

THE KIAI

Winter 2009

Newsletter of the AIKIDO INSTITUTE

Volume XV, Issue I

INTERVIEW WITH HOA SENSEI

Hoa Newens Sensei is the Dojo Cho of the Aikido Institute of Davis. In the 1980s, prior to moving to Davis, he shared the leadership of the Aikido Institute of Oakland with Kim Peuser Sensei. In the 1990s, Hoa Sensei became the Dojo Cho of the Aikido Institute of Oakland for several years, until he and his family moved to Davis, where he founded the Aikido Institute of Davis.

In December 2008, many Oakland aikidoka were in Davis for the grand opening of Hoa Sensei's dojo in a new location.

Hoa Sensei kindly agreed to an interview for the KIAI.

KIAI: Many of the students now at the Aikido Institute in Oakland began their study after you had moved to Davis. They would love to know more about your background. Could you tell us why, when, and where you began your study of Aikido?

HN: I began training in Aikido in January 1967 with Dang Thong Phong Sensei in Saigon, Vietnam. The year before that I studied jujutsu and judo with a bodyguard of my father who also did Aikido and who led me to Phong Sensei (now head of the International Tenshinkai Aikido Federation).

KIAI: What did you like about Aikido when you were young? Were you interested in other martial arts?

HN: I liked Aikido because we did a lot of acrobatic ukemi (high fall, long roll, high roll, etc.) and I had fun getting airborne. I trained in jujutsu, judo and Vietnamese kung-fu in addition to Aikido.

KIAI: How did you continue your study of Aikido after you left Vietnam?

HN: I went to Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and joined the Aikido club on campus which was run by Tony Smibert, a student of Seiichi Sugano Sensei (now 8th dan and

co-director of New York Aikikai), who was one of the last uchideshi of O Sensei.

KIAI: When did you move to the U.S.?

HN: I left Australia to join my family in the U.S. in December 1978.

KIAI: How did you first get involved with the Aikido Institute of Oakland?

HN: Before I left Australia, Sugano Sensei recommended two people for me to check out for further training: Robert Nadeau in San Francisco and Bruce Klickstein in Oakland. I visited both and settled with Oakland because I could understand it and my parents lived in the East Bay then.

KIAI: What was it like training here then? Who were some of the other students with whom you trained at that time? What do you remember of first training with them?

HN: At the first few classes in Oakland I was tested by some tough guys named Kim



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AIKIDO INSTITUTE OF DAVIS

Grand Opening - Our sister dojo, Aikido Institute Davis, had a grand opening on December 6th for the new location of its new dojo. Needless to say, the place is drop dead gorgeous. The turnout was tremendous...

Everyone who was anybody in Aikido was there. Great energy and great training.



The Grand opening consisted of a Tai Chi seminar led by Hoa Sensei, followed by an Aikido Seminar and Party afterwards. The Aikido seminar was divided into three parts. The first part was led by Bill Witt Shihan, the second part by Kim Sensei and the third part by Hoa Sensei. And of course, the party was fabulous with lots of food and drink.





To Hoa Sensei and the Aikido Institute of Davis:

CONGRATULATIONS!

From all of us at Oakland

[*Kim Peuser Sensei, now 6th Dan, Senior Advisor, Aikido Institute Oakland*] and Art [*Art Ward Sensei, now 3rd Dan, teaches Aikido in Portland, OR*] and the local uchideshi, Eytan [*Eytan Ben-Meir Sensei, now 5th Dan, Dojo Cho, Aikido Carmel, Beit Hananya, Israel*].

My neck and hips were very sore from those constant high falls that were bestowed on me. But I persevered and in the end they must have gotten tired of throwing me around and they welcomed me heartily. There were some gentler people who extended a gentler welcome to me, including Bernice [*Bernice Tom Sensei, now 6th Dan, Dojo Cho of Ocean Cliffs Aikido, San Diego*], Pat [*Pat Hendricks Sensei, now 6th Dan, Dojo Cho of Aikido of San Leandro*], Carol [*Jenkins*], Deborah [*Deborah Maizels Sensei, now 5th Dan, Aikido Institute Oakland*], Alberta [*Alberta Hankenson Sensei, now 4th Dan, Aikido Institute Oakland*], Kayla [*Kayla Feder Sensei, now 6th Dan, Dojo Cho of Aikido of Berkeley*], Lynn [*Innocenti*], etc. After a few months I wanted to live and train there as uchideshi, but Bruce, who was sandan and the dojo-cho at the time, declined and hinted that I was too high-ranked (I was a nidan) for that purpose. So I ended up renting an apartment near-by and came to the dojo almost daily.

