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It's all good in theory until it's happening to you

by George Lyons

Teacher: *How are you?*

Student: *I'm tense and exhausted.*

Teacher: *Apparently not exhausted enough.*

I logged a lot of training hours in my early days. At the end of class one evening someone came to me and asked if I'd like to do some free practice. "Are you kidding me? No! There is not one part of me that wants to free practice!"

I can't remember if these words actually made it to my mouth but I know for sure it's how I felt. I was exhausted. I wanted to rest, sleep, eat, anything else...just not more practice. I needed the discipline and structure of a class to keep me going. Without it I wanted to collapse.

Tired doesn't come all by itself either; I was frustrated, grouchy, self involved, I was an ass. Aside from resenting what was going on in the dojo I was unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, resisting things in my life too. At one point I was called in by the owner at my workplace and told that my mood was dark, so dark in fact that it was affecting my work as well as

the other employees. Perturbed, I griped to my coworker who nicely let me know the truth of it by squinting one side of his face and not saying a word.

IS THIS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY?

Questions start to loom large when exhaustion sets in. A little push from a well meaning friend, health professional, Mom...is enough to convince us we are doing too much and need a rest. "You know you can actually die from lack of sleep." "Dude, you need a break!"

Fitting practice into a busy day is difficult but necessary to move forward in learning any skill. But is it necessary to the point of exhaustion? There seems to be an unspoken message in the dojo that training to exhaustion and beyond is a good thing, but why? Wouldn't a little rest and recovery time help us to be at our best?

FALLING DOWN

It's a funny irony that there's a lot of talk about the art of ukemi but not a lot of explanation about how to do it. It's clear from the first day that we have to learn something about falling but we're told that a lot of verbal instruction doesn't help and can even make things worse. While explanations may be well intended, the outcome is usually a contrived

artificial response. The hope in taking ukemi is to feel what's actually happening rather than make it up from some abstraction.

Even without a lot of instruction though, we'll eventually come to a time when we think we're getting smart about how to handle ourselves. We know what we're supposed to do and we start doing it. It's been said that the ego is in charge of volitional muscles and works to achieve the best results...and if that's not possible at least to make us look good...and if that's not possible at least to keep us from looking foolish. We'd like to hang onto the illusion that we are in charge of our own destiny even if just for the few seconds it takes to get through a technique.

THE UP SIDE OF BEING DOWN

It can be very unsatisfying to train with someone who is a step ahead of you. Whether it's out of fear or a desire to do it "right" it feels like there is no connection to be had with this person. Agendas are woven into practice in subtle ways and unwittingly we sometimes end up isolating ourselves in our own world.

This is not a problem in practice but rather part of the passage through. Facing our isolation and loneliness, feeling sorry for ourselves; wanting to be good at it,

getting frustrated, grouchy; getting more and more self involved until we finally exhaust all of it and realize everyone else is in the same situation, that there is nothing to be afraid of, that this is part and parcel of the human condition.

CUTTING TO THE CORE

Even though we don't directly teach it there is a lot of emphasis on ukemi in our practice. The hope in taking "good" ukemi is in allowing force to pass through to the center of the body and from there respond spontaneously to whatever situation we find ourselves in. It's true that literally exhausting ourselves physically is a way to backseat agendas and connect with deeper, quieter parts of ourselves. It's also true figuratively as in when we get sick and tired of our same old ways of looking and thinking about things. Life can wear us down just like training and it's then that we have the best chance to realize that we don't have to pass our days in habitual thoughts

and responses. Have you ever been complaining and said, "I'm so sick of listening to myself?"

NO TRICKS

The dojo is the place we come to wear ourselves out on purpose; to get to our core and see what we have there. In Zen they call it seeing your original face. Of course we are free to go on defending our positions as intensely as we wish and for as long as we like. I'm really not suggesting otherwise. Just like ukemi, if we try to think our way through this, the outcome will be artificial; an agenda to drop agendas is still an agenda.

Just come to the dojo as often as you can and go for it when you do. Go for it with all you have; hold nothing in reserve. Go for it without ideas of a payoff. Go for it and see what happens when you exhaust yourself. ○

I see the sky and clouds

by Nikos Nikopoulos



Nikos and Helen at the Garrison

I see the sky and clouds—I hear birds and people living together. Sometimes I don't see, see anything. Sometimes, as if trapped, I can only see myself as black, gray, white, and immaterial. I cannot distinguish a form, I can only feel that I am a part of it. Maybe I can guide it or maybe everything happens by itself. But only if I am within it, will I be able to feel.

