

Aikidosphere

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Floating Along with a Cosmic Wind

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Having found it necessary to reduce much of my workload after my stroke in Labaroche, France (during the spring seminar in April 2003), by February 2004 I was ready to resume my training and start teaching again on a regular basis.

News of death reached me on Sunday, March 28, 2004. I was enjoying a beautiful evening in Hawaii -- sitting together with friends on a porch, having an after-dinner drink. The weekend seminar that I was invited to conduct had been completed with success, and everyone was in a relaxed and light-hearted mood. Yamada Sensei from New York called me and delivered the message of Kanai's death. The news struck me like a lightning bolt. I suddenly felt helpless and empty of emotion. I felt as if there was something vital within me beginning to collapse.

My last conversation with Kanai had been at his office on March 13, 2004, during a three-day seminar and only two weeks prior to his death. As I recall, the conversation went something like this:

"Hey, Hambei (his nickname, after a famous ronin named Kanai Hambei who had revolted against the Tokugawa regime during the mid-Edo period and was subsequently killed). You know that if I am going to die, I don't want to die on tatami," I said to him.

"I agree," he replied.

"How about us going to Tibet to die there after killing a few bad guys?" I added.

"That's a good idea." he went on to say, "There are plenty of nasty guys out there ... very, very nasty guys, aren't they?"

Generally, the expression "not to die on tatami" to Japanese men means to die on the battlefield away from one's home, and expresses the sentimental value of one's being a part of the warrior culture. This warrior culture demands the rejection of an easy, worldly lifestyle and the willingness to lay down one's life for the call of a higher principle.

The content of this short conversation only a few weeks before our final separation could well be taken lightly or as a casual joke between friends, however, it would be a mistake to take it as empty words. We both knew that we had still not lost the dreams and ambitions we had been embracing since our youth. Needless to say, it was truly



unrealistic to think that we would ourselves end up in Tibet for the reasons stated.

What bound Kanai and myself as friends for more than half a century is without a doubt based on a tacit agreement of mutual understanding in response to the inner call of "Let's go, when it is time." In recalling our last conversation I came to the realization that what made me feel so empty inside after his death was that I had lost someone who understood the implications of this tacit agreement -- a true friend. Indeed, Kanai kept his word and did not die on tatami. He died on his mission: what is known in Japanese as *kiyakushi*, which means, "to die abroad, away from one's home." I believe that Kanai embodied the spirit of *kiyakushi*.

There is something that sits deep inside of one's heart throughout one's life, held at its core, sustaining the fire of life's passions, keeping motivation and pushing forth one's will to live. This something may never materialize in a decisive or concrete form in action, but may instead end up as merely an unrealized dream or hidden wish.

Nevertheless, it can still provide assurance in the validation of one's life, and, as such, represents the essence of romanticism.

It is always true that you never realize the genuine value of something you have in your hand until you lose it. The feeling of emptiness that I had to struggle with after Kanai's death was enormous, and it made me realize that I couldn't continue on as before - I had to take a much-needed break for at least a year. Having now accomplished this, I am glad that I did it.

During my year-long break, I mostly spent my time reading, gardening, meditating and conditioning my body, which included walking a few miles per day. When I got bored with walking, I bought a bicycle to ride. (As a result, I have now memorized all of the street names for a few miles around my neighborhood -- a feat that never would have been possible otherwise.) I constantly struggled with the image of Kanai that continued to appear in my vision day and night -- especially in my meditation. As the image gradually faded in the passing days, I knew I was ready to resume my training again.