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## Bucks County Aikido Journal

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### On Testing, Trust, and the Teacher/Student Relationship

By G. Lyons

I believe it's important for the atmosphere of a dojo to be serious. That is to say, stepping onto the mat should not be a casual affair. At any one time there will of course be people at many different levels of practice. For beginners a more communicative "chatty" atmosphere might be appropriate but as training continues talking naturally drops off in favor of more subtle communication. Although it may be different by degree, every student should expect training will be intense for them at some point and yes even threatening. After all this is a martial art.

I understand the argument that learning can't take place in a threatening environment. I'm not suggesting that every class should push a student into a fight or flight situation. Every teacher should look to support an atmosphere along a scale of serious, to intense, to threatening, looking for ways to stimulate the variety of people who show up to study this art. Not only do I think every student should experience being pushed out of their comfort zone I would argue it's a necessity. Oth-

erwise, Aikido is no more than a collection of exercises for the body.

As a part of our tradition a "test" is a situation we use to provide an intense experience. It is a venue in which to push and stimulate the potential of a student. This situation does not happen in a vacuum either. Part of what makes it so challenging is the attention of all those present - from audience to members, ukes to teacher. Testing is not a singular experience; everyone participates and is affected.

Being tested also means being judged with all the connotations of this both positive and negative. But whatever differing perceptions we may have of the meaning and value of testing, I would bet that everyone who has confronted the uncertainty of it would agree the experience gave them a lens through which they had the opportunity to see themselves more clearly.

In today's world competition is the generally accepted way to challenge ourselves. Martial arts practiced for sport use it for this purpose. One obvious outcome of pitting one against another until there is a winner and loser is that the "judge" is removed from any responsibil-

ity other than enforcement of rules. For us, the teacher as judge has a greater meaning.

Let me say from experience that it's not easy to be in the position of judging others. But having someone shoulder this burden is an essential part of our heritage. It enables us to create an intense condition that takes into consideration each unique individual. The subjective nature of a test, judged by one person or even a committee, can be problematic but it's important to keep in mind that alternatives lead away from our most valued tenant; that insight into Aikido does not rely on triumph over another but on triumph over one's self.

Before going further I'd like to say something about hierarchy and the student/teacher relationship.



As a part of our tradition we have inherited a ranking system as a way to recognize and understand the length and depth of an individual's study. The hierarchical structure formed by this is not strictly a meritocracy in a technical sense but it does stem from the expectation that those who have gone before have some wisdom through experience.

If we accept that another person has greater understanding of something, anything, encounters with them can be filled with interest but might also be laced with the anxiety of not being in the know. Humility and the willingness to be "open," a vulnerable state, is a precondition for learning and why we react so strongly to any teacher or authority that violates the trust required of a student.

Having trust is a fundamental part of a teacher/student relationship and whether the student realizes it or not the teaching depends on it. There is a turning point when a student comes to this and accepts or rejects the leap of faith they must take. If the student leaps the teacher must meet them or he/she is not a teacher. If one or the other does not show up, the relationship is never set in motion.

If a student/teacher relationship does come to life, from the outside it can seem stern even harsh. Despite appearances, a teacher has compassion for the struggling student whose every act becomes a showing of faith. In turn, the student has compassion for the teacher recognizing the burden of the teacher's responsibility. Weathering doubts, a new stage of training can begin with the trust of the teacher as the precursor and the trust of the student as impetus. Now simple acts, such as the folding of a hakama take on

new meaning and become a sign of affection and gratitude, not the duty of an underling.

There is no denying that having trust puts us out there. We reserve our trust or pull it back when some part of us feels jeopardized. Though we can rationalize our reasons for protecting our self we might also intuit that in some way we are missing out, that somehow a life fully lived is not lived safely. A student/teacher relationship can take us out to this precipice.

The judgment of a teacher, both in day to day training and intensive tests, is part of this practice. The pressure of it can be difficult, even crushing for a student. Having trust during the rough patches and breaking points, is essentially affirming that our current view might be limited and that one who has gone before may see something more. Trusting in this process is trusting that transformation is possible.

Such an apprenticeship has nothing to do with performance and reward. Our "tests" must not fall into this trap. Without an appreciation for this, next steps could be towards competition where the pressure on the judge is relieved and the student becomes a worldly performer.

