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Bucks County Aikido Journal

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What Are You Looking For?

by George Lyons

Is Bucks County Aikido for you? No sugar coating it, training here is going to be difficult. The beginning student can expect practice to start out slowly, but eventually lead up to being rigorous and intense. Each person is challenged in their own way and each person responds differently to challenges. Athletic people sometimes give up and others who have never really done anything physical become great practitioners. The question is what's in your heart. What are you looking for?

We live in a society that is saturated with ideas of fame and fortune. Our pursuit of material gain sometimes seems insatiable. My teacher once asked me if there was anyone in this culture that is poor but famous. I couldn't think of anyone. Even if success doesn't bring prominence it's still assumed that it is synonymous with some kind of material reward. How would you define it?

Generally, the martial arts are categorized into such a small box that it's hard to imagine they might help with anything more than self discipline and maybe the chance to hang onto your wallet in a back alley encounter. There is a story about the emperor's fighting rooster who was so well trained that no other rooster

would fight him. You might think it's about invincibility, untouchable physical prowess, but like all parables there is a hidden meaning.

In Sun Tzu's classic *The Art of War*, it's written that conflict is an integral part of life and that subduing the other without battle is the most skillful. To grasp this you must go into it, deepening your understanding by continually putting yourself at risk. It won't be enough if all you are looking for is technique. In Zen training it's said you have to be willing to cut off your arm. In other words, you will not remain the person you are if you want to get to the heart of this. You are going to have to face every dark corner, turn yourself inside out. You are not going to add to what you are; you are going to drop what you think you are.

Success on this path is a quiet one. If wealth and fame is what you seek you should look elsewhere. You may even find that dedication to a path that is not concerned with such things can bring a great deal of misunderstanding from others in our culture. Maybe though, after many sacrificed nights and diligent practice you are more awake and attentive in the moment and are able to keep a passerby from tripping and falling with a well-timed helping hand. Maybe you find yourself handling a situation that makes you wonder if you transformed potential violence with a casual smile. Perhaps, selfish concerns de-empha-

sized, you find deeper connections with other human beings. That attention, that smile, that connection may take a lifetime of study. Could this be martial art?

I am often asked if I've ever had to use Aikido, or would it work in a real situation? The questions are genuine but skim the surface and can sometimes feel disappointing to a regular practitioner who has been working hard in the art. Still, they deserve an honest answer that hopefully will encourage more questions. Yes, I use it every day. This is the only real situation, right here, right now. If the practice gets through, it's not just in our doing; it's in our being.

If what is written here interests you I hope you will look into it more deeply. There will always be obstacles but let no scheduling conflict, no injury, no financial crisis stop you. Training here will be difficult. It may not bring fame and fortune but what you might find instead is a path and a practice that makes life rich. ☉

There never was a struggle or a battle which required greater valor than that in which a man forgets or denies himself.

Meister Eckhart

Raw Sitting

by Grace Rollins

The hour of Zazen stood out curiously on the Summer Camp schedule. I was only about three months into Aikido training, and all I knew of Zazen were a few comments from my dojo's grumbly senior members, such as, "Why anyone would want to sit in an uncomfortable position for a long period of time is beyond me." We didn't sit at my old dojo, so maybe it was rebelliousness that carried me over to the hall that afternoon. I wanted to see what the hubbub was about.

One beauty of beginner's mind is that it doesn't bother you much when you arrive late to a large room full of people preparing for Zazen. The Zen priest Genjo Marinello Osho was still giving his introduction so I was able to sneak into a row in the back before he rang the bell. His sage commentary flew over my head; all I heard was something about counting to ten.

I sat seiza on the zafu since that was most familiar, in retrospect not the wisest choice. The bell rang, and moments later my knees started to burn, my back to ache, my mind to spin... "This is one of the craziest things I've ever done." That's what I thought as I struggled not just with discomfort, but with a surprising flood of desires: move, scratch, fidget, run, do something. Sitting still is much harder than it sounds, let alone counting to ten. It must have been no more than 20 minutes before the bell was rung again and I was free to move. After a couple of these sits, I was in a daze.

