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The Razor's Edge

by George Lyons

To me, the commitment of a martial artist is more subtle and less obvious than simple, continued, persistent effort. Open-hearted in every moment, a martial artist is willing to adapt as necessary, reverse course, or completely let go of everything even unto death. Time invested in conventional commitments is of no consequence, whether it's in a job, a career, a marriage, or the study of an art. Fear of the loss of long-held ideas (lifestyle) can feel just as terrifying as a real death and is confronted head on. This is a commitment of a higher priority, to that of unconditional presence.

A martial artist clings to nothing and so is not bound to a continuum of growth through efforts and practice. The simple act of being engaged in the study of Aikido does not necessarily make us martial artists. This truth makes no distinction between beginner and advanced practitioners, so we can never be complacent about it.

I have now been training in Aikido for twenty-six years and a chief instructor for nineteen of them. I've approached the mat with enthusiasm as well as dread. My practice has given me many rewards and insights but also times of deep suffering and despair. Along the way I have indulged in self-satisfaction as well as self-loathing. I have at times



felt righteous in my point of view and convinced that certain situations were unjust. For a chief instructor there is no relief if he/she is willing to keep the dojo doors open through the chaos, ups and downs, successes and failures, in their relationship with the art and their students. Cutting through the forest of ideas and feelings, the entanglements of hopes and fears, remaining focused in the present moment to see clearly what "is" and not what we think "should" be.

Long time Aikido practitioners, no matter who we are, can expect the trial of loneliness; of feeling unappreciated, unneeded, stuck and frustrated, bored and bereft. Whatever events lead us to it, it's important to realize that this is part of the human experience and not just reserved for Aikidoists. Perseverance in the art reveals it, but in fact it's been there

all along. To pass through is to see ourselves clearly, accept what we fear most, let go of the self: our self-importance, self-involvement, our self-saving attitude. Not easy to do.

In my opinion, commitment without the willingness to be self-effacing in every moment, in every aspect of our lives, is just brutishness. Our path is a razor's edge where we must learn to see for ourselves if our commitment is one to preserve our worldview, or one that is willing to give it up and perhaps see as we have never seen before. This is the challenge for the student of Aikido and ultimately the commitment of a martial artist.

We act out of conviction and therefore create strong, unfathomable sin. It is in this sense that our very conviction is the womb of our sin. Religions are not at all the excep-

tion to this: rather, they are the greatest example.

Whether it is our faith or our philosophy, because of our firm convictions, we human beings create karma or sin. We must deeply observe this fact. After all, one's own conviction has trapped oneself more and more firmly into the darkness. Wars are caused because of this and, ultimately, the destruction of the world.

Zen Master Hogan ○

The Joy of Stuck

by John McDevitt

There is one more thing you need to do...

Approach it like your head is being held under water.

Lyons Sensei

Knowing you are stuck, in the dojo environment, can create a little tension. Some might call it a “gift”. I had a few other choice words in mind.

I knew I was stuck, because Sensei told me I was. I also felt it from a lot of you. Several of you also told me – in your own way. I am not sure why it is so difficult to see yourself as you are and then add/subtract as necessary. Why it is so difficult to even consider an alternative way of seeing and being? Why is there so much resistance to giving up what we already have? What I am sure of is that when you cannot take that breath that you so desperately need, you start to consider options that you might not have considered under less tense circumstances. Gift or not, it was mine... all mine. I realize, now, that no one else could help me with it. People could say – you are stuck – but they could not unstuck me. I knew that the answer was all around me, in front of me. I was swimming in it. I had to somehow let it in. Or let it out... I had to be willing to give up what I already had so that something else would be able to present itself. There was no pity, blame or even expectation from anyone in the dojo, simply recognition of what was. I had to feel it for myself first and then find an alternative. Be present, be aware, see what

was really happening, drop any extra... all those things we hear every night... and allow an alternative to emerge. I had to abandon part of my aikido to allow my aikido to continue to grow.

As I look back on it, I needed to do several things:

1. Take responsibility for my training/development
2. See myself more clearly
3. Be willing to abandon what was no longer needed.

At the time, however – visualize your head being held under water here – I was not thinking so rationally. I was panicking, distressed, exposed, desperately holding on to what I already had, and at the same time looking for solutions everywhere.

