

During Donovan Waite Sensei seminar at Sart-Saint Laurent (16 - 18 February 2018), we (Murielle Herman, Philippe Picrit, François Biquet) had the opportunity to meet our teacher, to thank him for his classes and ask him some questions.



*Murielle/Philippe/François: First of all, we would like to thank you for the classes; it is each time a pleasure to get your advices so thanks a lot for that.*

*How did you start aikido, what attracted you into that discipline?*

Donovan Sensei: I will tell you the short version because it is actually a long progression. I was doing judo first; I started pretty early, I was seven or eight years old. There was an aikido class, following the judo one, in the same dojo. The judo was for the kids like me and then there was an aikido class for adults. I got interested and curious because they were wearing hakama, I was wondering what it was; they were looking pretty awesome. I thought it was advanced judo as I had no idea of what aikido was. So I watched the class and the first one I saw was taught by a woman. I said to myself that I could do it. A month later, my mum was late to pick me up so I stayed to watch the class again. This time I asked if I could take the class but they did not teach children. Chiba Sensei run the whole organization then, he did not want children because he thought it was too complicated for them. So I stayed there and watched. Afterwards, I came again, asked if I could try and they let me do so. I kept my keikogi and walked all the way to the end of the mat, next to the black belts and sat there. The teacher, Ralph Reynolds, looked at me, smiled and said "No, you have to sit down there". So I had to

go all the way back and sit at the end. I think that's when I said to myself "I'm going to keep doing this until I sit up there", and I just did it.

*Do you think that practicing judo for a couple of years first was something positive before starting aikido?*

Yes, for me it was: falling was easy because I was used to that; I enjoyed the ukemi when I started.

*Do you think ukemis are the same in judo as in aikido?*

No, it is not the same but as in judo you are being held and thrown, I was not afraid to be turned upside down, I did not have the fear of the ground.

*So maybe it is a good thing to start with judo (maybe more accessible, easier to understand)?*

Sure! Maybe for people who fear falling, it can help.

*You followed different instructors like Chiba Sensei and Tamura Sensei, how did you come to follow them and what did they bring you?*

Chiba Sensei was first because he was at the head of the federation when I started, all the senior people trained with him. He was, maybe people would say, severe in his practice. He was very serious, very incisive; it was intense practice. If you did not concentrate or got distracted, he would remind you to stay focused.

*He was a bit more martial?*

Yes. His aikido was very dynamic, very connected: to get the right feeling about the internal part of the movement. Then I met Tamura Sensei as he would come to do the seminars too. I used to think of him as a magician. He was inspiring for me because of his really good techniques and timing.

Both were inspirational.

Then I met Yamada Sensei through Tamura Sensei, it was years and years back. I was talking to Tamura Sensei during that time because I wanted to train more intensively, be more committed. He told me about the ushi-deshi program. He suggested to do ushi-deshi with Yamada Sensei, so I went to New-York to meet him.

*And you did ushi-deshi with Yamada Sensei.*

I did twelve years of ushi-deshi with Yamada Sensei. I went directly to the United States to start the program.

*From your experience, what is the difference between practicing aikido like everyone and being ushi-deshi?*

In New-York, there were 4-5 classes a day, 7 days a week. I did all the classes for at least 10-12 years every day unless Yamada Sensei was not there. I would also be travelling with him like uke and when he was not travelling, I would start to teach his classes while practicing for my training in parallel. I would train for 6 hours a day and then teach classes.

*It is a lot of practice, do you think that dedicating yourself to aikido changed your way of thinking? Did something change at this point?*

Well it was focused practice as he watched all the time, always looking and observing and then he would correct things. Or he would say nothing and I would have to try to figure it out from watching him. He was training me to become a teacher eventually. While I was practicing, he was teaching me to pass it on and how to pass it on, to find my own way.

*Did you decide to become an aikido teacher or was it something he just passed on and you agreed?*

I never thought about it, I just wanted to practice, I just wanted to learn. But as I was doing it, Sensei let me come with him, asked me to teach the class for him and then give seminars. That's how I started. That became easier with time I guess and then because of that, he had me teaching his classes, the main classes in the dojo. He was putting me in a particular position, so the students of the federation would see me as the next for him. He deliberately put me in that position, to make a continuation.