Sometimes, I am able to put my ego aside and just coexist with everything else. To be one without thinking; just breathing and being in motion, never stopping. Never stopping my mind, never stopping my body, never stopping the wild horse wanting to sprint. I am still too small to be able to stop it. Or even guide it.

Every day we are tested, sometimes put in the centre, performing what we have been taught, and showing what we are capable of. Other times, we are fighting against

"The student is disturbed. He has come to the end of his "tricks" (actually desperate attempts to preserve the ego as boss, when it is only a competent executive officer) and the teacher will not "buy" any such tricks.

The student is not a fool. He knows all the time what he is doing and that one day he must surrender in utter helplessness. Meanwhile, he retains a second line of defense, a "secondary" judgment which does not yield whatever he may say openly. One day this too lapses, even if only for a moment.

Then something happens. The student is surprised to notice, for example, that his perceptions are sharper, everything seems brighter. Next morning he awakens to a situation which puzzles him for a moment. Something is missing. What can it be?

—Alfred Pulyan

our fears and weaknesses, and reposition ourselves in other positions. Further ahead or a few steps back. These are common, everyday moments. Especially as a foreign uchi-deshi.

Our goal is to become better humans. Sometimes it is not easy to let go of old habits, or accept failure or triumph. We hate failure and it is the last thing in our minds and yet it is failure that sets us free and repositions us on our chosen path.

The only way, as I understand it, that can keep a person alive, rested, and without unnecessary doubts and guilt, is to give your better self, 180% of what you believe you have to present as your better self. And it is in those moments when you think you have nothing more left, when you feel you have reached the end, that you realise there is more. I don't know how, but there is always more.... This is the only way to find out what you are really made of. This is the only way to accept and enjoy success. Keep moving. ○



“Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet / confinement of your aloneness / to learn / anything or anyone / that does not bring you alive / is too small for you.”
—David Whyte



Roman and Sensei in our new temple bell garden

dead, not yet.

by R. T. Loewen

50 years ago, there used to be a Lavender Farm here, years before the lake was drained. (could happen)

Don't take us for granted.

I was thinking about the impermanence of everything. Here today gone tomorrow. It is the truth of this precious life: everything that lives, dies.

Somewhere along the way I realized how special our dojo, our members, and our teachers are. This dojo is the center. I love its physical space and I love training here with you all. I've come accustomed to your faces, your spirits, your presence. Patti Sensei Lily Eric Grace Jon Sebastian Matt Kim Brian Cathy Ester Aaron Amit Virginia Wolf Jennifer Tom Erich Helen John Laura Kacy Osha Mc V Nick Bobby Self and

others (too many to mention)

Someday all of us will be gone. Dead. Every one of us. There will be birds, but not these birds. There will be flowers, but not these flowers. There will be humans (chances are) but not us humans. No Bell for us to hear. You may think: Oh, we have time, plenty of time, I'll train with my friends tomorrow.

No. Day disappears as night visits, only to disappear into the light of day.

On our Kamiza there are photos of O Sensei, our founder and Chiba Sensei, our teacher's teacher. Both have passed on. Beginners sometimes ask and wonder who were these men, what was it like to be taught Aikido by these masters.

Someday, on someone else's Kamiza there will be a picture of our teacher, George Lyons Sensei and

Roman Loewen, continued on page 11

Dogs Never Die

by Virginia Ahlers

One's own suffering is one thing. Sometimes it is easily dealt with, sometimes not. Watching someone else suffer is much, much worse.

I think about pain and suffering. What is pain, really? Nerve endings complaining? Warning me to stop what I am doing? Warning me of a possible injury? Is it just an emotional response, all in my head? It should be easy to ignore then, easy to let go.

When sitting for even short periods of time there is often pain; sometimes of the body, and sometimes of the mind. But it's usually temporary. I have moments of extreme agony, then breathe, let it go, let it wash away, and after a few minutes it fades away, to be forgotten again until next time. The same thing happens during body arts, too. Sometimes I think I just can't get up again, but then I tell myself, "Just one more...just one more..." Dealing with pain and suffering can be good sometimes. It can help us grow and develop strength. Not for animals though, not for dogs. They just suffer.

