**Ki No More**

*"I was prepared to die if need be."*

*- Chiba Sensei*

On June 5th, 2015, Chiba Sensei died. He left behind a grieving and deeply mourning family. The death of Chiba Sensei came as no surprise to those belonging to the aikido Birankai world he founded. We were all aware that ill health these last two years had lead him to stay at home with his beloved family. Though I knew that an announcement of his passing was inevitable in the not too distant future, I was nevertheless shocked when it arrived; shocked and deeply saddened. As the announcement of Chiba Sensei’s death spread among the thousands of people he touched around the world, all shared a deep sense of loss.

About six week after the announcement of Chiba Sensei’s death, the annual seminar of Birankai North America took place in Seattle, Washington, USA. This seminar, the first one after Chiba Sensei’s death, was modified according to Chiba Sensei's wishes to allow us, his aikido family and followers in life, to support each other as we adjusted to his death. A Buddhist ceremony was held in the dojo, a more formal ceremony in a church, and a social gathering in the evening.

The Buddhist ceremony in the dojo was very moving. A picture of Chiba Sensei had been placed in the shomen and, after the ceremony, we went to the shomen and bowed for a few seconds to pay our respects before moving on to let the next person in line do the same. This short gesture, a kind of farewell tribute, was followed by yet another one. People remained sitting silently on the tatami, facing the shomen, as if they had yet to grasp that Chiba Sensei was no more. Some cried. The deep sense of grief was powerfully evident and shared equally between those who knew him well and those who had had only a brief acquaintance with him. The path from the dojo to our rooms, which were located in a different building, was filled with people sharing their thoughts and memories of Chiba Sensei. Everyone grieved his passing.

The evening’s social gathering was of a different nature altogether. We came together, as someone there accurately phrased, “To do what Sensei liked to do most in his free time.” As drinking and singing together was what he liked to do in his free time, that is what we did; we drank and sang to commemorate our teacher. Students and teachers alike sang and danced. There was sadness mixed with joy. This fusion of emotions might seem odd but sadness accompanied by contentment is a familiar element in many cultures. Wakes are common in the Celtic cultures of Ireland and Scotland and in Judaism there is *Seudat Havraa*, a version of a wake held as a recovery meal after the burial. As for myself, I felt confused in the gathering as I could not avoid feeling a sense of denial, as if the absence of Chiba Sensei had not yet penetrated me as it should have.

The first sentence spoken by one of Birankai’s teachers upon being informed of Chiba Sensei’s death was, “He was a hero.” I believe he meant to convey that Sensei bravely accepted his impending death. He accepted his own death with no sense of resentment; none at all. I, personally, dare to understand this bravery as interrelated with his belief in the eternity of the soul.

In the dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato depicts the death of Socrates in the form of a conversation Phaedo, a student of Socrates, has with Echecrates, a Pythagorean philosopher. In it Phaedo attempts to describe to Echecrates the events surrounding Socrates's death.

Phaedo says,

I had a singular feeling at being in his company. For I could hardly believe that I was present at the death of a friend, and therefore I did not pity him, Echecrates; he died so fearlessly, and his words and bearing were so noble and gracious, that to me he appeared blessed... I was pleased, but in the pleasure there was also a strange admixture of pain; for I reflected that he was soon to die, and this double feeling was shared by us all; we were laughing and weeping by turns…

As far as I can judge, this is how Chiba Sensei passed away as well; fearless and at peace with the unstoppable process taking place within his body.

This combination of sadness and gratitude, prevalent among so many grieving the death of Chiba Sensei, reflects the meaningfulness of his life; a life that left its mark on people around the world. He left behind many students who he educated in the spirit of aikido. He lived this spirit in the most dignified way. His career spanned nearly 50 years and his impressive legacy can be seen in the way he shaped and changed the lives of his students. Objective observers can see and assess the results of his career endeavors. I would like to highlight a central trait of Chiba Sensei, one that cannot be inferred by any means of external observation, that of authenticity and to the expression of authenticity in his life. Chiba Sensei was authentic. He was authentic in his life. And, he was authentic in his death.

