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A meditation on some old advice

by George Lyons

George Ohsawa once said that there are three conditions that go into making a mature person: cold, loneliness and hunger.

We could take the statement at face value and interpret it literally. But if we expand on it the “cold” could refer to any external environment that threatens our comfort and security; any and all difficult circumstances. Confronting situational challenges takes fortitude and strong resolve. “Loneliness” could refer to our internal environment and feeling of separation, coming up against this calls for strength of character and an acceptance of ourselves as we are.

The feeling of loneliness is a personal one which may suggest we have some control over it, but we can feel just as much a victim of uninvited feelings of isolation as we can of severe surroundings. We could say that our “hunger” drives us to find a practice such as Aikido so we can encounter our feelings; process and pass through them rather than avoid or deny them.

After encountering enough hard situations in life it's understandable to have a thick skin and get some armor up when things get tough. Judged by outward appearance we may look relatively successful at bracing ourselves. But what's impossible to escape from, no matter how seemingly strong or clever we are, is what comes up from inside. To be ready for expected challenges



is one thing; but the ones that surprise us can crack the armor and take us to the brink. It's at these points in our practice that we get frustrated by what we apparently lack and can feel the least understood the most unappreciated abandoned.

On the surface this can look like a really good time to quit. Thinking up some justification for getting out seems reasonable. Excusing ourselves from the external environment we hope to relieve what's happening in the internal environment. It might seem that your teacher has forgotten you or worse is pushing you further into a corner. They know that what you are going through is important. Your personal crisis gives you a chance to find something in yourself that up to now has remained hidden.

Uncomfortable and isolated maybe doesn't sound like what you signed up for. The truth is the dojo is filled with good people working hard on themselves through this art. In that sense you are not alone. You probably won't find a more supportive group, so it's a good time to dig in.

On the other hand you will meet loneliness in yourself as there is really no escape if you are willing to stick with it. Every single one of us must find our own way. You may find the best community to grow in, the best guidance to rely on, but ultimately you have to make the journey yourself.

One thing is for sure, you will need all of your courage, so you better bring it. Your relentless effort will be encouraging to everyone. ○

Hi I'm Eric

by Eric Soroker

How's this for a training question to ponder: "who" are you when you step onto the mat?

The way I walk into the dojo is potentially how I will practice in class. What I will bring onto the mat. Am I still the same person that navigated my non-training day? Do I observe myself becoming a "character" or playing a role after I changed into my gi? Do I believe that I'm "not" something or "lack" something (that I "am" or "have")? Am I even here or off somewhere else? And of course the big daddy of them all: Am I connected?



If left unattended my mind seems to naturally transition from one state to another. Maybe languish in one state for a long period, or maybe ecstatically rock and roll in between. Sound familiar? The great masters tell us that the only remedy is to become aware of your states and then non-judgmentally and compassionately observe yourself. Just observe. No other actions. To just let go of resisting that it is a paradox. Right action comes from a right state of being. Right state of being comes from right thoughts. Sure, piece of spiritual cake. Cultivate acceptance. Cultivate awareness.

These individual journeys are beautiful, wild and bumpy rides. I think they become all the more beautiful, bumpy and exciting when you combine a dojo full of people (who, I imagine are all experiencing their own special "something"), agree to practice, and then throw. That's when the real fun begins. Your "something" meets with my "something" and then, hopefully, we be-

come alert because anything is possible. What a special way the mat has of revealing both our true and transitory nature and then amplify it.

Following along these same lines, consider this idea; "What is it like to train with me?" Can you imagine what type of experience it is for others to train with you? What would "I" feel like? I wonder if I would look forward to bowing into myself. Or would I cringe. Probably both.

Training is direct communication. The psycho-emotional level that we connect on the mat is surprisingly honest whether the mind wants it to be or not. Soul speak. I'm naked. You're naked. I've agreed. You've agreed. Individual energies coming together with the intension to fully penetrate and stir the pot. These are ripe conditions for some juicy conversation.

Yet, at times, I see in the dojo a room full of people who are all talking

over each other, but with only an occasional conversation occurring. She's too loud; he's too soft. I just don't understand where he's coming from. He talks nonstop without ever pausing for an opening. She tries to anticipate every word before it leaves your lips. He talks so fast and then doesn't listen when you talk. He looks bored. She has nothing to say. He used way more than he needed to get his point across.

So for me it comes back to connection. How can I be fully committed to the conversation and to really meet someone on the mat. To do that, I have to step out of my mind, accept, be open, and then train. Like the perfect cut, its felt not thought. I've grown and learned deeply about myself through my training with everyone. Those elusive moments of real connection are like major revelations. I seek them. I can't help but feel delight and joy when they happen.