I've worked with horses, dogs, and other animals for my entire life. I've seen so much pain, suffering, and death. I've been lucky though, it's always been fairly short in each case. Someone gets injured or sick and then passes away (sometimes aided) within a few days, or even hours. I never really knew how difficult it could be to watch someone I love slowly decline to their

inevitable end. This past year, I watched my 13 year old dog, Nero, lose weight and become weak.... I watched him stumble and fall as he tried to keep up with the others, even during our slow walks. I saw the mortified look on his face when he realized he accidentally pooped in the house. I constantly looked for what I could do to help him feel better. No one can prevent or cure old age, but I wanted to make each day as happy as I could for him. If he wanted to go for walks, we went. If

still happy? Did he want to go for a walk? Did he want to eat? How much pain was he really in? Did I have to make that final decision? I wanted it to be more obvious or have nature make the decision for me. Sometimes he would have a few bad days, and I would think, "Okay, it's time." But then he would seemingly feel better again. Finally, though, the inevitable came, and I had to help him pass along.

His death itself, although hard, was not the most difficult thing.



Nero

he wanted to be brushed, I brushed him. If he wanted to just lay next to me, I sat with him. I tried different foods, medicines and massage, even chiropractic care. Every day, I evaluated his quality of life. Was he

Watching him in pain for so long... watching him suffer...making that final decision of when...second guessing myself...should I have done more to help him be more comfortable? So I think about his

pain and my own. Some pain can be easily forgotten, some takes much longer to forget.

Would it have helped my dog to know the Heart Sutra? Or did he already know it? Dogs know how to live in the moment. They know

how to push their pain aside and get on with their day. They have nothing to learn from their pain. Maybe the lesson is for me. I could let my pain take me over; let it grow, surround and control me and my life. Or I could sit with it, breathe, and

let it go. Let it become part of me. Treat each day like my dog did: get up, eat something, go for a walk, enjoy the sun, enjoy the rain, and take a nap. ○

Dogs Never Die

Some of you, particularly those who think they have recently lost a dog to “death”, don’t really understand this. I’ve had no desire to explain, but won’t be around forever and must.

Dogs never die. They don’t know how to. They get tired, and very old, and their bones hurt. Of course they don’t die. If they did they would not want to always go for a walk, even long after their old bones say: “No, no, not a good idea. Let’s not go for a walk.” Nope, dogs always want to go for a walk. They might get one step before their aging tendons collapse them into a heap on the floor, but that’s what dogs are. They walk.

It’s not that they dislike your company. On the contrary, a walk with you is all there is. Their boss, and the cacophonous symphony of odor that the world is. Cat poop, another dog’s mark, a rotting chicken bone (exultation), and you. That’s what makes their world perfect, and in a perfect world death has no place.

However, dogs get very, very sleepy. That’s the thing, you see. They don’t teach you that at the fancy university where they explain about quarks, gluons, and Keynesian economics. They know so much they forget that dogs never die. It’s a shame, really. Dogs have so much to offer and people just talk a lot.

When you think your dog has died, it has just fallen asleep in your heart. And by the way, it is wagging its tail madly, you see, and that’s why your chest hurts so much and you cry all the time. Who would not cry with a happy dog wagging its tail in their chest. Ouch! Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, that hurts. But they only wag when they wake up. That’s when they say: “Thanks Boss! Thanks for a warm place to sleep and always next to your heart, the best place.”

When they first fall asleep, they wake up all the time, and that’s why, of course, you cry all the time. Wap, wap, wap. After a while they sleep more. (Remember, a dog while is not a human while. You take your dog for walk, it’s a day full of adventure in an hour. Then you come home and it’s a week, well one of your days, but a week, really, before the dog gets another walk. No WONDER they love walks.)

Anyway, like I was saying, they fall asleep in your heart, and when they wake up, they wag their tail. After a few dog years, they sleep for longer naps, and you would too. They were a GOOD DOG all their life, and you both know it. It gets tiring being a good dog all the time, particularly when you get old and your bones hurt and you fall on your face and don’t want to go outside to pee when it is raining but do anyway, because you are a good dog. So understand, after they have been sleeping in your heart, they will sleep longer and longer.