KIAI: When did you begin teaching Aikido? Do you remember what your early classes were like? How has your teaching style changed since those early days?

HN: I began teaching regular Aikido classes at the club at Monash University in 1974 for two years. I taught the first time in Oakland in 1981 when Bruce went to Japan and the local instructors had to take turns covering classes.

The way I teach has evolved from replicating Saito Sensei's teaching to showing what I really understand from his teachings; but since moving to Davis my focus has been not



on what I know, but on what the students know, so that I can reach down to their level and guide them from where they are.

KIAI: What do you remember most about the years when you were the Dojo Cho of the Aikido Institute of Oakland?

HN: I remember fondly the kids in the children program. I yelled at them a lot but they still learned in spite of it. The Sunday morning meditation and weapon classes were also special times; especially the dojo cleaning and brunch that followed the class. We would spend the whole Sunday morning at the dojo.

It was also during this period that I had the opportunity to visit Saito Sensei at the Iwama Dojo. The first time I went, Kim came with me and showed me around. I thought maintaining the physical link with the dojo in Iwama was important, so I encouraged students to go to Iwama. The second time I went, I led a group of Oakland students (including Richard Levitt and students who are no longer at Oakland).

Besides those good times, Oakland was where I developed a structure for operating a dojo: from logo design to training motto, to formal curriculum including a formal uchideshi program and a dojo manual. We started the Kiai back then. This structure served me well when I moved to Davis and built a new dojo from the ground up.

But something I appreciate more after leaving the Oakland dojo was the availability of skilled instructors. Thinking back, having Kim there to share responsibilities with and having the constant support of a strong group of sempai was a special treat.

KIAI: While in Oakland, you married and had two sons (Richard and Ryan). Your sons studied aikido from an early age. Do they still study aikido?

HN: Richard, my older one, started aikido at age 4 at Pat's San Leandro Dojo, since we had discontinued the children program at Oakland for a year. It used to be that uchideshi were automatically instructors in the children program at Oakland, but some of the uchideshi really did not have the heart for it, so I stopped the children's program for a while and then revived it when I could get personally involved. That's when Richard and Ryan began training in the Oakland dojo. They both reached shodan some years ago. Richard is now a sophomore at UC Santa Cruz and he occasionally trains at the club on campus. Ryan is in the 11th grade at Davis High School and still training a few days a week. They are also both competing at roller hockey tournaments throughout the state.

KIAI: When you moved to Davis, you opened the Aikido Institute of Davis. Was it difficult to start a new dojo and develop a student base?

HN: I moved the family to Davis in May 2000. After a couple of years in Davis to establish ourselves, I started the Aikido Institute Davis.

During those first two years, I converted our living room into a small training area with a 4.5 *tatami* set-up. I trained with my sons and the neighbor's kid. There were serious Aikido students in the area who had heard of my relocation and they came and trained weekly (Eric Winters, now 5th dan, among them). Peter Slote and a few others would come from Oakland monthly to train. Then I opened the Davis dojo in December 2002 and Megan Sweet and Geoffrey Evans came to help build the dojo and they trained regularly. Geoffrey became uchideshi for a year. JR, who was an uchideshi in Oakland, came up regularly, too. Eric brought a large group of students from Avalon Dojo in Sacramento; some of them are still training and have become sempai in Davis. Oakland students came up to visit and train frequently, mostly on Saturdays. I had all these people who came out and helped start the dojo from scratch. Sadly, many of them have moved on to other jobs.

Another important factor in our growth was that when we moved here, Phoebe and I were holding demanding jobs; then, in her infinite wisdom and kindness, Phoebe decided to quit her job to be with the kids and help me run the business side of the dojo. Without her involvement, we would not have been able to keep the dojo going for the past seven years.

KIAI: How has the Davis dojo evolved over the years? What is your vision for it in the future?

HN: After the dojo's first year, we doubled the mat size by expanding into the space next door. Besides making weapon training safer (the mat size was almost double the size of the Oakland dojo's mat) and facilitating seminars, I used the facility to begin my Aikido video series. We produced seven of them in four years, thanks to my skilled ukes. Toward the end of the video project these ukes began to disperse. It seemed like they came together to help me start the Dojo and create this video legacy and left after they had done their job. Attendance declined as rent went up, so we had to relocate to a slightly smaller area nearby. Our next steps are to complete videos for Wu Tai Chi and build the Dojo up to a level that would facilitate incorporation as a non-profit. I need to build a bridge to transfer the responsibility and energy to future generations of instructors to carry on the dissemination of Aikido throughout the world.

KIAI: Do you have any advice for new students just beginning their study of Aikido?

