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Bucks County Aikido Journal

■ Issue 4, Spring 2009

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

Shaping the Edge

by John McDevitt

photo courtesy of Kim O'Malley



When I started Aikido, I asked a lot of questions...the answer, more often than not, was “keep coming to practice”. For me, it was a very dissatisfying answer. I knew there had to be more to it than that. If I could just figure out the right way to watch Sensei, some quick way to figure out this center thing, just try harder....

A few months ago, while shaping an edge of steel, I had a moment of pure joy. It was an edge like any other. There was no special reason to make it clean, crisp, smooth to the point that the viewer would be drawn to touch it. There was no one watching me create the edge, no one there to pat me on the back because I was creating the perfect edge. I was just shaping the edge. Feeling the edge and making it right.

This joyous feeling was like nothing I have ever felt. I felt warmth running through my body. I felt like I was glowing. Even though I was alone, I looked around to see

if anyone saw. It quickly ended and I got back to shaping the edge. No rush, feeling the file against the steel and enjoying the beauty of the process.

The more I practice Aikido, the more I realize the joy is in the everyday practice. The shaping of the edge. There are no simple answers, no shortcuts or tricks. I find myself answering questions from my fellow Aikidoka with “keep coming to practice” and believing it, myself, more and more. ○

Strength of a Community

by Sarah Davis

Community is defined as an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location, but that sentiment does not fully capture the depth of its meaning.

There have been times and places in my life where I felt the distinct essence of community, but I never felt fully encompassed by it until I started training at the dojo.

When I started training my body through the practice of yoga, I focused more on myself and body awareness, but was never faced with the challenge of awareness of others. At the yoga studio there was a communal understanding that the class was meant as a personal decompression period. This was followed by minimal small talk, but more often than not simply leaving quietly. After a time I felt like the commute and costs were outweighing the benefits. I had a spiritual itch that yoga could not scratch even with both feet behind my head. After making this realization I knew it was time to move on.

Aikido infused me with a wild energy and enthusiastically inquisitive disposition to learn everything I could about the art. I felt as though I had finally been invited into the

intricate inner workings of the community I had so long been searching for without realizing it.

We, as a class, form our community, and the bond is an intensely sacred one. We respect and admire each other for the diversity each individual weaves into our lives, and we feed on the energy that radiates almost as an entity itself.

I am both proud and infinitely grateful to partake in the perpetual learning and growing process of such an exceptional group of people. These people are my chosen family. I come to class each night looking forward to what I will learn on the mat and being able to integrate it into all aspects of my life. This family also extends to Aikidoists around the world, connecting person to person, without saying a word. A transforming community rotating in and out, spiraling into itself and changing with each new generation.



Continued on page 2

We are growing ever closer as a family and in doing so we gain strength and integrity, which allows us to better serve each other and ourselves. We form ties that last a lifetime to be kept in the form of memories, anecdotes, and scars. We provide each other with the love and support to persevere through the inevitably turning tides of life. I have felt this most pure form of compassion in my time of need and I can only hope to relay it to my chosen kin. ○

The Value of Struggling

by Jon Kugel

In my childhood, I thought I would grow up to be a musician. I loved going to band class and being part of the group; but most of all I loved performing at the concerts. I was moved by being enveloped in the powerful sounds of a full concert band, especially when we nailed a difficult passage. As time went on, I found that practicing alone was a struggle. I hated hearing my sound without the rest of the ensemble and I was not comfortable with it. At first, I frittered away my practice time muddling through my favorite songs or by repeating exercises that I already knew well and eventually, I stopped practicing all together. But I was good enough to get by with the rest of the band playing around me, so I learned to hide my weakness in the crowd.

When I discovered jazz music, a whole new world was opened to me through the improvisational solo. The great soloists made mistakes all the time, but by emphasizing a mistake (playing a wrong note over and over again) the soloist can construct a new theme and extend the solo. I loved the rush of ripping out a monster solo and so I learned to hide my weakness in plain sight.

Once I got to college, I was exposed. I had failed to develop the discipline required of a serious student and it was obvious to everyone, so I changed my major and went back to being a casual musician. In other words, I took the easy way out.

At this time, as if on cue, I was introduced to Aikido and the concepts instantly appealed to me: blend with an attacker's energy, take the path of least resistance, neutralize your enemy. I saw the art of Aikido as a

grand exercise in listening to the vibrations of the universe and I drew comfort from that. I made it part of my life, but I fell into the same old pattern. Eventually, life got in the way and I quit the very thing that I loved because it was too demanding... again.

