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American Spirit

by George Lyons

*"Give me your tired, your poor;
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free, The wretched refuse of
your teeming shore. Send these, the
homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift
my lamp beside the golden door!"*

— Emma Lazarus, 1883

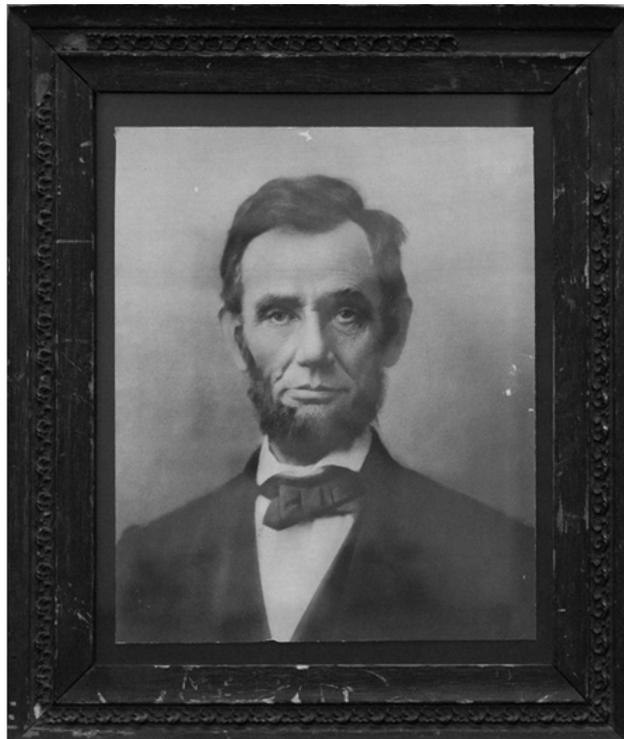
I keep a picture of Abraham Lincoln in my dojo office. Patti knows I admire him and found it for me at a nearby auction house. I don't know how old it is but it looks old. Even the frame looks like it's traveled through time to hang on my wall.

There's something about pictures of people from back in those days. Maybe nobody told them to smile for the camera. Maybe it's their lives were difficult and you can see it in their eyes. Whatever it is, it looks to me like they are full of grit and I find inspiration from looking at them.

Some time ago, while watching the movie "The Sun," I noticed it depicted the Japanese emperor as having a picture of Lincoln. How strange it seemed to me that I share an admiration for

Lincoln with Emperor Hirohito. Maybe he found inspiration in Lincoln's picture too. Perhaps he was interested in the spirit of the man. It might be a leap to think he was interested in "American spirit" but whatever we might say it made me think our two cultures certainly seem to have a fascination with each other. We share a history together that proves it.

Something I know about Lincoln and maybe you can see in those old photographs is that he struggled



with what was then called Melancholy. Of course there wasn't much known about the affliction back then let alone there being any treat-

ment for it. At that time the people affected were considered to be very sensitive, and also in possession of deep insight into human nature, a positive bent on the debilitating problem of depression. It came in waves for Lincoln, and when it was at its worst, his self-treatment was to visit the injured Civil War soldiers. He knew that by encouraging them he would find encouragement for himself.

The United States is a young nation with a short history but the struggles of its people are of course very old, stretching across time and borders and include famous people like Lincoln and ordinary people, too. We are a nation of immigrants, of people whose life circumstances were difficult enough that they decided to head out into the unknown for a chance to change their lives. It must have taken incredible courage to get on a boat to a foreign land. Looking at old pictures of people arriving at Ellis Island you can see something in them too.

We all know that the Founding Fathers of this country risked being hanged for having a meeting to discuss a new nation. The revolu-

tionary soldier fought and died for the freedoms it promised. The Civil War soldier fought brother and sister in a war that almost tore us apart. Americans have always been willing to push the limits to see what's possible for us individually and collectively as a people.

During World War II, American ingenuity coupled with a strong work ethic and willingness to pull together resulted in productivity the world had never seen. The famous Willow Run Bomber plant built "A Bomber an Hour" and was a deciding factor in the war. The ideas used there are now a part of a business model called "Lean Management," that is studied and used all over the world (ironically the Americans temporarily lost sight of the value of this management style while the Japanese were the first to adopt it).

Time changes things so quickly. I study an art from a country my father's generation was at war with. A perennial truth is we all have our wars to fight. Some are fought globally, some privately. We have a tradition in this country of rising up to them. We have a tradition of facing our fears and stepping out into life to fully live it or die trying. Life will always have its struggles no matter what era or country we live in. I started this article wanting to point out an American spirit I'm proud to be a descendent of, and how through Aikido I'm looking for it in my students. Now what I want to say is this; forget about ideas of "now" and "then"...of "ours" or "theirs"...

of "us" and "them." I propose the study of Aikido puts us in touch with the grit and forbearance of all people, that its study gives polish to "spirit," be it American, Japanese or any other.

You might think the Japanese custom of bowing to the kamiza is about owing something to our ancestors. It's more than having gotten something from them; we are them. We have only not to forget it.

Chiba Sensei has started a lineage of fine teachers in this country. If you want to change your life, if you want to find the grit in your belly to live fully, go find one; wait at the gate, bang on the door until it is opened to you; manage the complications of daily life but don't let them distract you from your mission; let quiet persistence be the core of your character. And when you make it to the other shore, do all you can to see the lamp keeps burning for the next generation—of us. ○

Ready for Anything

Submitted by Jon Kugel

(As assigned for Sandan 2013 examinations)

"I'm ready for anything," I said to Lyons Sensei. Tenth Anniversary Fall Sesshin at BCA was fast approaching and I had just inquired about my work assignment. I've been to sesshin a few times now and while I know it is going to be an intense experience; I've also learned a few things: count through the worst pain, coordinate with your partner at meal time, fully appreciate the walk to/from dokusan. The little bit of skillfulness I've gained through that experience has chased away the shadow of doubt I once had about sesshin. Now that I know I can survive it; what else do you have to throw at me? What's coming next? (As it happens, I was assigned tea service.)



At the time, I believed it: Ready for Anything.

Writing about it now, I can hear the arrogance behind these words. Or maybe that was just what sounded good in my head; sort of like taking the *correct* ukemi—I know what comes next. I also know intellectually that a martial artist should be equally ready to move in any direction, or to die, or to serve tea and cookies; whatever the situation requires.

“Are you preparing yourself?” Lyons Sensei asked me on another occasion. This time it was about testing. I was preparing myself for testing; but these words struck me another way. I was preparing to pass the test...but what if I fail? Am I prepared for that? What if a freak storm blows through and I don’t test at all? Am I ready for that? Am I ready for anything?

I don’t honestly know. Right now, to me, *ready for anything* means allowing this one moment to be just what it is, without imposing an artificial limitation on the next moment. It’s obviously useful and necessary to prepare ourselves for certain events and we can sense they are coming in advance by paying attention to the cues. But it is easy to fall into the habit of mind where expectations of the next moment become more important than the reality of what is happening right now (Everything would be better if I had another job); or the habit of mind that limits this moment by what has come before (I’ve been smoking

so long, I’ll never be able to quit). I’ve come to rely on my teacher, my brothers and sisters, and my training to help expose when I fall into these habits. I am grateful to have them all in my life forcing me to keep asking the question: Am I ready for anything? ○

Inner Voice

by Ester Barias-Wolf

My excursion into weapons studies didn’t begin on a good note. I was still figuring out body arts (still am), but I thought I would add another layer to my Aikido practice so I decided to show up for weapons class. I always had this inner voice that eggs me to try new things, like the one that egged me to sign-up for Aikido in the first place—remember that voice?

On my first night showing up for weapons, I had no clue what was going on or what to expect. I find that sometimes dropping myself in the thick of things is oftentimes a quick way of finding out what tools and skills I need in order to get myself out of it. After that first night, I never showed up again. What is it about weapons that had me feeling defeated that evening? It just didn’t sit well with me. I was determined to find out; my inner voice chimed, “This is a good thing, don’t give up.” My less understanding egotistical side retorted, “Shut the heck up self, let me sulk and feel sorry for myself!”

I have learned through time that my frustrations usually stem from lack of knowing or information. But even after reading some relevant information on weapons; watching YouTube videos; learning terminologies or watching classes in the sidelines—they were still not convincing me enough to pick up weapons again. I suppose I picked an inopportune time to start in the first place knowing one of my classmates had a mishap a few months earlier; it was fresh in my mind. It wasn’t just the lack of knowledge of what was going on but I became concerned and very self-conscious about my fears of being hit with a bokken or jyo. It was a daunting mental obstacle. Watching and actually doing what I saw brought up things that I did not consider in my initial gung-ho attitude. I thought, “How do I get over this?”