It's my intension, to the best of my

abilities and my present level of awareness, to fully try and meet you in the dojo. Come meet me. Hi, my name is Eric. I want to get to know you. I want to be known. Come train with me on the mat. Let's work on what's being shown and maybe we can have a good conversation. ○

A Year's Reflection

by Amanda Bottor

When I started aikido it was for all the wrong reasons. My best friend was doing it; I wanted to get in shape, and to be the cool chick that could really kick some butt. I quickly learned that I found something even better something that would help me blossom as a person. A year and 4 months later I realize that aikido has not only become a part of my life but a way of life.

As you all know I started my first semester of nursing school and it was definitely a challenge. The time went by so quickly yet so slow. I was used to coming to aikido 4 days a week. Slowly the number dwindled, as homework and assignments increased. Then clinical started and I was lucky if I even made it to the dojo 2 days a week.

I had an internal struggle happening; not only was I unable to come to the dojo, but I was unable to be surrounded by the people who support me the most. I had to find my balance again. Work, school, sleep, time to eat, and aikido were all that remained. It wasn't easy and sometimes I would forget to sleep or skip a meal or end up missing a few days of training. I knew I had fallen off the radar when my friends and fam-

ily would call or text me and literally ask "are you still alive?"

Even when I was able to make it to aikido I found it frustrating and hard. My aikido was sloppy, my movements not smooth, things that I had mastered before I could not remember or replicate again. While watching sensei demonstrate the techniques, atelectasis (collapse of the alveoli) would pop into my head and other random medical terms. Thoughts about the pharmacology test I took earlier that day and how the vastus lateralis and dorsal gluteus are both correct IM injections so which one was really the right answer? Next thing I'd know I missed the whole technique. My head was foggy and my aikido was showing it. I pushed myself to keep going to classes whenever I could. I knew the answer to my struggles was to "just keep training." So that is what I did.

Many nights I just wanted to cry because I was so frustrated with myself. I was battling my mind and my physical stamina, which was drained. I know my training isn't the best when I'm in school. I've come across it before just never to the extent that I did this past semester. I tried to stay

positive but it wasn't always there.

Although it was a struggle for me aikido still let me have a few moments for myself during my busy schedule. I have made the decision to go part time starting next semester. To be honest, a large part of that decision other than my own physical and mental health was the fact that I wanted to train more than two days a week. If I kept in the full time nursing program I would not be able to train at all next semester and I was not okay with that.

My semester is now done (thank god) and I have passed all my classes. I can now have a little bit of downtime to just relax before classes start again in January. I slept a good 12 hours the other day, much needed sleep that I had lost over



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the semester. My energy is slowly returning and hopefully my aikido will improve as well.

I wanted to take a minute to thank everyone for being patient with me and for the sometimes verbal, but mostly the silent support each one of you has given me while I work through my struggles of school and everyday life on and off the mat.

In the past year and a couple of months I have torn down walls that I didn't even know were standing and I have learned more about myself than I have before. I have gained strength in more ways than one, and I have realized that the reasons I had started aikido are the farthest reasons from why I keep returning. I am slowly growing and I am hoping to keep blooming until one day I have blossomed into the beautiful person I would like to become.

One summer day a friend once told me, "I think you might like aikido, I think it might do good for you." he was right and I am so glad I decided to step out of my comfort zone and give aikido a try. It is truly one of the best gifts I have ever received. And only now after I take a minute to reflect can I honestly appreciate the dynamic beauty of that which is, AIKIDO.

A New Beginning

by Olga Shaliga

Many years ago, while studying philosophy in college I came across a book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, written by Nietzsche. Although there are very limited parallels between Nietzsche's existentialism and Buddhism, this book became to me an introduction to Buddhist's philosophy, as East and West met.



According to Nietzsche, the human spirit, or human consciousness, passes through the various stages in the transformation, which is cyclical in nature. "I name you three metamorphoses of the spirit: how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child", spoke Zarathustra.

The first stage is a camel, a beast of burden. The camel is not free to make its own decisions, it does "what it ought to do", but wants to be free, wants to be king in its own desert. In the desert, the camel transforms into a lion, a mighty, noble warrior. For its own freedom it must kill, and the old values need to be destroyed. The lion is victorious, the lion can kill, but it cannot create. For creation to begin, another metamorphosis must take place. The lion becomes a child. The child is a new beginning, a play, a first motion, a sacred Yes. The child does not recall the heavy burdens of duty. It has no desire for freedom, because the child is freedom. The child forgets the past; it is not disturbed by

the future because the child lives only for the moment. Speaking in the words of Zarathustra, "The spirit now wills its own will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins its own spirit." A new beginning, beginner's mind...

As a typical social animal, I found myself mostly existing in the first two metamorphoses. I have too much of "what I ought to do" on my plate and seek mysterious freedom. Fortunately, my inner child is not asleep all the time, and there were many places in my world where it awakens. Even though I could not complain that my reality is deprived of colorfulness, happiness and creation, I could not get rid of the feeling that something is missing, like Swiss cheese, which tastes good, but still has holes.

