



Enso

Bucks County Aikido Journal

■ Issue 3, Winter 2008

BucksCountyAikido.com ■ 802 New Galena Rd., Doylestown PA 18901 ■ (215) 249-8462



Being Martial

by Patti Meisenbach-Lyons

To me, being martial is seeing what needs to be done and taking action. This sounds easier than it is because the sort of seeing I'm talking about comes from a place of clarity, not clouded by ego, personality, prejudices, etc. It is not what I think needs to be done, but what needs to be done. One does not have to train in martial arts to be martial, but training does give us opportunities to see openings and ways of taking action.

This past year I helped take care of my sister during her final days of a battle with breast cancer. When I arrived, she was still somewhat lu-

cid and asked if I would sleep with her. She was in a failing marriage and had she not been terminal, they would have divorced. Impending death does not fix a bad relationship. I saw in that moment what was being asked of me and I was there without hesitation. The days that followed were long and difficult. At first there were visits from friends, but soon it was only hospice and priests who came. I helped to bathe her, brush her teeth, give her pain medication, massage her arm swollen from lymph edema.

As difficult as the days were, the nights were even harder, longer. She was restless at night. There were trips to the bathroom, then the portable commode. We fell the first night. I was caught off guard by her

weakness and weight. I helped get her comfortable adjusting pillows, bed, sheets. Then I rearranged furniture trying to keep her from falling out of bed. I listened for her requests for help, then I just listened to her breathing. Was it strained or pained? Did she need more pain medication? Finally I just listened for her breath. Did it stop?... No, there it is.

Hospice has a booklet that describes the final stages of death (life?). Signs to watch for in the months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and moments before death. Could it really be so universal? We watched diligently and noted these changes. We wondered, was it days, hours or minutes? Finally, we just waited. Could this be martial, holding my dying sister's hand?

I see now that we shared the martial spirit. She, facing her death with fierce courage and grace. Me, bravely walking with her as far as I could go. Oh, what a gift she gave me, to put my years of practice to use.

In Buddhism, the Eight-fold Path speaks of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. To me, 'right' is not some specific set forth by someone else, but rather our own knowing of what is right through clarity. Clarity

Continued on page 2

that comes from practicing, through training, through sitting.

When someone asks if I have ever had to use my martial skills, they are looking for stories of fighting off parking lot attackers or city street muggers. Movie scenes, I think, not the mundane reality of having trained oneself daily for years to develop awareness, patience, compassion and the ability to see what needs to be done and do it. ○

Surrendering

by George Lyons

It has been a year of grief for Patti and me. In January, Patti's sister Barbie died from breast cancer at the young age of forty seven. Then our cat, Hissy Fit, was run over by a car. Finally one summer night as I put out the trash, our wonderful dog Daisy was killed by a hit and run driver. They were all so young and it seemed out of order. This couldn't have been their time. The reality of it was hard to take but there was nothing to be done but surrender to the truth of it.

I didn't like Zazen when Chiba Sensei first introduced it to me. At twenty five, I had no love for sitting and doing nothing. I trusted him, but I also wanted to see for myself how this motionless sitting could have anything to do with what I considered a dynamic martial art. The advice to sit and "die on your cushion" sounded like surrendering and contrary to the idea of defending yourself that the martial arts seem to espouse.

I recently gave a talk and demonstration to a group studying conflict



resolution. With our culture's interest in martial arts as a form of entertainment, its meaning has been over-simplified. Imagining only its brutishness, this group naturally met me with suspicion. While I couldn't deny this aspect of the martial arts, we had to get past the idea of it simply being a strategy for pummeling the other guy. As we talked, I could see their interest in how Aikido techniques blend with the intentions of the attacker. The ideal of no one getting hurt was well received but ultimately we had to get past this too. It's not that these elements are not a part of Aikido, but there is so much more if we are willing to dig deeper.

Without an agenda, we allow every opening and in this alert state there is ironically no opening.

It's true to say that in Aikido and Zazen we are studying how to fully present ourselves. It's also true to say that in these practices we work to fully surrender ourselves. A con-

frontation is a chance to see if we can drop our small self to encompass a larger view. The desire to preserve the self is surrendered so that we can be unconditionally present. Without an agenda, we allow every opening and in this alert state there is ironically no opening.