It's natural to want to laugh a thing



like that off from a safe distance, kind of like you would a minor earthquake or a powerful thunderstorm where no one got hurt. But there's no shelter from an internal experience of the raw forces of nature. I was intrigued into wondering what a few more inner tempests would reveal.

Back home in Connecticut, to scratch this new itch, I tried sitting a little on my own, and read a couple of internet articles and books. I remember reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and *The Unfettered Mind*. The main point I seemed to take away was, "Don't fixate on things." Don't try to get something, don't think you know what you're getting. Engage fully in what's in front of you, but don't get stuck thinking any one thing is such a big deal.

An article by Kate Savoca in *Biran* (the Aikido journal) was my first introduction to Sesshin. I'd only heard

rumors about Rohatsu Sesshin, the mythological eight-day retreat that Chiba Sensei used to make his Ken-shusei students attend on a deserted island, where even the toughest aikidoists reportedly threw up in their gis, passed out on the floor or ran away in the night. But Kate wrote with appreciation about embracing the challenges and small personal lessons of Sesshin. No macho stories indulging in suffering and violence, just a description of hard, rewarding training. It attracted me in the same way Aikido did: there was a mysterious virtue and soul-nourishing energy that came out of facing challenges head-on.

This is how, about six months after starting Aikido training, I attended the three-day Sesshin at Bucks County Aikido with only that Summer Camp introduction and a couple of self-supervised sits under my bright white belt. I'm looking back on it now a few years later with several Sesshin of varying duration

behind me, including a few long, cold Rohatsu, but I still think that first 3-day Sesshin was my hardest. The difficulties were many: inexperience, pain, distraction, fatigue, self-consciousness, and of course, the Attack of the Flies (there was an uncanny infestation of flies that year).

Yet in unison with the other participants I pushed through the weekend and emerged elated. When I looked around at the trees, the lake, the potluck food, the road on the way home, it felt like my eyes had been scrubbed out. The experience was unique and irreplaceable. Whether you fixate on the gruesome details of Sesshin as a badge of honor, or laugh them off, the immutable, invaluable core of Sesshin is what it reveals to you about yourself and the world around you. This is yours alone.

The way we approach Zazen practice in the Aikido dojo is somewhat unusual. Outside the dojo, many, if not most, students of Zen first read a lot about it, have Intro to Zen orientations, special retreats, technical coaching and so on. In the dojo, on the other hand, we often jump almost straight onto the cushion, unawares, like I did at that Summer Camp. If I'd thought too much about it I probably never would have tried that first sit before having someone teach me "how to sit," and definitely wouldn't have launched into Sesshin so unpracticed. But I'm glad I did. Tasting Zazen in its raw, unfiltered form, not knowing or analyzing in advance what it's all supposed to mean or do for you, holds a special power. For the same reason, I can see why it's better to not have too much verbal explanation when learning Aikido techniques. The

most important thing is what the experience shows you in that moment.

As I started attending Sesshin in the context of a formal monastery, sitting became layered with discourse, koan practice, and religious ceremony. At the heart it was still just me, watching those internal forces of nature, but an architecture started growing all around the raw experience. It's easy to get lost amid all that meaning, to fixate on more superficial influences. I hope that with Zazen, Aikido, acupuncture and my other endeavors, I can remember to stay in touch with the essence of the practice. Every time I train I have the opportunity to launch myself into the center of the tempest. If I sit with my eyes open I might be lucky enough to really get tossed around, cracked open and revealed. ◉

Life holds to one central truth: that all matter and energy needed for life moves in great closed circles from which nothing escapes and to which only driving fire of the sun is added. Life devours itself: everything that eats is itself eaten; every chemical that is made by life can be broken down by life; all the sunlight that can be used is used. Of all that there is on earth, nothing is taken away by life, and nothing is added by life—but nearly everything is used by life, used and reused in thousands of complex ways, moved through vast chains of plants and animals and back again to the beginning.