HN: Come to the Dojo and train regularly and let Aikido unfold in you. You are in good hands in Oakland.

KIAI: Any advice for older students who question whether they can continue with their Aikido training as their bodies age?

HN: The body may age and eventually disintegrate but consciousness is immortal and never stops growing. Aikido training is launched by the body but is perpetuated by consciousness.

IN THE NEWS

The Aikido Institute's First Annual Dojo Film Festival, which took place on three consecutive Fridays in January, featured three films by director Robert Wise.



Wise was born in 1914 in Indiana, and died in 2005. His working period spanned from 1930 to 1990 in many different genres: Horror, Noir, Western, Science Fiction, Musical, and Drama. His work included such films as: *Citizen Kane*, *The Sound of Music*, *Star Trek The Motion Picture*, and *The Body Snatchers*.

The Festival schedule was as follows:

January 9th - "The Day the Earth Stood Still"

January 16th - "West Side Story"

January 23rd - "The Sand Pebbles"



They were very well attended, educational, and a lot of fun. Read Steve Sensei's article about the Film Festival in this issue of the Kiai.

IN THE NEWS

Congratulations go to the six students who passed their kyu tests in November.



Scott R. - 5th Kyu -- Damian - 3rd Kyu -- Liam - 3rd Kyu



Jon - 4th Kyu



Michael - 6th Kyu



Jaimie - 6th Kyu

I BEAT THE SYSTEM

Firstly, I have to admit that I think I beat the system.

Last year when it came time to choose between AP English and WISE, I chose WISE not because I fancied the idea of diving headfirst into an independent research project, but because I knew it meant I would get out of school two hours earlier than if I had chosen a more conventional English class. After spending the eleventh grade slaving over seven academic classes, SATs, AP tests, and, God-forbid, deciding which colleges I would be applying to, I did not want to have another overbooked high school year. WISE (Wise Individualized Senior Experience) is a program in which first semester is a regular English class and second semester is when students independently study a subject of our choosing. It sounded like a great opportunity and was highly recommended by older, wiser friends. But truthfully I did not have much ambition beyond the aforementioned ulterior motive. So I signed up.

As second semester approached and I finished college applications, effectively eliminating any excuse I had for dismissing second semester as an intangible dream-land, I realized there was more to this project than simply having loads of free time. This project is supposed to be one of self-discovery, of character building, of independence and of inspiration... and I had no idea what I could possibly devote my semester to that would not lead to boredom and self-loathing.

As a child, I dabbled in the world of music, and found that I had no intuitive rhythm. I had taken various forms of dance classes, only to discover my feet would never bend that way. I turned to carpentry, where my lack of coordination was an endangerment not only to myself, but to everyone within saw length of me. I won an art prize in the fourth grade for drawing a horse, but my artistic abilities peaked at age ten. I don't have the patience to tutor little kids. I already have an internship at a medical office, and besides, I knew it was time to try something new. This list of things I crossed off left surprisingly little for this project, so I did what any seventeen-year-old would have done and procrastinated. Deadlines? They weren't for me.

But suddenly it was November and time to hand in a official statement with not only a final project decision but with a thought-out reason behind it. I could probably talk around the topic. But why would I skate over something that would determine the nature of my last months in high school? There was one resource left for me to consult before I had to admit to my teacher that I had given this project the bare minimum thought. I was confident my mom would know what to do. But I walked out of her room rolling my eyes. She



now gave me the same advice she did four months ago. It was my back-up plan that had, until now, diverted administrative concern that my project had no direction. But really, a martial art? Had she lost her mind? Aikido involves not only rhythm; I would have to make my feet bend that way and the unknowing instructors would most likely put weapons in my hands! It embodied every single thing I was sure I could not do.

The days went by and I found that I was out of time and still stuck. I realized that maybe I should look into her idea. She knows me pretty well, and as my mother, she could never send me to my doom... right?

So I googled it, and was pleasantly surprised to find that Aikido did not fit into my stereotype of what a martial art was about. Its movements are complicated and beautiful and its philosophy is sophisticated as well. It doesn't matter that I am not strong, big, or fast. It's unimportant that I lack the hand-eye coordination to operate a power tool. So far I have found that no; I still hold no passion for building shelves or writing concertos. Aikido is different (although certainly not easier) and I hate to admit it, but mom was right again.



I had heard WISE was not the traditional English program, but I hadn't imagined my experience could turn into something that I find not only incredibly inspiring, but fun. So I feel a little guilty. I am going to be graduating in June having spent my last six months in high school with the schedule all freshmen covet, with time to take naps and all, and better, time to saturate in as much Aikido as I choose. More importantly, and I certainly never thought anything could be more important than minimizing hours spent on school campus, I'm in a class which allows me to spend my time doing something I want to do, with people who are not only welcoming, supportive, and encouraging, but who love Aikido and clearly love teaching others. So yes, I feel a little guilty, but no, I do not feel guilty enough to tell the school that I have cheated their system, because even after just a month I know I would never give this experience up.