What does it mean to be authentic? The concept of authenticity has been explored from many angles by psychologists, artists, and many philosophers beginning with the existentialists. Authenticity might be loosely thought of as truth but truth and authenticity are not synonymous. There are basically two aspects of truth and authenticity; external (objective) and internal (subjective). The first aspect assumes each person owns an internal truth about which we can learn based upon cues in his or her behavior, the way he or she presents and interacts with the external world. We can see the objective self. The second aspect has to do with the way a person relates to himself or herself without any pretense, illusion or mask; the subjective self. This second aspect is entirely internal, private, with no presence in the external world. We cannot see the subjective self. Authenticity is the degree to which one is able to live in faith to one’s private subjective self, or spirit, while existing as objective self in an external world of rules, pressures, and expectations. It is the degree and manner to which one’s conscious mind resolves or interacts with these conflicts.

The wish to be subjective self -infinite at its extreme- completely free and independent, and the conflicting wish to be objective self, to be seen and recognized in the external world with its rules and expectations, is an existential contradiction inherent in every human being. Existential philosophers have described and explained this conflict in a variety of ways, such as intolerable inconsistency, dread, or despair.

For the 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, this kind of frustration or despair is a positive trait as it motivates one to decide to take action to transform it and create the freedom that allows one to adopt a new way, a way of one’s choosing.

We live our lives knowing we are going to die. Dying is the most personal and total human experience and one must go through it completely alone. The concrete event of death ends this intimate and subjective experience. According to Kierkegaard, if we are to lead our lives with this existential contradiction, the desire for complete subjectivity and the despair about the finality of life, it propels us to seek that which is eternal. What matters most to Kierkegaard is the level of one’s awareness of one's despair and awareness of one’s own death. As awareness increases, so does one’s passion to reach toward pure subjectivity, to pure infinity. A greater capacity to be aware in this direction is the basis of one's own authenticity.

In his book, *Studies in Existentialism*, Ran Sigad states that the life of an authentic person is expressed via death awareness, and that awareness is what makes a human being truly separate and independent. Kierkegaard, however, posited death awareness is limited to those rare people who are capable of striving toward a decisive decision, setting their minds to something new, and overcoming habits and conventions which are well engrained in their society. Thus, these rare people are alone with their own truth and in facing the growing anxiety. Martin Heidegger, one of the greatest philosophers of the last century, also addressed the horror facing modern man, indicating that death awareness is an eminent feature of the authentic personality. His own way of conceptualizing this issue stresses that the private, personal truth need not necessarily belong to exceptional, rare human beings. It can belong to any human being.

In his book *Being and Time* Heidegger seeks to explore the concept of *sein*, which means “being.” This exploration leads him to man's search for being as a kind of structure, a template of his existence. Heidegger then describes the human condition of *Dasein*, which means literally “being there” but is also translated as “presence” or “existence.” From the moment of birth he is surrounded by things, entities, and strives to achieve those aims which seem to him worthwhile. He reaches to attain his goals and, in that respect, is always imperfect. He tries to complete himself by his actions in the external objective world. The objects and entities that he finds around him appear as a phenomenon in his mind. In daily life man does not confront all the aspects of a phenomenon at once, but rather a few of them at a time. He relates to those of interest or relevance and they thus take a more concrete, finite form. This is how reality becomes distorted. Authenticity is, however, a situation in which he is continually open to the infinite possibilities engrained in everything that exists in his world - to the phenomenon as a whole.

