

## Birankai North America T.K. and Mitsuko Chiba Seminar Endowment Testimonials

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### Another Moth

I just wanted to become something more than what I was; I wanted to be that hero on the screen not the scrawny shadow staring back at me in the mirror. Something was missing: a key ingredient of identity I could not find by looking into my own eyes. At the same time, I simply wanted to seek enjoyment however it may be found. The mind of a thirteen-year-old is so expansive that instead of taking something and running with it, they just want to run. Yet you never know it yourself—maybe in a shrouded corner of your subconscious there are whispers of the truth, but no, you'd never venture in there; it's too much fun playing pretend. To tell your own story, to truly grasp something, to acquire strength to protect it, to be that iconic image of what is great, to be someone you are not are all obstacles the human condition grants us. Whether as children or as adults it is really the same thing. What do we want for ourselves? No, what can we cross to obtain it? For isn't it the Path we tread that defines us? My quest to discover the martial art of Aikido is not a glorious tale, however, perhaps what really should be spoken of are my reasons to keep going.

We show up to learn, but we stay because we're walking. We don't find out we're walking until we turn and see others walking beside us. We don't realize where we're heading until we encounter an obstacle to break through. A man on the top of a mountain will then look to the sky. Even then, the transient world harks to the lament of a wilting blossom and we go on. In my practice, I was always courting what I wanted to achieve, skittering around the sidelines with hopeful eyes pulled taught by a tether of my own creation. There was no push—no nuance of confidence comforting me to believe in what I could do. It wasn't until this year that I realized what the word dedication actually meant. I drove myself onward and onward through the rest of middle school, high school, and finally college on the foundation that I would finally be done. When I was finished, what I was telling myself all those years became a rickety skeleton crunched under the wheels of semblance. What I had thought I was pursuing in this art and in my life was only another excuse in a web of adolescence. Showing up to class without being there, not showing up to class but being there, to me, was the same. Going just to go—showing up just to throw people occasionally had me hoping upon hope that I could still carry Aikido even without maintaining that connection. I found out then that I would not be beckoned—I would not be pampered—I would not be granted. It was right there all along; I had only to seize it.

What is it? I don't know, but it's there. My sensei said once that he wants to keep the light on. I say, then I must be the moth, drawn to those flames...always on the brink of burning up. An old way—an outdated art, why should we give so much to practice something whose essence is already faded? Pulling a trigger or countless years swinging a strike that never lands, which has more meaning? Behind each cut—each breath—each drop of sweat, what is there? For me it isn't just accomplishment. I find myself smiling through every throw, presenting myself as I am, and accepting it just as easily as I give up my balance. This is really living, I think. Take a moment, contemplate it. You're already reading this, but these words are my own. I cannot be you and I cannot make your decisions; I can only point at it. And it's here.

If you are looking for something—if you lack nothing, Aikido is your answer. For the honing of the Self and all that follows, this is not just a martial art; this is a way of life. Welcome to the trampled tatami mat, bloodstained, battered, and bruised. There are no exits, only escapes. When you finally stop struggling, you realize it never stops until you do. It is when life becomes mundane, decidedly determined by a thermostat, and rank with the everyday that you become unknowingly lost within the fleeting. And I unknowingly stumbled

outside into a snowless winter without a coat, gazing upon the landscape as if for the first time. I fitted the practice into my schedule, stopped, started, began, continued, and then finally no longer gave myself the option. Show up. Be there. And I promise you that Aikido will grow to be something more for you as well.

Everyone is different and there are as many different Aikidos as there are people. My sensei says to try and get into his skin; do it as he does it so that when we finally have it, it will be our own. In that, every sensei is different—with different styles, mentalities, and aspirations lurking in an art that originated from one man. That is why seminars are so important: it draws us together all in one place—it brings the art back to its center and holds a mirror up to what we are practicing as a whole as well as separately. My first seminar was in 2005; I was fifteen years old and completely intimidated. Amid a sea of bodies, I floundered in and out of the basics until I was called up to demonstrate by my teacher's teacher: Chiba sensei. When I grabbed his wrist, it was in that moment I knew that what I was doing was not a hobby; it was serious. There would be times when smiling was inappropriate—when holding a sword fashioned to end lives just like your own was the same as trying to grip a wrist too thick to grasp. My little hand that was just barely able to clutch his technique told me so many things: throwing is the same as learning how to fall, cutting air is the same as cutting flesh, and breathing is the same as swinging a door. It also taught me how to hold on, and for nearly ten years now I did just that.