In my opinion, the backbone of trust is the total acceptance of the reality of our everyday existence. Life is precarious. However much we'd like to imagine otherwise our next heartbeat, our next breath, is uncertain. Unless we are forced to face this in some way it's likely we don't see life as hanging in the balance. This is more than an intellectual or physical learning. It is nothing less than the existential acceptance of what "is" and gives meaning to the martial artists acceptance of life and death and the freedom that comes with such realization.

In the end we may find that along with some hope of technical mastery, what we have been looking for is strength of spirit; a strength that allows us to trust even in the face of the unknown. Regardless of what has brought us to this point, what's called for in our practice is nothing less than the full unconditional acceptance of our life as it is. With no hindrance in the mind approaching every situation, every encounter with our teacher, every class, every injury, every "test," every person, every breath...living openly and unguarded. People can and do live this way. Now, step onto the mat.



*When meeting another person we are instantly reflected back on ourselves, and with this reflexive act come certain associations attached to this act. But until we can see the world and other people without this subtle discrimination, we will never see them as they are in themselves; instead we will see them only as they are in ourselves—which are two very different views. When we cannot see others as totally new, or as if for the first time, we cannot allow for change in them or ourselves.*

– Bernadette Roberts

# The Purpose and Value of Testing

Submitted by Sebastian Brown  
(As assigned for Summer Camp  
2013 examinations)

Testing has been an integral component of the student-teacher method of disseminating information throughout the history of humanity. In martial arts, it serves as a tool for evaluating a student's progression. Our practice of Aikido in Birankai, which stems from a rich lineage of budo in Japan, also utilizes it prominently. Every regional seminar and summer camp features opportunities for new yudansha and teachers to present themselves. Personally, I have struggled with the ideology of being tested since I began my formal education as a child, and have debated its usefulness in my Aikido training.

My scholastic accomplishments are rather underwhelming. Disinterested by the conventional public school system model of dulling the educational experience through lecture, and the universal reliance of measurement using standardized tests, I was left in a quandary upon graduation from high school. Weighing my options, I foolishly opted to try secondary education, where my resentment carried over and I dropped out after a few semesters. I resolved to become an autodidact and tried my best to compensate by reading and studying disciplines on my own. My desire to learn was unabated and I resolved to pursue something without too much structure or the constraint of tests. How ironic that I now find myself in a situation of learning a martial art in a traditional manner with outlined expectations of testing requirements.



When it came time for my first test, I recalled my previous failings and was bitter. My conditioned anxiety was compounded by being aware that this was a demonstration in front of not only my teacher, but other members of the dojo, too. Unlike any other examination, not knowing what to expect was daunting. Even upon completion and passing, I felt restless; I was disappointed thinking I hadn't performed to the best of my ability. I thought of alternatives such as a week or a month of training being considered an on-going test. Surely, an extended period of training would be a more apt qualitative assessment of progress. After some consideration and discussions over my angst of testing with some sempai, they informed me that the test was constant and the examination never ends. This revelatory information brought a great deal of peace and understanding.

There needs to be a moment in time dedicated for a student to display their progress. I understand now that it presents them with an opportunity to check in with themselves; to self-assess where they are in their training. Although this performance can sometimes be illusory insofar

as a tremendously gifted Aikidoist could simply have an off-day or suffer from crippling emotions, the process and act of doing it will not be wasted. If the student experiences something palpable to integrate into their practice, then the result of passing or failing is irrelevant. This transcends the test and feeds their training.

Although my criticism remains, I have greater peace in knowing that the environment is pregnant for learning. Birankai's testing is an introspection into how passionate we are for our practice of Aikido. For this, its purpose is invaluable.



## My Aikido Beginning

By Amit Belwalkar

One late afternoon on a fine summer day of 2011, Yan and I were sitting in our lab at Lehigh University when I glanced over Yan's desk and saw him watching a YouTube video. Taking every opportunity I get to take a break from work, I

immediately walked up to his desk and glanced over his shoulder. “It’s called Aikido,” Yan told me. Yan showed another video *Bucks County Aikido—an Introduction*. “That’s the dojo where I train,” Yan sounded both proud and modest at the same time. “Why don’t you come and observe a class?” he continued. I wasn’t sure what to respond. “I will think about it,” I said. Yan was about to leave for the 6 pm class when I requested him to show me a basic Aikido technique. He hesitated and said that it wasn’t a good idea but I insisted and he insisted back to come observe the class. He finally gave in and showed me the first Aikido technique—katatedori ikkyu omote. It had been an interesting afternoon and Yan left me excited and curious.