Over several months I had a series of injuries that limited my motion doing body arts, but totally sitting out was not an option (even though my physical therapist would have preferred it that way). “I could ease back on body arts while I heal, put in more time with weapons so I won’t miss too much...” were my reasoning for trying to segue myself back into weapons. What finally got me to at least step back with a weapon in my hand was when I remembered Sensei saying something to the effect of: “On days when you don’t want to come to the dojo should be the days you *should* come to the dojo!”

Wednesday night, weapons class. I was fumbling with my jyo in my hands and figuring out footwork. I felt like a pretzel both physically and mentally: “Which foot goes where?”; “Are my elbows too far out?”; “When is this class going to end?” rambled through my mind. I’m trying not to panic as I was at least resolved to stick to Sensei’s advice and watch what experiences unfold no matter how much I hated being there. Then, just out of the blue, it dawned on me that what was missing in the factor of understanding and overcoming trepidation was my lack of trust—in me! And the minute that occurred in my mind, it spontaneously addressed all other issues (as well as excuses) I was harboring. I was awestruck by its preciseness in revealing what I needed to see: I lacked trust in myself that I had the ability and levels of agility to save myself from harm!

I now go to weapons class as much as possible and if that wasn’t enough, I’ve signed-up for the Kenshusei program mid-summer of this year. I’m learning how to deal with fear but most importantly, I am learning more about myself just by showing up. I’m aware that there will be “good” days and “bad” but as long as I make an effort, answers will eventually turn up and more often than not, they are literally just right under my nose with some encouragement from my inner voice of course, “*This is a good thing, don’t give up!*” ○



Keep Digging!

by John McDevitt

When I left BCA to co-start Fearless Heart Aikido I really had no idea what I was getting into. What I did realize is that I was getting comfortable...a little too comfortable. Sensei might have felt the same thing or he saw something I didn’t. Clearly it was not comfort that Sensei had in store for me. Whatever the reason—it was time for me to create my own “high quality suffering” somewhere else.

Lyons Sensei tried to reassure me—if it doesn’t work, you can come back.... I think he was worried about me. He also knew, better than I, that the odds for my survival out in the real world were not that good. During the last few weeks of my training at BCA he seemed to want to give me more, to help me be more prepared.... During body art classes Sensei kept saying to me—

”Bokken, bokken, bokken...” He wanted me to “get” something. At the time I was obviously not getting it. I remember one day in particular we were doing sansho 1. We had not done it in a while and I was nervous about forgetting all the transitions. Surprisingly I moved through all of it by letting my body remember it. I felt good about it. Sensei was less pleased. “Your feet are in the wrong place...you have to get lower...I’m worried about you....” THANK YOU SENSEI!

At that moment I realized that I was ok with it all. Sensei had given his Aikido to me and I stole as much of it as I could. It was time for me to leave. The best analogy I can think of is leaving your happy home to move off to college. On one hand you are happy to be away from mom and dad. On the other, you are scared shitless about being on your own for the first time; defining your own vision and mission for your practice and those of

your students; having to study without anyone pushing you; renting a space knowing that you do not have enough students to cover the rent; being responsible for a dojo and students (if you are fortunate). Your parents know that you will have to suffer through it to grow.

Will I be able to take the foundation that I had been given and start to make my own art? Can I keep creating? Can I not only move from my center but also live from my center? Can I face the line of new students and start practicing Aikido? Can I be present with each student, patiently accepting, let go of expectations...let right intention be my guide? Can I stop asking, "Where is everybody?!" and genuinely meet those who show up? Can

I create an environment that enables our students to see the potential of Aikido? Can Fearless Heart Aikido be part of the Global Harmony that Chiba Sensei wanted from his art?

In order to change we have to be willing to consider an alternative. We have to open the door, walk through and let the door close behind us. We have to be with the vulnerability of change. In Aikido we talk about being ready for anything. For that to happen we need to consider letting go of everything. We have to be willing to drop the things that got us here and go forward without them. We have to have the courage to be open and leap into this moment as it is. We have to trust our teacher, our practice, ourselves and keep digging! ○

On Doubt

by Cathy Thomas

"Don't do what you want. Do what you don't want. Do what you're trained not to want. Do the things that scare you the most. Find out what you're afraid of and go live there."

— Chuck Palahniuk

Lately, something has been gnawing away at my insides and has put me in a dark place at a critical time in my life, a time when I have to be very specific about "what" I want. The "how," I leave up to the universe while always keeping in mind that I have to have unwavering faith and be receptive when the opportunities present themselves. The feelings I have are of indecision, a crawling out of my skin sensation, restlessness, boredom, and doubt—all merely symptomatic of fear. Uncertainty about my career, faithlessness in my Aikido practice, anxiety about the future, horribly bad food (which doesn't do anything but kill all of the above with detachment)—all of these things are keeping me from achieving my goals. It is doubt that is holding me in this wretched state of mind. It is doubt that the underlying malaise of fear is being fueled by. When I sit Zazen and I look down on myself, the thoughts that pop into my mind (though I am desperately trying to think of nothing) are the stuff of nightmares.

I believe that doubt is a sub characteristic of a more primal reac-

My Koan

by Laura Esposito

*What are you afraid of?
Heights! And spiders! Hydroplaning.
The ocean. Being disoriented. Losing control.
Being thrown into a roll and breaking my neck.
Getting hurt physically. Getting hurt emotionally.
Hurting someone else. Anger. Losing my temper.
Lightning. Horses (they're huge). Having blood drawn with a needle.
Diseases. Nuclear war. Being open. Trusting others. Letting someone in.
Being lonely. Being lied to. Never "amounting to anything." Failure.
Getting what I want. Exposing my flaws. Exposing my strengths...*

But what are you afraid of in this moment?

Oh,

nothing

tion to unknown or perceived (and misperceived) outcomes. That primal reaction is fear. There are a plethora of things out there we could fear. Something deep within our makeup—coupled with socialization, environment, or upbringing—tells us that we should be afraid of far more than we really need to be. What is all the noise convincing us that we cannot do something we would like to do or have what we wish to achieve? Something causes us to seize back consciously or unconsciously—I call this doubt.

Maybe we fear ultimate success because we don't like change, because we don't think we deserve a truly great life, or because we can't imagine ourselves being "that" person. We see ourselves as ordinary and that attaining that lofty goal is too big or is only for the lucky few or better adjusted many. Doubt is when we tell ourselves that we don't need to do our best, that we'd be just as satisfied with good. Who is satisfied with just good? You'd be surprised.

Mark Sisson is one of the foremost nutritionists in the world and author of the best-selling *The Primal Blueprint*. I've read a lot of his stuff thanks to Grace Rollins, who turned me on to his writings and advice, which has gotten me out of more than a few "mental jams" in my life. Mark is always talking about "leading the best life possible" through what boils down to self-care nutritionally, psychologically, physically...you get the point.

Most of what I'm writing here are a mixture of his philosophy and my own close self-examination.

Here is the key statement that you should embed in your mind and soul if you remember nothing else I have written here: "Sometimes we keep deeper success at arm's length because we are afraid of what we will be called on to challenge or give up about ourselves. More than perspective or weakness, sometimes our self-concept is the hardest thing to shed."

When I read that statement from him, it became one of those "oh, shit" moments and cut straight to the core of the issue for me on the topic of doubt. We are afraid of what we may be called upon to do or give up about ourselves in order to attain what we truly deserve. Why do we choose to retain some portion of deprivation that keeps our potential from ever being realized? Are we conditioned to not ask for too much from our lives, taught not to aim too high or expect too much? Is this the script you have to go through life with?

I've been dutiful about small changes, and not so much about taking the important big steps along those lines. I cycle back and forth between rigor and passivity. I commit to small improvements in certain dimensions but forgo effort in others. At this point in my life and to maintain honesty, the following statements just do not apply to me:

- I'm just too busy to do more that I'm already doing.

- I've made it further than I ever thought I could; I'll quit while I'm ahead.

- I'm doing better than most people I know.

- This amount of change is manageable; I don't want to push the envelope.

Is optimism really all that difficult? I mean, seriously? For me, in this moment, it is.