In the end I believe that several things helped me through this part of my training:

1. Embodiment of the fundamentals of Aikido and then “trusting my practice”.
2. Being held to the fire. Sensei made clear where I was and was not going to let me breathe until something happened. There was no pity or anger and also nowhere to hide... just a gentle but firm hand on the back of my neck.
3. Feldenkrais Training. Because of our Feldenkrais training I knew that it was possible to feel myself in new ways and find alternative ways to move.
4. Deciding that I was not going to give up. I had practiced too long and too hard to give up now. I had to let the negativity and denial that naturally presented itself wash over me.

All these things had to ripen to cre-



ate this moment where something else was possible.

I can now see the joy in being stuck. More accurately – I better understand the potential of knowing you are stuck. I see it as an opportunity to take a deep breath, walk through the door, and just see what is on the other side. Thank you all for working through this with me (I could not have done it without you). I am excited to be a beginner again and look forward to connecting with you on and off the mat. ○

Zen in Our Practice

by Serge Mikhailov

*If you have not
Linked yourself
To true emptiness,
You will never understand
The Art of Peace.*

Morihei Ueshiba

At the end of February 2010, invited by a friend, I agreed to check out a beginner's class at Bucks County Aikido. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. If someone told me back then that some 14 months later I would pick this subject of Zen for a piece in BCA Journal after spending quite a few hours in the dojo, and going through a sesshin last October, my best response would have been a skeptical smile. Back then, the only thing in my mind that linked martial arts with Buddhism and meditation was the fact that it was the prevalent religion and philosophy in the countries which everyone associates with martial arts, and of course the images of amazing Shaolin monks dispatching count-

less enemies in the movies.

My first introduction to a seated meditation (Zazen) was a short sit between classes, which I tried after a brief instruction and without asking myself (or anyone else) the questions like "What is this supposed to do for me?" or "What is the significance of this?" Back then it was just a nice breather between classes, and an interesting mini self-challenge: "Can I really sit in an unusual posture for 20-30 minutes without moving? Let's see..."

We all have heard Sensei's many remarks relating to Zazen about being present in the moment, staying focused, letting go after the strike. Our new dojo members have been exposed to the significance of Zen practice during the recent Zen week last March in the dojo, and those who already understood its significance have had a chance to have a little more practice. So I decided to explore the subject a little more.

In preparation for writing this article I read a couple of books: "Zen in the Martial Arts" by Joe Hyams and "The Art of Peace" translated and edited by John Stevens, which contains stories of life, and numerous talks and writings of O'Sensei. My perhaps excessive use of citations here was done with the purpose showing them in an unprocessed form so that the words can deliver messages that may have been misinterpreted or missed by me. Believe me, there are many more quotes which I originally intended to use in this article, but it would be better if you just read these very inspiring books on your own (if you have not already done so).

Joe Hyams, the author of the first

book, has been practicing martial arts since 1952. He has studied jeet-kune-do with Bruce Lee in addition to eight other martial arts disciplines. He says in the book that if somebody told him about his future involvement with Zen in the beginning of his path, he would have dismissed it as nonsense. It was not until several years into his training that he came to realize that the deepest purpose of the martial arts is to serve as a vehicle for personal spiritual development. He writes:

The role of Zen in the martial arts defies easy definition because Zen has no theory; it is an inner knowing for which there is no clearly stated dogma. The Zen of martial arts deemphasizes the power of the intellect and extols that of intuitive action. Its ultimate aim is to free the individual from anger, illusion, and false passion.

One of the many challenges for me in my present Aikido practice is getting rid of the habit of tensing up in anticipation of a technique, to the point of potentially experiencing injury by not properly taking ukemi. I bet a few readers who have practiced with me are probably thinking, "Dude, you're not only tense during that point in time; you are tense from point A to point B, with A being entering the dojo and B leaving it." Well, I'm working on it... and hopefully some progress has been made, though I have no timeline expectations of when this issue will be completely resolved. I'm on the right track according to this story:

A young boy traveled across Japan to the school of a famous martial artist. When he arrived at the dojo he was given an audience by the sensei.

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“What do you wish from me?” the master asked.

“I wish to be your student and become the finest karateka in the land,” the boy replied. “How long must I study?”

“Ten years at least,” the master answered.

“Ten years is a long time,” said the boy. “What if I studied twice as hard as all your other students?”

“Twenty years,” replied the master.

“Twenty years! What if I practice day and night with all my effort?”

