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Bucks County Aikido Journal

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



George Lyons Sensei (front row, second from right), Patti Meisenbach-Lyons, Ben Bowles and Paul Fricker with members of the Intro Class

Commitment

by George Lyons

As a group of new students join the dojo, I look for those who see something in this practice beyond what is initially evident. I make no judgment of those who are not inspired and wish them well. For those who do find something, I wait to see if they can commit to a serious practice.

What I always find difficult to accept is the loss of so many interested people because they could not live up

to their idea of commitment as they define it. Their departure begins... "I like to throw myself into things, so if I can't do that with my current life circumstances, I'm not going to do it at all." I'm sorry to hear it, as there is nothing I can do to help with their schedule, but perhaps a redefinition of terms would be enough to reframe their predicament.

For me, connecting time with the idea of commitment sets up a fantasy of what real training is. The only way to commit to anything is right now,

in this moment. Of course, we know that over time we will be faced with many hurdles: physical soreness, emotional agitation, spiritual loss of faith... We can overcome these challenges by being truly engaged in our training moment by moment. This is a serious practice and one worth taking with us into all areas of our lives.

Many times it's our idea of what's to come that is the problem. Bowing in, you sometimes wonder how you will survive the class. Now by now, of course, there is no other way. Doing battle with frustration, confusion and exhaustion, we bow out surprised, relieved, invigorated.

Admittedly, modern life is complicated. It feels as though our commitments to our families, jobs, careers, etc. pull us in other directions. The teachings of Aikido say, "Blend with it, don't fight the moment, accept it." Nice wisdom.

Working out conflicts is what we do.

There is no end to the obstacles encountered along the path. Scheduling conflicts are just the beginning. We imagine that this has nothing to do with our training, but our Aikido practice continues off the mat. Over-

Continued on page 2

coming obstacles to training is part of training. There is no separation. Working out conflicts is what we do.

We must face ourselves clearly and recognize that it's natural to look for ways out of situations that challenge our status quo. Rationalizing is a centuries-old practice, too. It's comforting to have a clever escape mechanism at hand when things get difficult. Zen masters caution us that the mind is as dangerous as a pit of snakes, that we can hide our real motives even from ourselves.

So commit and throw yourself into this. Get to the dojo tonight and don't worry about tomorrow. Commit to this class. Commit to this uke. Commit to this moment. What more can you do?

My dictionary defines "commit" as "to turn over for safe keeping." Nice wisdom. ○

When Do You Know?

by Amelia Perkins

Some people talk about knowing, the moment they walk in the door and see the first throw, that Aikido is for them. Some people realize after months, or years, that this is a permanent fixture in their lives. There is a certain point where it crosses the line from something you do to something you are. Aikido and I did not fall in love



at first sight, but now it seems that I'm constantly realizing how much it means to me. The moments sneak up on me quietly, and they hit me hard.

I don't remember the exact moment I figured it out first, but it was probably somewhere within the summer between fourth and fifth grades. Toward the end of that summer, my exasperated parents restricted me to five classes a week. I was furious. I had been averaging eleven hours of training every week and I was irritated at the presumption that my mother had something better to do than chauffeur me to noon class. I could not think of anything else I would rather be doing than Aikido.

During the school year, especially when I started cross country and track a few years later, training was more difficult to fit into our schedules, but my dad and I worked hard to keep making it to the dojo a few times a week. The seventh-grade track season was the first inkling I had that Aikido was filtering into all aspects of my life. I tripped going over a hurdle in practice. I was the third hurdler to fall that season; one girl had badly scraped up the entire left side of her body and the other got an impressive scar from the damage to her knee. I instinctively rolled when I felt myself falling. My wounds consisted of a small piece of stone embedded in my hand — from slapping the gravel as I went down.

We are lucky in that our family scheduling has more or less

grown to revolve around training, but it doesn't always work out. One winter, we had a few bad weeks where everyone's schedules collided and we barely made it to the dojo at all. The more classes in a row I missed, the less motivated I felt to go back; and when I didn't go to the dojo, I couldn't motivate myself to do anything at all. I promised myself that as soon as I stopped feeling empty and purposeless, I would go back. After a few months of promises, it finally occurred to me that Aikido might be what I needed. So I went back. Without my dad going anyway, I don't think it would have been possible, but as it was, it was easy to make it a priority again.