Esther Slaman



LEARNING AND TEACHING

What you learn often has little to do with what we teach.

Here's a little insight: students teach the teacher way more than the teacher teaches the students. Maybe not always technical stuff, like whether *nikkyo* works this way or that way, or how to pull off a great *koshi nage*. But more essential things: like how do you communicate effectively; how do you explain complex and often abstract ideas; how do you listen carefully to what is often not being said; how do you act with empathy and supportiveness; and of course, how to be patient.

Understanding the ebb and flow of a 90-minute class, being savvy to people's tolerance of—and need for—being pushed, and knowing what needs to be said versus what must be done are all lessons students teach the teacher.

This may seem a little surprising—especially considering that I post my lesson plan. But a teacher only sets the agenda; everyone else on the mat decides what actually happens.

Maybe, at best, a teacher points the direction. But you decide whether we go there.

Many times I had a big concept of what we'd do in class ... some super-technical exercise in blending or a complex combination of techniques. But the class wasn't ready for it. So we slowed it down and worked on more basic concepts.

One time, I had planned a didactic plunge into the nuts-and-bolts of something, probably *kote gaeshi* (and you know how much I love the nuts-and-bolts of *kote gaeshi*). But everyone in class was so senior that we whipped through the nuts and bolts and headed straight for flying buttresses and cupolas. So we did *kote gaeshi*, but certainly not the way I planned.

Running a class is like controlling a chariot pulled by many powerful, crazed stallions (this is Leif's metaphor). They (you) often accept the general direction, but really want to go bolting off on their (your) own. They (you) have tremendous power, in fact, all the power. The teacher has to keep at the reins, but be aware of where you want to go and pretty much has to let you go there.

A class is usually pretty clear about its needs and limitations. Not so long ago, we were working on a comparison/contrast of *irimi nage* to *kote gaeshi*, all from a variety of attacks. But not everyone was getting it, so we diverted into a practice of the attack/blend combinations. Once we had established that baseline, the comparison/contrast become more meaningful and more interesting.

Another time we spent the entire class working toward a randori practice: blends in motion, techniques that work quickly, staying grounded while moving. But when it came time to start the actual randori, a whole bunch of other things came up—footwork, hand position, body integrity. Clearly we weren't ready to plow into randori. So we stayed focused on blending.

From the outside, it may have even looked like *randori*. To a junior student it might have felt like *randori*. But it wasn't. It was blending practice.

So now you know. Classes are your classes, not ours. You have the power.

IN THE NEWS



The Aikido Institute Annual Winter Party was held on December 10th. The theme was California Cuisine. There was plenty of food and drink.

It was a chance for the whole dojo to get together in the holiday spirit and just hang out.

Many new students came and it was great to get to know them. And we finally met some of the significant others, and that was a lot of fun.



The trick, of course, is knowing what to do with all that power.

Here are a few hints:

Start by trying what the teacher asks you to try. Most of the time, a teacher has something in mind, and it's worth spending some time figuring that out. Also, if everyone is doing the same thing, the teacher gets to see what's working and what isn't. In fact, more often than not there'll be some concept that simply escapes the entire class. And when everyone is training and making the same mistake, it's much easier to identify and address.

Don't give up. If something doesn't work, don't stop and start over. Dive into a technique headfirst and struggle with it, swim up stream. Eventually you'll get there. The classic example is *kokyudosa*, which we do at the end of most classes.

Beginners often get stuck and frustrated, and are tempted to quit and start again. There's no learning in that. You have to endure the struggle to get past it.

Keep your flashes of enlightenment to yourself. It's really, really tempting to share all our golden droplets of knowledge with more-junior students. And (as you probably know) I'm the worst at this. My process is often intellectual, so I like to talk things through. That's fine for me, but how does it benefit another student whose experience and focus is elsewhere. Train with diligence, and in relative silence. Everyone will get more out of it. NOTE: Please feel free to remind me of this.

Watch senior students carefully. If something doesn't make sense, watch sempai. Most of the time, you'll see the answer in their technique.

IN THE NEWS

Aikido Institute Dojo Seminar - Every few months, Kim Sensei has been giving special 2 hour Saturday morning seminars. These are great events and are not to be missed. Especially since there is usually a surprise after each one.



This one was no exception. It took place on Saturday March 7th. There were over 30 people on the mat, with very high energy. We started with bokken work and then split up into groups to do *Kaeshi Waza* techniques.