“Thirty years,” was the master’s reply.

“How is it that each time I say I will work harder, you tell me that it will take longer?” the boy asked.

“The answer is clear. When one eye is fixed upon your destination, there is only one eye left with which to find the Way.”

The same principle applies even to the short-term goals while practicing a technique – having your mind set on something, even on the idea of freeing it, or trying to block the blockage, is counterproductive because it simply doesn’t work. From the books I have learned a new term – *Mushin*. It’s a state of mind that literally means “no-mind”. In Bruce Lee’s words:

According to the Zen masters, mushin is operating when the actor is separate from the act and no thoughts interfere with action because the unconscious act is the most free and uninhibited. When mushin functions, the mind moves from one activity to another, flowing like a stream of water and filling every space.

This sounds really cool, but I realize that in order to attain this level one has to rely on the body’s in-

stinctive responses, and not just *any* instinctive responses (like blocking a strike with a stiff arm and with the heart racing) but on those proper and effective ones developed throughout the years of training and getting them under your skin. When enough techniques practiced thousands of times are at the body’s subconscious disposal, when the proper moves are executed intuitively and efficiently, with the proper Ki extension, another Zen-inspired O’Sensei saying will start to come to fruition in our practice:

Ultimately, you must forget about technique. The further you progress, the fewer teachings there are. The Great Path is really No Path.

Being a realist, and understanding that at this point I have to deal with my sloppy self for years to come, I need something to rely on. In my reading I came across two remarks O’Sensei made that comfort me in my training and my perception of my own mistakes:

In reality, Aikido has no forms, no set patterns. It is like an invisible wave of energy. However, such a phenomenon is too difficult for human beings to grasp, so we use provisional forms to explain it and put it into practice. Any movement, in fact, can become an Aikido technique, so in ultimate terms, there are no mistakes. My advice to you: Learn and forget! Learn and forget! Make the techniques part of your being!

Failure is the key to success; Each mistake teaches us something.

I especially think of the second one after I get my fingers smacked during my bokken practice when I am not completely letting go and relax-

ing at the end of a strike (though, I think I should be able to get rid of this habit rather soon, given the motivation involved). Having said all that, what conclusion am I getting to? I am not sure if there is one. One thing that comes to mind is that for all of us, the students of the Art of Peace, it is important to remember to always live in the moment and try to present ourselves to our fullest capacity—be it with training and its physical challenges, meeting our own fears and anxieties and letting them go, or sitting through *zazen* and dismissing all those pesky thoughts that block our way if not to enlightenment, then to at least some higher state of inner peace. In the beginning, we may walk what seems to be two separate paths of training and meditation, which should meet and become one study of the spirit. And as they do, we begin to walk the path set by O’ Sensei:

Work on yourself and your appointed task in the Art of Peace. Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow. You are here for no other purpose than to realize your inner divinity and manifest your inner enlightenment. Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art to all that you encounter. ○

Keep Going

by Kim O’Malley

I want to stand at the top of a mountain

And whisper before we are destroyed

“Keep going”

March 11, 2011 – Tokyo, Japan –

Magnitude 6.6 Earthquake

This is it, I thought, this is what I have been waiting for—the bristle of reality to curl its bony fingers up my spine and puncture the reverie. No one knew how to react aside from a few squeezed murmurs of terror. The world was ending. The haze broke and I clutched the desk, waiting—waiting for pieces of sky to shatter at my feet. That was the first second, but then it got worse. I felt the tips of my hair touch the blade before it connected with my skull—the crushing weight of it all ending bearing down on my existence. ... It was something... so strangely familiar. I remember taking a breath then and recalling that I could move. The sword never touched me—not even a thread of my clothing was severed. Our Japanese Social Problems professor had already bolted into the hallway, popping her head back in just to tell us to get out as fast as we could. I had a conversation with myself

then—in that brief half-second of decision before your body acts. As I hung halfway under my desk from a desperate attempt to save myself, I saw a mountain. It was baked in white snow, littered with frozen, brown sticks, staring straight back at me. My eyes drew clearer and a strange calm basked through my veins. Five seconds had passed. The room was nearly empty and my friend was trying to shove papers into his backpack. I was going to leave my things, but I had already stopped thinking.