I went to Aikido even when it was the last thing I felt like doing. It was the best decision I ever made again. To make our new website more personal and member-centered, Michael had been patrolling the dojo with a video camera for two weeks asking for interviews. We watched everyone's interviews at the "launch party" for the website. I hated mine. I cringed watching it. I hadn't realized how hard it was for me to talk about Aikido; I think I actually got choked up while I was talking, but that wasn't the problem. The video didn't communicate anything that I had wanted to communicate. I had struggled for words and come up with the wrong ones, and it mattered that the words be exactly right because Aikido was the most important thing. No one else saw a problem, but my video ended up not being included on the final version of the website anyway.

That fall I started high school, where I had to explain to five hundred new people about Aikido. People stop listening after you say "martial art," as

Continued on page 3

evidenced when one teacher suggested brightly that I do a demonstration for extra credit during a unit on Japan. I explained that Aikido was not the greatest of spectator martial arts, but everyone was excited to miss class, so we dragged some wrestling mats out to the lobby and I decided to roll around for half an hour. I thought it was going to be a disaster. The week before a sensei from a different, even more obscure martial art, had come to talk to us about the samurai and show us videos of how to break limbs in horrible ways. His martial art was much more ostentatious than Aikido, and I was the only one who had really enjoyed the presentation.

I misjudged my classmates. I threw myself into it, committed myself, and from the first moment I could tell everyone could feel it. The semicircle of ninth graders was completely, respectfully silent. It was magic. I was rolling on wrestling mats, in the high school lobby, in my sock feet; I was focused like a laser. I'm sure I did some talking, explaining what I was doing while I rolled forwards and backwards, breakfalls, irimi tenkan, but I don't remember what I said.

With that demonstration, I finally managed to make myself understood. I had shown clearly that aikido was my path in life to the group of people that were least likely to ever understand.

The silence is what sticks with me. It wasn't until I had put my shoes back on and dragged the mats back to the gym and we were regrouped in the classroom waiting for the bell to ring

that I realized. I had wanted so badly to communicate how much Aikido means to me, but the words I chose were disappointing. With that demonstration, I finally managed to make myself understood. I had shown clearly that Aikido was my path in life to the group of people that were least likely to ever understand.

Maybe I don't need to get the words perfect. Maybe it's enough that I make it to the dojo and work on perfecting myself. I don't know if I'll ever be able to talk about it in a way I think is eloquent enough, but at the moment all I need to say is that Aikido means a lot to me. Anything deeper, I can communicate on the mat. ○

What Does Lavender Have to Do With Aikido?

by Patricia King



What does lavender have to do with Aikido?

This was a good question from a small boy whose autism does not prevent him from trying to make connections. George Lyons Sensei connected him to O Sensei with a few

threads, not too many; just enough to satisfy him.

“Lavender brought me to Aikido,” I thought as I stood by listening.

As a kid, I used to rest near a kind but intent grandmother, watching her fingers fly in her needlework. She smelled of Yardley lavender soap and always kept sachets in the yarns, in her drawers. Years later, while walking around a lake with an old dog, I noticed a tall barn. It somehow blended with undulating and improbable fields of lavender and the trees behind it. A small sign said “Peace Valley Lavender” and so I ventured out of my typical orbit one day and peeked in.

The lavender scent embraced me with its customary warmth, relaxing but alerting at the same time. It flooded me with a sense of familiarity. There was a wonderful stillness to the shop and the two people I saw there. They seemed almost my age, yet moved with a lightness that made me look twice.

“How do you stay so fit?” I finally worked up the nerve to ask.

“Aikido,” came a short reply on top of dancing brown eyes. Patti.

“Where do you do that?” Always a quest, always looking for a teacher and a discipline.

“Upstairs.” “Oh.” “Go online, look at the website.” George Lyons. I didn't know about George Lyons Sensei then.

I began the introductory course in October 2007. I began against the advice of my son who had taken class-

Continued on page 4

es and had been deterred by “getting thrown around.” “You’ll get hurt,” he worried, or was it just a statement of fact?

By week six of the intro course:

“It’s hopeless.” “It’s only hopeless if you quit,” said Nick.

“It’s hard.” “It’s neither hard nor soft, good nor bad...” said Eric.

“Posture,” said Helen.

“Foundation,” said John.

“Is there ever a time that you’d have to tell a student that they just didn’t have what it takes?” “I can’t imagine a situation we’d have to say that,” said Patti, with a small smile.

“What do these vows mean that we chant in zazen?” “Sort of just to do your best,” said George Lyons Sensei with a small shrug, never too much, always just enough.

***I began to read about
Aikido’s history.
It was called an Art.
I could see why.***

I began to read about Aikido’s history. It was called an Art. I could see why. *The Art of Peace* replaced all the bedside books. Not many words in that little book, but powerful.