When I joined Bucks County Aikido, all of my preconceptions about Aikido were shattered.

I recall on one of my first days in the dojo, I was training with Nick. When he attacked, I raised both of my arms in defense (something I learned in another school). Without having exchanged any prior words, he stated matter-of-factly, "If you bring that arm up again, I'm going to break it." I thought, "Whoa buddy! We are supposed to be on the same team!" After this encounter, I was sufficiently shaken and parched to want (no, to need) a drink of water and I began to make for the water jug... but Nick gently placed his hand on my shoulder and encouraged me to watch Sensei demonstrate the next technique. I struggled to remain seated with my throat dry and ego bruised. "This is not the Aikido I remember," I think "what have I gotten myself into?"

This, I found, was the beginning of a long struggle: a struggle to relax, a struggle to see what Sensei is demonstrating, a struggle to take good ukemi, a struggle to give an honest attack, a struggle to sit during zazen, a struggle just to get to the dojo, a struggle with Aikido.

Through my struggle with Aikido, I have come to understand that I never actually took responsibility for my study of music. Early on, I refused the struggle. I avoided acknowledging my weaknesses and focused only on my strengths. I was comfortable with that. I have learned that as a student of Aikido, I must take responsibility for my weaknesses. Indeed, they spill out onto the mat for all to see. The dojo offers me no place to hide them.



Through my struggle with Aikido, I have learned that my initial attraction to Aikido was also misguided. I became attracted to Aikido because I found validation in taking the path of least resistance and comfort in the concepts of blending. But I do not believe this is the true spirit of Aikido. I have learned that as a student of Aikido, I must seek out resistance and the partners that challenge me. Without opposition, without conflict, I do not believe the true spirit of Aikido can arise.

I recently came across this passage in a book, about the legendary warriors in Homer's epic poem, that I think speaks to what I am trying to convey (paraphrased from *Ilium* by Dan Simmons). "In everything they do, these men run the full risk of failure."

I have to come to know that Aikido is not 'the path of least resistance' at all... it is a very difficult path to follow. Sometimes I feel as if there is no path at all, or that I am all alone on the path, or that the path is full of contradiction; fraught alternately with fear and inspiration, pain and joy, people in conflict and people in concert. So get comfortable with your weakness, run the full risk of failure, and struggle with your Aikido. ○

Weeding the Path

by Dave Diehl

Exhaustion mingles with energy, emptiness and knowledge dance together. A year ago, I chalked these feelings up to being new; why then, am I still experiencing them? I searched long and hard for a place like this, and those months should have made any transition short and simple. Yet I still struggle. Some days, everything is clear, as though the skies have parted and the sunlight shines a beam, indicating the direction I seek to travel. Other days, night rolls in and it feels as though I must go in every direction at once, though I am instantly incapable of accomplishing anything.

Life can be hectic. Nearly everyone in society understands the pressures of a job and the desire to do the best job possible. We all handle it differently. The days when everything goes according to plan seem too few. The promise of those days though, makes the days that go completely astray bearable. Ask any golfer, when you hear them griping about their game, why they play (for relaxation!) a game that frustrates them so. I'd bet you'll hear a story about "One time, I shot 2 under!" While a part of me can say I would love to lead a life that completely followed my plans, it can not be all of me; some of the greatest things in life end up being unplanned. For me, Aikido was one

of them. While I had searched a long time to find a home, I was searching for something else. A colleague recommended (for a second time) that BCA was exactly what I was describing...I just didn't know it. Now, I can see that Aikido is the means to attain the balance I seek. It provides a general direction to go, but does not lay out the exact steps to take. It requires you find your own path...something I am beginning to do.

When I first visited BCA, I was instantly impressed with the austerity of it all. In near silence, the group practiced, moving with a grace and fluidity that I couldn't see myself capable of achieving. And yet something told me, this is what I want... what I need. And so I began the proverbial journey of a thousand miles with the first footfall into the dojo. By the end of the intro course, I knew this was a great decision to have made. I enjoyed the peace and clarity of mind that came from the study, not to mention the physical exhaustion. I began to sit zazen on Sundays towards the end of the summer, and found it a great way to start the day and the week...the world ceased to be hectic and things became clear...what I needed to do versus what I wanted to do, and how to balance them.