But don’t get fooled. They are not “dead.” There’s no such thing, really. They are sleeping in your heart, and they will wake up, usually when you’re not expecting it. It’s just who they are.

I feel sorry for people who don’t have dogs sleeping in their heart. You’ve missed so much. Excuse me, I have to go cry now.

 (Originally posted by milkyj on Reddit)

In the Forsythia

by Alli Warshaw

One foot is deep in a pile of moist leaves, the other foot is resting on a flimsy branch of forsythia. The sun is hot above me, the chickens are running as Lily herds them to nowhere, and the fox sits beneath a log waiting for her chance. I am ducking in-between the bushes in front of Lyons Sensei's house reaching for grape vines when Sensei appears through a small clearing in the leaves. He has his phone in his hand and says, "Hold still." He takes a photo of me through the chaos of branches. He tells me that this will be the photo for the article, and "Oh, by the way, you are going to write an article."

With dirty sweat streaks down my face and thin forsythia scratches up my legs, I grasp tightly to the grape vine. It is surprising to me that writing an article is to be part of my uchi-deshi training. I long for a practice and community so full circle. Where our daily practice on the mat, on the zafu, and on the land is tied together with our words in the journal. While each practice can survive on its own, what a beautiful example of "the sum is greater than its parts." So I was thrilled, and my heart and mind were bouncing about with what to share. Being one for mixed-metaphors and long convoluted allegories, I settled on offering a guide for weeding grape vines:

To successfully remove grape vines, you must first walk the perimeter looking for evidence from

above of the broad lobed green grape leaves about the size of a hand. Build an awareness of space. Then, get down on your knees and enter the brambles where you believe the root may lie. You are like-



Alli in the forsythia

ly to be wrong on your first attempt. You will see that just beyond your reach through the bramble lies the grape vine root. So you must backward shikko out of the bushes and

enter again over by where you spotted the root. Self-correct. Once you have yourself up close with the ants and spiders that make their home in the undergrowth, take out your clippers. With words as an offering, give your peace to the grape vine and cut the stem as close to the ground as possible. Respect all life.

With the grape vine dislodged from its root, slide your hand up the vine to the canopy of the forsythia bush. As your hand slides, bring your center up, moving your head and shoulders into the labyrinth of leaves and knotted branches. Move as one.

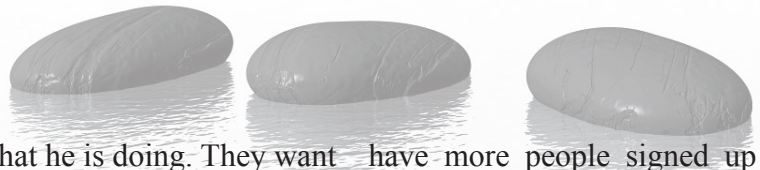
It was here, deep in the chaos of the thicket, that Sensei snapped a photo of me and informed me I was to write an article. At a glance one would assume that I was lost. And sure, I was in a mess, but I had a path. Don't let what your life looks like from the outside define how it is experienced.

When you find yourself clearing grape vines and you are gross, sweaty, tangled and about to lose it, take a breath and keep your hands connected to the vine. Stay connected. Like with grape vines, you will find yourself lost and spinning in the streets someday, about to lose it. Keep your feet connected. With a deep breath, slowly pull the vine down through your hands to gently remove the twisted tendrils from the hardened forsythia branches. If you have never encountered grape vines, just know they are always longer, more tangled, and tougher than they appear. Just when you

Alli Warshaw, continued on page 12

Optimal Experience

by John McDevitt



Once upon a time...there was an Aikidoist who was working at his art, just about every day, for 30+ years. He has somehow kept his art the central component of his life. He is still passionate about it and seems to be continuously breaking new ground. People wonder how he is coming up with all this new stuff! He is skinny, but strong! He has a magical partner who does all the same stuff! He is very lucky (or fortunate, as his mother would say). He has the wind at his back and a smile on his face.