The dread, to which I alluded earlier, in the context of Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of the human condition, reappears as an existential in Heidegger philosophy. Dread is what directs one to take responsibility for oneself. This responsibility is bound to develop as a private phenomenon. If one is immersed in the external world, in others, then the external world is what supplies the moral standards and other conventions, which are part of any society, and essentially release one from serious decisions in that regard. A person then might find an exit, or respite, from what otherwise might become a kind of existential exhaustion. Indeed, as Heidegger points out, there is a temptation to live a simple, quiet life but there is a price to be paid for doing it. One might lose his freedom upon seeking that kind of simple, quiet life, and by doing so become alienated to himself. The only road that can free one from that kind of numbness, even temporarily, is the experience of dread, of fearfulness.

The fear that Heidegger addressed is an emotion that forces one to confront an infinite and formless concrete being. It has a presence of empty intensity – the presence of the nothingness. And the phenomenon that transforms the human being into nothing is death.

Heidegger, like many other intellectuals, enlightens us to the fact the most common phenomenon in our everydayness is our effort to suppress any trace of the notion of death.

Sigmund Freud also addressed the issue of suppressing awareness of death. He wrote (1915):

Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belong to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed?

One’s own death, we should remember, negates one’s physical existence. It is a complete subjectivity devoid any commonality with anyone other than one’s self. One’s experience of death is limited to the death of other people, never one’s own death, so death is never truly a personal experience. Since we have no direct personal experience of death, we allow ourselves to deny our own inevitable death. Yes, death might be there, waiting for us right around the corner, but denial is a common response. Those other people are dying, not me. I need not face that most private, lonely, personal possibility.

Ernest Backer opened his book*, The Denial of Death*, with the following statement:

The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.

Any concrete implementation of actual dying annihilates the infinity of possibilities that come with life. The authentic existence of a human being comes to reality by facing the nothingness in his life, by the ability to tolerate the anxiety of being-toward-the-end. Paradoxically, the state of mind of nearing death opens one’s mind to the possibilities of one’s life. The encounter of one with the wholeness of life *as a whole*, enables one to face the endless possibilities of self-realization.

We can find a number of similarities between the thinking of the existential philosophers and the Zen philosophy that was adopted by the samurai warriors about a millennium ago.

The samurai, the martial artists of middle ages, have greatly influenced martial artists for centuries, from their time in the middle ages to now in the 21st century. Chiba Sensei was certainly influenced by them. We know that these Japanese fighters were required to master their craft completely, whether it was the sword, bow or yari (spear). In addition to mastering their weapons, there was another area of incessant preparation for them. They had to prepare their minds for the impending battle. Zen Buddhism, with its strict methods, came to their aid and provided exactly what was needed for the Japanese warriors to perform as demanded in their moment of truth. The warriors acted without any hesitation, without thinking. Only intuition and physical capability stood by their side. Any hesitation in battle amounted to a loss. Death was an inseparable companion of the samurai. Awareness of that crucial moment, that split second, when death could replace life was ingrained in their culture. The attitude of awareness is similar to the manner in which existentialists view the being-toward-the-end state of mind.

I assume that the search for authentic life was not central in any way to the world of the samurai. Nevertheless, they shared an understanding of the existential contradiction and they attempted to resolve this contradiction. Samurais treated the moment of dying as a moment of elation. Yes, death was for them a very unique and private moment and yet, they sought to make it public. That they left farewell songs attests to this intention.

Daisetz Suzuki wrote, "Death is the most serious affair absorbing all one's attention, but the cultured Japanese think they ought to be able to transcend it and view it objectively."

One cannot fail to observe the similarity here to existential ideas. It is rather astounding that Zen thinkers, way back thousands of years ago, encouraged thinking beyond conventions, beyond routine, beyond everyday life. They even encouraged a fuller perception of the meaning of life, such as that which has been elaborated by current philosophers and called an authentic life.