Fast forward nine months to the present day. I again struggle with the concept of balance: once more, it seems there is too little of me (and that is saying something, at 6'6") and too much that needs my attention. But the needs of school, of the kids, my fellow teachers, even administrators, supersede my own desires. What happened? What happened to the clarity and vision? When did the sense of balance and evenness disappear? When did I leave the path I had started down in June?

But looking closer, I see the path has not disappeared. I have simply let the growth overtake its once well-groomed edges. I can see the outlines of the path still, promising me its guidance, beckoning me forward. As I write this, I have come to a realization, one that I now recall my psychology professor impressing upon the class some 20 years ago: what stands in our way more often than not is ourselves.

We assign greater importance to things that shouldn't be so, and lessen the importance of things that should be. And undoing that can be as simple as making up your mind to do it.

So to all of you who read this, I simply say this: take the time to understand the world around you. Take the time to understand your part in it all. Take the time to do what you want to do in the midst of spending time doing all you need to do. Take the time, every now and again, to weed the path of your life, or else the jungle may overtake all in its path. ○

All or Boring

by John McDevitt

As I get older, I find myself getting bored more easily. I suppose it's a mid-life crisis thing. Maybe some sort of control thing? Am I trying to make every moment count? Trying to focus on what is significant, important, profound? Not sure really -- but bored I am.

Fortunately, or not, I have discovered that I am bored with myself. Quite disturbing, on many levels, if I let it end there. I guess it had to circle around and hit me in the forehead. After much wallowing, I have discovered that being bored with oneself can also be an opportunity to see in new ways. A chance to reassess and maybe get rid of some shit I have been hauling around (are we allowed to say shit in Enso?). Or grab on and nurture something that I feel has promise. Or just - freaking - try something different. And, hopefully, to change in a constructive and positive way.

Specific to Aikido - I have found myself incredibly bored with much of what I have been doing. Mostly with the fact that I have been doing a lot of the same things over and over, despite that voice in my ear screaming - "drop your center, posture, breathe, put your ki where you want it, absorb with your whole body, still stiff!..." How many times do I need to see it, feel it, before I make it my own?

Boring!

Weapons practice has been incredibly challenging for me. It has been so in my face,



for so long. My favorite excuse for not giving a good attack is that I am afraid I might hit my partner. Could it be that I was hoping -- if I don't hit you, could you not hit me? No wonder there is no ki in my jo. All very safe. Great excuses. Perfectly logical justifications for my actions. How can you argue with such logic? Where is that whacking sound coming from? It can't still be me!

Damn Boring!

Constructively using the boredom and frustration I was feeling with my practice has produced an opening that I needed to wake

myself up. It has given me the chance to break out of my self created safe-house. A chance to see things in a new light. As a result - I am going for my weapons partner with a new vigor and, importantly, not being afraid to hit or be hit. Trying to take uke's balance, not throw uke. Looking to feel the moment uke loses balance and working with that feeling. Not rushing. Enjoying it fully, without attaching myself to a desired result Laughing more, feeling more, and finding new joy in my practice.

Any one out there bored? Come for me! All or boring!! ○



Recent Promotions

Yondan, Shidoin
Patti Meisenbach-Lyons

Sandan, Fukushidoin
Nick Fritz

2nd Kyu
Jon Kugel

3rd kyu
Sarah Davis

4th Kyu
Amanda Bottor
Lyssa Buda
Pat King
Phil Pappas
Brian Stoudt

5th Kyu
Ryan Adams
Chris Currie
Dave Diehl
Patrick Kelly
Olga Shaliga

Spring 2009 Schedule, beginning June 30

(Interim Schedule: Mon/Wed/Fri 6-7 & 7-8 PM, Sat 9-10 AM. All classes open to everyone.)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen	9 - 10 am Mixed	8 - 9 am Zazen
	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed			10 - 11 am Feldenkrais	9:15 - 11 am Free Practice
6 - 6:55 pm Mixed	6 - 6:55 pm Intro Class	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed	6 - 6:55 pm Intro Class	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed		
		6:50 - 7:10 pm Zazen		6:50 - 7:10 pm Zazen		
7:05 - 8 pm Mixed	7:05 - 8 pm Intermediate	7:15 - 8 pm Advanced*	7:05 - 8 pm laido	7:15 - 8 pm Mixed		

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