It had been a while since I felt such an excitement. When I was in 8th grade, I was introduced to volleyball. I played volleyball whenever I got a chance. While learning to spike the ball over the net, there were many instances I felt frustration and even embarrassment in front of my buddies. But since I loved playing volleyball, it didn’t matter and I continued to practice and after a year and a half, I finally mastered the art of spiking. It was glorious. I still remember that moment. The same kind of spark, that excitement, I feel for Aikido now that I am about to enter in the third year of training.

When I joined the Beginner’s class in the Fall of 2011, I was the only beginner there. So, although Sensei started with the 5th Kyu techniques for the first couple of weeks, it all changed after that. I realized that increase in the difficulty level and asked a senior student whether the techniques I was learning were

the beginner level techniques. His response was, “Most of them were not the beginner’s level. You are thrown right into the fire.” But the senior students were very warm and welcoming. They endured my cranking their wrists in kotegaeshi and dealt with my stiff frame when I took ukemi. “You are too tight—relax Amit,” they used to say tapping on my shoulders. I still get that every now and then. My favorite technique by far is shihonage. I enjoy doing it although I cannot get it right. I am waiting for my “volleyball moment” with it.

I have learnt a lot in the past two years from each and every individual at the Bucks Country Aikido. The techniques that I learn on the mat are important to the advancement of my Aikido knowledge. But there are things that I learn off the mat that are equally important; invaluable things I never would have learnt anywhere else, things as fundamental as punctuality, cleanliness and living in the present. I am not saying that I am perfectly able to incorporate all these virtues in my life. Heck, I am far from it. But I will say that I am definitely more aware of them and will continue to practice to have a better control over my life.



## Aikido in the Raw

by Michael J. Formica

“Don’t hold back, Kim.”

Sensei’s words, sharp and intent, hung in the humid summer air.

Of course she shouldn’t hold back. I’ve been practicing martial arts almost twice as long as she’s been on the planet. I hold an instructor’s

rank in two different systems, and know my way around a half dozen others. I also know what she can do, and she should do it.

And in the split second when the next shomenuchi descended, crisp and powerful, that moment of towering ego exploded into emptiness. Then there was nothing: nothing but the ferocious harmony of uke and nage—again, and again, and—exhaustively—again.



Aikido does not afford us the luxury of self-indulgence. It holds no space for posing or posturing. It strips away all pretense and peels back the layers of who we believe we are, leaving us naked and exposed, facing our greatest opponent—ourselves. And in truly facing ourselves there is no room for ego. There is only room for the pursuit of egolessness, authenticity, and the naked Self.

I came to the practice of Aikido later than most. I had promised myself long ago that when I reached my 50’s, I would start. It turns out the intuition to delay was profound. Well, profound might be something of a strong word, because there really is no mystery as to why that delay was necessary. Psychologically and spiritually, I just wasn’t ready.

My personal challenge in this lifetime has consistently been humility.

Things come easily to me—school, sports, music, opportunities—I always seem to land on my feet, both literally and figuratively. It turns out, that’s a problem. Contentment and ease can breed overconfidence and ingratitude; things that can so easily devolve into a sticky sort of arrogance without us even noticing.

Aikido is something that does not come easily to me. Not just the body art, which continues to baffle me more often than not, but, more, the deeper aspects of self-examination, self-realization, and personal evolution that Sensei continually brings us back to.

I have struggled with my commitment for more than two years because, while the crucible of the mat was somewhere I needed to be, it was also somewhere I didn’t want to be. It is one thing to live in fear, but to live in fear of what the mirror might reflect back at you is another matter entirely.

The confounding thing about all of this is that I have been a student and teacher of spirituality almost as long as I have been a student and teacher of the martial arts, and have been writing publicly about the confluence between psychology and spirituality for nearly a decade. Which, given the question that has been brought to me time and again, “Do you actually read what you write?” draws us back to the notion of authenticity.

Aikido brings the word off the page. It’s all well and good to acknowledge O’Sensei’s teaching that, “Heaven is where you stand, and that is the place to practice;” or Chogyam Trungpa’s admonishment to “...always, always, always run at the fire;” or the Buddha’s aphorism,

“Too pure water has no fish,” but these are just words.

Aikido brings those words to life, and opens us up to its spirit—our spirit. When uke and nage meet, a violent harmony is created that burns away the chafe of our pretense, and we are exposed, mind and spirit. In our failure to be perfect, we find our own perfection, clothed in the gi of our simple, messy, and often patently absurd humanity.