We all go through the "I shouldn't eat this" or the "I should put more effort into this activity." I'm going through the "am I doing everything I can to maximize the time I have in this life to know true happiness and dispel all doubt?" Mark Sisson has a saying: "If it doesn't serve you anymore, stop repeating it." What I think he means is that we need to understand why we have doubt, accept being uncomfortable (Zazen is a great place to do that), and lean into the self-defeating parts until you've managed to diffuse their influence. Then let it all go.

Are you doing things this way because this is the easy way? Could you do things differently? Fill your life now with different messages. Rewire your thoughts and shift default tracks. This isn't about perfection. It's about letting yourself succeed. It's about doing exactly what you probably don't want to do—find out what you are afraid of and go live there. ○

When I'm good, I'm very good.
But when I'm bad, I'm better.

— Mae West

Drowning Freely

by Eric Soroker

When I was eight years old I had a near drowning event. My family, due to one of its many relocations, had been living in a Marriott hotel for several months. This lifestyle availed me to several *perks*, including constant access to the large indoor pool. I played in it, usually alone, almost every day. I definitely enjoyed the pool but there was one minor issue: I didn't know how to swim.

I would walk on the bottom of the pool (at a depth that allowed me to stay above the water) and make an approximation of *swimming arms*. If you were watching me you would think I could swim. I had a small repertoire of strokes from the crawl to the butterfly. I tried several times to teach myself to swim but I would sink, choke, and then become afraid. Eventually I gave up trying to actually swim and felt half-satisfied by my solution of *playing* swim.

One afternoon, there was another boy, several years older, already in the pool. We had very little interaction, most likely due to the age difference, until the boy decided to push me off the edge into the deep end. I was only a few feet from the lip but it didn't matter. This was one of those moments when your internal video camera turns on and remembers everything. I was thrashing wildly to try and get to safety but I wasn't moving in any direction. I swallowed big mouthfuls of

water. My wide-open eyes marked my downward progress as I went from the surface of the pool to under. I didn't think I was going to die; all I wanted was to grab the lip of the pool. One simple thought. Safety.

I don't know how I got to the edge. The boy didn't help me. I could see him on the deck looking down. I can still feel the rough, porous concrete lip as my fingers dug in trying to penetrate deeply into the foundation. I somehow hauled myself out and rolled onto the deck, vomiting water out of my mouth and nose.



Just then my mother arrived at the pool and screamed at the boy, "Don't you know he can't swim!" The other boy cried out, "I'm sorry! It looked like he could swim. I'm sorry." And in a microsecond, all the elements crystallized together: can't swim, make it look like you can swim, fool someone into think-

ing you can swim, drown, and get caught. Fraud. I'm a fraud.

Instead of taking this experience and using it as fuel to learn how to swim, I buried it in shame. I didn't speak of it. I didn't tell my father or my sister. I stayed out of the water and found creative ways to avoid any swimming. My parents did try once, signing me up for swimming lessons, but the moment I went into water deeper than my shoulders I panicked. Lesson over.

Much to my own dismay, this pattern would re-emerge many times in my life. The first time I felt this way

in relation to my Aikido happened during a vacation in Costa Rica. Grace and I were enjoying a beautiful moment on a secluded beach when a brazen thief robbed us as we sunbathed. He emerged from the bushes with a rag wrapped around something that looked like a gun. While pointing it at Grace, he was

shouting some unintelligible mash of words and then grabbed our single bag that contained everything (wallets, car keys, iPhones, etc.) and ran. Grace and I both took up chase. I can run fast but I was at a disadvantage being bare-footed and the ground was dirt and rocks. I was in a frothing rage and almost had my hands on the thief but as we turned a corner he had an accomplice with a motorcycle, which he jumped onto the back and they sped off. As they drove off the thief was laughing and acted like he was shooting me with his prop gun.

How did I let this happen? I had seen the guy before he reached us on our towels but I did nothing. He pointed what looked like a gun at my beloved. Then there was the moment when he jumped on the back of the bike and I could have grabbed one of the hundreds of rocks at my feet and nailed him. I'm supposed to be a martial artist. This is what I train for right? My spirit had broken in that moment and I continued to run after them for another ½ mile or so mostly to punish my feet and myself. When we finally returned home to Pennsylvania, it took me a long time and some very wise words from Sensei to get me out of the dark place I inhabited. Except now my nemesis had found its way into my Aikido practice; I'm a fraud.

This is where the dance really begins for me. You could say I've subscribed 100% to the idea that Aikido is for self-transformation. I've drunk the Kool-Aid and I have all

my chips on the table. Over the last decade, I have practiced Aikido to drop something, to let go of ideas, beliefs, and ego. I want to break free of my beliefs and to be true to myself. Yet there is this nagging doubt hiding around the edges just out of sight.

The last year or so has been especially dark for me. I assumed that maybe in my haste to seek being free that I lost something pure and good. At my worst I couldn't even bare to look at myself in the mirror anymore. There was no love or friendship in the eyes staring back at me. I would repeat the phrase, "It didn't happen for me" over and over like some twisted mantra. I seemed to be only looking backwards, reviewing and analyzing the past nostalgically. Watching the wake of my life. My nemesis had slid its way into the driver seat and it held its post with silence and shame.

I couldn't really speak of this with anyone. I was afraid that I would poison others. I felt I had let my

teachers down. I'm supposed to be a senior student, a teacher, and a leader in the dojo. What's wrong with me? But that's how shame works. It wants you to be silent. Only in silence can it keep its dominion over you. It lives in the dark.

I kept training, hoping before every class that I would regain what I thought I lost only to be crushed when it was over. I was pushed into the deep end again. Desperately flailing my arms to stay afloat and grab the familiar edge of safety. The harder I tried the more I went under. One simple thought. Endure.

Only recently did something shift. In a still moment I had an insight, what if I just let myself drown? Stop trying to grab the edge and save myself. What if I let go? My nemesis didn't like that idea. It wants to live. It needs me to struggle and be fearful of exposure, of being vulnerable. I can't be a fraud if I drown. There is nothing more real than that. Drowning freely. I'll let you know how it turns out. ○



The middle of the road is where the white line is—and that's the worst place to drive.

— Robert Frost



Suffer With Me

by Brian Loughrey

Many people have asked me why I do Aikido—why I put myself through this training. To tell you the truth, I have asked myself that same thing many times, especially when I wake up before the sun peeks itself over the trees, staggering through my routine on the way to Zazen. Countless aches, pains, annoying injuries and bruises all over, I often think to myself what the hell am I doing? My response to that question has evolved over my five years of training. It started with a need to fill my time with something more positive to having more discipline in my life and then became a means to find out more about myself. To be honest, since I was a teenager, I was on a path that was either going to end with me incarcerated, dead or both. Luckily, I avoided each of

these and the latter; for a long time, was something I thought I would welcome. For most of my life, I was truly lost, consumed with anger and hate; I found myself trying to escape those feelings with just about any substance I could put in my body until the point of total numbness. I was destroying myself trying to hide from a past that I could not escape. My response to the question of why I do Aikido now is that this is where I belong. After thirty-five years, I found somewhere I feel that I belong. I would like to someday help people the way Aikido has helped me—the way my teachers, brothers and sisters that I train with have helped me. To be able to pass this on to just one person and help change their world would be a true success in my eyes now.

I found Aikido three days after being discharged from a facility that treats a variety of invisible ailments.

For me, it was addiction, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. At the age of nineteen, six months after surviving an assault that nearly killed me, I found my life unfolding tragically as I held a close friend in my arms while his life slipped through my trembling hands. To this day, I still don't know why he chose to do what he did. I've asked myself over and over if there were any signs or warnings that I could have noticed had I been more aware. I felt I had failed someone so terribly that part of me died that day along with my friend. I blamed myself for not being there when I said I was going to be, and I developed a hatred for myself that I thought could only be quelled by abusing every substance I could get my hands on until I either felt nothing or passed out. It took me ten years until I finally broke and started to talk about what happened on that day. Those close to me finally understood why I felt the way I did for so long. Many can't comprehend dealing with an event like that or even how to deal with someone who was suffering the way I was. I lost some friends because they just didn't know how to be around me. And I finally realized how desperately I needed help. I sought treatment and began to feel differently. When I left the hospital, I felt rejuvenated, sober, and ready to tackle something new.