There were many new students at the dojo this particular morning. They thought this *Kaeshi Waza* was just phenomenal.

As we kept training, each technique started getting more and more complex. The fun was in trying to figure out what was going on.

Another fun thing was watching Kim Sensei and Deborah Sensei do *Kaeshi Waza* with one another. They switched and turned and turned and switched. It was impossible to figure out who had the upper hand. It was just great.



Then we switched to bokken. Everyone formed two huge groups on each side of the dojo. Then the Sensei took turns attacking each person down the length of the dojo. I am lucky to be alive and tell the tale. Overall, we have to admit, it was a phenomenal seminar.



All that may seem very much like I'm suggesting that you follow rather than lead. But in Aikido the two are delicately and subtly intertwined. By following the instructor, you are actually making it much easier for the instructor to perceive what the class really wants and needs. If you start by following (blending), you can end by leading.

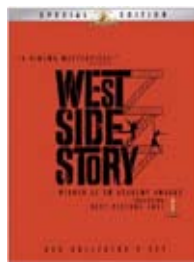
Richard Levitt

THREE MOVIES, ONE THEME

The first Aikido Institute New Year Film Festival featured three movies from director Robert Wise, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *West Side Story* (1961), and *The Sand Pebbles* (1966). These three movies, a science fiction classic, an adaptation of a Broadway musical, and a period drama, each present a different way of looking at the aikido theme of harmony.

The Day the Earth Stood Still presents the theme in very straightforward terms. An alien visitor, Klaatu, comes to Earth to deliver a message and a warning. The message: live in peace. The warning: if you can't, don't spread your violence past the boundary of your own planet or there will be dire consequences. The unspoken message is that the consequences of not being in harmony with our neighbors, either locally or galactically, is a pathway to destruction.

In common with its source material, *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* delivers the message of the need to live together through a negative example. The consequences of living



without harmony in both tales is tragic for both the main characters and their families/gangs. As with many polarizing conflicts such as the Montagues and Capulets or the Jets and the Sharks, the causes of the conflict are deep-seated, sensible and automatic to the insiders. To outsiders the conflicts seem almost petty.

In *The Sand Pebbles* the disharmony is on a personal and national level. The protagonist, Holman, is at odds with the US Navy, those around him and himself. He's in the Navy in order to have a close relationship with the machines he cares for and that keeps him from caring for the people around him or the places the Navy sends him. When he does find people he cares about and a place where he can settle down, the

external, national forces of discord outside of his control intervene to bring his life to a tragic conclusion.

O-Sensei made harmony the core of his Way. His writings are full of reminders to his students that love and harmony are paramount. He said, "The entire world is like a single family under one roof, and there is not one outsider." It can't be simpler. We are one family, regardless of the surface differences that occupy so much of the news. We are not nationalities or races or religions or gangs. We are not different families. We are one family.

Stephen Kilmer Sensei

HAIKU - by Ray Wan

Haiku #1

Tuesday evening class

Sensei demonstrates quite well
the pain of nikkyo

Haiku #2

Rain hits the dojo

my mind thinking as it drips
don't roll on wet spot

Haiku #3

Their assurances

Still do not change the fact that
High falls sound like death



IN THE NEWS

Happy Birthday Steve Sensei - So, after the Grand Opening Seminar at Aikido Institute Davis, on our way back to Oakland, the gang had arranged to surprise Steve Sensei with a stop at the Scandia Family Fun Center to celebrate his birthday. And he was indeed surprised.



After much debate, we decided to split up into 4 teams and play miniature golf. Childhood memories came flooding into my head as I remembered that I'm horrible at it. But with my chin up, I tried to keep up with my fellow colleagues. After we warmed up, the scores got better and I must confess that we had a wonderful time.

Then it was time for the real challenge, and this one can become very habit forming.



I was introduced to a fascinating game. It's called Lasertag. You have to put on a vest, and then a helmet, and then you get this huge gun, and it's in the dark, and you have to shoot people, but you can run out of energy, so you have to go back to base and re-charge, but you have to make sure you don't get shot, and on, and on... IT WAS GREAT.

There we all were divided into the red team and the blue team. That's when the real personalities came out. Richard started shooting anything and anyone in his path. Sweet little Zoe became a demon of mass destruction (keep weapons away from this girl!). Liam let out all his uchi deshi frustrations and just wanted to kill everyone on both teams (sort of Uchi Deshi Postal). Scott was in heaven. Jaime and Damian moved with the speed of lightning. Somehow, June was always just above me so I was constantly being zapped. Lars Eric, Dave, Jon and Steve truly enjoy killing people. Just frightening!