This is what Aikido offers us—a window into our true self, our true nature—and what we, in turn, offer to the practice, to our brothers and sisters, and to the community that we, together, create.

## Porchlight

By Kim O’Malley

There is no story as to how I found Aikido. What is important to me is that I continue to find it every day I come. I cannot remember my life without this art. Whether it was brought to me or I came to it, I walked up those steps two days after I turned 13 years old, and this became my place—this became my journey. Even if I don’t remember how it started, I have always been here.

I began as a short, shy, timid, tiny-handed little girl who was intimidated. I pretended to be confident, yet when I had to face the non-fiction, I’d run away. How can I escape? Towering men and thick wrists, hairy arms, sweat, and nail-biting blood wasn’t a place I thought I belonged. Still, I wanted to belong, and I don’t know why. Already determined to become a modern-day samurai, I invested my mother’s money, gas, and time into harassing me to go. Yet, even while clinging to my bed mattress and whining about being too tired, I managed to somewhat complete the one and only Women’s Intro class without learning how to efficiently kneewalk, roll, or attempt ikkyo. Success! Wait...

I was going backwards. My friend who had joined with me dropped out, leaving me alone among wrists I couldn’t get my hand around. Yet each time I managed to convince myself to go, I felt closer to what I loved. I was in the Sengoku jidai—I was learning an art passed down by generations! I vowed to steal every sinew of Aikido. Tomorrow.

For me, just getting to the dojo was



*Although the warrior's life is dedicated to helping others, he realizes that he will never be able to completely share his experience with others. The fullness of his experience is his own, and he must live with his own truth. Yet he is more and more in love with the world. That combination of love affair and loneliness is what enables the warrior to constantly reach out to help others. By renouncing his private world, the warrior discovers a greater universe and a fuller and fuller broken heart. This is not something to feel bad about; it is cause for rejoicing.*

— Trungpa Rinpoche

exhausting. I was afraid—afraid of *them*, and afraid of myself around *them*. I knew I would change—I knew I would become something I wasn't, but at the same time, I had myself convinced that I was ready. Let me tell you, it was a long process of short spurts of dedication, fighting myself, and excuses. Those were my favorite. I used to believe that even when I wasn't at class, my spirit was. That made not going acceptable to me, but is not being there ever being there—is being there *really* being there? Those were questions I often asked myself while toiling with youth and discovering more. What can *I* do to be like *them*? I wanted to become strong, and maybe I was not so far off to have had eyes that were able to see the light Sensei left on.



*Sensei, Kim and Amelia, Jan 2004*

However, because of my inconsistency, I never really connected with anyone; I felt as though it didn't matter whether I was there or not. I would sit in the corner of the mat before class and watch people do things, talk, stretch, etc. I didn't belong because I was always the child—the little girl that no one noticed. That was what I thought. I remember one jyo class we were learning Sansho-I and I came late. I bowed in to Martha, and she attempted to show me how to do it,

but it was painstakingly slow. Within a few moments, she told me to sit out because I hadn't come to the other classes and was too far behind. I sat there and watched the entire class on the side of the mat. To this day, sitting out makes me highly consider seppuku. That was one way to get the point across, except the point was a little sharp.

Another major realization came not from my mom or brother spouting this nonsense about commitment and dedication, but from Sensei himself. It was the day he introduced kenshusei to our dojo. After class, I followed him to his office, and... I still hate myself for this. I was all: "Hey Sensei, I want to be kenshusei!" (Someone shoot me.) And he responded with: "I don't think you would be able to because of your commitment to school." OH THAT. Right. Whoops. I realized that day I had to start prioritizing, and I couldn't get everything I wanted.

Fast forward many years, and I finally finish school. It was hard dealing with my mom yelling at me to go to Aikido, but at least I had that. When I could drive, the first place I ever drove was to the dojo. When I had to start paying for it myself, and start compromising my schoolwork, I had to weigh my options. I almost quit Aikido for good, but when I confronted it, I remember writing: "Can I quit my life? It's the same thing as quitting Aikido." I even did my high school graduation project on it, called *The Way of Life*. Funny, how you realize things later, only after the fact when you can say, "Damn! It was right in front of my face all this time!" That is the essence of Aikido. One day you will come to class and suddenly a technique will happen naturally, as if

you've had it your entire life. And one day you will come to class.