I walked into Bucks County Aikido not really knowing what to expect. I watched a class and sat there in anticipation, hoping that

one day I would be one of those students with the flowing blue pants gliding across the mat. When class ended, Patti Sensei came over to me and introduced herself and began telling me a little about Aikido and what they do here. I don't remember much else, except for one student who came over to me and said: "Hello, I'm Roman and I'm the worst student here." Patti Sensei laughed and said: "Oh, there are no bad students." She then told me I could wait a couple of weeks for the intro class to start or I could just start the next class. I said I couldn't wait to get started so I came to the next class, ready to go. She informed me that their chief instructor and a fair amount of students were at summer camp, and I would be able to meet them when they returned. I had no idea what I was getting into.

I met Sensei after attending a few classes when he returned from summer camp, and I was immediately struck by the presence he commanded. Before he introduced himself, I knew that he was the leader of

this school that I desperately wanted to be a part of. Like many new students, I trained as much as I could, which—at the time—I thought was a lot, but then again, I had no idea what serious training was. One day while sweeping the mat at the end of class, I noticed Sensei standing in front of me watching intently as I held my head down, discouraged that class was over. He asked me if I was okay, and I gave him a typical response of someone who was still struggling with the rawness of being new and trying to fit in. "Yeah, I'm okay," I mumbled shyly. He said: "It just seems like you are suffering, and I just want you to know that you don't have to suffer." He was right; I was still suffering even after leaving the hospital. I was still struggling with my life, haunted by my past, sleep deprived and malnourished. I'm sure it was plain to see that something wasn't right. I was overwhelmed with that statement; it seemed as though he had a sixth sense. My eyes started to well up, and I told him how this is the

only place where everything slows down.

Those words have always stuck with me, and spurred on my decision to talk with Sensei about what brought me here. He told me that through training, the things in my past will not be able to cling to me. They will still be there, but they will not hold me down—that I will learn to accept it and move forward. I asked if sitting would help. He said yes that sitting Zazen will help. Meditation was one aspect of the dojo I had no interest in at first. I thought why would I want to sit there and think when that's all I do when I'm not here? I don't want to think about all the garbage I'm trying to escape; that is not why I'm here. I fought it for a long time, and at that moment, I realized that there was an entire dynamic at this dojo that went far beyond the techniques one sees on the surface. There was a relationship between teacher and student that had to be cultivated and one that was nourished by the other members of the dojo, whom I now find myself calling my brothers and sisters. It took me quite a while to realize that there is a vast difference between what I thought Zazen was and what it really is. Zazen isn't about sitting there, dwelling on things that you cannot change, but being absolutely present with them and letting them go. Sensei told me that I could change my past, and I was very confused. He told me a story of how deer ate the alfalfa he planted and instead of getting an-



gry that the deer ate the alfalfa, he realized that he planted the alfalfa for the deer. Changing the way you perceive your past is changing your past. I thought I have finally found what I was searching for.

This feeling of belonging is not something that came right away for me. For a while, I thought that these people here are far too good for me to be around, and that my past and attitude would just poison this place. The people here were and still are some of the best people I have encountered in my entire life, and I used to think that I just didn't fit in. The beginning of my training gave me the courage to take the next step in my life and return to school to finish my degree. This also opened up some more time for me to train, and I started to feel some of that relief that Sensei had told me about. But as the rigors and stresses of being a college student once again began to weigh on me, I relapsed into old habits. Old feelings started to creep back into my mind, and my training became very sporadic. I was ashamed of myself and I felt I had failed not only Sensei, but my fellow students who had accepted me into this community as well as my family. I once again found myself getting help for things that I thought I had put behind me.

I eventually was able to return to training, and this time decided to throw myself completely into it like I had never done before. I attended every class and committed to the Kenshusei program, and now



close to the end of my first semester as Kenshusei, I finally feel like I belong somewhere. I no longer feel out of place like the black sheep that I have felt like my whole life. Sensei was right, my past no longer clings to me. I have learned to accept it and move forward. That's not to say, I don't struggle with it at times; I think that is to be expected. I just no longer blame myself for the one singular tragic event that shaped my life. I have realized that my past, no matter how difficult, will not define my future. So, I guess I did change my past: despair has been replaced with hope and sometimes that is all that is missing. The undeniable power of hope is something that I have once again.

Over the past several months of training, I have found that my relationships with those close to me—my family, friends, Sensei,

Patti Sensei and many others in the dojo—have blossomed. I look forward to how those relationships will grow. I love these people here the way I have never loved a group of people before, and they have seen me suffer and struggle and rise over and over again as I have seen them. I have seen them vulnerable as they have seen me. We laugh, we sometimes cry, we break bread, and enjoy some drinks together (responsibly for me of course). We sweat and sometimes bleed through rigorous daily training that few can understand, all while forging a bond of the likes that I have never felt before in all my life. Most of all, we watch out for each other and let each other know that you are not alone in your suffering. Even though I felt alone in my struggles, I realize now that no one is alone once they find where

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RIDING

An interpretation



Looking for the Ox

I'm not sure why anyone shows up for Aikido. Everyone has a story but it probably doesn't have anything to do with it. What we are looking for and how we find the dojo are different from why we are looking in the first place. Some people seek and some don't seem to have the need to. Even if we think we know, the "whys" shift over time so what do we really know after all?



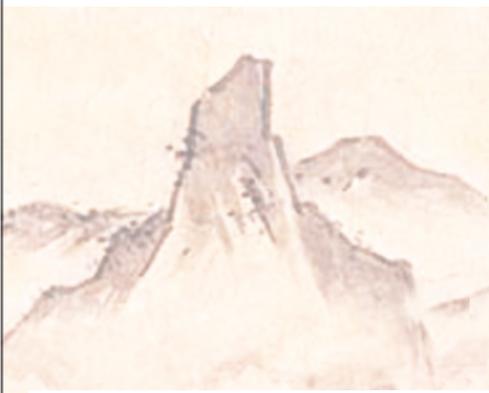
Noticing the Footprints

Whatever the reason, you're on the mat now and starting to learn. Be careful not to fall in love with Aikido too quickly as it seems a sure sign you won't last. Stick around long enough and you'll figure out the practice isn't easy. Real training doesn't happen on our terms. You have to give over to it and that's hard to do.



Catching Sight of the Ox

So you dig in and soon find out that more than it not being easy, it's difficult. In fact, maybe you're never going to get this. The honeymoon is over; clumsy, exhausted, weak, you get your head handed to you class after class. Add an injury to the mix and things can look pretty bleak.



Original paintings by Tenshō Shūbun (1444–50), a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk and painter of the Muromachi period. Source: wikipedia.org.

THE OX

on by G. Lyons



Getting Hold of the Ox

Against the advice of family and friends you continue (“you pay for that?”). Maybe you’ve been at it long enough that it’s become a habit. Maybe with so much of yourself invested you’re afraid to give it up. You’re in it this far might as well keep going. Testing is on the horizon. Best get ready.



Taming the Ox

At some point you find acceptance that this is your path. Your friends and family stop asking. It’s what you do. If someone refers to it as your hobby you might even get insulted (“it’s a bit more than that”).

Of course acceptance’s cousin is rejection and questions remain. Categorizing the good and the bad; the people you train with, the techniques and how they are done...the ups and downs of practice, it seems you have to choose every day, every moment, to keep going. It’s a lot of work. Maybe enough is enough.



Riding the Ox

Until now you’ve been categorizing and using discriminating mind to help make your way. But through discriminating you separate and create duality. Eventually all of your previously used methods and strategies of approaching practice are thwarted. Even trying to stop yourself from discriminating turns out to be just more effort, more “doing,” that is in itself discriminating; a circular problem that can be hard to see let alone get out of.

The way through is to exhaust all efforts. There is nothing to do but rather something to give up doing. It may sound abstract but it’s an experience that is physically felt. It is embodied. Now training is unconditional. Ox and rider are one.

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they belong. Every day I go to class is my way of thanking each and every one of them that I connect with on the mat for suffering with me, for giving me a place to belong, for accepting me. Each and every day I attend class is my way of saying I am here for you and I will not fail you, I will not let you down. The past is not something you can run from, it is something that must be accepted. Do not dwell upon it, instead reflect on it and see it as a chance for growth. We can all change our past; sometimes it just takes a different perspective. ○

Getting Attached to Outcomes

by Helen Tai

Everyone who enters the dojo is in a different place. Some have devoted their lives to Aikido while others are still trying to figure out how to tie their belts. Some are young and annoyingly flexible; others are older and injury-laden. Some feel excited and exhilarated when entering the dojo; others feel stress and even dread when walking in the door. Some seem to learn with almost no effort, while most of us need to practice over and over just to get the basic moves.

