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Trust

by George Lyons

When learning any new skill, we need to tap into the evolutionarily oldest parts of our brain. These functions of our brain are like having a wild animal inside of us. Our animal is quick and powerful, so it's natural to want to embrace it as we study a martial art. Getting in touch with this part of ourselves can open us up to previously unknown potential.

However, just as we can tap down to our animal brain, our animal brain can tap up. And it does. The animal brain's reflexive first motivation is self-preservation — and it's fast. But this impulse to save the organism above all else, paired with speed, can be a liability in training. Before we are consciously aware of it, we can be filled with fear and anxiety, tying us in knots, slowing us down, and maybe even paralyzing us.

You have probably heard me say that every cell in our bodies must be engaged on the same project. It seems ridiculous to think that there can be parts of ourselves in conflict with one another, but such is the case with us complicated human beings. Aikido is known as the art for resolving conflict with others,

but before we can hope to do that, we have to become aware of and resolve conflict within ourselves.

One of the reasons we train in silence is that it creates an environment in which we are more likely to become aware of our internal dialogue. Once aware, we can tune in and listen. To listen we need to be sensitive. When we're sensitive we find that our nervous system can be so good at this that we can hear a proverbial "pin drop", not only in our own nervous system but in the nervous system of our partner.

There are three essential steps in developing this sensitivity. First, we need to have the insight that something is going on apart from the obvious. Next, we need to practice staying aware — making it part of our consciousness as we train. Practice will stabilize the awareness, until it becomes a normal aspect of our training.

There is a lot to pay attention to in the dojo. Just learning the language of the art is difficult, and at times overwhelming. The idea of listening to the subtle messages of our nervous system might seem out of reach and maybe even a little far-fetched. Our capacity to "listen" waxes and wanes over time depending on so many factors, our understanding of particular techniques, our mood, the kind of day we're having, the partner

we're training with... . This can be frustrating. Remembering and finding our way back again and again is a challenge. All we can do at this point in our practice is stick with it and trust in those who have gone before us.

Even when we begin to have a sense of it, our confidence in the messages we are getting can be shaky. This can be a very difficult time especially when the issue is clouded with false humility. Simply put, we need to learn that we can trust ourselves.

Reaching such a profound level of practice is an achievement. However, having reached it, we are in danger of getting stuck in self-congratulation. Arrogance is deafening. Even when our knowledge of technique is deep, we have to maintain the innocence of "beginner's mind" or we will lose the internal awareness that we have worked so hard to develop. This is the part of martial arts training that some people have difficulty understanding because it seems to run counter to ideas of self-defense. To fully trust our own perceptions, to be able to really hear, we have to abandon our assumptions, and be fully in the moment. We have to let go. We have to surrender.

By surrendering I do not mean giving up. In fact, the surrendering

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I'm talking about is fully engaged. It's an engagement, however, that is detached from desire, right down to the smallest of preferences. To do this at the speed of a reflex, we have to convince our inner animal that we are at peace even in the most difficult situations; we have to be free even from the instinct of self-preservation. No longer seeking to save the Self, self-consciousness evaporates, and we know the art, ourselves, and our uke, a priori. Every cell in our body is on the same project.

It should be said that it's possible to train without being aware of this dimension of practice. Training "too strong" is the nervous system's equivalent of shouting. Some people walk around in this state, in whole or in part, all the time. When someone is grabbing or hitting them the problem is exacerbated. Aikido seen only through this lens can be misinterpreted as a contest of strength. While I continually hope for breakthroughs in perception for these practitioners, it's my opinion that the only benefit of this kind of practice is exercise. Exercise is good and we should all get some, but it's just a fraction of what the art has to offer.

The word *trust* is typically used to refer to someone we can count on, a

situation we're sure of. But I think the word holds a larger meaning. I'm using it here to point to a state of being that is free from predictions, goals, and outcomes altogether, good or bad. I'm using it to describe a feeling of self-assuredness and maturity that allows us to abandon imagined scenarios along with the worry of how we will handle them. Free from preconceptions, we find we are capable of being genuinely open and spontaneously adaptive.