From the official report issued by the Stockholm Conference in 1972 (predecessor to the 1997 Kyoto Accord)

When is Not Training, Training?

by Rose Gladstein

The last article I wrote about aikido was my shodan essay over 12 years ago titled something like "When Not Training is Training". It was about stopping hard training when my son was born. I don't remember what I said exactly, but I do remember believing I could use my life, as a parent, for training.

These years have been as relentless as hard training. Several times I felt I couldn't take another step. Falling, getting up, falling. At first, I thought my aikido resided deep within my cells and would sustain me, carry me through the rough parts. But the rough parts just kept getting rougher and the mat seemed miles away. My body betrayed me, transforming into another person, and my mind convinced me the years spent training were worthless. Where had I gone? Did it happen cell by cell, each one reaching its end to be replaced by one with rearranged nucleotides, or did it happen all at once?

I'm not sure what has and has not been training over these past 12 years, and most of the time I don't think I've used my time well. But in early August something shifted during my annual pilgrimage from Hawaii to New York. Bucks County Aikido and Peace Valley Lavender farm have been part of this pilgrimage for most of 7 years, but this year was different.

No one seemed to notice or even care who I thought I had become.

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When I stepped on the mat during my first of 3 classes I could barely move, my gi too tight and already soaked. By the end of warm ups and ukemi, my pulse raced, my face flushed; I sat down to rest during practice yet nobody seemed to care. I felt tears and sweat and tears. I felt grief and longing and desire. Then all that noise stopped. Everything inside quieted and began to drop away. Back stretch, bow.

My second and third classes didn't bring internal storms. In fact, I was glad and relieved for just the physicality of training, the movement, falling, getting up, sore knees and contact with others committed to training. During my visit I felt the strength of Bucks County Aikido. In Honolulu, I've seen a lot of aikido, but nothing like what George and Patti Sensei have created, nothing like what you, the students, have made possible by your own training. Please take care of it. Please appreciate it. Please make sure your training is Training. I may be 5,000

miles away but my three days of training will need to sustain me and invigorate my not-training Training until I return. ☪

Remember Your Practice and Breathe

by Pat King

It turns out that the daily habits and disciplined practice I established this spring were not hard won. It's easy when you're only living for your own self-improvement and you have the sense to sign on with master teachers. The habit-structure was like a sand castle on the beach. I added one bucket of sand at a time, sometimes stealing from other peoples' designs and energy, sometimes able to add a bucket alone. Always shaping and caretaking "my own self", attached and proud when it stayed strong enough to withstand

insult and injury. Lately though I've watched as a big wave came in and washed the structure away. Muscles that had taken months to harden and support efficient movement are now puddling down, drawn there by gravity, the pull of the earth. This hasn't happened without some emotional notice.

Irritation, impatience, boredom and anger lurk where no eyes can see, just black and heavy, leaning on me. There's a song in there somewhere.

The wave is family life. The minutes and hours of the day disappear and suddenly, the sun is setting and I'm tucking my father up for the night. He is hungry for attention and patience. I had neither at first, floored and upset by a year's worth of wear on my Dear. He used to call my mother 'Dear' all the time, until we kids, in gentle mocking, began to call him that. It stuck. He is Dear, Old Dear and still dear, but he doesn't often respond to that name or any name any more. He can't recognize people, can't see them; he's blind. He can't hear people well and when he manages to catch a conversation, his stroke-assaulted brain rarely makes sense of it. He talks a lot, most often to a population of hallucinated folks he calls the zoomers. He says he can tell the real people from the hallucinated ones because the zoomers don't talk back, just stare at him. He's always reaching out and touching people or the air, doing his check-ins, trying to stay with us.