Amazingly, despite all these seemingly large differences, with the right attitude and approach, the dojo provides a place where we can all practice together, where we can learn and even thrive.

You may have the goal of passing your next Aikido test, an objective shared by many Aikidoka. You come to as many classes as you can, you learn all the techniques on your test, and you stay after class for extra practice. Through your commitment and hard work, your practice measurably improves. On the day of the test, you feel ready. So far, so good.

What happens next depends on how attached you are to passing your test. How will you feel or behave if you pass your test? Happy, relieved, proud? Conversely, how will you feel or behave if you don't pass your test? Sad, angry, humiliated? Will you blame yourself or others? Will you relive the test, congratulating yourself for what you did well or chastising yourself for what you could've done differently?

If passing your test is your main aspiration, then the outcome of the test takes on paramount importance.



But if your ultimate goal is to be more fearless, then it doesn't even matter whether you pass or not. If preparing for and taking the test en-

abled you to become a little better acquainted with beginner's mind, to being more present and joyfully accepting whatever happens, then you are one step closer to fearlessness

There is nothing wrong with having goals. The trouble is when we get attached to a specific outcome. Set high goals, try like hell to meet and exceed them, then let go. Along the way, we will learn fearlessness. I can't think of a better reason to train. ○

Control on the Edge of Harm: Joint Locks in Aikido

by Grace Rollins

My hand has been swallowed whole. Through every place where our skin contacts, nage's grip connects and extends, passing the weight of shoulder, spine and center not merely into my hand and wrist, but through my entire body, bringing me effortlessly down to the mat. This is what I remember of the first nikkyo I received from Chiba Sensei. I was perhaps a year into training and not especially discerning. Still, it had a very memorable feeling, different from the usual wrist twist-and-pinch.

Joint lock techniques in Aikido have a challenging nature. I think they're *harder* than big open techniques like kokyuho and iriminage to do *well*—there's just more physical complexity, more “stuff” to sort

out between you and your partner's center of balance. For that reason they are very good tools for studying Aikido over time. And yet, because they hold immediate potential to damage uke's body with manipulative strength, they're *easier* to do *badly*. And far more dangerous.

With joint techniques like ikkyo, kotegaeshi and shihonage, I find that when nage encounters a snag, they can often power through the technique anyway, especially if they're stronger than uke. When enough pressure goes into a joint, uke will move rather than suffer further pain or harm. Have you ever received an ikkyo from a strong beginner who treats your arm like a crankshaft and leaves you nowhere to go but down? They didn't need any Aikido principles, just strength and basic knowledge of the joint lock.

I can take argument and not fall down if I don't feel unbalanced by someone's kokyuhō. With nikkyo on the other hand, because I have a weak thumb, all it really takes for me to submit is if my partner has a strong grip and squeezes my thumb and hand bones together hard enough. There's a lot more complexity to nikkyo than hand-squeezing, and the opportunity to practice Aikido is completely lost on both sides in this case. Nage's grip must learn to be sensitive; the technique needs to be about more than just the hand and wrist.

That in part helps explain the encompassing feel of Chiba Sensei's nikkyo. The closest word for it was

a "hug," even though it wasn't especially comfortable. There was certainly no resisting it—pain was on the other side of that notion—and it was mandatory to go quickly down. Yet instead of pinching one aspect of my wrist, or putting my hand in a vise, it connected fully through my entire hand and wrist all the way to my center.

It's a facet of training with skilled, sensitive practitioners that as long as you're responsive, the ukemi is relatively painless no matter how much you get worked over.



Our sometimes sado-masochistic culture doesn't always like to admit this, often joking about what a great thrashing so-and-so got from the sensei. Probably the ukemi from the insensitive partner in the corner was actually more dangerous, in terms of the joints at least.

Injury in a joint lock can also happen when a technique is going "well" but the nage goes beyond what was actually necessary to move or pin the uke. Last summer

I took ukemi for a dan test, and the tester's grip and force during kotegaeshi was so excessive it visibly bruised the back of my hand and even caused some temporary nerve damage. He was technically fine, but blind to the boundary of where he could move me as desired without causing harm. Unfortunately sensitivity is a skill that isn't graded in tests. We have to recognize its value for ourselves.

There's a certain feeling I can identify in Aikido that is not happening if we are too nice to each other,

fake our way through techniques or attack without the spark of martial awareness. I almost prefer the pain of a vise grip on my hand or a forced shihonage, than the soulless boredom of falling for an unconnected mercy technique. But on the other end of the spectrum is excessive force, which is a lost opportunity in Aikido. Unless you're in a sparring competition, a technique like nikkyo or kotegaeshi is just another conduit to uke's center, not an end unto itself.

The treasure for me lies in discovering the boundary of control, the unique hug of connection, the elusive perfection of timing. From there, it's incredibly satisfying to then practice with liveliness, power, breath and spirit. I'm absolutely guilty of using excessive force, but my goal is to shed this bit by bit. By doing so I can become a better master of myself and also take better care of the person who is offering up their body to train with me. ○

Infected

by Bobby Ceruti

In 2002 I worked for a painting contractor who was training at Bucks County Aikido. He was involved in becoming educated in conflict resolution. So naturally, he was learning Aikido. He taught me a lot about life, being a man, the nature of con-



flict, and painting houses. As I look back, I feel deep gratitude for him. He pushed me in great ways. He showed me how to grow from getting uncomfortable. He introduced me to Aikido.

I signed up for my first intro class in April of 2002. I would guess my experience was similar to others in that most of my time was spent being confused in this foreign world of moving my body in new ways. I trained for around a year or so, on and off. I loved Aikido but my lifestyle was not conducive to the commitment it required. I was living a rockstar life, partying, partying, and more partying so Aikido slipped away into the background.

I struggled with the decision to return for years. Sometimes I thought I might be done and that Aikido was a thing of the past. This was crazy thinking because I was infected. I had been bitten and it was in my blood. It was like a disease that had been dormant for years. It just needed the right conditions to thrive. But this is no disease. It's a beautiful, painful dance that reflects life itself. I could not stay ignorant to this knowledge. I knew deep inside it was inevitable that I would return. So after a lot of growing up, I started my second beginners class—10 years later, in April of 2012.

Here I am now. Life is different and Aikido and I

are getting along well. I am proud to train under Sensei Lyons and with the incredible community at BCA. At this point, there is no end in sight. As long as my body will allow, I will be on the mat. See you there. ○

Entering In

by Rose Gladstein

This semester Sensei assigned the book *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* by Thomas P. Kasulis. It's a difficult read and when I groaned to him about how academic it seemed, he urged me to just continue and read on. So I did and realized it offered me a different way of looking at the world—a framework for understanding a bit more about where I'd been living, how I got here, and our training together.

The book is a series of lectures that lay out and analyze a paradigm for understanding cultural differences and worldviews based on dimensions of intimacy and integrity. In particular, Kasulis compares Western and Eastern cultures and ways of thinking.

In 2004, I moved to Hawaii. While ten years in Hawaii isn't a lifetime, it's long enough to be changed by the place and people. For tourists and romantics, Hawaii represents paradise. For business and government, it's "Where East Meets West". For locals, it's just home, their *Aina* and connection to it.

For half of my time in Hawaii, I lived on the small rural island of Molokai. With fewer than 7,000 people, the island is home to only about 700 outsiders (*Haoles* – literally translated as the breathless). Though I lived in isolated places before, finding myself in the middle of the Pacific, on an extinct volcano 38 miles long and 10 miles wide, with not even one stop light was pretty strange. But more unnerving was how I experienced the cultural differences. Everyone seemed to know everything. While this seems true for most small, tightly knit communities in the states, this “knowing” on Molokai seemed to come from a dimension I couldn’t define.

I remember being stopped while crossing the street between Friendly Market and Mango Mart by an older, weathered guy. He introduced himself as Uncle Kili, the Mayor. (I knew there was no official mayor of Molokai).

“You’re the new teacher, right?”

His eyes catch mine and hold me in this deep gaze that’s longer than comfortable. Squirming inside, I feel him looking **in me**—searching for my inner core, not just at me.

After that he chatted politely and went on his way. This type of meeting happened a lot in my first few months, then I started getting used to the direct eye to eye, essence to essence encounters between people.

Another common practice that

reflects the intimacy worldview in Hawaii is the way a formal introduction takes place. On Molokai and in Honolulu, whether in a group or individually, formal introductions include describing your lineage: your parents, grandparents and where you’re from. I was told that this explains who you are—you



are not just the individual person. It was a lot to get used to. After a few years of doing this, I actually began to feel differently about my family and even from thousands of miles away I reached out to them more than I had in years.