It's difficult to encounter conflict, both inner and outer, but listening and becoming aware of it is the path to resolving it. The skill we acquire along the way might be helpful in a self-defense situation but to me this seems a fringe benefit to how understanding, both ourselves and others, can expand into our days, and ultimately into the whole of our life. ○

Fear of Falling

by Eric Soroker

"Basophobia (or basiphobia), also known as the fear of falling, is a natural fear and is typical of most humans and mammals, in varying degrees of extremity. ... The fear of falling encompasses the anxieties accompanying the sensation and the possibly dangerous effects of falling." (Wikipedia)

I started training without ever having seen Aikido or really knowing anything about it other than it was a Japanese martial art and the people wore cool looking pants. It seems rather unbelievable now, but this was back before everything imag-

inable was available on the internet (YouTube didn't even exist yet). Chance, or maybe providence, had steered me to Bucks County Aikido's website and a few days later, I was a wide-eyed beginner on the mat.

During the second week, I decided to stay after class to watch the advanced class. It was a small group consisting of Sensei and two senior students. After bowing in, Sensei prompted one student to attack and quickly executed a response. Now attacking, Sensei changed roles and the student was the one executing the technique. After several cycles alternating between partners, Sensei would change techniques and they would resume again.

I was captivated by the way Sensei was handling the attackers. Gradually, a fuller picture of what I was observing overcame me. It was not just about the techniques being applied but also the way they were "receiving" them. Arms and bodies contorting in ways I had not perceived before. Powerful movements that seemingly should have ended in tragedy were strangely transformed. It was one of those moments in the dojo that just burns into your psyche that you spend a lifetime unpacking.

Unlocking our natural expression of ukemi is a challenging endeavor undeniably worth pursuing. We could say it's hard to learn except the word "learn" isn't quite right to describe the process — it is discovered, which means trial and error (and a lot of error). Aikido is said to get into your bones

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through your pores. Ukemi, therefore, is not a product of the mind but something personal that has to be grasped through cultivated training. Fundamentally, you simply cannot progress in this art unless you dedicate (and rededicate) yourself to your study of ukemi. Seek to absorb the core concepts of ukemi as soon as possible if not purely from a survival perspective, so that we can grow old together in this art.

So why then does this physical process of ukemi in Aikido specifically seem so daunting? The simplest answer seems to be “fear”. Basophobia. The mere act of taking ukemi is to confront our base fear of falling. While absolutely logical to be afraid of being turned upside down and thrown on our head, I think there is something else at play beyond our reaction to painful stimuli. What may actually be in the way are the mental “*anxiety accompanying the sensation and the possibly dangerous effects of falling*”. (Wikipedia)

Fear itself is a simple, stand-alone feeling that our thinking minds are constantly trying to define and justify. Fear happens in the present. Anxiety on the other hand is an uneasiness and apprehension about future uncertainties. Anxiety is just a hindering “thought” and a maladaptive creation of our minds. Repeated thoughts will become patterns (patterns that we often don’t realize we are maintaining).

Adding to this, humans innately like to operate on autopilot. When learning something new,



Wainscoting project, always improving.

we slow down and deliberately focus on every step of a task. This is called a Closed Loop thought process (or what we call “beginner’s mind”). When a skill or task has been learned, our brain puts it into an Open Loop process or autopilot, which requires significantly less cognitive attention. Once something has been committed to Open Loop it can be very hard to make changes or updates to the process.

It is this specific combination of the Open Loop process overlaid

with anxious hindering thoughts that create some, if not most, of our internal obstructions. Though all of this may seem like a lot of cerebral indulgence, there are some practical examples of these internal blocks specific to ukemi that I’ve recognized in my own practice over the years.

- Not wanting to fall: Not knowing how to receive technique. Not moving or waiting for the pain to initiate movement. Basophobia.

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- **Stiffness:** Muscle tension as a physical response to fear, unconsciously or consciously, used to try and stop the possibility of pain, force or movement. Mental stiffness can also display as a tense body. A tight muscle can neither respond nor can it receive information.

- **Fear of letting go:** Made up of several permutations, all of which ultimately stem from the desire to control the experience or maintain control. Examples include blocking or denying the opening, resisting, not giving up your balance, excessive or perpetual heaviness, preemptive ukemi (doing the technique for nage), and bailing out.