Everything was moving, but it was slow. Chairs fell over, books thrashed off the shelves, I collided with the wall, but it kept going and so did I. By the time I reached the stairs from the third floor, hoards of people were already pouring down them, shrieking like an alarm clock telling me to wake up. I was alone as I dodged frantic college students, balancing on barely a single toe—like during *irimi nage*. A dragon

was coiling under the ground; we were standing on a sinking ship and getting seasick. I caught a girl with reaction time I didn't know I had just before she slammed her head into the stone wall. It was so slow I thought I would never reach the bottom, but I wasn't worried. The swaying building could have collapsed with me still descending the stairwell, but I was confident that I would make it somehow.

Just as the earthquake had started, it vanished like a ripple. ... I felt something that had killed nearly thirty-thousand people. Outside, we heard whispers of news from iPhones whose connection hadn't been cut off yet, telling us that Sendai was destroyed and an aftershock was coming. I bought ice cream. After almost eight years of aikido, I bought ice cream from a convenience store and watched as people clung to poles, clutched their loved ones, and cleaved their hands together to pray to whatever they believed in. It was the same as after the first time I felt *yonkyo*; I got up smiling. ○

Take That First Step and Go

by Michael Ryvkin

Several years ago I made a list of all the things that I would like to spend my time on, in order of importance. Relationship and family were the first two. But we all maintain busy lives and finding a balance between relationship, family, work and daily chores is not easy.

When Aikido became important to me, there were trade-offs and schedule changes that needed to be made, and I am thankful to my family for their support. Without them I would not make it. Also there are times when I come home from work thinking of all the things that could be done around the house and start hesitating about coming to practice. But it is regular training that does the magic in the end, so I grab my backpack and head to the dojo.

Aikido has attracted me with its par-



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adigm of redirecting attacker's force rather than opposing it, non-violent approach and beautiful yet effective techniques. Soon after joining the intro class I realized how narrow my understanding was.

Although techniques repeated over and over get remembered on a muscular level, it is not only the body that gets trained. Regular and effective training can be achieved only with a combination of physical and mental efforts.

Finding time in your daily schedule is just the beginning in the training of your spirit.

On the mat you are working with a partner but often struggling with yourself. Feeling of the center, proper timing, direction, footwork, and balance – everything is important. It seems simple when you watch somebody doing it, but this feeling is deceptive. There were many classes where I thought I had not done my best. But failure is part of the practice; success and failure always come together and are inseparable. Any never done before task that you take seems hard and uncomfortable, but if you keep doing it, success is inevitable.

There is another important thing related to the mental aspect of training that I understood only after sitting meditation classes. Only when you let go other thoughts and concentrate on one particular thing, whether it is your breath during meditation or your partner during training, its quality changes dramatically. The ability to bring that to the class or implement that in your daily life is an important milestone.

Although I have just begun walking

this path, it is essential to keep going. As goes one of my son's favorite songs:

*Soon you will see,
Just how brave
Brave your heart can be.
Look on up, to the sky.
Take that first step.
Kiss your fears goodbye. ○*

Notes from the Swamplands

by Andy Cleff

As I write this, spring is nearing. I see the early bulbs begin their annual thrust through the winter's debris towards light.

In the same manner, I feel my soul awakening as I pass into my second half a century. And I begin to make my way thru my inner debris towards rebirth.

My dream-time has been filled with clues as to the directions I may travel. But the trouble with my unconscious is, well, it is unconscious and unconcerned about laying things out in a clear, direct way. So to get my attention, it tends towards the dramatic, choosing good old Alfred Hitchcock as the director.

Through these fuzzy, ever-morphing, nocturnal clue-threads I begin to weave a patchwork of cloth, and – to borrow a phrase from Yeats – perhaps I can turn that into a coat to warm me against the frost of the modern age.

In many of my dreams of

late I am in a maze of sorts – vaguely familiar snippets of past personal history. Looking for a way back “home” – wherever that may be. As of yet I have not been able to get there. Encumbered by a load of baggage – half it not even mine!

There are no recognizable landmarks. No paths I can remember. Plenty of dead ends. Passages that constrict as I follow them down. And – every too infrequently – a window – that if I can only open it – I sense I will be able to fly, unencumbered by gravity.

I am often confronted in my dreams by someone who intends me harm – communicated with a glance, a glint of a blade. The threat of annihilation. At those moments, I awaken – my chest pounding, my veins flush with adrenaline.