I hated bowing; I thought it was sullyng myself. If everyone was equal, why should I submit by lowering myself? My audacity was uncanny—my ego was flaunty, and when I suddenly grasped the reason why I bowed to my sensei, ever since I have bowed lower. Now I do it at the register, when I'm buying groceries, when I'm asking something from someone. It *may* be remnants of my time in Japan, but it still holds worth. What does it mean to truly be grateful? I can tell you one thing, had I never met my sensei, I would not be myself. I'd be one of those lost out-of-college ex-students without an aim—without a direction. I am seriously sitting here trying to remember what life was like without Aikido and I can't. When I was twelve (before I joined), what was I doing with my life? Perhaps that is indication enough how much this art has affected me and how worthy it is to be passed on to others. So help us to flurry around this light before it ever has a chance to be lost.

Daniel Kempling  
Chief Instructor, Aikido of the Kootenays  
Creston, BC

The Japanese use the word "tanren" to describe both the forging process of a sword as well as the lifelong, disciplined practice of the martial arts adept. This forging process gives rise to a self-guided spirit of inquiry, both of the art studied and into one's overall aptitude as human being in greater society. After some thirty years as a student of Aikido, Zen, and Japanese swordsmanship, I'd like to offer some reflections on how this forging has impacted my life.

One aspect of Aikido training that must be addressed squarely is the fact that it is a martial art. Not a combative sport, nor a contest of any sort, but a sincere practice of Budo, the martial tradition of the Japanese samurai. This distinction is a fundamental principle of the Aikido training within Birankai, and perhaps the defining quality that drew me to train with our founder, T. K. Chiba. Chiba Sensei's example is one of ferocious commitment to one's ethics and values, to a courageous and ceaseless pursuit of martial skill, and to an open-hearted generosity of spirit, wherein the teacher puts the needs of the student above his own. It is from this example of the spirit of service that I see the most positive impact that Budo training can have in greater society.

Aikido training, while not exactly an athletic pursuit, nonetheless demands a physical conditioning of the student that can approach that of an elite athlete. To study Aikido is to study the body, and within this study I have gained not only stamina, strength, and vitality, but have gained also insights into our common movement patterns and habitual tensions. This physical self-awareness has shown itself to be one of my greatest treasures and the foundation of a life lived mindfully.

One of the pillars of our training is zazen, the primordial practice of sitting, still. Meditation has a somewhat romantic reputation, but I like to think that it gives me a superior tool with which to survey my environment. What showed up in my system some years into zazen practice, was, firstly, a physical settling down, a dropping of habitual tensions, especially in my upper body. This had a profound and noticeable impact, especially on my sword practice. Secondly, regular meditation practice developed what I'd call an endurance of attention, the capacity to sustain concentration for more than a few minutes at a time. While these insights were welcome on the mats, it is in my vocational life that I most appreciated them. Working as a carpenter at the time, I found that I had an increasing capacity to concentrate on my work, to be aware of the needs of the job and those of my co-workers. I became a much more productive, safe, and efficient tradesman.

The physical aspect of training, though often arduous and frustrating, becomes a natural part of a wholesome, disciplined life. The questions that I ask of myself at this stage of my practice now more often relate to issues of fatherhood and citizenship: has my forging process succeeded in giving me the tools to overcome my laziness and cowardice, am I aware enough of my surroundings to respond to my environment in a way that is compassionate, skillful, and creative? I may not always be able to answer "Yes" to these questions, but I am vividly aware of when I am off track, and that is a gift in itself.

Aikido along with Zazen and Iaido is a potent combination. It develops a vital human being, open to insight, yet with their feet firmly on the ground. It has given me the motivation to train for training's sake. This understanding of the necessity of self-propelled training has turned out to be one of the most important insights of my life. Chiba Sensei once said, "The secret to building ki [internal power] is to cultivate virtue without hope of recognition." Personally, this has meant a depth of well-being I could have never realized without training. Interpersonally, I have experienced a wealth of friendship and comradeship with those who trod this path with me. And transpersonally, training in Aikido has cultivated within me an ineffable gratitude for my life and for nature in all its forms. I count myself blessed to have found this Way.

Charlotte Mueller  
Birankai Testimonial  
12/14/12

When I moved across the country for school, I did not know anyone in my new town. One of the first things I did was search for a new laido dojo, which I found in the form of a Birankai dojo. Although I did not know it at the time, I had found a network of friends and support that would become the backbone of my life in my new town. When I struggled with severe anxiety and depression soon after my move, the dojo and the physical and mental practice of laido became my anchor. The support of many new friends and their genuine care and concern helped me through that difficult time. The art of drawing the Japanese sword, laido, provided me with a mental distraction that demanded complete focus and led to simple joy in the movements of my body and sword.