Over the years people start to show up at his barn to witness his creations. A few of them decide they want to be his students. He does not ask to be their teacher...but they keep showing up. They want to fig-



John overseeing class at the Garrison

ure out what he is doing. They want to steal from him and also give to him. It is a funny practice in that way. More students keep showing up. They are curious, hungry, and some are even a bit crazy. They have no idea what mutual passing through is but they smile and listen when he talks about it. They love and respect their teacher and want to “get it”. So, they practice. Then they practice. Then they practice some more. They are told that that is the secret.

One day the teacher gathered his students together and announced “I want to have a retreat!” So we can practice for days without end. I want us to immerse ourselves in it. To let our Aikido fully consume us...transform us.

At first no one really understands this idea because we practice almost every day already...but everyone is so excited that they all volunteer to help. They find a wonderful castle along the Hudson river where they will practice. The rooms are simple and all have very white sheets. There is a chef there who makes wonderful food. The scones are yummy and the coffee is strong. There are no outlets in the rooms but no one cares! They create a fire pit for us because they know our leader wants a fire. Someone arranges for all the carpooling and makes sure we don't forget anything or anyone. Practice mats show up early and are magically set up when we get there. We

have more people signed up than rooms...but when it is time to rest we all have a bed to sleep in. Someone very crazy is in charge of the kamiza and he sets it up beautifully and then watches over it carefully. If someone moves something, he moves it back. People show up with wigs and pretend to be New York Yogi's just to make us laugh. The crazzziest person washes all the Gi's and smiles the whole time! We all look out for each other and care for each other.

We all wake up early in the morning to practice...and practice. We stop to eat and rest and then practice more. Everything we need is provided for us (even sauna towels). Some feel that time is passing very slowly. Some cannot believe that the weekend is almost over. The flow of it lifts the course of life to a different level. The flow provides a sense of creative discovery. It has the potential to push us all to higher levels of performance and to lead to higher levels of consciousness. It allows for concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in the activity. We feel strong, alert, effortless, unselfconscious and at the peak of our ability. Both the sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear. Group FLOW.

Sensei has a lot of tricks up his sleeve but he also reminds us...“I cannot do it for you”. Some of us

John McDevitt, continued on page 11

Letter To An Old Friend

Dear Friend,

It made me really happy to hear that you're in a healthy place psychologically and physically. I have great love for you and want to see you reach your full potential. I want the same for myself. It seems to come easier for some, but for others, like me and you, it's dark periods and battling demons. I don't know why I'm so stubborn and emotionally sensitive, and why it's such a process to let it all go, but I know that Aikido has been my path navigating me through. For me, there was no other path that could've gotten me to the place I'm in today; and it's amazing to think that there exists this very specific thing that I needed, and I just so happened to have discovered it in my neighborhood! I know a lot of people think it's weird; I get thrown around for 2-5 hours every day, and I don't have a lot of time to go out for a drink, or watch tv shows. But I know there are others who find it admirable that I am so dedicated to something that is helping me to become more of myself; some even wish for it in their own lives. For the last 3 years now I have lived in a tiny cottage at my dojo as an apprentice to my teachers. Each year has had it's difficulties, but the first year was definitely the hardest. I have memories of feeling watched by Sensei. His presence was always felt; judging the genuineness of my

character. It was unclear what was expected of me. I didn't want to do too little, but I also didn't want to do too much and get in the way. One of the first days I had some time to fill, I went out to sweep my porch. Later, during one of my many talks with Sensei, he said to me: "I saw you sweeping your porch, so I know



Laura and Roman

that you care." I don't know which tree he was hiding behind for him to see me, but I felt we then had an understanding that I was here to be a dedicated student. In those early days, I watched and learned to listen to the silent conversation that was happening between us. Sensei was constantly giving me work that challenged me, and I used it as food to develop my character. Knowing I

had a fear of heights, he had me go on a ladder for weeks to paint the cottage and the pool house. Also, knowing my fear of machinery, he had me repeatedly mow the lawn with the zero turn mower, fix the driveway with the giant tractor, use a log splitter—among other things. I stopped giving fear any room to react and just accepted what my teacher wanted me to do without question. I wanted to be of use, and not a burden, so I had to push aside any fears. Eventually, I noticed I could walk up stairs without getting dizzy, and I could walk around the property at night without irrationally fearing for my life. I stopped feeding the thoughts of fear, and was finally able to walk around relaxed in my body. I didn't realize how much fear and anxiety I carried around until I noticed the absence of it. A big "A-ha!" moment for me was during a trip to the movie theater with my teachers: I sat in my seat, among the crowd of people, and waited

for the familiar feeling of anxiety to grip my body, but it never came. As I sat there, I felt still and calm, and I remember thinking how odd it felt, and how silent. It was in that moment that I really felt the impact that this training had on me. For a long time in my earlier training I would constantly try to release any tension, focusing on the idea that if you tense up you'll get hurt, and if