*Now that you are teaching foreign classes, are you still learning - probably not the same way- and is it still interesting for you?*

Yes, I am always learning. I always have to make it easier and find how to refine it. And also think about how to pass it on because as it changes, I want to pass on the changes to the students too. But not just to pass on the differences but pass on why I have made it different, why it is safer. There is a rationality to the changes, it is not just a copy. I try to give an understanding of that progression; so that the students, as I practice and as I develop or learn things myself, are given the same opportunity to go through a similar process, to learn what they are doing.

*We have witnessed it, since you started to come to Belgium we have seen the differences and the evolution between then and now.*



*You developed a 3 D training program. Do you think it is complementary to the practical training?*

People have told me it has helped them, because of the ukemi part and being able to examine the techniques. You can stop it, look from top or behind. It helped them to see how to do the movements. I will try to continue that because I want to add on to it; I just haven't got time to do it yet. It is on paper, we know what to do, we just did not go to the studio yet to film it. There is going to be more added, the program is continuously building, continuously evolving.

*Do you think aikido has its place in this era of technology and communication? Can aikido fit in or does it have to stay the way it was originally?*

It can have a little of both but you learn aikido by doing and touching; looking at it does not tell you how you have to do it. It can help people who already practice, people who have experience already. They will look at it, understand what the shape is and then go to practice. But for somebody who has never done aikido before, who does not understand the feeling of his own movement or what that movement is doing, it is not enough. He needs to physically do it first.

*Do you think there might be a danger with people looking at videos on Youtube and so on, watching and trying to reproduce, maybe incorrectly?*

Yes, and maybe people can misunderstand what they see because sometimes what you see is not actually reflecting what is happening, what is done. There is indeed a danger to it so that's what I mean by an experienced person needs to look at the film and make sense of it, he/she should be on the mat practicing. He or she should be practicing it, think about it and then look at it.

*Can you talk a little bit more about your vision of the relationship between uke and tori?*

Aikido is fifty-fifty. Fifty percent of your practice is falling, the other part is doing. You should practice both and one leads to the other, one informs the other. So, taking ukemi gives you information because you feel it. It is a feeling that you have to register and associate to a response; then when you do the technique, you try to create those same responses. You're learning from the touch, feeling it and then you're learning how to create it and you put them both together. The mechanics of the movement are both those elements.

*Do you have the impression that too many people have neglected the practice of ukemi?*

Yes, I think people should do it more. It is not just about the safety of the practice, it is because of the information it is giving. People do not pay attention necessarily to their ukemi. They just grab or hold or fall down and they're not engaged in that. There should be engagement and engagement also means that there is a commitment. If there is no commitment, there is no attack; the attack is the intention, the fact that I am thinking to do it. That's what you have to take control of. If people don't practice with the right intention, you don't get the right feedback. Intention gives you the feedback and that tells you if the technique is working or not. That is information you need so ukemi needs to be practiced, not just the falling, even though it is important for safety.

*For you, what is the place of weapon practice?*

Weapons are for foundation. You have to stand straight, have to keep your extension, posture, ensure that everything is in the right alignment. To cut the bokken, everything has to be in the line. If

you want to go forward, everything has to be in the same line. It teaches you the ground work, what your hips are doing at the top of your feet. To me, your toes are your center: they position you because your feet are attached to them. They have to be in the right place.

*So, it is definitely important to practice weapons.*

Yes, because it gives you the bases. Bokken teaches the structure: how to stand. Jo teaches you the extension, the movement, the dexterity (how to move your hands) and tai sabaki. Jo is for body and hand movement as well as extension. It is longer and it uses both sides. Bokken is only one-sided so it is a structural weapon, not practical in movement when someone is attacking you. It is only teaching you the ground structural position and you use that information for movement. Working with the Jo extends your work, makes it bigger, open and broaden your space. And then the idea is that you put them both together: you have the movement and you have the structure. That means you have a good balance, you have the extension and dexterity. That means you understand what you're doing with your hands.

*We've been talking about your time as ushi-deshi and how you have practiced aikido a lot, so how does aikido now translate in your day-to-day life? Where can you find aikido outside of the mats?*

It is in my head all the time. I do not know how to say it otherwise.

*Do you consciously think about aikido?*

Not consciously, not so much like I sit there and physically think about it. But it is in me, it's essence is in me. I don't think about it like that, it is more like a feeling.