In a practical martial sense, meeting each moment without our thoughts as intermediary, we are faster, more adaptive, open to the unexpected. To find this though, we have to face our existential fear. We have to surrender self.

Sometimes preparing to sit Zazen, to die on my cushion, I remember a poem for the deceased that speaks from the point of view of the person who has passed saying, "Tasks I have left undone must stay that way". It's hard to let go of the activities of life, to drop our self importance and self involvement... to stop worrying about preserving ourselves. Our practice gives us a chance, but sticking with it is not easy. We get little support from a

society that misunderstands martial training, thinking it at best a discipline for children and at worst a forum for our animalistic nature... sitting Zazen, doing nothing, unproductive.

It's natural to have doubt and dismiss what's not immediately evident. Even when we have faith we get discouraged and wonder if we will ever be able to lift the veil that obscures our view. But I believe, in quiet moments, at our still point, we all intuitively know that when we finally drop what we are trying so hard to protect we will not only be relieved, we will have resources beyond our imagination. In this there is no time to waste. ○

Accepting vulnerability

Allowing every opening

Sitting like a mountain

Training at the center of the universe

Without a cloud in sight

Two-Month Introductory Course Begins January 13

Classes meet twice a week,
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 6-7 PM.

The cost of the course is \$150 and
includes one uniform (do-gi).

Classes are open to teens and
adults. No prior experience is
necessary.

For more information, visit
www.buckscountyaikido.com
or call (215) 249-8462.

Ten Thousand Things Within

by Ben Bowles

condition *vb* 3 a: to put into a proper state for work or use 5 a: to adapt, modify, or mold so as to conform to an environing culture b: to modify so that an act or response previously associated with one stimulus becomes associated with another

*there was no need to look back
after that day when your every cell
was depleted*

*when the gap between the echoes of
your parched heart increased*

*and you swore you would not get
up again*

*how was it that you drew the bow
acquired your target*

took aim

*and fired the truest arrow of your
life?*

Often when thinking of conditioning, the first thing that comes to mind is the process of refining the body and the modern standard of athletic training – repetitions of muscle movements, weight training, treadmills with O2 monitors, adhering to a specific diet, monitoring variables for development. Though these exclusively physical methods are practiced the world over, they reflect a limited perception of what conditioning is about. Generally speaking, we limit our sense of health to the physical realm, assuming that if our bodies are in proper working order and aesthetically pleasing, then we are healthy. At the least, we do not think that if something is wrong with us in a



metaphysical way, i.e., psychologically, mentally, spiritually, etc., then it could stem from our physical being. In aikido, one of our objectives is to bridge the physical with the immaterial and realize the interdependence of all of our facets, internal and external. To hone the mind correlates with a change in physique, even if it is a slight change in how one walks or uses a certain part of their body; when body or mind changes the other is right there with it. Aikidoists use conditioning as a means to study this dynamic, but it should be completely clear what conditioning is and is not. Merriam-Webster's defines condition as, "to modify so that an act of response previously associated with one stimulus becomes associated with another." Conditioning does not mean progress but preparation, refining our connectedness in order to react according to our environment. This study of action-reaction is very martial, yet the patience and dili-

Continued on page 4

gence it requires would characterize a peaceful mind, perhaps one that is not overpowered with fierceness. Our training allows us to examine both sides of the physical-spiritual sword along with the many virtues and vices, advancements and impediments that we encounter along the way.

Although aikido is a spiritual art, it is not necessarily safe to assume that spiritual development takes precedence over physical development. The long-established equivalence between body and mind is more of a subject for study than the debate between which is greater – the physical or the spiritual – and aikido calls us to closely examine the relationship between these two. Body and mind cannot be developed without each other and both act like two mirrors positioned opposite one another, each continually reflecting the other. It is tricky to determine which comes first in the matter – the spiritual or the physical. Does the body reflect the spirit, or vice versa? To say that one is more important than the other is to establish a kind of hierarchy. Yet in a spiritual way, there is no comparing, no better or worse, no more important or less important. The spiritual and the physical coexist like a matched pair and if we are following O'Sensei's suggestions for training, then we are looking at both.

Body and mind cannot be developed without each other and both act like two mirrors positioned opposite one another, each continually reflecting the other.