Greg O’Connor’s *Aikido Student Handbook* came in next to it — the philosophy, spirit, etiquette and training methods of Aikido. He didn’t neglect to say that Aikido can be a lethal self-defense, “but if you are attacked too much in life you need to begin examining what you are put-

ting out there.” That tore a scab right off a 30-year-old wound in my heart. Anger flooded up, no longer just inarticulate and breathless fear, but ANGER. I put nothing out all those years ago except a feminine joy of life, long strides, head flung back... I was attacked three times. Three times I fought, three times I lost badly. Now people were grabbing me around the neck and throwing me down. The muscle memory and the emotions became huge: I was freezing. An uprooted tree brought me to tears... this introductory course had become part psychotherapy, part Rolfing.

All through this beginning, George Lyons Sensei would throw the blanket of his glance out. “Where are you right now?” his eyes seemed to ask as turmoil and frustration would turn frenetic. Oh. I am here. And so I was and so I am.

“Why do you do it?” asked the small boy some months later. “It helps me remember to close cupboard doors,” came the glib reply, followed by “Patience, it builds patience in me, just like you do!”

The dojo has become hombu. New vocabulary has replaced neurotic old loops.

Aikido filled a lack and yet made space in an exhausted mind. It has begun to remodel an old body. It has renewed faith, made laughter well up, put old demons to rest.

Months later as I sit quietly watching my old dad’s breath go in and out, I am flooded with gratitude for the lively partnership of training, for the energy that fills the dojo every day as people come to practice together. The sweat, the physics, left, right,

posture, move, blend, look. Sit still. “A stick, a stone. It is nothing at all,” Antonio Carlos Jobim sings for us. ○

Freedom in a Tube

by Eric Soroker



What does it mean to be Free? Really Free. Over a few drinks one night, I asked a friend this question and he said, “To be able to do whatever I want.” He then went on to describe a series of fantasies that involved not working, eating and traveling, experiencing various places and things. My first reaction, I’ll admit, was a little critical and judgmental at his simple and un-spiritual sounding response (nothing like a little spiritual judgmentalism to remind oneself where you are on the path). The more I thought about it, I realized that there are two ways to look at freedom. There is “freedom from,” as in the physical world (free from entrapment, prison, hunger, sickness, poverty, etc.) and then there is what I will call “real freedom,” the type that I believe comes from the pursuit of higher ability (training, meditation and the arts).

One evening after class, Lyons Sensei presented to us a problem to solve: How do you give a snake freedom? The answer he shared with us was to put it in a tube. When he asked if we understood, I sheepishly nodded my head yes, even though I had no

Continued on page 5

idea what he was talking about. I racked my brain on this for a month. I thought, what is freeing about being “trapped” in a tube? If freedom is the absence of barriers, then isn’t a tube a constraint? Can a snake even move if it’s in a tube? Is the snake really “happy” in there?

The purpose of summer camp, as I see it now, is to fully pursue “real freedom” through deep, focused training.

At some point, at least in concept, I got it that the snake is free because it “lets go” of everything other than the tube. But it still sounded bleak. That is, until I experienced it for myself during this year’s summer camp: my first summer camp. To an Aikidoka, summer camp is “the tube.”

For one week, all of the student’s needs are taken care of in a self-contained environment. I was housed in an extremely comfortable two-bedroom, two-bath apartment that I shared with three other fellow dojo members (wow, maid service, maintenance staff and plenty of fresh towels). Regular meal service was provided on campus in a pleasant cafeteria and even a discriminating vegetarian like myself found a way to eat well. Everything was in walking distance, the San Diego weather was delightful and there were many people working hard to make sure all was taken care of and running smoothly. I was away from my home, my computer, my stuff and my “life.” Sure sounds like “freedom from” to me.

The purpose of summer camp, as I see it now, is to fully pursue “real free-

dom” through deep, focused training. And boy did we train a lot. Even the day’s schedule reinforced “the tube.” Wake at 6 AM, train at 6:30 AM, eat breakfast, train till noon, eat lunch, take a small break (or work), train till 5 PM, eat dinner, participate in the evening event (which sometimes was training), socialize (or work, or both) and then pass out in your bed. Repeat.