Although I am an laido-only student in a system based largely on the practice of aikido, I have never felt left-out or shorted in attention from the instructors and senior students. The friendly atmosphere of my dojo, and that of the people in the several seminars I have attended, is accepting of many different levels of commitment and interest. Although I have never taken the aikido body-art classes, my instructor found new ways to challenge me and increase my growth by including me in weapons classes, which are based in aikido instead of the laido system.

I have only been with Birankai for two and a half years, but in that short time I have made friendships that will last a lifetime. My self-understanding, patience, and martial skills have increased, and I look forward to many more years in the Birankai association. I believe these benefits are highly enriching to the life of anyone studying Birankai martial arts, and provide an excellent return for time and effort invested.

Ea Murphy

27 December 2012

Like many before me, I stumbled into aikido. At the time, I was stumbling in life. I must have been looking for something to catch me. Aikido caught me and then asked me to fall again.

At the time I started aikido, I did not have money, but I heard of a dojo that had a sliding scale fee and work trade opportunities. Young and unemployed, with plenty of time on my hands, I joined. Immediately, I was taking every class I could. I met my friends in the park to train on the grass. I discovered a community and an intimacy that came from trusting others with your body and your fear.

A few years later, I joined Birankai. Rooted strongly in tradition, bonded by intensive training and dedication, my practice became more and more serious. Training at my new dojo meant two to three hours of vigorous practice every day under a demanding and compassionate teacher. At regional and national seminars, I saw what was possible through aikido. I met role models whose ability and sincerity pushed the limits of what I thought was possible. They had forged their bodies and sharpened their souls, and I wanted to be like them.

I had to pull my life together in order to meet these physical and mental demands. At the most basic level, I now had to eat, and eat well. At the time, this was a major challenge. I struggled in the aftermath of a childhood of abuse. Simply surviving, not thriving was my mode of operation. But now I had a singular purpose, to eat and be healthy so that I could train.

Training was a tangible goal. Make it to class and give it your all. On the mat, internal conflicts were silent. I could give myself completely, and in so doing, transform who I was. The laws of physics were at work. Every time I pounded the mat, again and again every class, an equal and opposite force absorbed my pain, my anger, and my insecurity.

So to train I needed to eat. To eat I needed money. For money, I needed work. It turned out that for work I needed passion, and for passion I went back to school. Twelve years later, I now exist in the world as a whole person, not just a survivor. Through training, I have burnt out impurities and released anger in order to grow.

Today, aikido practice continues to demand change, growth, and adaptation. Aikido caught me, saved me in a way, but still asks me to fall again and again in humility, gratitude, and compassion. I still have an unquenchable thirst to understand this art and this practice, but my commitment now also stems from a desire to give back - to aikido and the Birankai community, a community that keeps its martial roots present and demanding for the benefit of the next generation.

Stephen Thoms

## THE STORY OF HANK

Having been the chief instructor of Eugene Aikikai since its founding in 1994, I have seen many people come to explore our practice of budo. Some people are only briefly with us, some stay for several years, and others continue practicing for more than a decade. I have helped develop a number of black belts and one of my students is now a certified teacher with his own dojo.

Of course, developing black belts and teachers who can pass on the practice of budo to others is something any teacher wants to do. However, the percentage of our students who achieve such levels of skill is fairly small. The students who are with us for two, three, or maybe five years are a major part of our work. Some of these students are more diligent than others. Some have more talent than others. All of them are important. All of them are changed by practice. I would like to tell the story of one such student, who I will call Hank.

Hank, a quiet and shy individual with average coordination, started practice at Eugene Aikikai shortly after he graduated from high school. He did not have an easy childhood. His parents separated early in his life. Hank's father was an alcoholic living on the streets, a fact which was a source of embarrassment throughout Hank's early years. Although I am certain that his mother did the best she could, she was not up to the task of being a single parent. I found Hank to be a kind person very much floundering in life.

For two years or so Hank attended classes fairly regularly, with occasional short periods of absence. During this time he passed his first two tests for rank. He then decided to go back to school at the local community college. His presence in the dojo decreased and he would sometimes disappear for a month or two. Eventually, he stopped attending class altogether. He did, however, complete his AA degree.

During the next couple of years I would occasionally run into Hank around town. He still seemed a bit lost but life was obviously better for him. The last time I saw Hank he had a part time working with young children. This had been his goal and he was happy with this job. Then he just disappeared. For several years I had heard nothing about Hank and never ran into him. I was very happy when, one day out of nowhere, I received a letter from Hank. He revealed that he had moved to another city, had a good job with children, and his life was good. At the end of this letter he said that he was writing because he wanted to thank me for showing him what love and compassion are. These are the moments we live for. One of our students passing a black belt test is great. One of our students doing well in life is beyond words.