*Do you try to actively apply some aikido principle in your everyday life?*

Yes, here's an example: when you're out in a bar, with friends and there is a little bit of tension with other people who are looking for something. If somebody gives you that kind of intention and you stand in front of it, it will escalate. The more you give, the more he will give back. If you do not give anything, sooner or later he will just soften because there is nothing to get feedback from. You absorb that, you talk quietly; there is no confrontation so it dissipates.

*So, it is not about the possibility to use a technique in a fight, it is more using the principles of aikido to avoid the conflict?*

Yes, using the techniques in a fight is the last thing you think about. if you can't avoid it then you have to deal with it. But first we try not to fight and to avoid situations like that.

I can also use these principles when I talk to people and make them feel comfortable. Like when I am on the mat, talking to the people, looking at them. I deal with them from what I get from them. For example, if they're a little tentative, I would stand and let them know that they can do it, I am there to help. I can also help by showing, taking their hand and put it in the right place. But then some people do not learn by touch or feel so I will explain to them. For others, I will need to actually do it to them, so they register how it works and how to practice.

*So, you will adapt your way of teaching depending on the people in front of you?*

Yes.

*And I think this is highly appreciated.*

*Do you have a model or someone you are fan of?*

Yamada Sensei is the one that gave me a lot, there is so much I can thank him for. He is like a father to me. That is the kind of relationship we have. At that time, he was the one that gave me the opportunity and the access to all those Shihan, who were directly linked to ô Sensei. I had the advantage that not many people have met them all, trained with them all and most of all, took the ukemi from them all. I got to experience them all by touch and to me that is a big opportunity because I remember touch, that sticks inside me. I am trying to incorporate the best of all of them and put it in one body and at the same time be myself, trying to be an individual.

*You started aikido when you were really young but at that time you did not think about being a professional?*

No, not at that time.

*What were your ideas about what you wanted to do in life, when you would be an adult?*

I wanted to be a peer teacher when I was younger because I was very physical. I used to run, play basketball, did athletics so I wanted to teach that, I wanted to teach something that was body function. I wanted to help kids, teach them how to develop a good structure, balance, coordination and so on. As the years went on, I first taught kids' classes then adults' classes. Then somebody else took kids' classes and I took over Sensei's class. It was more responsibilities, not just to teach the class but being principal instructor. During the training I would continue interact the same way with other students, like buddies and friends. But Sensei did not want me to do that anymore. He said that I was principal instructor and they were my students, so there were not buddies on the mat. I had to learn how to talk to people as the teacher, as the instructor, not as buddies. That part was hard for me. I figured it out now so the respect is there and when I teach, there is a Sensei and teacher relationship. Then when we go out, there is a little bit of buddies in there.

*You lived in different countries and travelled a lot, what country do you like most and why?*

When I started to travel, the people that influenced me the most and got attached to me quicker were the South Americans. Argentina and Brazil were the first countries. I have a long time connection with them. I did not come to Europe as much at the beginning when I was teaching, mainly in South America and Asia so I have lots of connections there. Afterwards, I started to come to Europe and overall it will be Hungary because they have a bigger connection to me and I like those areas too. I feel closer to those students in that manner and I have an affinity with them.

*For you, what are the qualities of a good aikidoka?*

Patience and being self-critical. Examine yourself all the time and never be satisfied. I don't mean you shouldn't feel good sometimes about your practice but being aware that you can always learn more. Humility too, that is part of it because that says that you can learn more. Just because you can do it doesn't mean you can't make it better. So always try to improve it. Aikido needs always being polished to keep the shine. If you do not, it starts to go down; if you do not practice polishing it, it dissipates. Continued practice means to continue polishing, to make it better and never stop. So be

patient, humble, self-critical and take your time, there is no rush. Learning is not about speed, it does not mean you have to learn fast or slow. There is no time limit there, you learn when you learn, you learn as you learn.

*As a Shihan, is there a message you want to give to all aikido adherents?*

Well, enjoy your practice, it is fun. Keep practicing but at the same time be patient, perseverant and humble. I have been practicing for more than 50 years now and I still need to practice. My body changes, my mind changes, my attitude changes and that affects what I do so everything has to change with it. There is always a process of polishing, relearning and learning all the time.

*We would like to thank Donovan Sensei for this very inspiring exchange and sharing of information.*



Pictures: Laurent D., stage Donovan Waite, Aikido Sart-Saint-Laurent, février 2018