Don’t get me wrong: It’s not like I was in some state of training bliss where I skipped to class singing and dancing with impending enlightenment. This type of training shreds you. The first full day’s enthusiasm was shattered when I woke the following day so sore that I thought my blood had been replaced with broken glass and concrete. There were continual periods where within a span of fifteen minutes I would experience every type of emotion and thought in the human pantheon (I love this, I hate this, I’m tired, I’m awesome, I suck, why am I here, wow that was a real connection, I need a nap, that was fun). I started to develop blisters on my blisters.

The classes were mind blowing. There was so much good Aikido to absorb, so much to learn. It is like drinking from a fire hose. Any previous beliefs I had about what I thought Aikido is, and what I thought it was supposed to look like, was blown wide open by Doshu, the teachers and the other Aikidoists. I just had to trust that I was absorbing what was being shown because there was just too much for my mind to try to remember consciously.

And I practiced. I practiced Aikido. I practiced connection. I practiced awareness. I watched myself become completely devastated when I had to

“let go” of my nap so that I could help with the running of the camp store. “How will I survive without my nap!” A nap is such a simple pleasure. How dare “they” take it away from me? It’s mine! This was my low point. I gave up, crumbled and let go.

Every summer camp veteran told me that after/around day three your body adapts. I struggled with this idea, until the middle of day four when I realized during class I might be a machine. I was tired, but there was something else going on. I was steady. My body seemed to be able to keep going. My thoughts were calm. I felt satisfaction. I felt peaceful.

I was the snake. That’s when it dawned on me. When it all came together. The shape of the “tube” takes care of the snake’s needs, or the “freedom from,” which then allows for the snake to fully encounter the tube, or the “Real Freedom.” And that ultimately leads to the snake’s experience of moving forward through the tube. Freedom is an experience. It does not have a real anatomy. It is the snake, the tube and the moving through the tube all occurring simultaneously.

Having now experienced it directly, if I ask myself “What does it mean to be free?” I would have a hard time putting it into words that others could understand. What I know is the feeling. It’s peace. ○

Parenting Through Aikido

by Matt Perkins



One of the first things you discover when you are born is that your parents are more competent than you are. They can walk, talk and generally take care of themselves with apparent ease. To some degree, this relative ineptitude continues throughout childhood.

My boldness as a parent has been rewarded with compassionate teaching and caring by the entire community.

When I started Aikido with my children, the playing field was leveled. We had the opportunity to fumble together at something new to all of us.

I brought my family to Aikido at the same time as my third daughter, Sophia, was born. This coincidence has been a convenient milestone in recollecting how long we have been practicing, and it was the beginning of a six-year connection between my

family and BCA. I find it a little surprising now that I was comfortable bringing my 7 and 9 year olds into such a physically challenging environment, but I am glad that I was mostly blind to the risks at the time. My boldness as a parent has been rewarded with compassionate teaching and caring by the entire community.

Susannah found a different path (she has returned and left several times over the past few years), but Amelia has continued to study Aikido with increasing enthusiasm. We have progressed together and have mostly tested for new rank together. I have come to rely on her preparation to guide me with my own. We once spent a train ride to Chicago going over our yonkyu requirements in a cramped cabin. Unable to move more than half a step, we relied heavily on our conviction that thinking and visualizing Aikido was nearly as good practice as actually doing it.

Our last test was my second attempt at ikkyu and Amelia's first. Of course, I was focused on my own performance, but alas, my focus failed to prevent a minor but dramatic injury to my face that interrupted the test for a short time. After some ministrations to my wound, Sensei asked Amelia if she wanted to resume her test and she agreed. Having achieved enough internal balance to know that I wasn't going to be able to continue myself, I fretted at the future annoyance of having to prepare for this test yet a third time. But as the blood clotted and I relaxed, I was able to turn my attention outward to watch Amelia finish her test. Radiating poise and confidence, she moved powerfully through each technique. I was proud, but more, I was struck by how grown-up she appeared. I was

also floored by what an impressive grown-up she made.

At the beginning of training we say "Onegai Shimasu" to our partner. It is a humble entreaty to accept the other as both a partner and as a teacher. Typically, we alternate between the one doing the technique (nage) and the one receiving it (uke). In either role, we can both learn and instruct. The moment of asking "Onegai Shimasu" is like the moment when you meet your child for the first time. You are both embarking on a mutually instructive journey.

From the day we first bowed in six years ago until today, I have learned many things in Aikido. Most importantly, I have learned to accept the trading of roles with my daughters, to be uke to their nage. I am reminded to be grateful after every class when Amelia bows to me and says, "Thank you, Daddy." ○

"Always examine yourselves, recognize where your temperament is unstable and where it is stable, and what your strengths and weaknesses are; reduce excesses and foster what is insufficient. In matters of leisure, let others go first; in matters of labor, be first yourself. What warriorhood requires as duty, moreover, is in this one thing above all — in emergencies and combat you should not defer to others. The way lies in each aspect of your everyday conduct and activity."