Pitch awake. Unable to fall back asleep, I find my zafu. And sit through the hour of the wolf. My mind howling. Breathe one, two. Nightmares most real. Three, four. Just breathe. Five, six. Just sit there. Twelve, thirteen. Shit. To be quiet is as impossible as unringing a bell.

Jung tells us that the characters in our dreams are just reflections of



ourselves. I am not only the protagonist of this drama, but also the author. These traps. They are of my own making. The incubus is me.

My psyche is urging me on – to engage in both ambiguous and ambitious questions: Where am I going? What am I doing that blocks me from getting to that place that summons my soul? Who am I apart from the roles I have been playing?

To step into these questions – to make choices that enlarge rather than bind me to my past – forces me to bear the anxiety of doubt. To step into the deepest ocean, uncertain whether I will be able to swim to some new distant shore.

In the same way as entering into uke's attack – into the path of the blade – accepting and embracing the fragility of it all – even if only for a fleeting instant in the spinning shuttle of eternity – into the opening.

The opening that leads to revelation. The revelation that leads to discovery. The discovery that leads to...?! ○

I don't pretend to know
What you're going through.
And I don't pretend to know
How to make it any better.

But if you want to talk about it,
Bow in and grab a hold of me.

I have my own stories.
I have my own hell to live
through.

You are not alone.



Growing Up

by Amelia Perkins

I feel like a child more often and more acutely now than I ever did before, and maybe that in itself should be a clue. Children aren't ashamed of acting like children.

I did something to my leg recently. I fell wrong, I landed funny, and I pulled something, and it's not getting better. In all my years of aikido I have never had an injury that persisted for longer than a week. I've fallen badly so many times.

I don't bounce back easily anymore.

So much doubt. Have I always fallen that way? Do I always fling my knee out, smash my heel into the ground, absorb all the force with just my shoulder? How many times am

I going to have to hurt myself before I figure out a better way? Will the rest of my aikido career consist of correcting the mistakes I made when I couldn't get hurt?

I used to describe myself as a martial artist, so that I wouldn't have to talk about aikido to people who didn't really care. But I am not a martial artist. I cling too hard to my fragile idea of who I am. I don't live in the moment. I don't stand under the sword. I'm not ready to die.

At sesshin, Genjo talked about enlightenment and I cried. Why would anybody want to let go of their attachments? Is that really what we're working towards? What am I doing here?

Does it make me a coward, to know that I don't want it but continue to sit in silence?

Does it make me brave?

It has been such a gift to be able to spend my time wading through the muck of daily training. It has been a gift to recognize my flaws and my talents on the mat, where there's no hiding and no running away.

Living here was supposed to be my grand farewell to the dojo. But then I helped dig the trench and build the groundhog fence and install the

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new office floor and put together the wilderness comfort station, and I forgot I was supposed to be saying goodbye. I moved in at the tail end of the summer and suddenly it's almost summer again and I only have a month left, and the idea of leaving makes my throat close up.

I am leaving, and there is going to be a moment where I will have to stand up and tell you all how much I have loved practicing with each and every one of you, knowing that afterward I'm going home for the last time.

This is my dojo, more familiar to me than my own house. I grew up here, protected and pushed in equal measure by my fellow seekers and my teacher, and I have to leave if I'm going to keep growing.

It's time. ○

Haley

Helen and John's beloved dog Haley passed away on May 25, 2011. For the past ten years he has been a familiar presence at the dojo, and he will be missed by all of us.



Provisional Summer 2011 Schedule

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		6:30 - 7:30 Zazen	7:00 - 7:30 Uchi Deshi	6:30 - 7:30 Zazen		8 - 9 am Zazen
					9 - 10 am Mixed	9:15 - 11 am Free Practice
	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed	12:15 - 1 pm Mixed			10:15 - 11:15 Iaido	
5 - 5:45 pm Free Practice	5 - 5:45 pm Iaido	5 - 5:45 pm Free Practice	5 - 5:45 pm Zazen	5 - 5:45 pm Free Practice		
6 - 7 pm Mixed	6 - 7 pm Intro/Basics	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed	6 - 7 pm Intro/Basics	6 - 6:45 pm Mixed		
		6:50 - 7:10 Zazen		6:50 - 7:10 Zazen		
7 - 8 pm Weapons	7 - 8 pm Mixed	7:15 - 8 Weapons	7 - 8 pm Mixed	7:15 - 8 pm Mixed		