- **Escaping:** Finding ways to disconnect. Numbing out or flatness, disengaging, extreme passivity, or creating distractions, excuses/excessive talking.

- **Doing it right:** The wish to do “good” or “correct” ukemi. Going beyond trying to do well, hyper

concerned about outward appearance and how one looks while receiving the technique, versus the honest and actual connection between nage and uke.

Maybe you too can recognize some of these patterns. Thankfully, after all this introspection, there is an antidote that is built directly into this transformative practice of Aikido. Simply come back to train with openness again and again. One does not need to be preoccupied or even to safeguard against the above patterns though it may be helpful at times to identify them when they arise. Like losing count during a sit, just return to the practice. Like all things complicated, the answer is simple. When receiving ukemi, be light, connected, and dynamic. Attack honestly. Respond to what is actually happening. And always keep looking. The fear of falling can become the falling of fear. ○

Writings of Aikido

by Beverly Sessegolo

I have dwelled in the shadows of the mountain, in its valleys, gazing always towards the towering peaks, threading the twisty, narrow pathway to the top with my eyes, towards a seemingly impossible ascent. There, my mind has rested and denied entry to the soul that has waited in the quiet darkness of illusion.

Yet, something moves the body upward, the gaze seemingly distracted by this impossible aim. One step forward, and two steps back, the mind confined to its narrow grasp of what should be and the body conflicted by its lack, yet somehow moving forward.

At times, however, the mind loses its transfixed grasp on the idea of its aim, as if fog moved in and covered the peaks of this mountain. Suddenly the step forward is all and everything, and the spirit steadies itself in the body, and in a moment, the steps become more intentional and the gaze turns inward as if called to contain its sense of worth to what lies in the corners of my being.

The spirit of others engages mine, and the connection with each, weaves a tapestry in this narrow ascending path. The movements of the body follow a different lead, the soul begins to find its light in the art that engages us all by the light of our Sensei and all those who came before him.



Post pandemic class size rebounding

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I don't know where the path will lead me, I don't know how to recognize the Ki and somehow I know it is there. The valley begins to fall behind, the taste of Shu (as described by Chiba Sensei) becomes familiar.

It seems, despite myself, I am moved toward a dance and a tenacity that only the spirit of Aikido can define, something that the mind cannot word, but the body, in a moment, can manifest. I no longer gaze towards the peak, it is lost in the fog of my mental illusions, but I know it's there and it calls for a different effort, one of presence and the authenticity of my feelings. It requires an awareness of my bones, my muscles, my flesh, the embodiment of the spirit, it requires engagement with my partners, my weapons, a connection that holds a softness and a strength that can't be thought or forced, it requires the mystery of Ki. The more I know, the less I know, the learning that requires an unlearning of habits crystallized in the being. This strange, graceful art that has captured the innermost strivings of my lifeforce, that invites this old body to seek a graceful encounter with itself, and bow to the possibilities and impossibilities with a soul filled with gratitude for being gifted with the wholeness of a love that does not discriminate by age, form, or ability, rather celebrates the uniqueness of each, gently inhabits me.

May it be, that when I draw my sword from its sheath, I am all here, unfractured. May the chains of the

ego be loosened enough that the rest of me can open to a different kind of awareness. One that does not lose itself to owning anything, instead expands to encompass everything. May I not lose sight of the direction given and yet know how to recognize when I am lost. Onegaishimasu. ○

Snapshot Into My Aikido Journey

by Nick Fritz

When a student begins to study Aikido, they start with the basics: learning to roll, where to put their feet and which direction to move. As training progresses, technique refinement takes place so that movements become more effective and precise. Eventually less effort is needed to create the technique.

Many students of Aikido also start to study healing practices. This leads to a better knowledge of the body and that in turn leads to a deeper study of their Aikido technique. It helps to understand why techniques are done in a particular way. By learning how to unlock or loosen tight muscles, they can also learn to tighten muscles, which is what Aikidoists are trying to do by striking the forearm when sliding in to stop a tsuki strike. By hitting hard enough in the right spot, you can lock up an attacker's forearm. As uke, we try to prevent this by relaxing our arm at the time of impact. These little gifts are throughout the puzzle of Aikido. The more you can learn outside of the dojo increases what can be learned in the dojo.