Yamaga Soko

From *Training the Samurai Mind*
Edited and Translated by
Thomas Cleary

Grabbing Hold the Tiger's Whiskers

by Betsy Robson

Although I moved away from Bucks County, you all are my brothers and sisters whom I have not left. In the neighborhood of our hearts you are right around the corner. Distance and time between us will always be naught.

Tonight I reflect upon how gracious and forgiving this teaching of Aikido is, to relinquish our tenacious clinging to a separate identity, to yield to the Harmony available at all times. We are taught to pour ourselves into our training, to hold nothing back. Constantly we are faced with the habitual ego and repeatedly it is wounded. Yet over and over and over we get up once more, reach out and grab hold the tiger's whiskers yet again. What a paragon for the path of letting go of self, much fodder indeed. We get pumped up with pride by our accomplishments, by the ki that runs through our guts and limbs, and by participating in the elegant and steeling etiquette.

I did wonder how many Buddhists actually get into street fights.

Noticing how slow and unconscious those others are. I am an Aikidoka, look at me I'm getting somewhere! And boom! Down again. Each time shedding a thin film of this cloudy veil, as we rise back up with humility. Each time a bit of the tarnish rubbed from our hearts and we become more able to feel the Truth, to be present,



to let go. We strengthen one another through this practice and our repeated efforts. You have all reinforced my spirit with your earnest commitment, and taught me how to apply the essence of ai-ki in daily life.

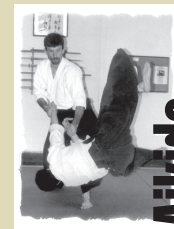
Exploring a rather labyrinthine web forum on Buddhism, a questioner had asked if there were any practioners of Aikido out there and if Aikido was any good in a street fight. Most thought it wasn't. I did wonder how many Buddhists actually get into street fights!

But regardless, it provided a delicious snack of irony. For it seems to me Aikido helps to fell the potential for pedestrian conflict right at the root. Your practice, our practice, is teaching me to see openings all around, openings into which one may position sensitivity, compassion and guidance — a kind word, humor, a kernel of insight or even the simple wisdom of silence. How that can change the course of things, directing toward the expansive.

The county I have moved to is set to undergo a major gas drilling campaign, which threatens to disrupt the beauty, ecology and serenity of the area, jeopardizing aquifers, streams and rivers, and damaging natural habitat. Recently I've encountered neighbors who are under the spell of money they may receive by leasing their land to gas companies (the oil and gas industries by the way are exempt from the Clean Water Act).

A rudimentary understanding of blending and merging is showing me in this instance and others that it's possible to engage in dialogue with

those whom I vehemently disagree, and in this way, perhaps, to have an influence in weighing the bigger picture. Not fanning the sparks of conflict, better encouraging ai-ki. Easier said than done, of course. Not only for myself but for all, I am grateful for your continuing dedication to this jewel of practice. Together, near or apart, let us continue to pour ourselves out completely, exposing those greedy nooks and crannies within to the openness of the great Circle as we aim toward Harmony within and without. ○



Fall introductory course starts September 2

A true martial art, or budo, Aikido cannot be reduced to a simple category or intellectual idea. It is a path through which we encounter ourselves.

Regular practice broadens our perspectives in life and deepens our experience of even the simplest moments.

Aikido is not only a practical art for self-defense, but a philosophically satisfying art to last a lifetime.

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

The costs 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.

Fall 2008 Schedule

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
AM		6:30-7:30 Zazen / Iaido	6:30-7:30 Zazen	6:30-7:30 Aikido	6:30-7:30 Zazen	9-10 All levels 10:15-11:15 Beginners Weapons	8-9 Zazen 9:15-11:15 Free Practice
PM	6-6:55 All levels 7:05-8 All levels	12:15-1 All levels 6-6:55 Intro Class 7:05-8 All levels	12:15-1 All levels 6 - 6:55 All levels 7:05-8:15 Advanced	12:15-1 Beginners Weapons 6-6:55 Intro Class 7:05-8 Beginners Weapons	6-6:55 All levels 7:05-8 All levels		

Recent Promotions

Nidan

John McDevitt

1st Kyu

Matt Perkins
Amelia Perkins

2nd Kyu

Eric Soroker

5th Kyu

Patricia King