Zazen, running, conversation, reading, considering, (and taking responsibility for) the problems of the world, having dinner or taking a bath ... whatever you are doing now—that is the daily reality for you: do not try to escape it. Each thing we are doing or facing now is our true reality, our true encounter. This is exactly the point. Whatever you are doing now, do it. Just do it. Don't avoid it. If you escape from this, you are always escaping towards some future, from the cradle to the grave.

—Hogen-San

you're afraid you'll tense up. Actively putting this idea into a physical practice has really affected my entire mental state.

Besides the farm constantly needing to be taken care of, there is also the dojo, the cottage, and my teachers, (not to mention my own life)—there is a continual juggling that occurs. The selfless work is infinitely rewarding, but can become overwhelming and exhausting, and at times can even turn into resentment. There was one day, after working 8 hours, I couldn't get to the dojo early, and as I walked up the dojo stairs with only 5 minutes to spare before class, there sat a giant cobweb. I became so enraged that no one bothered to get rid of it, that I could have screamed at everyone in there. As I got to the top and grabbed a broom, I began to soften; I realized that maybe no one actually noticed it, and I was filled with compassion and gratitude for being given this deep practice of seeing. Also, it felt good to care for the space that has given me so much, and to make the path looked cared for for my teachers who have given us this space.

Aikido is helping to wake me up. I was struck with how asleep someone can be, at an Aikido summer

camp a couple of years ago. I was walking alone down the campus road, and came upon a bird enjoying a bath in a puddle. After taking a few moments to smile and share the feeling of the joys of life with the bird, I happily moved to the sidewalk to give it space to continue its bath. As I was going on my way, I noticed a campus student walking straight towards the bird. With backpack on, earbuds in, and her gaze directly forward, I knew she would not notice what I just saw, so I tried waving her over. The girl didn't even notice me waving, and if the bird had not flown away in time, she would have stepped right on it. I was shocked into a moment of complete horror, and I quickly realized how important the work that we are doing in our training is.

Wait, 9 months vegan!?! That is a serious accomplishment! A year or two ago, I was forced on a vegan diet because I was having gut issues and I wanted to "re-set" my gut flora. It lasted about 3 months, and it was an incredibly dark time. I think I was addicted to sugar/carbs. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone, and I was an angry mess. I remember one early morning at Zazen (meditation), I was curled up inside of my

misery and suffering. I must have looked like a wild beast with my hair going every direction and my burning eyes because I looked up at everyone staring at me and laughing. I know they were only laughing at the situation, and that they all have undergone their own suffering so they understood my pain, but it was a mirror I didn't want to look at and I burst into tears for the entire hour sit. It takes a strong and dedicated person to go through their battles and not try to get around them, or give up for something easier.

It's been almost 5 years now since I started Aikido and with every break through there comes a new challenge. Some days I am steeped in gratitude, and others I long for a hot bath and a soft pillow. One of my biggest ongoing challenges is to overcome the feeling of wanting something more, something different, or to be somewhere else. I am repeatedly finding myself with one foot out the door in every aspect of my life, always ready to run away. And when I ask myself, "Where else would I rather be? What would I rather be doing?"; I never really have an answer. Maybe I want to be alone on an island reading books in a hammock all day, but I know that

eventually will become unfulfilling. What would be completely fulfilling is to be totally present with an open heart; as Sensei says, “Completely crack open.” So that is what I am working towards in my life and in my training.

Do I recommend taking on a martial art that calls to you? I think that anything that calls to you or scares you holds something real for you to discover, and if you are ready to let go of any ideas you’re attached to about who you are, or what you can or can’t accomplish, and you’re willing to go through your darkest fears and face your demons, then you have already taken your first steps on your real path to becoming. I look forward to hearing about your own journey!