Understanding healing is not on any Aikido tests. However, understanding healing goes along with practicing Aikido. Injuries are common enough on the mat. Looking at an injury as a gift, creates the feeling of opening the gift. It is a present to figure it out and understand better. If your leg did not tighten up, you may never understand the way the muscles are grouped. By investigating the injury, it is possible to understand what caused the tightness. It may be overuse, dehydration or an impact. By stopping the cause of the injury, the associated discomfort may be prevented. By healing, the effects can be lessened. Injuries can form injury chains and have further effects. One injury can cause another, if untreated, and then another, and another. After seeing enough of these injury patterns, it is possible to retrace to the original injury, which may have happened six weeks earlier. This can be done by following the injuries as they progress. Treatment at any earlier point, can stop the injury progression.

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"Change will lead to insight more often than insight will lead to change."

— Milton H. Erickson

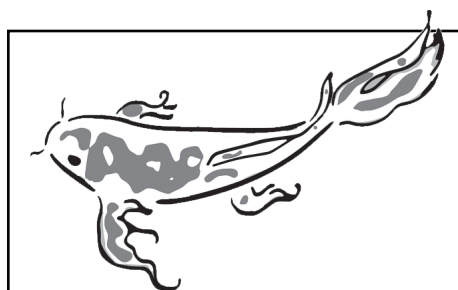
I have encountered many injuries, I'll share an instance as an example. I have physically learned that my legs are far stronger than my back muscles. To prevent my back from becoming sore or injured, I watch my legs. I have learned through experience that my leg muscles often become tight by standing still or driving for an extended period of time. Most days, I am always moving, so this is not a problem. In times when I am not moving, I pay attention to my legs, especially my calves. If I can stop the muscles from tightening in my calves, then I can stop progression that ends with a sore back. Before I gained awareness of what was happening, my tight calves would cause other leg muscles to become tight. These leg muscles connect and then pull on the muscles of the lower back. The lower back muscles are considerably smaller and weaker than the leg muscle; it becomes a game of tug of war between the two muscle groups. The lower back muscles get pulled too far and overextended. This can make for a very sore and debilitating week. It is much more comfortable to pay attention to my legs and deal with the original problem rather than the extrapolated effects a week or two later.

Since injuries are a common effect of attending class, it doesn't hurt to understand injury progression. Fixing a single sore muscle is much nicer than relaxing an entire angry muscle group. This is a facet of where my study is progressing. It is not that you stop practicing anything else that you were working on earlier. The areas of study become

expansive and you are working on learning more. I like to believe that lessons are dropping from the ether for anyone receptive to pick them up. It seems that throughout history, many people come up with the same idea, independently at the same time. Being at the right place, with the right understanding, and seeing what you can pick up. ○



Nick and Phoebe



"Learning to let go should be learned before learning to get. Life should be touched, not strangled. You've got to relax, let it happen at times, and at others move forward with it."

— Ray Bradbury

Still Here

by Jennifer Saltmarsh

"What brought you here?" is a question that often gets asked at the dojo.

Why you came, and the circumstances surrounding the beginning of your Aikido journey is an interesting part of your story.

Whatever brought me to the dojo, I have stayed for over 7 years. Balancing Aikido practice with other life responsibilities is part of the journey and seeing the commitment and persistence of our dojo members is evidence of the meaningfulness of Aikido.

Early on, the physical conditioning provided was a constant encouragement to continue training. Also as a beginning student, the instruction to drop all expectations and immerse yourself in the kata of technique was uniquely freeing. Do it the best you can and then try again. Meanwhile, the rest of life's worries can stay outside the dojo door. Leaving life's worries behind was and maybe is another pull to the dojo. It is an escape, but if I understand correctly, one that is meant to eventually help relieve the need or desire to escape by shedding the separation of (dojo and life) everything. I tend to look at the aspects of life as Aikido even if I haven't touched the surface of letting go. How to approach training on the mat or any experience in life isn't really different. Be awake and present and do your best. Don't give up!