Once the door is open to the world of the spiritual, the opportunities for conditioning are limitless. Thought

patterns, concentration, memory, and faith are all subject to an internal conditioning that corresponds to what we do physically. Though spiritual training is not the science of athletic development, the tools of understanding physical training allow us to make useful analogies to the spiritual. For instance, in the spiritual realm, as in the physical, it is possible to reach a plateau. Anytime we feel a lack of change in our lives it is a reflection of a plateau. The usual emotional response is boredom and a sense of futility. I have wondered many times what is the point of such arduous training when I do not perceive personal change or progress. I become withdrawn, even depressed at my status. I fail to feel connected to training partners and perceive the teachings from behind an emotional veil. The aikido world shrinks to what I am doing within myself and loses the expansiveness of the whole universe from which it is born. Yet in hindsight, it was during those same moments that something internal was breaking down that allowed me to express something deeper. Somehow we generate the strength we need but thought we were not able to muster. This kind of breakthrough is like a lotus in the mud, requiring a dirty, challenging environment in which to bloom. I don't think that it is the breakthrough that evidences the spirit as much as persevering through the mire of training. To me, though, perseverance is an important aspect of spiritual practice, one of the three pillars of buddhism – faith, doubt, and perseverance. Conditioning is overcoming the barriers that prevent us from practicing freely and continuing to train despite the resistance we generate. But there is a danger in resorting to training with every personal

obstacle that arises in our lives. I find that to prevent practice from becoming obsessive, it is important to condition the mind.

A Zen buddhist monk who lived in New York City once commented, "Imagine if we could train ourselves to come back to our breath every time we saw a pigeon." For local practitioners, this was a meaningful notion relating the countless pigeons of the city to the individual's practice of mindfulness. The corollary for aikidoists is the sense of muscular extension that characterizes our ideal of movement. Though it is a physical quality we are looking for, we cannot find it without our mind's recognition of the proper feeling. Our sense of discernment is perhaps what is conditioned most of all in training. We are constantly noticing differences through our eyes, hands, feet, essentially our whole bodies. When the mind enters the picture as an intellectual tool, it is very useful in the process of accepting duality. Oftentimes, we establish ourselves in a fixed position or opinion with disregard for the opposing view. The aikidoist should be able to clearly see both sides of a two-sided argument before choosing a side if necessary. It is like adopting a god's-eye view of a conflict between two people – yourself and your attacker. Personally, I have found this ability to be a blessing and a curse. To its merit, I am able to sympathize with a lot of different perspectives, even ones that conflict with one another. The problem arises when it comes time to choose my own perspective. "Wait a minute," I tell myself, "both sides make sense here, so where do I stand?" Like some strange self-negator, I conceive of sensible counter-arguments to my own point of view, sometimes leaving myself

dumbstruck as to where I stand, what I believe. The awareness-training in aikido led me to examine why I often found myself in this position, and I gradually came to find my own convictions in situations where previously I would not have. Moreover, when I am confronted with a dualistic argument, I look for the transcendent resolution. More often than not, there is a third side to a right-wrong, black



and white argument and I find it is one of the most difficult perspectives to find. Ironically, when I have encountered it, I am stunned by its simplicity. Like regular training, I condition myself to look beyond the two sides presented and find the uniting principle behind them.

Thus, in addition to cultivating one's ki, physical prowess, and qualities of mind, it is also the training environment that has to be conditioned. When the community as a whole responds, or doesn't respond, to an event, it reflects the collective conditioning of the dojo. Certain aspects of aikido tradition are critical - the degree to which students respect the dojo, dedication to regular training - but more importantly, the degree to which students support one another, the sincerity of their interactions, and using the dojo as a place to practice compassion are aspects of communal conditioning that influence the spirituality of the environment. Many times when I have entered our dojo alone, I can feel the sanctity of the space. Like waves in a pool minutes after you get out of the water, the empty dojo emanates the ki of our social interactions as much as our individual spirits and

