

An Interview with John Mazza Sensei

On a given evening at Northwestern University or at Shinjinkai headquarters in Chicago, John Mazza Sensei can be found leading training with the compassionate and humorous demeanor for which he's known. But the humble and mild exterior is the result of many years of intensive training. This interview originally appeared in "Myoken", the former Shinjinkai newsletter. In it, Mazza Sensei reflects on his his early days, and on the ongoing path of martial arts practice he continues to walk.

Myoken: Sensei, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Can you start by telling us how you began training in martial arts?

JM: I first began training in February 1964. I was in the military at the time, stationed in Korea, and a Judo instructor came into the barracks. He said, "You need to take Judo; it will be good for you." My uncle was involved with a Judo group in Philadelphia, so I knew a little bit about it. I decided to take the instructor's advice and trained for 13 months in Judo while I was in Korea.

During my training in Judo, I was basically a throw dummy for my instructor. We would have free fall practice and be thrown on a one-inch cotton mat that was laid over a cement floor. The mat had little buttons on it, which would annoy the hell out of me.

Myoken: What happened after you came home from Korea? Did you continue to train?

JM: I came back in '65, but didn't train right away. My time in Korea had exposed me to the culture and philosophies of Asia, so I began studying Asian philosophy and yoga, basically following a route that led eventually to Zen Buddhism. Then in 1969, some of my friends were studying Shotokan Karate. They said, "You need to take Karate; it will be good for you!" So I decided to try it and I ended up training in Shotokan for the next ten years. Karate gave me a different mindset when it came to training because we had tournaments. That was difficult for me, because in our dojo we were taught very traditionally. Our ideal was "one punch/one kill" and that's how we tried to train, with that kind of intensity. But then in tournaments, you don't make full contact. This cause me some problems!

I did tournament fighting for about four years. At that time, I was trying to live a life of training. I worked a full-time job and then would go to the dojo and train until midnight or 1:00 in the morning, just working on various techniques or kata, or doing tsuki up and down the length of the dojo.

Myoken: And what brought you to Aikido?

JM: I began cross-training in Karate and Aikido in 1975, at first just to explore. I first studied Aikido under Shuji Maruyama Sensei in Philadelphia. But then in 1977, I met Toyoda Sensei at a summercamp. After I met him, I immediately decided to move to Chicago and study under him. Aikido was what I wanted, from that moment there was no question.

I came to Chicago in December of 1977. I walked into the dojo just to introduce myself, and there was Toyoda Sensei, in a t-shirt behind the desk smoking a cigarette. I didn't know what to make of him at all. But Sensei just asked me where my gi was. I told him I didn't have one with me. He said, "You need to train!" and he gave me his gi and black belt and I trained that first class wearing his gi. I trained under Toyoda Sensei from that point up until his death in 2001.

Myoken: Many of us remember you from that time not only as an instructor, but as one of the senior administrators in the Aikido Association of America, Toyoda Sensei's organization. What kind of responsibilities

did you have under Toyoda Sensei?

JM: Well, after awhile I began traveling with Sensei in various areas of the United States. I also went with him to Greece and to Japan. Some of my favorite memories of Sensei come from those trips. Under his direction, I became the chief instructor of the Northwestern University Aikido Club (Zanshinkan dojo), a position I hold again today as part of Shinjinkai. I was also President and Chairman of the non-profit organization Toyoda Sensei founded, Aikido International Foundation.

Much of my work right before Sensei died was centered on the construction of his new headquarters dojo in Palatine, Illinois, which had been his life's dream.

Myoken: You eventually left AAA, which must have been a difficult change.

JM: When Toyoda Sensei passed away in July 2001, I stayed with the organization for one year following his death. It wasn't a planned amount of time. I had no idea like, I'll stay with the organization for such-and-such time out of obligation. I had hoped to stay with that organization for the long run. But after that first year passed, I realized I couldn't stay. There were differences of opinion and there were some people there who felt there could only be one leader or instructor, rather than a cooperative effort. So I thought it would be best to leave.

Myoken: How did you come to be a Director for Shinjinkai?

JM: I had always kept in touch with Moore Sensei and Miller Sensei, even after they had left AAA. I had a good relationship with them. Shortly after I left, Mr. Moore invited me to teach a one-day atemi seminar at Shinjinkai's headquarters. Then, he invited me to be a guest instructor at the Northwestern University Aikido Club because of my previous affiliation with that group, and I accepted. It was because of Shinjinkai's open attitude and willingness to explore new dimensions that I decided to make a commitment to this new organization. Eventually I was offered a position as a Director, which I accepted.

Myoken: What are your goals when you teach? Can you tell us what you would like students to learn from you?

JM: If people could learn one thing from me, I hope it would be not to get locked into a technique or one way of doing things. Be willing to change and to explore different options.

The same advice can be applied to one's daily living as well. People with small minds try to shut out, exclude and ignore things they can't control or understand. They isolate themselves. They think this makes them safe, but really it cuts them off from the life of the universe. They lose their direction, they create limitations and boundaries that become their own prison.

Open yourself, open your eyes, and see everything there is to see! It's a huge world, and we're all just human beings.