Yes, this game can indeed become very habit forming. And just for good measure we played not one, but two rounds. After the dust cleared, and there were no broken body parts, we decided it was time to go home.

KIDS' CLASS

A teacher is always proud when his or her students do well, even though it can be sad to see them move on. Congratulations to Ben Norton and William Hoyt who have made the jump from the kids' class to join the adults' program. Their first adult class was on Monday, March 16th.

The transition can be intimidating, especially since William and Ben were the tallest and oldest of the kids. They are



looking forward to being challenged and working with partners who are more their size – in other words, “they now get to pick on someone their own size”.

I would also like to thank all of the adults who have gone out of their way to make Ben and William feel welcome and who are helping them make the transition. And, of course, they are still

welcome to help out in the children's classes whenever they might be available.

Kyu tests...

...are occurring right now. Unlike the adult's class, where the kyu exams are held on specific nights, the kids' class tests happen whenever an individual student is ready, and his or her family members are available to videotape, photograph, and cheer them on.

Congratulations go to the kids who have passed the Kyu tests already held for this session (from left to right):

Vanyal Seigel - 7th kyu (blue belt), Arthur Winning - 9th kyu (yellow belt), Skyler Luci - 9th kyu (yellow belt)



Pictured below: Christopher Orman - 5th kyu (brown belt) [shown still wearing his green belt with Noah Abel, uke]

Emma Hardison - 9th kyu (yellow belt)



Sam Clewans (not shown) - 8th kyu (orange belt)

Sam was tested for his rank on his last day for this session. Aikido is one of many activities that our talented children participate in, and Sam has to fulfill other commitments. We look forward to seeing him again next session.

Want to help out? Any adult member of the Aikido Institute is welcome to help out in the children's class. There are only a few requirements:

- You need to be 6th kyu or above. In other words, you need to have tested for your first rank.

- You need to touch base with Martha or Lars Eric before your first time helping us out. This would be to just go over a few considerations about working with children.

And that's it!

Clap in is at 5:00, clap out is at 6:00 (doors open at 4:30, and we have circle and sweeping up to about 6:15). There are few things more rewarding than introducing Aikido concepts and movements to children.

Plus, they are so bouncy when they fall...

Lars Eric Holm and Martha Evans-Holm

COMMUNITY

For those of you who don't know, I grew up in a small town. As you can imagine, the community I grew up in was, well, "small town". People were mostly polite. They would carry on all sorts of conversations with you while in line at the grocery store or bank (yes, I remember a time before ATM's). Even though there were times when I felt my neighbors were being too nosy, at least I knew they cared and watched out for me and my loved ones.

When I left my home town I went to college in Austin. Great city, but that's another article. Since then I have been moving west and north to gradually bigger cities, ultimately



finding my way to the Bay Area. One of the biggest differences I noticed as I moved to more heavily populated areas is that no one looks you in the eye. OK, some do, but they are usually trying to sell you something you don't want to buy. It was once explained to me that since people have very little external privacy in a place like the Bay Area, most people try to respect each others'

internal privacy by avoiding eye contact. It made sense to me at the time and "when in Rome, do as the Romans do."

After a while I started to feel cut off from those around me. I started to miss those casual conversations and the freedom to look someone in the eye while in line at the store, shake their hand, and ask how things are going. Where I grew up, the town's people were my community. And although I have made some great friends here, I don't get to see them daily or even weekly so I miss feeling like I am part of a community from day to day.

When I started training at the Aikido Institute it was to fulfill a lifelong wish to study a martial art. I studied some Tae Kwon Do and a little Judo in college, but I never felt that I was competitive enough to excel in those types of arts. The basic philosophy of peaceful resolution to conflict that Aikido is built on sounded like just what I was looking for.

What I did not expect was to become a part of such a supportive, diverse community. I remember when I first joined I kept expecting people to judge my lack of experience and ability. I could not have been more wrong. My new friends at the dojo have been patient teachers in many ways. In addition to instruction in the physical techniques of Aikido, my Sensei and Sempai have also taught me about encouraging positive language, fear management, and communal support. My best example of this would be my

Kyu tests. Even though looking at the other students can make me nervous, I always remember they are pulling for me and want me to succeed. Conversing with the testing panel afterwards is always positive, constructive, and polite.

Now that I have been practicing for over a year, the community has started to grow. Last year at the Lake Tahoe Gasshuku I met aikidoka from around the globe. Everyone I trained with was kind and supportive. Late last year several of us drove to Davis early one Saturday to attend the grand reopening of the Aikido Institute Davis in its new dojo. Again

IN THE NEWS

Super Congratulations go to Scott McCormick who took his Shodan test right after the Sensei Seminar on Saturday March 7th.