In Honolulu, at least 43% of the population is either Asian immigrant or descendants of Asian immigrants, predominantly Japanese. Being an outsider in both places was really hard and frustrating, especially because I considered myself respectful and appreciative of the host cultures. And in some

ways, through my Aikido and Zen training, I had more direct experience with some traditional Japanese practices than many modern Japanese and Japanese Americans. When I found out that the Hawaii Soto Zen *Japanese Church* has no Zazen, I was dumbfounded. I eventually learned that the majority of Soto Zen Buddhists in Hawaii are past 60 years old and are continuing practices that were modified during World War II for the survival of their temples. After all, Buddhism has changed many times through many forms, I told myself. I was relieved when the Temple Bishop and others accepted and finally welcomed me in what they called *church*.

Feeling like an outsider is a common experience for anyone approaching and trying to enter a group or culture, but I think it’s particularly strong when

entering what Kasulis describes as a culture predominated by intimate worldviews and dimensions. Our way of Aikido training and the dojo community came to mind in his discussion of Epistemology, which deals with what we know and how we know it. Kasulis writes that from the intimacy orientation “...knowledge occurs in the conjunction of self, reality and community... The community of shared praxis often has technical vocabulary intimating the subtleties of the knowledge unknown to those not sensitized. The proper use of such a vocabulary

identifies one as part of a community of knowers.”

Although the vocabulary referred to here is language, I suggest vocabulary can also refer to our dojo etiquette, our training process and our forms. Our Aikido practice, itself, embodies many dimensions of the intimacy model, the most obvious being the shared physical intimacy of grabbing, striking, throwing and pinning each other repeatedly day after day—and sweating together in an art that often feels mysterious, even dark or hidden from logical analysis. How many times have I heard Sensei say something like, “I can’t explain it, only show it”?

So how does someone enter a community like this without being and feeling like an outsider? It’s impossible. The community is good and strong, but it’s a community because there is a shared experience

and knowledge. So no matter how warm and welcoming the introduction, there will always be the uncomfortable and sometimes unbalancing beginnings. In my case, and I suppose maybe just in my mind, I’ve been a distant part of this community since the dojo formally opened at the chicken coop at Blue Moon Acres. But being here as *uchideshi*, really being here is different. It is full-on. It is messy. It has meant everything from shoveling days and days of heavy wet, beautifully white snow to tending to our community’s *deposits* in our wilderness comfort station.

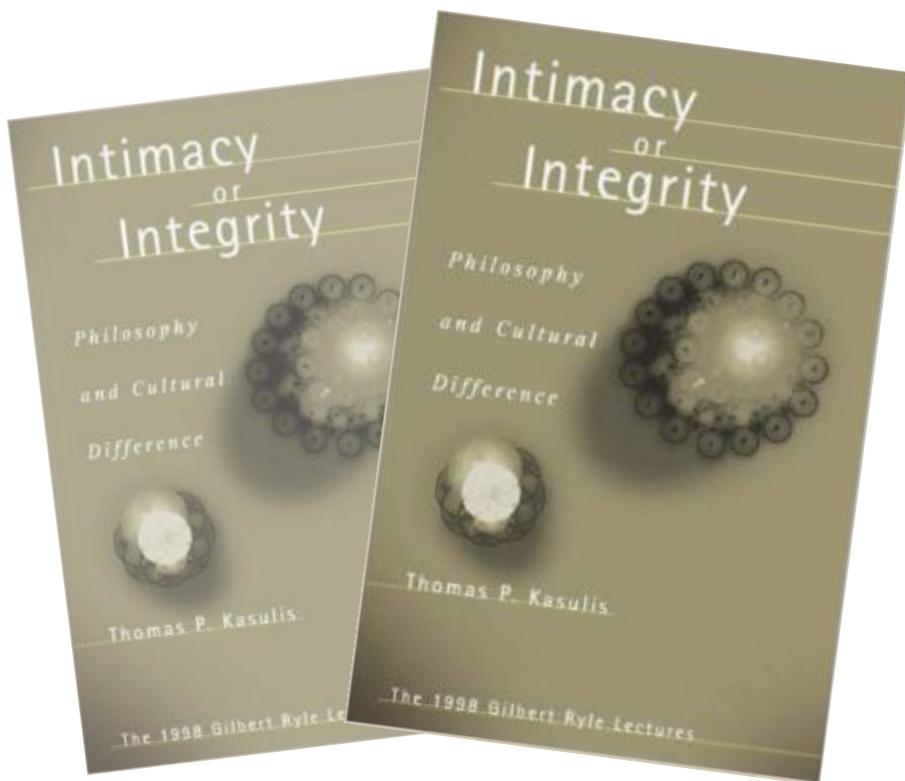
Yes, our training is *suwariwaza shomenuchi ikkyo* and everything else we practice on the mat, but for me, finding my way as part of the community is training and, in itself, a journey. *Gassho* for your support.

Anti-Breakthrough

by Eric Wolf

Early on in my Iaido training I was in a Saturday morning class and we were practicing the 12 *shoden* techniques. I’d spent a lot of time memorizing all 12 forms and I was feeling proud of myself when Sensei decided to offer up a nugget of wisdom for us to chew on: “It’s not about picking things up, it’s about letting things go.” He looked around the room after he spoke, was he looking for a sense of understanding from us? It felt like I had been hit in the gut. I swore he was talking directly to me and everyone else in the class was just an innocent bystander trying to figure out what he meant by those words. I had spent too much time accumulating these 12 techniques instead of focusing on the basics of swordwork.

It’s the same with Aikido. We spend a lot of time collecting these techniques in our mind: *irimi-nage*, *kotegaeshi*...which foot goes where. And after a time you may be told you’ve had a breakthrough. Something to celebrate and hold on to, you’ve reached some new plateau. Congratulations, you’ve accomplished something! However, in my opinion and to quote Admiral Ackbar from Star Wars, it’s a trap. This idea of a breakthrough is tricky, it gives you a sense of pride and accomplishment in an area of study that you don’t really want to feel a sense of pride or accomplish-



ment. In sesshin this year I was told I had a breakthrough—and I respectfully disagree.

When you are in grade school and you learn addition and subtraction you may run home and tell your parents that you know math now. As you progress further and learn mul-



tiplication and division you realize that what you thought you knew as math was only a small portion and now you know more about it. Do you suddenly “know” math now? I think a better way of describing it is you are deepening your understanding of math. Next is algebra, geometry, calculus, trigonometry. Every step of the way your understanding deepens, but as you learn more you realize there will never be a point where you “know” math.

I feel it’s the same with our study at the dojo. Understanding how we relate to the world around us whether in a martial sense, through the study of Aikido, or in a more esoteric sense, through our study of body movement and Zazen. There’s never a point where any of us should feel as if we finally understand it all. I think that’s why I dislike the word *breakthrough*. It implies this point in time you can hold on to. This moment where you know something you didn’t know before. I move differently than I did when I first started Aikido. I feel like I’ve deepened my understanding of how to move

and blend with a partner, but I feel like I’m still working on ikkyo...

I’ve yet to experience the breakthrough where I feel like I’ve perfected that technique; and I don’t want that breakthrough. Having a breakthrough can give you a sense of satisfaction and I don’t want to be satisfied. I want to be hungry to learn more. For me, the hardest part of our training is Zazen. There’s a lot to dislike and it’s easy to reject. I argued with myself about participating in it the first time, “It feels like praying or worship, it’s a Buddhist thing, there’s this whole chanting thing that goes on before hand, it’s ritualistic.” I’m not Buddhist, I’m not into praying, and I dislike rituals; but after participating in sesshin those aren’t what Zazen is about for me anymore.

For me, Zazen is being forced to be alone with your thoughts and to quiet your mind. During sesshin this gets brought up in a way that I don’t think any of our other training is capable of. After sitting for hours my mind is screaming that there is something wrong with my

leg, that I need to get up and move. Learning to quiet down the alarm klaxon of your brain and just sit is powerful. Learning that you don’t need to react to every impulse your brain sends no matter how urgent it seems, that’s a deepening of understanding about you as

a person. Getting to work on these things with people who are looking for similar deepenings of their understandings, that’s a gift that I am very thankful for. ○

My First Sesshin

by Amit Belwalkar

I always wanted to learn meditation, a tool at your disposal to calm your mind. I learned “Sudarshan Kriya,” a rhythmic breathing technique which supposedly calms one down and reduce anxiety. But sitting is different. Sitting is being in the present moment, experience whatever you may feel and just be. For me, it’s a complex notion. I don’t understand it well. I knew that weekend-long sesshin was not going to turn things around for me. But I definitely had some expectations even though not very specific ones; I was curious how it’s all going to unfold.

