

## Meeting the Masters: Mitsunari Kanai (1938-2004)

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 some of my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way. Thanks to Sensei Wes Brown for the idea for this article series.



Kanai Sensei (1939-2004) was one of the youngest of the *uchi-deshi* (inner disciples) to train under Morihei Ueshiba O-sensei in Aikido. I trained at Kanai Sensei's New England Aikikai in Cambridge, Massachusetts for six years, having already earned a *sandan* in aiki-ju-jutsu, but never testing for rank in aikido. I always kept to strict Japanese budo etiquette, and adapted to the Aikikai's specific etiquette as well. For this reason, I talked to sensei only rarely—once, for example, to ask for a translation of some old kanji. I was surprised when, having turned the symbols around in his hands like a Westerner looking at code for the first time, he said, “Too old. Not sure.”

It was etiquette that kept me training with the white belts even though, after a year of noting valuable aikido refinements to familiar techniques, I was teaching most of my partners rather than learning with them. Typically, Kanai Sensei demonstrated his *waza* four times, then raised both arms and said, “*Hai, dozo!*” indicating that we all should give it a try. Instruction was never verbally offered but could be visually taken when he thought it appropriate to give a demonstration to a couple of partners who were evidently veering off the path of accuracy. Most of the other trainees in the immediate area would stop, kneel, and pay attention. It was, after all, the only technical refinements available at the time. The dojo was probably 3000 square feet and perhaps a quarter of it held immobile kneeling students hoping to glean some insight from Sensei's up close demo. “Dozo!” and he flung his long, dark hair back with a flip of his head.

With behavior that, to me, seemed dubious in a budo master, Kanai Sensei sometimes favored students, sometimes ignored them, but these actions generally resulted in explanations from his students like, “He comes from a samurai family,” or “In Japan, it is expected that Sensei is like an overlord.” Well, I hadn't trained in Japan, but I suspected that the excuses were a little more creative than necessary sometimes.

Several of my *Tales of the Dojo* sprung from my time at the Aikikai and other students' interactions with Kanai Sensei, but I wish to emphasize my most satisfying interaction here, especially since it illustrates how sometimes when the sensei is silent, we assume an inapproachability that reflects more on us than on he. During my six year of training, I attended

Aikido Summer Camp every year with several of my aiki-ju-jutsu students. I was getting tired of helping out the white belts during class while the black belts hogged the larger part of the matted real estate. I felt that I was paying to coach white belts rather than to train with peers so I mentioned this to Fran and Norm Wachsler, aikido friends from day one. “Why don’t you talk to Sensei about it?” they suggested, logically. I had not even considered talking to Kanai Sensei. “Just go up to him and tell him what you told us.”

I took a breath, settled my *tanden* and after class politely spoke to Sensei. “Excuse me, Sensei. I don’t know if you know who I am...”

“I know [who] you are.”

“I wonder if you’d mind my black belt students and I training with the black belts on the mat rather than the white belts.”

“Sure. You train.”

I had spent years maintaining etiquette and never asking for this privilege where I could have learned so much more by getting permission to work out with the *yudansha* at least five years before. I wanted to kick myself, but realized that it would be too karate-like. Years later, however, I found that my self-restraining etiquette paid off in one of the best complements I could receive.

*More on this next time.*