We were all so excited to see this young man's test. The tension had been mounting for quite a few weeks



now, and he did not let us down. It was clean, crisp and centered. "It's about freak'n time" commented one of



his colleagues, "you're going to look so fabulous in black".

Scott was presented with a broken-in hakama and a brand new Black Belt by dojo cho Steve Sensei. Then he was rushed to the back mat where Steve Sensei and Kim Sensei showed him how to tie a hakama.

Eventually he got it right, came out to the front mat and did his first roll to the enthusiastic applause of all present. Way to go Scott!

Then it was party time. "So", he was asked, "now that you've gotten your black belt and have become a shodan, what are you going to do now?" He responded, "I'm going to the Grand Lake Theater to see Watchmen! Wanna come?"

Just goes to show, you can take the hakama out of the kid, but you can't take the kid out of the hakama.

I found myself on the mat with people who made me feel welcome and valued. Most recently Gina, Pete, and Tom Sensei from Reno attended Kim Sensei's workshop and Scott's dan test at our dojo. My community is getting bigger.

Most every human on the planet is quite naturally part of a community. I believe having close connections with others is important for physical, mental, and spiritual well being. I feel very lucky to have found my Aikido dojo. I extend thanks to all of my fellow aikidoka for bringing a little of that "small town" feeling back into my life.

Jon Hesser



RANDOM OBSERVATIONS

I can't really write much about aikido, but I'll share some observations. Cold muscles are easy to injure, tight muscles are easy to injure, speaking is great for conveying abstract ideas, showing is great for conveying physical ideas, ideas and philosophy are great for thinking, meditation is great for watching thought, doing is great for doing, thinking takes energy away from doing, doing takes energy away from thinking, to expect progress in doing by thinking is like eating more in order to lose weight, teachers can only show what they themselves have learned, learners can only learn what they themselves are willing to remove, learners make teachers out of all, teachers make learners out of all, good teachers are learners, bad teachers are teachers, dangerous teachers never learn, a bad thing done a thousand times is still bad, a bad thing done once a thousand times is a different thing, self correction requires acknowledgment of wrong direction, discernment is a gift, in the winter it's better to live in a warm house than a big house, in the summer it's best to remember the winter when looking for a place to live, appearances deceive those who are confused, confusion can be contagious,

to change to doing takes energy from thinking, thinking is then and when, doing is now, techniques can be taught, that other thing must be discovered, discovery requires space to be wrong, space is a measure of time and attention, to give time and attention without interruption is patience and love, when wrong is part of the discovery process it is right for development, at the right moment a smack in the face is better than a pat on the back, good technique requires subtle oversight, copying is great for copy machines, repeating sounds is a great distraction, a calm ocean with hungry sharks is more dangerous than a turbulent one, pain is necessary for healing, avoiding pain will also avoid healing, if being wrong hurts something is wrong, in a crazy world sanity is deceptive, continuity is inevitable, to want what already is is odd, "I" is little less than a function of language, a man chasing skirts as a means of fulfillment is as fruitless as a woman kissing frogs expecting a prince, knowledge is often stale, the experience of time is a measure of separation, a mind is an interesting thing to watch, conditioned love is similar to commerce, in commerce clear agreements should be made to avoid dispute, the belief in nothing is different than the absence of belief, good and bad require a reference point, words are sounds, different sounds are different things, the universe can be found in a cup of tea, nothing is original, inconceivable is natural, money is great for buying food, to perceive motion requires separation, the known universe was born in motion, the unknown universe exists in stillness, an empty hand is an amazing tool, being numb to the pebble in your shoe is not the same as taking it out, life appears to be a process, nothing will last forever, friends are to be found.

Fred Martini

AIKIDO GUITAR

It took me 12 years to learn how to practice the guitar.

For the better part of that time, I played in bursts (four hours a day for a week straight and then two weeks off, for example). In my marathon sessions, I careened from one idea to the next without focus, my shoulders tense, my wrists strained. It's not surprising that I taught myself how to be sloppy.

I'd watch musicians I admire and marvel at how relaxed and fluid their playing was, how their command of the raw, visceral elements of music seemed to flow effortlessly through their bodies and turn into something powerful enough to make me shake. How did they do it?

After years of struggle, I finally submitted to a simple idea: it's totally unrealistic to expect to be able to play any song or use any technique immediately. It seems obvious, but it was a hard realization to come by.

IN THE NEWS

KANGEIKO - Is a special training with weapons that takes place in the coldest month, the darkest month, the earliest time, in the dark, with no light, on a crowded mat. A recipe for disaster? Well, that's part of the fun. But being in class even earlier to warm up was very hard. And the weather did not disappoint. It was freezing, it was dark, it was early, and it was wet.