At least once a day, usually over a gin and tonic (weak) on the deck he becomes oriented and social. Two days into my stay with him he told me that the zoomers hadn't been around lately. "Do you think I'm



Rose Gladstein with her son Gabe

too loud for them?” I asked him. “You might have a point there,” he responded thoughtfully and made me laugh. There is more out of tune singing when I’m around, more talking to animals, more questions and comments to field. His deafness can be intermittent: I upset him by saying to sister that if it was up to brother and me we’d have to place him in a nursing home. My sister glared at me, knowing it’s always on his mind and sure enough, he picked that up and was nervous around me for a while. I had to reassure him that he was safe and sound here, that his youngest daughter will not hear of a change like that.

“Either settle down and love it or hit

the road,” she said succinctly. No teachers here? Who am I kidding?

So I’ve begun to regard these negative emotions as ‘uke’, some kind of self attacks. I think of Chiba Sensei’s joke at last year’s seminar: “It’s simple. Get out of the way.” Wake up and get out of the way. I am not these negative emotions, don’t have to act on them in any way shape or form. Just watch them. It’s hard not to follow them though—I want to track the antecedent, track the conditioning reinforcers, enter in and dispense with them intellectually. It’s no good. The best way is the same here as at the dojo: “No need to follow it or try and figure it out.” Sensei’s advice for sitting zazen.

“Feel things with ‘your whole self’ and the right time to act and speak will emerge.”

But what’s with this whole self, and who is this whole self that a part of it now is sabotaging my days? Having met and labeled this source of the negative as my own self, I’m left to acknowledge that the ‘disciplined, training self’, the ‘better’ other self, relied heavily on the energy and instruction of others. That I steal the discipline, the devotion and energy and think it’s mine. A part of this whole self has been put out and is looking to blame. My ego is screaming and most of the society around me supports it: “Old people belong in nursing facilities when they can no longer care for their own bodies. You have a life to live, goals to meet, fun to have, projects to start and finish.” I said it to my sister. After glaring, she laughed at me: “What’s so important about all that?” What’s so important indeed?

Sometimes out of boredom I flip scenarios around. People die unexpectedly in car accidents and Dear is left to fend for himself. Who knows how long he’d last? He might do OK. Shadow and Lucky the dogs would be here, the cats and all the zoomers. He might like it better. I remember Harold and Maude. I am Harold! I think of Maude’s message: Just seize the moment, don’t dwell on the tombstones, just steal a car and go for a joy ride. I wish I could give some of that abandon to my father but then he’s always lived a life of measured caution, always adapted to circumstance. That’s what he’s doing now, and why is it I think I have nothing to learn here? Why is ‘there’ any better? Good question.

The answer and the challenge came



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in the email this morning:

“True strength of virtue is best cultivated with a spirit of self-sacrifice and actions carried out when there are no eyes to see them. Therefore, daily life and training should be led by one’s own conviction and subjective attitude, seeking neither recognition, praise, nor return for what has been done, but making practice be about Silent Work.”