## To Ki or not to Ki from a "beginner's mind"

By Jon Lytle

It literally took me ten years to take the plunge into the Aikido world. I would get close then get distracted. Why it took me so long I do not know. I am glad I finally stepped up and came in to watch a class. Within the first five minutes of watching a class, I had chills down my back and my posture changed. I was sitting up straight and was excited. I realized this was it! Why did I wait so long? One of the many regrets in my life. I have been training now for around five months. I wish I could train more than I do but with life, work and a young child this can be difficult; my wife and child are my first priorities. I'll do what I can do to get in more training whenever possible because Aikido saves me from myself. I have a dark side, like everyone. Aikido gives me an outlet. Aikido helps me to see others and participate with them as people, humans like most, with aims and minds and hearts similar to mine.

*Beginner's mind* is a concept, that one should always try to learn with an open mind, without being too distracted by failure or success especially when one starts something brand new and has much to learn. I've also heard this idea compared to being a child, being in the moment, with little connection to the past or future ideas about what you

are doing. This is why you may hear me grumbling, near temper tantrum status or seeing smoke coming out of my ears on the mat.

*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.*

—Benjamin Franklin

At this point, with a small amount of training, there are things that resonate with my life and the practice of Aikido: the striving for peace and harmony, less stress; the discipline of the practice and respect for Sensei and all others. Aikido also parallels some of the principle elements of my values. It helps me be humble, showing my achievements to be tiny, very tiny, and my ignorance to be great. Aikido has brought people into my life I would never have ordinarily met or have crossed paths with. Meeting people in the dojo practicing Aikido is a unique experience: I get to be corrected with graciousness, humility and appreciation. I get to throw people and be thrown; strike at them and be struck; pin and be pinned to the floor hopefully with smiles on both of our faces.

I have good classes and bad classes. “You have done this one hundred times; why can’t you do it today?!” I say to myself. Through the good, the bad and ugly, I will eventually learn or die trying. Thank you all for your patience.

*The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.*

—William Arthur Ward

## At This Moment...

By Virginia Ahlers

At this moment...I’m in Body Arts. What’s the attack? Watch the feet. Left foot here, right foot back, left hand cuts down. Feels like playing twister. Are my shoulders relaxed? Am I dropping my center? Turning my hips? Am I staying connected?

At this moment...I’m in Weapons. Jo. Hand up? Hand down? Step off the line. Hands above my head. How much angle? Oops, too much like shomen uchi. Oops, off my shoulder. Am I blending? Am I staying connected?

At this moment...I’m in Iaido. Am I casting out with my left hand? Use little fingers to stop the movement. I don’t hear the swoosh. The strike isn’t straight. Relax, breathe. Send it out again. Is this really supposed to feel like fishing? I’ve never been fishing. Are my feet parallel? Is my wrist bent? Imagine the attacker. Am I staying connected?

At this moment...I’m sitting Zazen. Draw the spine up tall, not stiff. Breathe in, breathe out. 1... 2...3...Birds chirping. I wonder what kind it is? It’s pretty. I can hear the geese too. Oops. 4...5... 6... What was the cool new technique in first class? How did it go again? I wonder what we’ll do in the next class. What should I have for dinner? 3...4...5...6...7...I’m falling asleep. What a long day. So hot out. I can feel the sweat coming out of my pores. Weird. 5....6....7...Stay focused. Stop thinking. How can a person stop thinking? Start over. 1...2...3... Am I staying connected?

At this moment...I’m riding my horse. We’re doing trot/canter transitions. Am I straight? Sitting evenly? She always shifts me left. Is she straight? Don’t brace. Just breathe and relax. Drop my center. Don’t stiffen. Extend hands forward, legs down. She’s anticipating the canter. Just trot. Don’t think about anything else. Keep the rhythm. Dat dat dat dat dat... Feel her mouth through the reins in my hands. Am I staying connected?

At this moment...I’m teaching a riding lesson. Is the rider straight? Instead of telling her that she’s not, I ask her if she feels straight. Does one leg feel longer? Is there more weight on one sits bone? Is the rib cage collapsed on one side? I want her to be able to learn her body, to figure out where she is on the horse. What if I’m not there to tell her she’s crooked? How will she know? How is the rhythm? Is the horse speeding up, slowing down? Make little adjustments. Feel what is happening to her, under her. Is she staying connected?