..This consists in seeing directly into the mystery of our own being which, according to Zen, is reality itself. …This is an appeal to an intuitive mode of understanding, which consists in experiencing what is known in Japanese as *satori.* Without *satori* there is no Zen. …The principle of satori is not reliant upon concepts in order to reach the truth of things, for concepts are useful to defining the truth of things but not to making us personally acquainted with them. Conceptual knowledge may make us wise in a way, but this is only superficial. It is not the living truth itself, and therefore there is no creativeness in it, being a mere accumulation of dead matter (Suzuki, p. 218).

Samurais acted long centuries ago, but it is Chiba Sensei who lived among us in modern days and who internalized the values of the samurai both in their physical embodiment and in their superiority of awareness. He acted upon the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. From a very early age, he was ready to die, should the need have ever arisen. In 1978, upon the occasion of facing a man who had challenged the Hombu Dojo, Chiba Sensei said, "I told him as a martial arts teacher I was prepared to die if need be." - As reported in an interview published in *Aikido FAQ* (originally published in Terry O'Neill's *Fighting Arts International*, issue #70).

Chiba Sensei visited Israel in 2010. I remember clearly the two of us sitting on the beach in Tel Aviv watching the sunset. The sand was soft and pleasant under our feet and the beer was cool. There were the usual beach sounds of people talking, walking, and playing in the sand. Parents and children wandered back and forth, splashing in the sea with great commotion. We sat quietly and talked. Slowly we began to talk about his childhood memories from the Second World War. He spoke about the U.S. bombing of Japan, of his city. The fire caught hold in homes everywhere and there was an urgent need to flee from the flames. These were horrific moments and Chiba Sensei spoke of them vividly as if the bombing had just happened. This encounter with death never dimmed nor lost its grip on his consciousness**.** I listened intently and asked him how he felt about death. He turned to me, looked at me with his gentle yet penetrating eyes and said, "I was never afraid of death. I will die when required. When it comes, well, this the course of nature." This was not the first time I heard him talk about death but it was the first time I heard him share in such an intimate, personal tone. What impressed me most was not the content but the calm tone in which the words were uttered.

I have never known another man, before or after Chiba Sensei, with that kind of consciousness of death. Death awareness evidently accompanied him in everyday life and with it came a calm and unique acceptance.

As mentioned initially, there are two aspects to authenticity. According to the first, we can observe one’s authenticity via external cues. There is no doubt Chiba Sensei provided these cues. He was clearly a man of inner truth, willing to accept responsibility for his actions and pay the price of his deeds. According to the second aspect, there is nothing for the viewer to observe as it is completely internal. This authenticity has no external manifestation. However, the consciousness of authenticity can be inferred, and I have no doubt that also in this respect Chiba Sensei lived in the authentic spirit to which I have earlier alluded. He stood in front of emptiness with great courage. He possessed an inner truth that anyone who met him could never deny or forget. Daniel Kempling, one of Sensei's past uchideshi, described it well when he said, "Chiba Sensei had hands from hell and heart of a Buddha."

In the article, *On the Limits of Aikido for Future Teachers*, by Chiba Sensei, one can find the integration of Heidegger’s rejection of ‘everydayness’ and the readiness of ‘being-toward-death’ as manifest in the world of aikido.

Chiba Sensei noted:

There is no way to teach the essence of the art of aikido to the uncommitted sword. A committed attitude (sword) exposes one to death and, without this, they cannot pass through the solid gate which stands between life and death, creation and destruction, and I cannot help them. The gate will never open to the uncommitted because with endless self-indulgence they become so large with hubris that they crowd each other to every tiny corner of our society.

Chiba Sensei met his death in the same state of mind and the same readiness to die as he lived. Shortly before his death he wrote to all Birankai teachers. It was a very sad and moving letter. Here I wish to quote the sentence that moved me the most. He wrote:

Several weeks ago, I was told that my cancer had spread and that treatment will only prolong my death, not extend my life. For that reason, I have chosen not to pursue any of the options offered me. I will instead allow what comes to do so naturally.

Rest in peace, dear Sensei.