hours on the mat. Like visiting a revered holy site from the past, it conveys a character which reflects its constituents, our good-heartedness, and, at times, our darkness. If we condition in our environment properly, I see the dojo as a microcosm for our interactions with the world at large. Here we practice compassion toward fellow students in preparation for meeting our fellow citizens of the world. The question is, how do we condition ourselves to help others? What does compassion look like? I think it is one thing to do things for other people, a common modality for expressing a desire to help someone. But sometimes the better thing to do in order to help someone is to present them with an opportunity, something by which they can understand how to help themselves. Whether they take what is presented or not is their decision. To me this is a manifestation of the uke-nage relationship. An uke who is willing to relinquish their balance presents the nage with the opportunity to fully express the technique, the chance for the nage to learn. On the other hand, if the nage takes their partner's center, it is an opportunity for the uke to learn how to move with the technique and save

themselves. Which do you think would be an environment that was more likely to induce a transformation - one in which everyone hinted at or even told you what to be and how to conduct yourself, or one in which everyone around you set an example? Personally, I take Gandhi's advice to heart, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." I feel that if everybody was the change they wanted to see

in the world and in others, eventually others would make a choice for themselves to change or not. The logic of the situation hinged on the individual absorbing the qualities that surrounded them. The process of immersing oneself in the training environment seems like a version of osmosis to the western outsider, but immersion is full of conscious and subconscious study, learning on levels that transcend intermittent training and connect us with something very deep within ourselves.

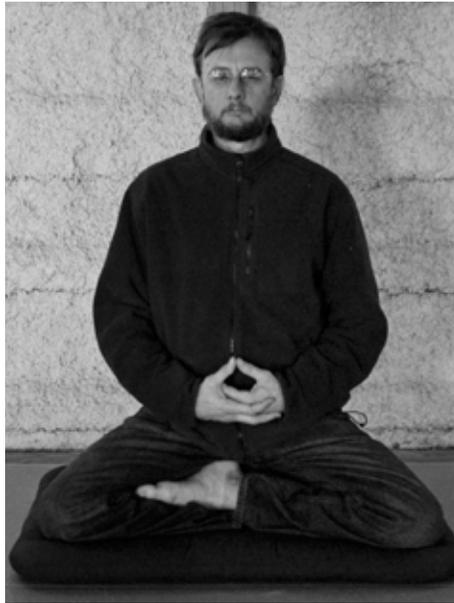
Through aikido, I discovered something within me that is indestructible. In a way, I think of the possibility of someone attacking me as a non-threat because a part of me cannot be destroyed, regardless of the outcome. Even under the worst imaginable circumstance, am I truly in danger? Instead of fearing physical harm, what concerns me are the internal mechanisms of my mind. In terms of self-awareness, if I were to be cocky and arrogant about being unbeatable, I would underestimate those around me, attackers and non-attackers. I would be placing myself above others, detaching myself from the global community and removing my compassion. As aiki-

Continued on page 6

doists, we should always be aware of when we separate ourselves from others. We are at a great risk of losing our humanity when we do that. And still, sometimes I perceive aikidoists as a kind of super-race conditioning themselves far beyond the reaches of average people: we are in excellent shape, we are committed to a universal truth, we strive to be virtuous, and so doesn't the rest of the world have some catching up to do? As I see it, if anything were different about the rest of the world, I would not have this very moment that I am given right now. I would not have had the opportunities that were presented to me. What I have in this moment is as good as it gets in this moment, but that doesn't apply to just my circumstances but the universe as a whole.

Physically, our training should be challenging, but it should not feel thankless. If we condition ourselves to be sincere, our gratitude for the opportunity to practice will grow. The list of things to condition in aikido training is nearly infinite. This is triumphant in that our spirit always has opportunities for growth. The bittersweet part is that as we are continually training ourselves and polishing our ten thousand aspects, we also have to condition ourselves to let go. If we relinquish our ideas of progress, the goals we hope to accomplish, and our conceptions of what aikido is about, we clear our minds and we allow our spirits the expressive power they long for. Though nothing may seem more difficult than the physical demands of aikido, letting go of all the things I have come to know and love may be the greatest challenge of my life. ○

Where Are All The Warriors?



On Saturdays I see them – a room full of warriors in the dojo, swinging sticks- throwing bodies. Strong faces determined to train, determined to gain skill and strength.

Yet in the early morning hours in the zendo, there are few to be seen. Only a handful of students make the effort. Where are the warriors? To sit zazen and to face yourself is the hardest part of training. To face yourself fully and honestly is the hardest part of life.