Before I tell you about my sitting experience, I have to mention about...the chopsticks. Before sesshin, I had a few *concerns*. Sitting was not at the top of that list but eating with chopsticks was! A couple

of times at practice dinners I kept everyone waiting while I tried finishing my meal. As a reminder of that experience, Patti Sensei placed training chopsticks in my meal kit. It was supposed to be a joke but I didn't get it then. There were numerous things that were about to happen so I didn't think of it much. I tried them on and hoped that I wouldn't embarrass myself again.

I struggled using the chopsticks at dinner and breakfast the following day. But with the help and encouragement of my sesshin neighbor Eric Soroker, I survived. I decided to give the regular chopsticks a try and somehow it worked. To be honest, I practiced with them the day before. The chopsticks cooperated and I was finally able to enjoy the meals, delicious, delicious ones.

I did not sit prior to sesshin so I didn't have much experience going in. For the first few sits, my mind

wandered. I was trying to focus on my breathing but I was not able to. It was like you wanting to sleep but cannot because you are focusing on the loud music your neighbor's playing. You feel frustrated, but you can't do much about it. Instead of focusing inward, I was focusing outward.

After a few hours of mind disorienting sits, I felt the breathing was much smoother in and out and I felt its rhythm. I caught the rhythm wave and rode with it. Somehow it became easier to leave the attachments and the distractions behind and just breathe. That definitely put my mind to a better place. At the same time, the pain started to kick in and I realized I was able to focus much better. It was as if the mind and body knew it was time to rise to the occasion.

When sesshin was over, it was a feeling of triumph and fulfillment! To be frank, if I had succumbed to the pain, I wouldn't have enjoyed it as much as I did. It wouldn't have been a positive experience. But the dojo members inspired and pushed each other and that helped me cross the finish line. I returned home in high spirits. As difficult as it was to get to that *greater* feeling, it was just as quick and easy to get back to the *normal everyday* feeling the very next day. I guess it's not easy for such a feeling to last for a long time. At the least, I am glad that the seeds of sitting were sown from sesshin for years to come! ○

Weeds

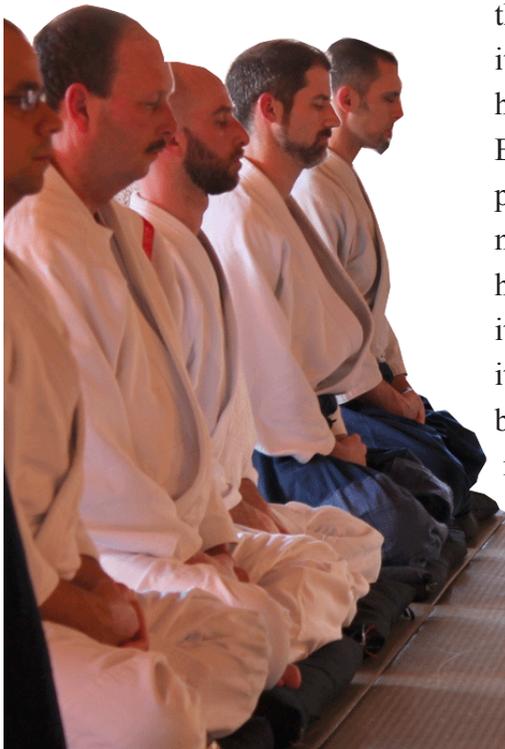
Submitted by Kim O'Malley

(Assigned for Shodan examination. Topic: The harmony we speak of in Aikido requires absolute commitment in body, mind, and spirit and therefore requires putting down selfish concerns. Given this, can a person with an injury really practice the heart of this martial art or are they forever fated to be distracted?)

"Everybody needs a little poison in their life."

Everyone starts out on different levels. They come with expectations; they arrive with doubt; they open the door to a gym; they change clothes to look in the mirror; they climb stairs to be set apart from the crowds; but in the end, we're still grabbing each other's wrists. When we bow, can we practice this art without letting ourselves get in the way—can we put all of that down?

I have seen so many faces including my own, and I've come to believe that our selfish concerns are not something to dispose of. Our selfish concerns are starting points—they are many beginnings from which to expand and become someone new. Awareness of them is the first step. And you'll find that even when one concern has been trampled down on your Way, more sprout up like weeds. There is no end to them regardless of if there is one or there are many.



I had always used my selfish concerns as excuses to evade change. It was easier just to avoid them. However, weeds grow larger when left alone, and eventually the crossroads come, like it or not. Stop avoiding it—make a decision! Because once you cut off the top of a weed, it'll keep growing back. You have to continue to show up for it over and over until, at last, you can walk through the roots without tripping.

For me, a major turning point in my life happened after March 11, 2011: the Tohoku Earthquake. I remember coming back from Japan and going into Sensei's office. He asked me if I was okay. "Of course!" was my answer. I think that was the only time I ever blatantly lied to Sensei, yet at the time, I was also lying to myself. I wanted to believe that there was no weed there, strangling the life out of me, shaking the foundations of my life apart. I had made a decision I regretted—I had left Japan: a place I had built my life around since the day I realized I had a life to build. And there I sat, trying to play pretend.

Those of you who saw the news are aware of the tsunami and the radiation scare, but I was *living* there *in* that—where aftershocks slammed into my room at odd hours of the morning, and walking on the sidewalk felt like walking on water. That was fear; then again, it was also truly living. I didn't want to leave the country, but everyone I knew was. I didn't want to give in, but I saw my dad cry. And somehow I knew I wouldn't be able to go back once I left.

A Poem by Roy Lee "Rocky" Dennis

These things are good: ice cream and cake, a ride on a Harley, seeing monkeys in the trees, the rain on my tongue, and the sun shining on my face.

These things are a drag: dust in my hair, holes in my shoes, no money in my pocket, and the sun shining on my face.

*Rocky was afflicted with craniodiaphyseal dysplasia, a rare bone disorder that, amongst other things, disfigured his face. His short life was the inspiration for the movie *Mask*.

Since that day, part of me was broken. Sensei knows; a lot of people can tell. All of that hope I invested—my entire life—was left there, scattered in little constellations of artificial light seen through a plane window. I haven't been back in four years. I want to go back, just not now. I set it aside—I put it down. Everything happens for a reason. Because of it, I was able to find that absolute commitment in mind, body, and spirit to learn what Sensei has to give. It saved me.

Though, it does not end there. Like I said, more sprout up; not all of them come from the mind. A year and a half ago, in the depths of my dedication, I got my right leg caught in Sensei's hakama. At first, it was nothing serious—just a seed I brushed off. However, it grew and progressed into a chronic injury that, on some days, was intolerable. It got worse, and I have been on and off the mat ever since. Of everything I tried, nothing seemed to "cure it."

I vividly remember a day when Sensei said I should sit out from Aikido for a while. It seems so trivial to say, but having heard that rattle

through my resolve, built around the choice I made to stay in this country, was like being a passenger on a derailed train. I don't want this! After everything—after pressing the pause button on my life, you want me to just watch? Of course, there are merits in watching, but I felt as though I were standing on a highway median, watching traffic fly by on either side. Alone, restless, but even that failed to resolve anything.

Training with this injury is entirely unpredictable and unruly. To keep coming when just walking up the steps hurts—when you haven't slept—when just sitting down is a nightmare, is hard. On bad days, it becomes a fog, enveloping—smothering. It's hard to focus—hard to breathe—hard to *trust*. I am blind to what was just demonstrated—I hear Sensei yelling at us to use our hips, but mine have degraded. I can't use my leg as an excuse, but it happens to be one. I have to keep going even when just dying there on the mat would be nice. I get jealous; I have doubts. I'm in pain. How can I connect with anyone like this?! When I'm falling apart before I'm ready.

Sensei said once that when you are ever attacked, you will never be at your best—you'll never be ready. Maybe you have a headache, or you worked all day, or you're not paying attention, that's when it'll be. No defenses, just Aikido. This could be teaching me something—it's a gift, and a distracting one. You have to be okay with showing that vulnerability, accepting it—going *through* it. Let it pass by like one of those ships, even if you're falling apart at the seams. Let it go. Distractions are a fundamental part of everyday life; however, you don't need to follow them when they beckon. They'll lead you astray; you'll just end up wallowing in it, getting lost, and forgetting what really matters.