I don't remember the details of when or why I began Iaido, but it was long before I would otherwise wear a hakama. Sensei Patti was lending me

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A few months ago, we said goodbye to our beloved companion, Lily. She had near perfect attendance at the dojo over the past 14 years. She watched from the side of the mat, never criticizing or praising our efforts. She just watched ... and waited ... for the ring of the bell, the clap of the hands and the final bow of class to join us on the mat. Giving licks, getting pets, sitting on our hakamas as we tried to fold them, making sure we didn't miss the chance to get and give some "Lily love".

Her spirit was huge! While she will no longer walk up the hill with us to the dojo each night, she will still watch ... and wait ... for us to join her in the Great Beyond for more licks, pets and "Lily love" on the biggest mat of all.

We Love You Lily! ❤️❤️❤️

J. Saltmarsh, continued from the previous page
 a hakama, but it seemed like I should probably get my own. I was so conflicted about this! I thought, what if I get this precious item and then something happens and I don't keep coming to the dojo? What if I get injured or the timing doesn't work out or something changes and I don't get to do Aikido anymore? I was really afraid that getting a hakama would somehow jinx me. (And get this, even writing this I have those same feelings again because I am expecting a new hakama soon and some part of me wonders, how long can I hold on? I don't know if there is an answer to the why of those feelings or what that might be. When I typed the words "hold on" I was struck with the weight of knowing that holding on doesn't sound much like letting go.)

What I am getting to, is when I voiced these worries in the dojo at

the time, someone said to me, "... just commit!" And then I ordered my first hakama.

What does it mean to commit? (Please See Enso Issue 15) Is commitment letting go of the fear of the unknown? Why do I keep coming to the dojo? Maybe there is no answer to that question except that I do. Is that good enough? Can running away and running toward be the same thing? I read earlier today that "concepts are worthless without inner clarity". Maybe I am coming looking for inner clarity even though I know that it isn't here. And yet, I have to do something. So I train. ○

"When you catch yourself slipping into a pool of negativity, notice how it derives from nothing other than resistance to the current situation."

— Donna Quesada

The Price of Victory (a parable)

by Michael Leaver

I walked with Kobayashi Sensei through the city, working through his latest lesson in my head. It was dark, and I was so caught up I didn't sense the danger until it was too late. A man in a leather coat loomed before us, the glimmer of a knife shined in his hand. Sensei's arm pressed against my chest, stopping me in my tracks.

"Let's have it," the man said. "Don't even think, just hand it over."

I stepped forward, eager to take action, ready to prove myself, but Kobayashi Sensei held me back, surprisingly strong for his age. "I don't have any money," he said. It was true; Kobayashi doesn't carry cash.

"That's the wrong answer, old man," the mugger said, passing his blade back and forth between his

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hands, prowling toward us. I looked around for a weapon to defend with. A stick, a rock. Fuck it, I'll use my bare hands. But Sensei squeezed my arm.

"I have this watch, though," Kobayashi said, unphased. "And it's worth more than some people make in a month. You should have it." He slid the antique off his wrist and held it out. "I'm Akano. This watch was my grandfather's. Do you have children? Maybe someday you can pass it on to them." His voice sounded somehow...kind.

The mugger paused and looked curiously at the old Japanese man. His brow softened for a moment ... and then he snatched the watch from Kobayashi's hand and ran. We let him get away.

I stood there for a moment, still clenching my fists and processing what I'd just seen.

Then I got mad.

"What exactly just happened, Sensei?" I asked. "That guy took your watch. It didn't have to go that way!"

"I stopped someone from getting hurt. At the small price of a piece of jewelry."

"Who gives a damn if he gets hurt?" I said. "There's two of us, and we're martial artists!"

He looked at me, hard. "I meant I was keeping you from getting hurt. About to rush in like that, so quick to start a fight. And he had a weapon. What were you thinking?"

"That's the whole point of martial arts! To defend yourself! We could've taken him. We could've taught him a lesson!" I suddenly realized I was

yelling at my teacher, and being greatly disrespectful doing it. In my humiliation, I slumped against the wall. "I ... I'm so sorry."