Speaking for myself – I often avoid myself, often avoid facing myself on the mat. There are many things about myself that I don't like, that I do not want to deal with. Often lazy and too often selfish. I would rather sleep than get up early to go to the zendo. I'd rather distract myself from the realization that I have so much work to do. When I sit in zazen without distractions I have to come to grips with the truths of my life. The good, the bad and the ugly. We are all like that. I can be nasty,

lazy, angry, anxious, fearful – did I mention selfish? By paying attention I realize what's good about me as well as what needs improvement. It's hard – sometimes I drag myself kicking and screaming to the mat. As an aikido student I'm a complete beginner, out-performed by stronger students. Hey – I'm a skinny Kraut, barely 145 lbs., but I assure you that inside me beats the heart of a Warrior. I started sitting zazen decades ago and have come to realize that by paying attention and facing myself, I'm slowly growing, slowly improving, slowly maturing. Did I mention I'm slow?

In focused zazen we face ourselves-lose ourselves and become one with the world. Peace of mind takes concentrated effort. Facing yourself is the toughest part of training with the biggest reward. Lose yourself and gain the universe. Lose your fears and gain a calm and peaceful mind. It is difficult to train consistently, but that's ok. With me it's always been two steps forward, one step back. It's a process.

We fall – we brush ourselves off- climb back onto the cushion. Lots of work still to be done! Lots of room for improvement!

Calling all Warriors! Show your Face!
Show your True Self!

the zendo is open...

Gassho,
Roman ○

How Do You Know?

by Brian Stoudt

“What brought you here to train?” This is a question heard occasionally here at the dojo usually directed toward beginning students but occasionally senior members as well. The usual answer consists of, “I came across the website,” or “I have wanted to take up martial arts for years and a friend recommended this dojo.” It wasn’t until the basics class party last August that I heard a very unique answer: “I didn’t want to go to a McDojo.”

At first I had to take a moment and think about what that meant. As I thought about it, I realized that this creative expression referred to the “fast food way” of teaching martial arts. These “McDojos” take in as many students as possible, training them in a cookie-cutter-type system – teaching stances, blocks, punches, and assorted kicks – and systematically go through a certain set of defined skills to achieve the next “belt.”

That expression has definitely stuck with me. Ever since, I can’t help but compare this cookie-cutter method of teaching to my experiences at Bucks County Aikido. The moment that I sat and observed a class of aikido at BCA, I was struck by the balance between intensity and suppleness that senior members dem-

onstrated. I was also intrigued by the teaching style that was offered by Sensei – focusing on the observance of the technique, the silent instruction which encouraged the matching and blending of the movement, as well as subtle suggestions offered by senior members. Instantly, I knew that this dojo was for me.

When beginning my search for a dojo, I read an article that stated, “You needed to understand the basic features of a given style before choosing where to take class.” I now know that while it is important to understand the basics before choosing a style, it is equally if not more important to realize that in many ways that style chooses us. This may sound overly philosophical and a bit mystical; however, after hearing many of the stories of how fellow students have come across Sensei, Patti and Bucks County Aikido, I believe this now more than ever and count myself as one of the lucky ones that “found” Bucks County Aikido. ○



Searching

by Paul Fricker

One of the things I have found to be so unique about aikido, and perhaps one of the reasons I enjoy it so much, is the way in which it is taught. The notion that the burden of learning is on the student to steal from the teacher, rather than the teacher giving his knowledge to the student, allows for self discovery of the art. I think it is this process of self discovery that allows us to make the art our own.

When I studied Tang Soo Do, I was taught very specifically how each technique should be done, what the correct hand position was at any given moment, the exact position my feet should be in etc, etc. After only a few years of study, it seemed to me that the only things left to learn were new techniques and new forms. While this certainly kept me busy, I never paid much attention to the basic techniques I had learned, except to make sure I was still doing them the way I had been taught. I think that is why I eventually stopped studying. I had become bored with the art because I had not learned anything new in quite some time. I wasn’t actually studying anymore; I was just rehearsing the forms and techniques I already knew. Perhaps there was more to that art that I simply didn’t see because I was so young at the time. But at the time I stopped practicing Tang Soo Do, no one had corrected me on any of the most basic punches or kicks in several years, or in any way let me know that there was more to them than I realized at the time. So unlike aikido where after more than three years of intensive study, I still know that there are

Continued on page 8

many levels of even the most basic techniques I have yet to unravel.

