi to Ms. Sioux Hall, a long-time Aikido student, who often took care of mat fees and other incidentals at the Aikikai. Sioux explained that there was a new policy regarding mat fees but that she would go to the private room at the back of the dojo and ask Kanai Sensei if they could pay a mat fee for training.

Kanai's private room was always right behind the dojo Kamiza. Few students ever saw it except for a peek when he entered the dojo proper before class began. Usually, all that could be perceived was a sword on a stand or a coat on a rack.

Judy and Jim waited patiently, fully expecting to be politely rejected due to new hombu policy. Sioux came back to the reception desk and stood behind it. “Kanai Sensei says,” she officially announced, “that any of Annesi Sensei’s students can train here any time—and they do not have to pay a mat fee.”

Needless to say, it was one of the finest (if one of the most low-key) compliments I had ever received from a master, and it had nothing to do with the quality of my technique or any personal relationship with Mitsunari Kanai Sensei. It had to do with personal conduct and etiquette.