"Michael," he said softly. "That man can learn his own lessons. Maybe if he stops and thinks about what happened tonight, he will. But tonight, this is your lesson. Could we 'take' him? Perhaps. But I think it would just reinforce that whichever one of us is stronger, faster or tougher is the winner and therefore the one who is right. Maybe sometimes that's what's necessary." He paused and thought. "But personally, I don't want to add to the idea that whoever is the most violent is the victor. Therefore, tonight, because no one got hurt, I am victorious." ○

The Gift of an Injury

by Jon Kugel

"The wound is the place where the light enters you." – Rumi

Sensei tells us that an injury can be a gift. Something to unwrap and discover the secret hidden inside. How can that be? Injuries are painful, sometimes even after healing, and we are rightly afraid of making it worse. We naturally recoil from the pain of using the injured part of the body. It can be scary to move vigorously as we train. The technique you're doing always seems to find a way to hit the right spot with excruciating consistency. This fear and pain would logically be nature's way of saying "don't do that" and it

is sound wisdom to heed that warning. So how can we find the gift in an injury?

I will first recognize that there are many types of physical injuries we can suffer in our life and there are certainly some that require rest to heal. Being off the mat while still engaging your practice is a different experience altogether.

Here's the point up front, taking honest and sensitive ukemi can help us become aware of and investigate our own physical limitations, especially injured areas of the body. For me, it involves leaning into one part of our mental training.

I try to stop the instant judgment as good or bad while taking ukemi. "I can't believe nage just did that!" "I just took terrible ukemi." "This can't look good to anyone watching." This is not an easy thing to do in my experience, even if someone isn't cranking on your arm, but there is a relationship to this and our za-zen practice which for me is always fraught with combating my preferences. During ukemi, I think it is easier to become aware of my instant judgments (as opposed to nage-side) because we are actively trying to be neutral in that role. When we become aware during our ukemi that we are thinking, "I didn't like that," or "Ow, that hurt!", it has probably affected our ability to respond naturally to nage. We are going to resist or actively influence the situation in some way or another to make it more to our liking. While taking ukemi, when it comes to my mind that "I don't like this", I try to reframe the statement

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in my mind as a question. “Do I like this ...?” Then leave the question open. Don’t answer! I want the experience to provide information and to take it in without judging it instantly as good or bad. I try to think instead, “I’ll decide tomorrow.”

I don’t mean that you should suck it up and ignore the pain or act like you aren’t injured. It’s not like slamming the gas pedal to see how fast your car can go. It’s more like entering a pitch-dark room and slowly discovering where the furniture is by bumping into it and maybe occasionally stubbing a toe.

It is also important to take care that your partner is sufficiently advanced in their own training and that you aren’t hindering their progress by burdening them with your limitations. But when you are training with a partner who you trust is controlled and sensitive, you can let go of natural self-preservation, let go of fear, and trust in the art to care for the whole of you.

It’s a worthwhile endeavor even if we aren’t successful all or even most of the time. Go digging around in your injuries. We all have them, new injuries, or old injuries; with care, you’re bound to turn up a secret or two. ○

You practice Aikido, at your age? Ouch!

by Tom Rush

As I lay here in bed, two aching knees and pain in my right hip, moving around the heating pad from joint to joint and debating if I should take ibuprofen for additional relief. I try to remember that this will pass. I will be back on my feet. I will get back on the mat.

I will be 54 this year and finally facing the reality that as I age, aches and pains will become a more frequent part of life, making it difficult to continue practicing Aikido or any other regular physical activity. However, intellectually, I appreciate the health benefits of physical activity, as well as the benefits of moderating stress, attaining harmony and balance, and living in the present moment — all gifts that come from the practice of Aikido. These are two realities that at one time I thought could not coexist.

The most challenging obstacle that I needed to overcome to enable this coexistence was to realize that I could take it down a notch during class and not push

myself to the same level of intensity as I did in the past in order to receive the benefits of the practice. In fact, pulling back on the muscle and speed in my approach is forcing me to find different ways to work with and move my Aikido training partners. This is something that I can only hope is further maturing my understanding and mastery of the art, while simultaneously sparing my joints and muscles.

Through the advice of others, most importantly our teachers, the other approach I am taking to enable this coexistence is to seek out modifications or variations of techniques that are less taxing on my body due to my particular physical condition. This is primarily the torn menisci in my knees. Besides the near elimination of knee walking, I have come to realize that my somewhat ungraceful ukemi during particular techniques was jolting my knee joints and adding unnecessary stress on them. I needed to find new ways to come down on the mat that are consistent with nage’s direction while still allowing me to protect my troublesome joints. This is something that I continue

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I DO MY OWN STUNTS™

“Where my tendons have been torn, my psyche has been mended. This was a worthy trade.”