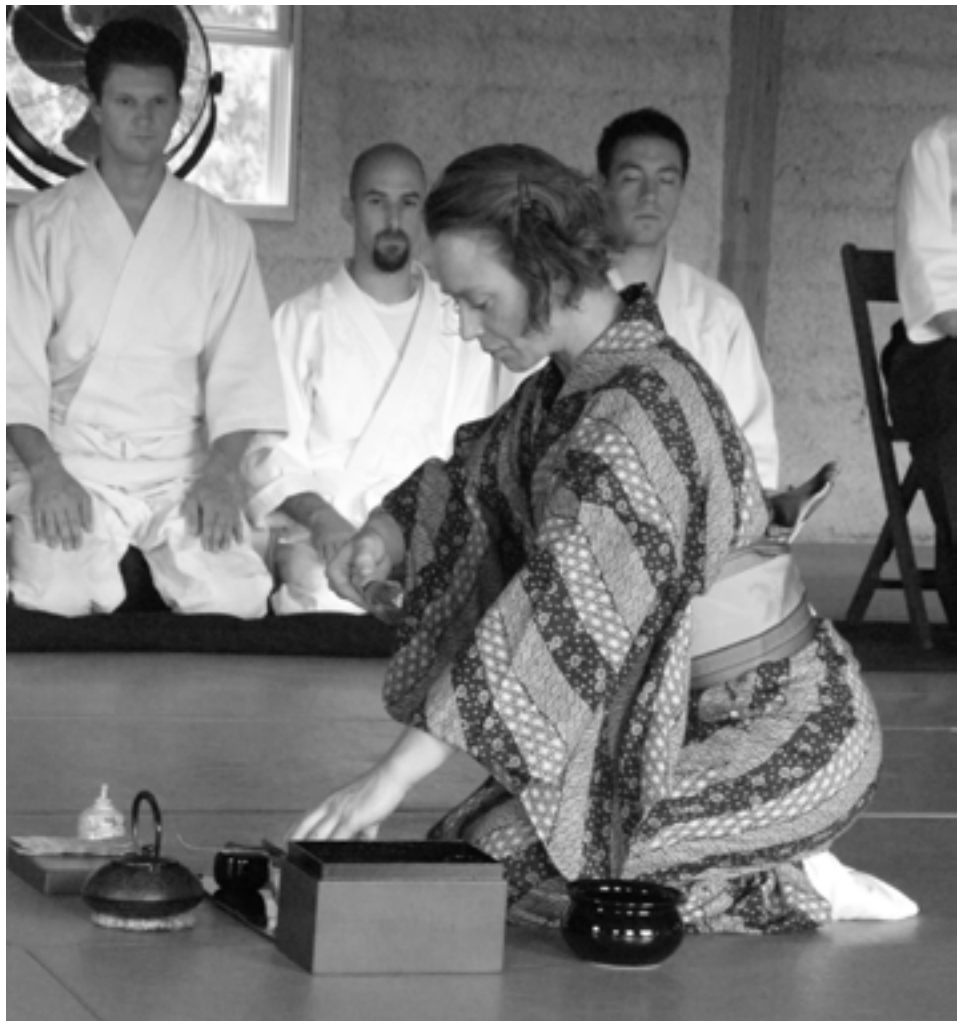
T. K. Chiba ◉

In memory of our dear friend Shadow, who spent the last few months of his life happily here on the farm. He will be missed.



Shadow

May 12 1999 - August 6 2010



No Holes

by Patti Meisenbach-Lyons

I remember Chiba Sensei saying years ago that you should have one thing in your life that has ‘no holes’ in it. Something that you have worked on diligently, passionately, turning it over and over, inside and out. I was thinking of this as I watched Roo Heins perform the Japanese Tea Ceremony recently at our dojo. Not that tea ceremony is her thing with no holes, but rather that I observed so clearly the studied, practiced movements; the distinct and deliberate sounds; the timing and rhythm of the ceremony. I saw how such a thing could become ‘perfected’. Roo spoke of her teacher who has

been studying tea for more than fifty years! Really? Fifty years to perfect making and serving tea?

As we spoke later, she talked about the difficulty in her practice of bringing her awareness fully to the ‘guest’ or recipient of the tea during the ceremony. Aha, I thought, that’s what takes fifty years!

It’s the ‘other’ that makes these practices more interesting, challenging and potent. That which will show you your openings. Maybe basket weaving would be a less challenging pursuit, no ‘other’ to contend with, or is there? In Aikido it is so obvious, your attacker is always there. But sometimes you train

with a partner who seems to have absolutely no idea that you are on the other end of their arm. Just an execution of technique. This is certainly a stage of development in Aikido practice, the proper placement of hands, feet, hips, irimi, tenkan, etc. But what of the ‘other’? This level of study gets more difficult but also more interesting; how to bring another into the technique to make it whole. How to bring a drinker to a bowl of tea?

Technique and form serve as a map to direct us, but it takes practice, imagination, patience and awareness to really include another. It can take a lifetime to completely exhaust the openings in one’s practice, whatever it is. We should all be so lucky to live a long enough life. ☉

Something is Happening Here and I Do Know What It Is

by Roman Loewen

I think we all realize how special our Dojo is. When you’re away for a while you realize it even more.