Sincerely Always,
Laura
○

One

by Kacy Reeves

I know nothing about Zen. I’ve never received a koan to study, I haven’t memorized the Heart sutra, I can’t even sit with proper posture. Despite this, I’ve managed to accumulate a small amount of time upon my zafu. And I have made a concerted effort to give my experience with sitting the space to be exactly what it is and nothing more.

When I sit, I count my breaths. And that is all. I don’t strive to be the perfectest breath counter in the world, or to always make it to ten consecutive breaths without stray thoughts intruding.

The interesting paradox I’ve noticed in my practice is that even though making it to 10 indicates success in focusing only on my breath and nothing extraneous, to cling so tightly to making it to a tenth consecutive breath uninterrupted by my monkey mind is to miss the point entirely. The greatest achievement in my counting, by far, is not 10, but 1. Returning to *one*.

In the return to *one*, the present moment shifts into focus once more. No other thoughts can occur simultaneously with *one*.

In *one*, I find now.

Though many parallels exist between Aikido practice and Zen practice, this is one I can understand.

Suburi, during Iaido class: Sensei will say that each cut finishes before the next begins. The subtle moment in between the blade coming to rest at its target point and rising back into the air...to me, that near-imperceptible stillness is returning to *one*.

In my Aikido training, each time my attempt at a technique is complete, I return to *one*. All of the chaos, success, failure, joy, frustration, and fear in between the attack and the pin is wiped clean. The moment my partner and I are facing each other again, we return to *one*. As simplistic a concept as this might seem, it carries immense power. It is what keeps me training. It is what keeps me alive.

In the dark, suffocating labyrinth of anxiety and depression, *one* has changed the landscape from a

downward spiral to a navigable path—a path from one to, well, one. Anxiety, and more specifically panic, feels like a riptide. It is frighteningly easy to drown in the undertow. I know this because I have been pulled under and looked up to the surface, having reached the limit of my breath, and wondered if maybe I am just meant to sink. Sometimes, I still wonder that. But just in the way a victim of the current must keep an eye on the shore and swim along it in order to break free, so too have I returned to *one* in order to find the calmer waters of reality. Sometimes the swim is long and, while choking on the seawater, I forget to keep my eye on the shore. When I do forget, a lifeline extends through the storm: Patti Sensei and others; reminding me that there is a *one* when I’m too exhausted or numb to remember.

The greatest, most powerful gift my practice on the mat and the zafu has given me is presence. The present moment—so fiery and beautiful that, if it could somehow linger, to keep looking at it would burn my eyes. It’s the song of a sword rushing through the air, so lovely that I could listen to it forever, but the sound exists only through the fleeting movement of the cut. It is the film on a reel, it burns away if it remains in the same place on the projector. The quieter, yet equally potent gift my training has given me is the courage to face this moment, over and over again. Because of my practice, this dojo, these incredible people, I am here now, returning to *one*. ○

R.T. Loewen, *continued...*

beginners there may wonder who was this Aikido Master, what was it like to train under him, what wisdoms did he impart?

Good News We don't have to wonder; our teacher is alive, we are alive Let's take advantage and steal all we can, while we can. There are many here that train harder and more hours than I do, they are awake to the fact that now is the time to train. Every day I will do my best to see you all, because I love you and will not take you, my Aikido, or our beloved teacher for granted.

Sorry, but we have no time to waste, only precious time. This is it. Be here, be here now. ○

John McDevitt, *continued...*

wish he would learn that trick. But we all know that optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment. The NOW thing. Each person has to achieve it on the basis of his/her own individual efforts and creativity. But Sensei is willing to prepare the feast, serve it up to each of us, and then sit back (hopefully with a glass of nice wine) and watch us dig in.

Sunday Rolls around. We all drive home so we can get ready to practice the next day. The End. ○

(FLOW is the title of a book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—his name has Zen in it!)

Aikido Anarchy

by Sebastian Brown

Anarchy is a very charged word. For some it's a way of life, for others it strikes fear and rattles them to their bones. I once fancied myself as an anarchist—the opportunity to live life free of tyranny and rules seemed very compelling. I read books that fed my desire to break free and others detailing government corruption that sent me into a spiraling depression. Aikido has offered me introspection into this earlier period of my life and given me wisdom and real life examples to follow.