— Chris Matakas, The Tao of Jiu Jitsu

to try and optimize, and has become another dimension to my training.

Finally, I find it important to remember that even with this change in approach I can not only continue to practice, but also still feel like I am progressing in this art. At one point I thought it was all about how many techniques I could perform on command or how quickly I could execute them. But now I am able to find a true internal feeling of satisfaction from discovering new ways to approach the art, appreciating more of the subtleties of the techniques, and figuring out how to apply the principles of Aikido to my daily life.

On a final note and afterthought, I appreciate that I am not the first practitioner to come to this realization and grapple with the aforementioned coexistence. However, I believe it's something that I had to discover on my own in order to maintain the motivation to continue, cast away the excuses and keep my feet on the mat regardless of my age and physical limitations. Aikido is a long term commitment, and yes, it will continue to come with the occasional "Ouch! ○"

"There is no coming to consciousness without pain."

- Carl Jung

Enter through the Narrow Gate

by Roman Loewen

It is often difficult for me to show up to class, hindered by anxieties and excuses. What drives me to make the effort is a bit of a mystery to me. My daily effort is deeply rooted in an inner guidance that is hard to explain. Learning Aikido from George Lyons Sensei and training alongside my dojo mates is something that I am drawn to do, pulled up from a deeper core.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who enter that way. How narrow the gate and

close the way that leads to life! And few there are who find it.

This Bible passage speaks to me and this is what I hear:

*Get your guidance from within
Clear your mind
Settle down your chatter
Drink from your own well
Have Faith to follow your own deeply rooted guidance*

Everybody has opinions. The airwaves are full of information. Listen in moderation. For Guidance: GO IN, NOT OUT.

For the seeker, there are many gates to choose from, many paths, many leaders, many martial arts, many schools, many teachers.

Choose your own Path and travel in earnest. ○



Holding On and Letting Go

by Karl Bernhardt

The last three years have changed much of the way we live. Nothing is as it was before Covid-19. The way we greet and interact with one another and how we work together, everything seems to have gone through a “Covid makeover”.

I am searching for a way to share my experience of this Pandemic as simply as I can. As I reflect, a thought keeps recurring and that is “holding on and letting go”.

Holding on to let go, letting go to hold on. Either way my experience of moving through the Pandemic has helped me to embrace the fact that I must do both at the same time. Yes, a paradox, but no less a truth.

With that thought in mind, I searched for inspiration and a way to express my feelings. Fortunately, I did find something that I would like to share. In an excerpt from the book, “Sword and Brush”, Dave Lowery beautifully conveys the imagery of what I seek to express when he writes:

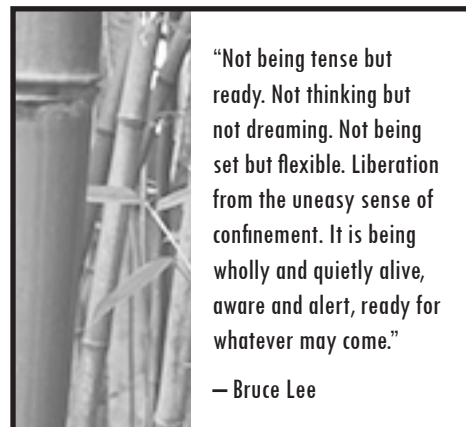
“Ju: Pliancy

Pushing up with vigor, green sprouts of bamboo can pierce concrete if it lies between them and the sun. The energy of all young shoots in the plant world is extraordinary, especially so considering their delicacy. The slightest breeze can bend new growth. The character for Spear rests atop that for Tree to create the kanji for Ju. The etymological implication is that the growth of the tree has the power of a spear thrust.

Ju refers to the forces of pliancy. Ju is flexible strength, gentle potency. It is tenacity of a sort that embraces malleability. It bends to endure. Ju is durably soft; it receives in order to resist. Like the bamboo’s spring growth, the Ju of the bugeisha is always yielding yet as unstoppable as the season itself.”