A year ago, I was introduced to Aikido. I recall my first visit to the dojo, when I came to observe a class having very limited ideas about martial arts and Aikido in particular. I was deeply impressed in spite of the fact

that I hardly understood of what was occurring on the mat and could barely distinguished uke from nage. Beautiful people training in near silence, the sunset above Galina Lake and thin scent of lavender were all together so calm, present, and complete. Aikido was meant to become a part of my life.

Both, physical and mental aspects of training are difficult for me, and on other days they seem excessively complicated. I still an absolute newbie, “forever newbie” after a year of training. Knowing that the human body has a specific set of biological and biochemical capabilities and limitations, I, nevertheless, still have a very little knowledge of what mine is capable of. Decades may pass before I learn how to attack and take a proper ukemi, how to blend with uke and redirect, how to keep my inner child awoken and focus on the moment, how to sit Zazen without thinking of “what I ought to do” or what is truly meant by being centered. In an article which I recently came across, Aikido was compared to the mindful meditation in action, and I could not be more agree. It is a truly unique path to spiritual understanding, patience, acceptance and letting go. Aikido is never static and is an ongoing process where there is no sense of being, but becoming.

The more I practice Aikido, the more I enjoy this wonderful journey of discovering and understanding of who I am. It is a never ending path to a new beginning, which adds meaning, color and perspective to my life. ○

All I Am Is Now

by Nick Fritz

I have been questioning time for a while. After adding 40 more hours to my week by not having employment, I thought that I would have plenty of time to work on my hobbies and get projects accomplished. But I still do not have as much time as I thought I would. There is always going to be something to fill up the hours. Even wandering aimlessly takes time. Spending time wisely takes constant thought and planning.

I want to tell a story I have been pondering for some time. It came to me from Tom Brown Jr. and an interaction he had with his teacher Stalking Wolf. It begins with Tom finding his teacher as he is staring at a blueberry bud. Stalking Wolf was going to watch the blueberry bud open into a flower. Tom knew what he was doing, but in true pot-licker

form, he goes up to Stalking Wolf and asks “What are you doing?” Stalking Wolf’s response was “all I am is now”. Tom is flabbergasted and realizes that he will be exploring that phase for the rest of his life. Stalking Wolf was not concerned with anything else other than that bud. He was not going to eat, drink or think until it finished opening. In a way, Stalking Wolf became part of the bud as it blossomed. He was so consumed by the miracle of the bud turning into a flower that nothing else mattered. “All I am is now” is so simple and yet so complex. I am trying to learn is how I can live this way. What does it take to be so awake and alive? I believe that we are searching for this oneness on the mat

What is it to “wake up”, to “be in the moment” and to be the “now”? It may mean to give up the past and future and to be only concerned in the moment. Maybe it is like living



moment to moment and forgetting the last to become full present at the current. This is far easier said than done. This means letting go of our thinking mind; which, doesn't want to be let go of. We can accomplish this through sitting (Zen), Aikido and other meditations. What these tools do is to break down the thinking mind so that it will let go of its death grip. With the thinking mind loosening its grip, the spiritual mind is allowed to grow. Over time, these practices may let us feel and experience instead of constant thought telling us how we are feeling. All of the thinking we do hinders us from truly becoming alive.

A very good teacher is the outside temperature. Take the cold as an example; we go outside and feel the cold. We think it is cold and cause our bodies to tense, which in turn makes us colder. We end up thinking the cold and therefore we must be freezing. If we were in the moment, the cold would not matter. It just is. Our thoughts make and keep us colder than we actually are.

We need to transcend distractions, like cold, to be in the moment. The physical mind is all about limitations. The spiritual mind only has one limitation which is the imagination.

When we practice zazen and other meditations, we are trying to empty our cup. Modern living holds us back from emptying our cup and living in the now. We are able to still our bodies and clear our minds, but then we return to our entertainment lifestyles and fill the cup right back up again. This is where I have particular trouble. I enjoy the radio and movies, but they are not real. Movies not only take me out of the now when watched, they also have effect me later on. They take me out of the moment and the 'now' for days after. It happens whenever we think about them again.

We keep another distraction in practically every room, the clock. Yes the clock is useful, but it also takes us to the future and away from the 'now'. We worry about what we

have to do and where we have to be. It helps us create a lot of stress for ourselves by rushing around. In fact, the mind and spirit do not know human time. Think of how it can speed up or slow down. Such distractions as the clock keep us away from the now.

An advantage that Stalking Wolf had was that he was willing to take the time to watch the blueberry bud turn into a flower. This is what I thought I would have time for when I stopped working. I was wrong. What I am realizing is that we must allow time to practice this or any other activity. It takes a constant, consistence effort to live in the moment with out allowing our mind to distract us. We need to slow down and forget about the future and the past in order to be at one moment fully. The now is a place of timelessness. Time does not exist in the now. Much of us can not exist in the moment. This is something placed on my heart and everyone needs to follow what is on their heart. ○

Spring 2010 Schedule, beginning January 12

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

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen		6:30 - 7:30 am Zazen	9 - 10 am Mixed	8 - 9 am Zazen
	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed			10 - 11 am Beginner's Weapons/laido	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		