I used to dream of anarchy much as Hollywood does: rampant looting, gratuitous violence and total disregard for others' safety. A necessary component to living freely, I thought at the time. Perhaps a culling would help straighten things out (did I mention I was 17 when I had these thoughts?). As short sighted as this was, since I've been training I've reexamined this popular belief of how anarchy would actually translate into in my life, and how training Aikido is a balance between anarchy and form.

For sure, there would be chaos in anarchy. The sudden vacuum left by the collapse of governmental agencies we've come to rely on would surely wreak havoc, destabilize commerce and cause catastrophic trauma on the economy. There would no money, no electricity and little to no food. How could we survive such turmoil?

Perhaps one of the strongest components of a healthy dojo is the integrity of the community. The spirit of those who train Aikido is very compelling. We share an intimate space in the dojo that is designed to let go of the material existence, delve deeply into our souls and connect with others in a meaningful practice. A natural byproduct of this experience gives rise to caring for one another in a significant way. I love my partners regardless of financial/social status, physical appearance, sex, gender, age or any other trivial judgment humans resort to as means of defining a person. We face each other directly in person on the mat, not over social media on the internet. When we go to train, we arrive to engage form and bedlam.

The dojo is a place of chaos. During class, the described diversity of individuals from above are thrown into an extremely mentally and physically demanding, sometimes violent environment: bodies getting thrown everywhere, people suffering in pain, others in emotional anguish over the futility of repeating a technique they struggle with perpetually. Some can barely hang on, some can barely make it through, and some simply don't. Our support for each other ensures that, during these grave moments, we have others to rely on to help make it supportive. The care of one another is genuine and stems from the intimacy of the practice. Despite the wildness of training, the essence is always of sincerity. We work together as a group—we

Alli Warshaw, continued...

think you have the last of the vine, it branches off and slithers its way up to the nearby maple or oak tree, higher and higher. When the last of the grape vine is left enmeshed in the oak branches above you, your best option is to take a pause and look for a nearby deshi. With two deshi, practice funakogi undo to pull the remaining grape vine down from the tree above. Join centers. And when you are in the street or at work or at home and it becomes too much, look for a nearby deshi. We can only get to the other side together.

It is only through the practice, THE PRACTICE, of joining centers, staying connected, moving as one, shifting your balance, respecting all life, self-correcting, and building an awareness of space, on and off the mat that a thought becomes a way. As an uchi-deshi at Bucks County Aikido, I had the opportunity to train with many truly brilliant Aikidoka (thank you); and I find that more than just improving my nikyō or my ukemi, it is my practice with the mundane meshugenas of life that have taken on a deeper meaning. We may not always have the blessing of a gifted sensei to instruct us in our Aikido, but if we can take what we learn as uchi-deshi into all aspects of our lives, then grape vines, foxes, chickens, rain, fire flies, and the moon may become our sensei; so we will never leave the dojo and our path will remain clear. ○

bow in together to start and we bow out together to end.

The dojo is also a place of rules, form and structure. New students are flooded with seemingly arcane rituals, hierarchical demands, unusual etiquette and subject to execute specific forms. Somewhat unique to Aikido, this martial spirit is stricter than other martial arts where the approach to training is more lax. These are in place to promote the gravity of training. We incorporate them to ensure the purity of our practice remains true. At first, it may seem arbitrary whether or not to bow entering and leaving the dojo. However, the more one practices the clearer it becomes how a simple gesture, a “rule”, can provide important insight. Maintaining such rigid nuances can allow us to evolve into a deeper understanding into their significance and provide substantive meaning.

I believe if anarchy were to descend upon us, we would intuitively organize ourselves into resilient communities. We would create

support networks and help each other. Similar to training Aikido, there would be structure. It would be expected that everyone participate as needed and work collectively to ensure that the group is taken care of. Out of such arrangements, rules or form would most likely self-manifest. There would be people who assume leadership roles and those who covet being indispensable help and follow the direction of the group. Training Aikido helps drop the individual desire for self sufficiency in favor of group sufficiency. If something needs to get done, someone would realize it and do it. It's not idyllic—it's what we should all be striving for currently in our practice.

Aikido is a beautiful art that has enriched my life and altered my perspective. It has demonstrated to me the power of community with structure and helped me interact with transient, wild chaos. I may no longer wish for anarchy, but I am glad I get to experience it in form. ○



Patti after the last class at the Garrison. The End