At this moment...I’m writing an article. I’m thinking of the four horses I still have to ride today...that I should be at work, cleaning the tack room or the kitchen...the jumps to repair, the ring to rake. I’m thinking of all the unpacking I still have to do... that I’d rather read a book or take a nap...but, I’m trying to be in the moment and stay connected.





## “What do you do?”

by Eric Wolf

I was sitting in the front room of a house with a guy I had just met. We had introduced ourselves and made some small talk when he looked at me and asked, “What do you do?”. It made me pause.

What a weird question. I know he was really asking what I did for a job, but is that really what I do? I mean, what you DO should be something you are passionate about. Something that compels you to dig deeper and give more. Something that no matter how you feel that day you go DO that thing anyway.

Is my job what I do? For me my job is really a means to an end. It's a paycheck that allows me to do the things that I am passionate about. Is that what this guy is really asking me? Where does my paycheck come from? Or does he really want to know something about me? I realize I've spent too long thinking

about this answer and now he is looking at me with a slightly odd look on his face, I've made it weird and I stumble to recover. “What do I do for a job? Or what do I really do?”

Ok that was a stupid question, he's looking at me even stranger than before. I better explain myself. “For work I'm a computer programmer, but what I really do is study Aikido.” He brushes the latter part of my comment off as if I'm giving him too much information or being obtuse. In reality this is the only important part. I see this happen all the time, people asking others about their jobs as if that is important, and I guess it is to some extent.

We never seem to ask anyone what they are passionate about when that truly is the thing that matters most. Are we afraid to ask people what they are into? Are we holding our-

selves at a distance so we don't have to get involved with others on a deeper level? It is selfish in a way; I'm just as guilty of it as anyone else—asking throwaway questions to carry a conversation just to be polite. In the back of my head, I'm thinking I don't have time to go in depth, just feign interest and then I can move on without seeming like a jerk.

We can do that in Aikido as well, go through the motions, turn the practice into an exercise rather than the study of the relationship between nage and uke. You can come to Aikido every day and grab someone's arm and let them throw you to the floor, rinse & repeat 100 times... 1000 times...but it can be the same as the initial question: superficial and mean nothing. Looking for the deeper understanding of how we present ourselves to each other and the ebb and flow of energy when someone grabs and takes a fall, that is the deeper question. That is what I'm trying to study when I come to Aikido.



## Crossing the road to fear

by Dave Conway

It was June as I nervously drove up the gravel driveway, entered the side door and was greeted with a friendly, “Hello, are you here for the beginner's class?” I replied, “Yes” and was shown where to change.

Class began with formal kneeling, bows and a series of stretches and foot movements. Sensei then took center on the mat to start the techniques. We started with katatedori

gyakuhanmi ikkyo. He made it look so easy, but in my mind was: “Oh what did I get myself into, I’m not sure I’m going to understand this.” I kept trying and to my surprise this wasn’t too bad—pretty cool.

On to the next move and the next. Class ended. My face was beet red, sweat dripping profusely, but I had a huge smile on my face. This could be good just the kind of internal happiness I’m looking for. A few classes later, I found it harder and harder to understand the techniques and terms. I was getting frustrated with myself, but deep down I knew this was for me.

Over time I found myself distancing myself from class. Sensei once told me of a student who was very confident during classes, came for a while, but then would stop coming. One day when asked, “Where have you been?” he replied, “I would pull up to the lot but could not go

in.” A fear had come over him. I said I would not let this happen to me, but there it was: the same fear happening to me. Why? Where did it come from? I really didn’t have a true answer and this added even more frustration because I loved Aikido.

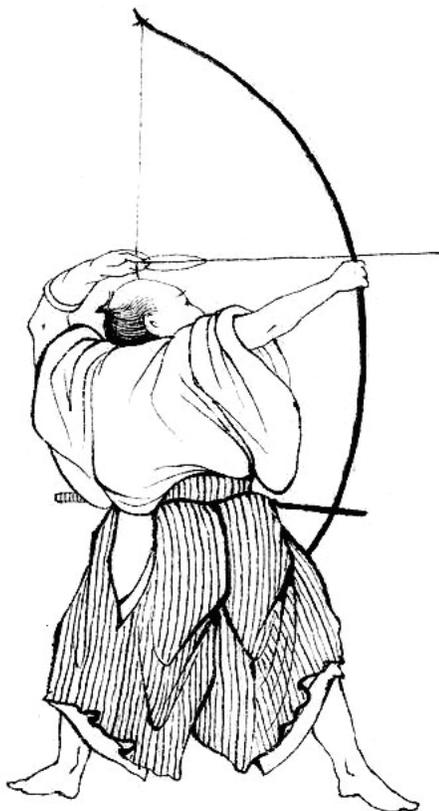
Time passed, I couldn’t keep this up. So I took a hard look at myself. Where was I going? Where did I want to be? So I prayed on this for a while. I don’t know where it came from but I pushed and pushed hard, no excuses, I was going to make a class every night. One turned to two and two to three. Before I knew it, I couldn’t wait to get to practice. No more nervousness, no more fear, what a great feeling. I still have trouble with the techniques and terms, but I’m fine with that for now. It will come to me in time, the more I practice. As Sensei says, you have to do your own Aikido. I looked within myself, found something that