For me, this is the idea of “letting go to hold on.” This is my experience of enduring the Covid years. At first the virus seemed as impenetrable as concrete. The Pandemic became an obstacle to everything. It cut off pathways and made going about daily life seemingly impossible. Covid was not going to allow us to continue our way, whatever way that was. Yet despite the challenges, the loss and fears, the world continued turning. We had to hold on and keep going. We let go of much that we once took for granted. It may have been a favorite coffee spot, sitting on a neighbor’s porch or shopping in town. Whether we liked it or not we had to yield our way of thinking and doing. We had to let go of the idea that the world around us was going to stay the same. Letting go of the thought of having control over anything, other than ourselves. Holding on to the thought of bending to the changing world around us with pliancy.

The sprout must let go of the path that is shortest to the sun and hold on to finding a way through the cracks in the concrete. We have something pulling and pushing us as well. For the sprout, it is the forces of nature such as the sun and the earth. For us, maybe it is something different.



The push and pull of family, friends and loved ones, our practices and disciplines, listening to or playing music, reading a book, the simple things like sitting quietly; just being alive. These are the things onto which we held.

This Pandemic has taught me more than ever to hold on to the good stuff and let go of the rest. I find that when I let go of the things I don’t need, my hands are free to hold on to the things that matter most.

In truth, I must say that I had feelings of both guilt and gratitude. My own experience of living through the Pandemic was a mixed bag that included a wide range of emotions, filling in the space between two bookends. I was very fortunate. I survived very comfortably while many around me did not. Others were not so comfortable, nor did they survive. Hence, I found myself feeling this sort of “survivors’ guilt”: I had more than I could ask for, I did not go hungry, I was not sick, and I was able to enjoy the freedom of having time on my hands without the fear of financial ruin. I live in a town where local musicians played for neighbors to enjoy from the proper “social distance” of

continued on the next page



BCA Holiday Picture 2022

“I was returning from high school one day and a runaway horse with a bridle on sped past a group of us into a farmer’s yard looking for a drink of water. The horse was perspiring heavily. And the farmer didn’t recognize it so we cornered it. I hopped on the horse’s back. Since it had a bridle on, I took hold of the tick rein and said, “Giddy-up.” Headed for the highway, I knew the horse would turn in the right direction. I didn’t know what the right direction was. And the horse trotted and galloped along. Now and then he would forget he was on the highway and start into a field. So, I would pull on him a bit and call his attention to the fact the highway was where he was supposed to be. And finally, about four miles from where I had boarded him, he turned into a farmyard and the farmer said, “So that’s how that critter came back. Where did you find him?” I said, “About four miles from here.” “How did you know you should come here?” I said, “I didn’t know. The horse knew. All I did was keep his attention on the road.”

— Milton H. Erickson

K. Bernhardt, continued from the previous page
 the sidewalks and yards. Groceries and beverages could be picked up or delivered safely without much trouble. I continued my practices of Aikido, Yoga and a book study group thanks to Zoom. It was all very strange, yet all very easy. I thought like others, that maybe the shutdown would last a few weeks or a month at most, I was wrong. The virus wasn’t going away. Then came the opportunities to help: food pantries needed volunteers, neighbors needed help with errands and through helping, a sense of connection began to emerge. Gratitude was beginning to fill the space that guilt held and there was much to be grateful for. We helped each other however we could and helping made all the difference. Drawing upon the support of one another we found the strength to hold on to the promise of better days ahead. However, to be our best selves in the service of others, we need a source of nourishment and rejuvenation of our own. I found a deep well full of what I needed. It was, of course, our dojo.

nation of our own. I found a deep well full of what I needed. It was, of course, our dojo.

There is something very special about sharing the practice that we do. It lifts and carries us and provides us a way to lift and carry others. Many words come to mind as I think of Bucks County Aikido: community, dedication, commitment, trust, friendship. None of that would ever be possible without the tireless giving and commitment of our teachers. Sensei’s dedication to keeping Aikido alive is something for us to hold on to. To take for granted that it will always be waiting for us whenever we want it, is something to let go.

And now at last, the days have come to feel more like the spring shoots of bamboo the moment they break through the cracks in the concrete to bathe in the warmth of the sun and grow. Maybe we can all learn something from the yielding yet unstoppable little sprout. See you on the mat! ○