Even so, there are still things I cannot do. I have to recognize them. I have to compensate. I have to accept the compensations. I have to adjust, and know I adjusted each and every time so that I do not build nasty habits. On good days, I have to be able to go back to doing techniques the right way, and be prepared to give it up again in the next moment. As unpredictable as it is, I can never entirely gauge what's going on with me, which makes it practically impossible to relay to other people. I won't know it hurts until it hurts; when it does, it's hard to hide it.

Everyone knows, in a way. And also some people forget entirely, thus worrying about it is also inevitable. How hard are they going to throw me? Maybe he had a bad day. Crap, we're doing udegaramé. Are they

going to force me to break fall? Everything—*everything* sprouts up into that unavoidable fear that I just have cut down over and over again. A lot of the time, I just can't help but be afraid. *Anything* can happen, but its trust that keeps the connection alive. I have to trust them; I have to trust *myself* to take it. Otherwise, what are we doing?

"Take it easy on her," was one of my hardest trials. No! I don't want anyone to take it easy on me ever!! Not now—never! And yet, I can't be thrown like that. Already, I have an injury I'm dealing with. Anything more and I won't be able to handle it. And it hurts. It hurts to hear Sensei saying it, but at the same time, I cherish it. I know people go easy on me; let me tell you. I feel it, and I also feel the need to go easy on them in exchange. Sometimes that works, but other times, it can dull the practice into a bittersweet technique.

"I don't want to throw you" was even harder. What do I do then? Okay, don't throw me? It forces me to have to drag it out of *them*. Throw me anyway. This is a martial art. If I'm on the mat, it means I'm here to be thrown. When it gets to the point

where I have to convince someone to throw me, it really makes me aware of how much pain I'm in. It makes it harder for me. Maybe I shouldn't be here? Am I ruining their practice? What am I doing here?! I must be insane. So I strike them harder.

I keep showing up, and feeling my way through the haze because at the end of it all, I want to go to those places where neither of us hold back. Sometimes, I feel like I'm thrashing at the tether, hearing it creak while my name is being screamed into the wind, but I can't make out the sound. And I keep thinking, all that it takes, I will get there, and I will be free. My technique will fall apart sometimes; my ukemi can be a wreck. I enviously look on at other people and think: I can do that, but I can't. I have to sit back, suck it up, hold it in, and be okay with it. This is me and my weed—my distraction and where I am. Today. And it hurts almost as much as the pain that comes. Yet I still practice this art because vested in me is the belief that even with distraction—even with selfish concerns, there buried in those roots, is the heart of this martial art. You just have to get dirty. ○

St. Therese of Lisieux's Little Way:

- When something is taken away, let it go without complaining.
- When accused—even falsely—accept without excuse.
- Render small services to others, without seeking acknowledgment.
- Endure as much as possible before making a complaint.
- Bear courageously the inconveniences and fatigues of your life.
- Rejoice in being forgotten.

Honest Expression

by Erich Bass

While many were recovering from Thanksgiving, we returned to the dojo and our training. Our first class of the evening was typical: focused, intense, Martial arts training. The first class was followed by a brief Zazen. As we began to assemble for the second class, I spoke with Patti Lyons Sensei. She casually warmed up with a bokken while we chatted. It is not unusual to see members of the dojo practicing weapons work before or after class, however I had never seen Patti Lyons Sensei do so outside of weapons practice. Being relatively new to the dojo, I shrugged it off to the fact that we did not have weapons class earlier in the week. We lined up for the second class of the evening and bowed in. George Lyons Sensei instructed the class to take ukemi to loosen up after our sit or recent arrival for those who had missed the first class.

Once our warm-up was complete, one of the senior students was called to the center of the mat. Sensei then asked for an uke, and called out, “Suwariwaza ikkyo!” This opening to class was anything but typical. However, since the senior student had been preparing for her Shodan test, I assumed that this was a warm-up for her test in two weeks. Fully expecting to start training, I glanced around the room to find a partner. To my surprise, Sensei called out another technique, and then another.

I quickly realized that this was not a warm-up, this was her Shodan test.

Sensei called out several more techniques, then called for a new uke. Again several more techniques, then a new uke. Following several more techniques, Sensei said, “Pick up a jyo.” She promptly headed to the weapons rack to retrieve a jyo. At this point, I was having a growing difficulty sitting seiza, which only put me in further awe of the spectacle before me. Here I could barely manage to hold my seated position, while she demonstrated her mastery of one technique after another.

After demonstrating jyo techniques, it was time for bokken. Following techniques with the bokken, it was back to more body arts with yet another uke. Countless techniques, several weapons demonstrations, a handful of exhausted uke, and over an hour later, she knelled in front of Sensei ready for his next command. Upon his final command the test drew to a close.

Having never seen testing before, as the instructors conferred about her performance, I was nervous. The most notable thing to me was her technique. It was not the same as Sensei’s. This is not to say that her technique was poor, quite the opposite, it was merely different. I was not sure of how this different expression of her technique would be viewed.

We lined up again, as Sensei knelled in front of the kamiza. “Shodan, passed!” Sensei pro-

claimed. Her test was honest. It was a clear expression of her understanding of Aikido, and the culmination of eleven years of training.

A great martial artist put it much better than I will: “You see—really—to me, ok, to me, ultimately martial art(s) means honestly expressing yourself. Now it is very difficult to do. It is easy for me to put on a show... Or...I can show you some really fancy movement, but to express oneself honestly, not lying to oneself and to express myself honestly, now that, my friend, is very hard to do; and you have to train, you have to keep your reflexes so that when you want it, it’s there. When you want to move, you’re moving, and when you move you are determined to move—not anything less than that.” — *Bruce Lee*

Congratulations to Kim O’Malley on your Black Friday Black Belt! 🍷

Copper to Gold

by Laura Esposito

Why did I want to be a live-in student? I ask myself that all the time. At first, I didn’t really know; actually, I was really resistant to it, but something inside of me knew that I had to do it—that there was something I had to gain from it. Now I’m seeing just how transformative the experience is. When I try to compare it to something else, two scenarios come to mind. It’s kind of like walking the narrow ledge of a cliff while battling the elements and your fears; and, it’s also like being

in the center of a zombie apocalypse, and you either scream and cry, or let go of your fear and pull something out from inside of you that wants to fight and live. It reminds me of the movie *The Grey*, where some couldn't go on in the freezing wilderness being hunted by wolves, the brave Liam Neeson fought to the very end. Believe me, there have been (and still are) many times that I just want to run away, but I'm always reeled back in by Sensei, the dojo, or the thought of feeling like I never completely went "through".

When I first started Aikido, I made all the same excuses that everyone does: "I can't afford it," "I'm not coordinated enough," "I have arthritis in my shoulder," "I have no time," etc. For the first month or longer, I couldn't even look up at anybody because it was so hard, and scary, and embarrassing, and I was incredibly nervous. I had to give myself pep talks and listen to sooth-

ing music before class; and after class, I usually cried. However, the lessons learned on the mat, and how they translated to everyday life, is what kept me going.

The first thing that really struck me was the phrase, "If you tense up, you'll get hurt." During training, you'll physically get hurt if you get scared and resist allowing yourself to move with your partner's movements. In life, it doesn't help you to be resistant (anxious, worried, angry) to whatever comes—good and bad things come, just allow them to come and then allow them to go.

Next, came the feeling of being more connected to my body—constantly learning to move in ways I couldn't before. I even began walking differently. From there, things snowballed to the point where I don't even recognize myself sometimes, and yet my practice is still very young. Maybe at one time it was helpful for me to be quiet, nervous, distrustful, and disconnected,

but I knew that it wasn't serving me anymore—I knew there was a "me" inside that has always been strong and unafraid to be herself, free from anxiety, someone that loves everyone, and has a deep compassion for everything.

That is why I do Aikido. And that is why I wanted to be Uchideshi—to be pushed to the edge so that I have no choice but to let go of all of the things that are holding me back, and not serving me anymore, and to draw out the person that I know exists inside of me. Uchideshi life is: duty, responsibility, selflessness, awareness, being present, in tune with your teachers, zen moments on the farm, doing things the ego doesn't want to do, tension, going "through" instead of around, discipline, love, connection, exhausting, demanding physically/emotionally/mentally, sacrifice, joy, pain...all of the things that help transform copper into gold. ○



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