Let’s give credit where credit is due. It’s the WORK of Sensei and Patti, their personal EFFORT that made this place possible. They have given us a great gift:

A VEHICLE FOR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION.

It is about AIKIDO, our TRAINING, and our PRACTICE and



even more. Their WORK needs to be fully recognized. Here we learn how to FIGHT. We face and fight our fears. Here we learn how to go to battle against our sorrow, against our weakness. Here we fight our demons and we fight well. This battle breaks down our old skin—renewed, we emerge.

When we transform ourselves we touch the rest of the world, changing everything and everyone that we come in contact with. Because of this WORK, these EFFORTS, the world is being altered for the better. When and if we deal with our personal issues, we are physically changing the universe. The choice is ours. It’s up to each one of us to do the WORK and put in the EFFORT. The point is that we have a vehicle for transforming the world. There is no more important WORK than that.

It’s about LOVE. Sensei and Patti’s WORK and EFFORT affect all those who come through these GATES—even the customers. When my 80 year old mother-in-law lies down at night and hugs her Lavender pillow she forgets, for a few moments, her

body’s failings, forgets the aches, the pain. She smells Lavender; she smells LOVE.

I am grateful to have this vehicle for transformation.

This WORK, their WORK, is making the world a better place to live. Really! That’s heavy duty—it doesn’t get any more REAL than that.

Something is happening here and I do know what it is. ☉

Two-Month Introductory Course Begins September 21

Classes meet twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 6-7 PM. The cost of the course is \$200 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.

The scroll at the front of our dojo was a gift from Chiba Sensei and is the calligraphy of Kazuaki Tanahashi representing ten, or breakthrough. Tanahashi Sensei studied Aikido with O-Sensei at Iwama dojo in the late 1940's. He is a calligrapher, painter and writer. The following article is reprinted from Aikido Today Magazine.

ten, breakthrough

by Kazuaki Tanahashi

Breakthrough is a sudden and overwhelming unfolding of freedom from long-held limitations. It makes what seems impossible possible. Various fields of human activity — scientific research, medicine, education, business, and political work — can be seen as processes for achieving breakthroughs.

A problem with the English word “breakthrough” is that it sounds violent. It may remind people of penetrating an enemy’s front line or destroying an obstacle. I thought it might be useful to find a concept corresponding to breakthrough in the East Asian ideographic system. Here it is (1).

The original pictograph for the Chinese word *zhuan* consists of two parts. The left side represents a wheel; originally a horizontal picture of a cart, it was later moved to a vertical position (2, 3). The right side represents the sound *zhuan*, which means “to rotate.”

This ideograph is pronounced *chon* in Korean and *chuyen* in Vietnamese. Its Sino-Japanese pronuncia-

tion is *ten*.

The symbol carries a wide range of meanings that have to do with rotation: revolving, spinning, rolling, going around, turning, shifting, and changing. It can remind us that, in pursuing breakthrough, what we really want is to change the situation and that we may not need to humiliate, destroy, or remove others to achieve our objectives.

The basic patterns of the Aikido movement — *irimi* and *tenkan* — are spelled in Japanese as shown at the [right]. *Irimi* consists of two ideograms — one meaning “enter” (4) and the other meaning “body” (5). So, *irimi* indicates a straightforward approach to an opponent. *Tenkan* is a combination of the word meaning “turn” with the word meaning “shift,” and it indicates rotation of position (6).

It’s interesting to hear people who have never trained on the mat say, “I did *Aikido* at that point.” In saying this, they probably mean that they did not resist, struggle, or force but went along with the natural flow of interactive energy and arrived at an unexpected shift of situation.

Aikido can indeed help people learn the art of breakthrough. ○



(1)



(2)

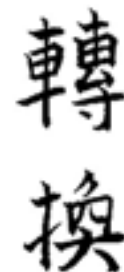


(3)



(4)

(5)



(6)