I wanted bad enough and overcame what was holding me back. So now I look within myself further to be the best student that I can—this person, at this age and this physical and mental ability—for today.



**I have learned  
silence from the  
talkative, tol-  
eration from the  
intolerant, and  
kindness from  
the unkind; yet,  
strange, I am un-  
grateful to those  
teachers.**

- Khalil Gibran



## Rules For Learning

- \* Always strive to do your best. Never accept mediocrity in yourself.
- \* Be flexible and open-minded. Resist the temptation to reject any teaching that does not coincide with your opinions and preconceptions.
- \* Learn to study on your own. Your instructor can show you the way, but you must make an equal effort to learn.
- \* Listen and watch. Do not expect to be actively taught all the time. Learn to “steal” from the teacher by observing and copying the way he/she does things.
- \* Never make excuses when you don’t understand. If you are confused, go back to the basics. They are the ideal place to make a fresh start.
- \* Don’t be afraid of failure. See it as a learning experience that provides an opportunity for continued growth.

Kyudo Master  
Onuma Hideharu

# Game-Changer

By Cathy Thomas

“Why do some students wear skirts?” –A question in *The Aikido Student Handbook*

I took an injury supe early in my Aikido training that took me off the mat for a while. I had time to observe. I *noticed* that some students wore the long skirt-like pants called hakama. At this time, I was still really ignorant about progression in the practice and asked a person sitting out with me, “At what rank do you get to wear the skirt?” The person told me it’s not about rank, that it depends on when Sensei believes you are ready for it—you have to earn it (and it can be unearned, so I am told). I didn’t think about it much after that.

My first year of training was on and off. Truth be told, my body wasn’t acclimating to training fast enough for me to avoid injuries. My second year was better, but still not consistent. I was then forced to walk away from training almost totally because of my job. I was upset by the fact that I was working 12 to 14-hour days and weekends and not able to practice much at all—this went on for four months. It was during this time that I saw people I came into Aikido with and a few who came after me starting to wear a hakama. Something in me shifted (or snapped). I vowed that when my contract ended, I would train in a different way and a lot more often. I got back on the mat in January of this year and threw myself into serious and long training.

No lie, bowing into someone wearing a hakama always struck a chord

of fear in me and I would sometimes shake visibly. If you let it, the mind can create inferiority in you that just isn’t inherently there. I didn’t think of a hakama as the Holy Grail, but I know I felt I knew less than the hakama-sporting mystery I was bowing into. It hit me hardest at my first summer camp. So many hakama around—it made me feel... apart from them. I never felt more like I was somewhere outside the dynamic circle.

I was allowed to wear a hakama while practicing Iaido—everyone does—that is tradition. I liked putting it on and it made me feel different. The more I practiced Iaido with my hakama on, the more I didn’t want to take it off. Something funny—so many times, I wanted to roll in my hakama after Iaido just to see what it felt like. I thought it would be disrespectful to do that, somehow it wouldn’t feel right, so I never did. In March, I started training for my sankyu test, even though I wasn’t told to prepare. I’d be ly-

ing if I said I was just going after the rank. I saw the rank as a stepping stone to a bigger commitment welling up inside me. I trained hard for the next few months, really hard. My technique got markedly better.

Everyone I talked to said that sankyu was no joke. Some said that sankyu is an important test of determination, a decision to seriously study basic technique, and can be very telling as to who will continue to train deliberately and who will not. Daunting. I thought sankyu might also get me closer to wearing a hakama, as it is also a basic qualification for kenshusei who have to wear a hakama (something I also had my eye on). It wasn’t until the end of April that I was told to prepare for testing. In the five weeks before the test, my technique got even better (though at times, it was hard to see that for myself).