When watching a demonstration during class, I try to find that next piece I'm missing, figure out what sensei is doing that I am not or how he is doing it differently than I am. It is easy to fall into complacency and think "OK, we're doing sankyo now", but it is something I try to fight against and always watch closely, always be searching for the aspects of the technique I haven't seen before. I try to do the same when working with a partner on the mat. I try to feel what is happening between me and my partner. Am I connecting to their center? Are they denying me their center or am I not finding it? Is it more effective if I do it this way or that way? How are they doing the technique differently than me? Am I giving good ukemi, or just receiving the technique according to my own preconceptions? It can be very hard to come to any



definitive conclusions this way since every encounter is different and every connection with another person unique. The important thing is to continue searching, to fully experience this encounter now. For me the greatest joy on the mat comes from discovering something new in a technique, finding a new aspect of it I didn't realize was there before, or helping someone else do the same.

This is what makes aikido so unique and so beautiful, that we are always searching.

I have found that my progress in aikido is very circular in nature. I go through the same cycle again and again as I progress. I'll begin to see some things that I was unaware of before, and as I do it will become very clear to me how much my own technique is lacking. This can be a very frustrating time in the cycle because I know that I'm missing something, but can't figure out what it is; or I'll realize that my sempai are trying to show me something that I'm just not seeing. Gradually though I become able to see these new aspects more clearly and start to incorporate them into my own technique. After some time it will simply become part of my technique and no longer require so much effort or concentration to apply. At this point it becomes very easy to become complacent or feel as though 'I've got this down.' Experience however has taught me that this feeling just means I'm not searching hard enough because there are always more aspects that I have yet to see. Sure enough eventually I'll start to see or feel something that I was unaware of before. Then the whole process starts all over again.

I can sometimes see others going through this process as well, and I often struggle with how much I should tell them. My instinct is to tell them what they're not doing or how to improve their technique because I want to see them improve and find the answers to what they are struggling with. At the same time though, I fear that by doing so I will take something away from them. If I tell them too much, I deny them the chance to discover it for themselves and it will just become a thing; something they do because they were told rather than an organic aspect of their own technique. There are times though, when it just kills me to watch someone struggling with something. I can see their frustration and want to help but know that this is probably something they need to find for themselves. I realize that sometimes you do have to help people along and there are times when it is appropriate to correct something they are doing, but not always. Knowing when to help, and when not to, is the challenge. Like so many other questions in aikido, there probably is no definitive answer. We just need to hold the question in our gut, like a koan, and keep searching.

This is what makes aikido so unique and so beautiful, that we are always searching. The student is not told explicitly how to do the technique. It is simply presented to them. It is up to the student to take the learning for themselves; if they are not actively searching, it will elude them. Because of this, every person's aikido is as distinctive as they are. There are infinite possibilities in aikido and within this every practitioner finds their own path and their own style. ○

Wake Up

by Helen Tai

It's so hard to stay awake. What does it mean to be awake? Is it awareness of what's going on around us? Is it accepting things as they are? Is it simply not dreaming, but being fully present? How does one stay awake when the urge to sleep (or at least nap) is so strong?

As practitioners of aikido, we are constantly honing our awareness, trying to sharpen our skills, and awaken ourselves. Our training is full of opportunities to increase our awareness, by stealing from sensei and by interactions with our practice partners. I know of many things that I'd like to do better. But even with conscious intent, sometimes the simplest change, like remembering not to duck, can escape me. Or maybe I actually succeed in changing, but then my mind wanders to something else I'm doing wrong, and pretty soon I'm ducking again.

As if the struggle to change ourselves isn't hard enough, don't we all sometimes feel that our practice partners are thwarting our learning? E.g., If this guy weren't so \$&%*stiff, I could execute the technique perfectly. How am I supposed to learn if my uke falls before I've even done the technique? Why can't this know-it-all give me a chance to try it before correcting me? Why does he throw me as if I'm the Incredible Hulk? Can't he see that I'm half his size? Oh my god, I can't believe he hit me on the head with his bokken again!

How can anyone not be justified in being annoyed? How are we supposed to learn in these conditions?



At times, our fellow aikidoka can be extremely exasperating, so how do we stay awake and not just tune out? How do we resist the urge to blame our partner and just pray for sensei to clap? To be sure, sometimes my partner could do better, and sometimes I am in a position to help him or her improve. But isn't it also possible that my partner is just reacting to something I'm doing? Maybe I'm being stiff or maybe I'm yanking on my uke or maybe I'm being ornery (no, not me!), and he's simply trying to deal with it.

Or perhaps he really is just clumsy & unaware, and we feel vindicated when others complain about the same problem. After all, if Joe Aikido consistently smacks everyone else's fingers with the jyo, then it can't be my fault!

Maybe so.

Or...maybe one of us needs to wake

up and figure out how to behave differently.

Since one of the main reasons I practice aikido is to improve myself, finding fault in others when something goes wrong doesn't make sense, nor does it make me any better.

Whatever the case, how I respond is my choice – I can prefer to believe that there's nothing I can do, or I can awaken to the gift in it. What could I do differently that would result in a better outcome? Blaming my partner is easy, but it doesn't cause me to take a hard look at myself or force me to consider how I could change. Since one of the main reasons I practice aikido is to improve myself, finding fault in others when something goes wrong doesn't make sense, nor does it make me any better.

Continued on page 10

Just as with aikido, the rest of our lives are also filled with challenges – blabber mouths, drivers who cut you off, liars, cheaters, incompetent bosses, dim-witted coworkers, Republicans... It's so easy to be superior and think how stupid they all are and how much better the world would be if they would just get a clue.

I was recently laid off from my job. Although I wasn't devastated, I was worried about how I was going to pay my bills, I was angry that my hard work was not better appreciated, and I felt sad about having to leave behind my valued colleagues. I fantasized about what life would be like if I were in charge or how things would be different if we had never merged with that other company. I blamed my CEO for mismanaging the business and I blamed George Bush for his disastrous policies. But daydreaming didn't make me feel better, and more impor-

tantly, it didn't change the fact that I was out of a job. It really brought home the point that it's futile to fight against what already is.

So then I started to think about how I hadn't been happy in my job for the last two years. I had made genuine efforts to make it work; I sought opportunities to make changes, but none of it really changed anything. Overall though, I was pretty comfortable – I made a decent salary, I was good at my work, I enjoyed most of my coworkers, my commute was reasonable, and I didn't have to travel that much. In essence, I was in a malaise – my job had its share of issues, but I had grown comfortable with the pain that I knew.

An old proverb says that if a frog is thrown in boiling water, it will jump out. But if it is placed in cold water that is slowly heated, it does not jump out and slowly boils to death. I was too sleepy to jump out

of the boiling water, and if I hadn't been laid off, it's conceivable that I could've spent several more unhappy years biding my time. When I looked at it from this perspective, I realized what a tremendous gift I had been given – a chance to make a fresh start. I was fortunate to have a wake-up call forced upon me.

Sensei always tells us to look for the gift in an injury. This may seem like an oxymoron – what good can come out of an injury? It depends on how you look at it.

Losing a job is not good or bad. Having a rough nage, a clumsy uke, or an unaware practice partner is not good or bad. It just *is*.

Wake up or stay asleep – it's your choice. ○

Spring 2009 Schedule, beginning January 13 (Interim Schedule: Mon/Wed/Fri 7-8 PM, Sat 9-10 AM. All classes open to everyone.)						
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen	9 - 10 am Mixed	8 - 9 am Zazen
	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed			10 - 11 am Beginner's Weapons/Iaido	9:15 - 11 am Free Practice
6 - 6:55 pm Mixed	6 - 6:55 pm Intro Class	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed	6 - 6:55 pm Intro Class	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed		
		6:50 - 7:10 pm Zazen		6:50 - 7:10 pm Zazen		
7:05 - 8 pm Mixed	7:05 - 8 pm Intermediate	7:15 - 8 pm Advanced*	7:05 - 8 pm Iaido	7:15 - 8 pm Mixed		

(*3rd kyu and up, by permission only)