I tested in June and on that night, I was told to wear a hakama from



then on. I was so grateful and felt elated.

The very next day I came into practice. Being the gothic person that I am, instead of the traditional dark blue color, I naturally chose a black hakama. It took me about 20 minutes to figure out a way to tie it onto my body so that it would stay on, but I relished each second it took (not kidding). I bowed onto the mat and immediately did a roll. For me, it was a slice of heaven. My hakama was part polyester, which made for great three-foot slides across the mat when being thrown. I felt lighter, dynamic, instantaneously transformed. I remember grinning all through class, happy as anything, and absent of the fear I had before. It meant something to me. That was a really good practice. Next couple of days, same thing – great practice, grinning the whole time.

Then the comments came in for whatever reason. “Be careful what you ask for...that’s a target on your back and your front,” someone said. “Another layer of clothing slapped on you just in time for a sweltering summer,” someone else said. Another one asked how it felt, and when I expressed that I was on cloud nine, I was told that it would fade quickly, no worries. I was also told it really meant nothing. Maybe I was going nuts, so I started to repeat the same thing to others, making light of it until maybe, eventually, it would mean nothing to me. I stopped saying those things because I had to be honest—I just didn’t feel that way about it.

I have to tell you, for me, wearing a hakama is a total game-changer. I got my hakama about a month

before summer camp and this camp was different. I loved putting it on every morning knowing I had earned the right to wear it all day long and not just during Iaido. I felt so much more relaxed on the mat. I will swear to you that my technique climbed another notch overnight just wearing it the day after I was allowed to. I love the flow of the fabric as I take a roll or a break-fall. I love the blackness of my personal hakama and I love folding it each night. It instantly leveled the playing field in my mind, as it removed whatever terror was struck into me when I would grab the arm of someone wearing one. After all, I am wearing a hakama too.

The Aikido Student Handbook says, “[hakama] is a traditional Japanese garment worn in Aikido by advanced students and black belts only (some schools may allow beginners or juniors to wear hakama). It has been retained in Aikido because of the way it enhances the beautiful circular movements of Aikido. On a more practical level, it hides the movements of the feet and gives the wearer a unique feeling of grounding and movement. The strapping and tying also gives an enhanced awareness of the physical center or hara.”

I believe it. The hakama is a beautiful symbol of our practice that sets us apart from all other martial arts. Maybe the freedom and excitement I feel is the “feeling of grounding and movement.” Laugh if you want to, but I feel something good and I’m going to ride this one until the wheels come off.

## 36 Jyo Basics

### KESA

1. Kesa #1 (J)
2. Kesa #2 (J)
3. Maki otoshi #1, #2 (J)
4. Kaete uchiotoshi (J)
5. Junte uchiotoshi (J)
6. Kaeshi uchiotoshi #1, #2 (G)
7. Kaiten uchiotoshi #1 (G)
8. Kaiten uchiotoshi #2 (G)
9. Otoshi tsuki #1 (J)
10. Otoshi tsuki #2 (G)
11. Otoshi tsuki #3 (G)
12. Otoshi tsuki #4 (J)

### TSUKI

1. Choku tsuki (J)
2. Kaeshi tsuki (G)
3. Harai tsuki (J)
4. Maki otoshi #1, #2 (J)
5. Kaeshi uchiotoshi #1 (G)
6. Kaeshi uchiotoshi #2 (G)
7. Maki uchiotoshi #1, #2 (J)
8. Kesa uchi #1, #2, #3 (J)
9. Otoshi tsuki #1 (J)
10. Otoshi tsuki #2 (J)
11. Kaiten uchiotoshi #1, #2 (G)
12. Katate uchi (J)

### SHOMENUCHI

1. Nagashi uchi (G)
2. Harai uchiotoshi (G)
3. Kaeshi tsuki (G)
4. Maki otoshi #1 (J)
5. Maki otoshi #2 (J)
6. Jumonji suriotoshi #1 (G)
7. Jumonji suriotoshi #2 (G)
8. Otoshi tsuki #1 (J)
9. Otoshi tsuki #2 (J)
10. Otoshi tsuki #3 (G)
11. Kaiten uchiotoshi #1, #2 (G)
12. Kesa uchi (J)





**“The violence you speak of is not anywhere else but in our minds, in which we separate ourselves from others and from the world.”**

**- Zen Master Hogan**