It is three classes per week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The class was led by Kim Sensei himself at 6:00 AM, for 4 weeks. 12 classes in total. 20 people on the mat in the dark.

You had to know all 20 *Jo Suburi* just to qualify (and if the group photo looks a little fuzzy, well, you would be too if you had to be up this early).

We went through all 10 *Kumi Jo* with several variations. We also did various *Jo Dori* techniques. Somehow, after each class, it came down to *Yudansha* vs. everybody else. Actually, it was sandan and up vs. everybody else. It was nerve racking but a lot of fun. For the last class we did a very quick review and then were tested on the *Kumi Jo* and how fast we could react when a Sensei told you what number and if you were defending or attacking.



Somehow we all passed, and after checking the mat for blood and missing body parts, Kim Sensei gave out the garment of graduation.

It's been a tradition that if you survive *Kangeiko*, you get a garment. This year it was a zippered hoody. The design on the back was a drawing of the first move of the 2nd *Kumi Jo*. Was that really a drawing of Kim Sensei and Dave? Well, the jury is still out on that.

And after all was said and done, it was time for coffee. And that was not only fun, it was well deserved.





Now, my practice routine is slow and deliberate. My ultimate goal is to make the patterns, rhythms, and shapes of music a part of my subconscious, so that when I sit down to play, I'm free to draw on all of that knowledge in the moment without

having to remember that I know it. It's a work in progress that takes discipline, patience, and awareness.

As a new student at the Aikido Institute, my initial experiences have powerfully reinforced the realizations I have come to as a musician. One can't possibly hope to do something fast without first being able to do it slow. Slow, thoughtful practice is how we gain fluidity and—most importantly—how we learn to stop thinking. The place where the brain gets out of the way and the body, or the spirit, or the soul—however you name it—takes over is the ultimate goal.

Today, I won't claim that I'm a good guitar player, but I can say that I'm better than I was yesterday.

Sam Edmondson

HURTS SO GOOD

Or, a Beginner's Perspective on the Importance of the Grin

"I can tell you're going to be good at aikido," a nage said to me after what was for me a particularly giggle-inducing *nikkyo ura wasa*.

"Why is that?" I asked, skeptical.

"Because you smile when you fall down."

Regardless of whether or not I actually end up being good at aikido, I have found that the Japanese must have left out the character for "smile" when they were naming this martial art.

I started training with the Intro to Aikido for Adults in September, trained until December, and then took time off only to come back in February like a sadomasochistic addict who gets high on sports medicine.

At the risk of sounding like a major cheeseball, I must admit that smiling is of crucial importance to aikido. After all,



many aikido aspects are just plain funny, such as hearing different people's kiais, trying to stumble through an unfamiliar technique, and certain sound effects one can add to the techniques. And fifteen or so consenting adults in a friendly environment oozing with mutual trust are the people giving you the bruises, the sore muscles, the ribs that feel like they're going to implode.

And those, my friends, never go away entirely. But it is possible to lessen that pain temporarily - by adopting a big, toothy grin right when you know something inside your body is about to pop, strain, or break.

Try it! Smile at your training partner, and see if he or she doesn't go a little easier on you or at least not get as annoyed by your screw-ups. Smile at your sensei, and notice if he or she isn't convinced of your willingness to persevere and learn (hey, you're trying). Smile when you feel your spine crunch during a fall taken in poor judgment, and you might avoid biting off your tongue. Smile when your face hits the mat by accident; heck, laugh even, and you'll keep those tears at bay. Smile before, after, and during class, and you'll see that everyone on the mat feels just a little better, including you.

Smile when it hurts, and after a while, it might start to hurt so good - if you know what I mean.

Sarah Smart

SOME THOUGHTS LOOKING BACK FROM THE STARTING LINE

Every time I have a belt test, my big concern is remembering all the details of technique I'll need to pull out on the spot. Pressure is part of the point - my first sensei spoke of tests "searing in the knowledge" like cooking a steak - and I'm probably not the only one to mess up a detail under pressure that I'd been getting right in class for ages. Memorizing those details is why we cram for the tests - ideally, getting technique down "into our bodies" so it comes without thinking.

But even with cramming in extra *keiko*, there's only so far I can go with memorizing. So, while I'm waiting for perfect blends and throws to come naturally to me, I focus on the fundamentals, technique below technique. This is something

IN THE NEWS



Happy Birthday, Sensei! - Deborah Sensei taught her Thursday Basics Class as usual but surprisingly the class had more than 18 people on the mat, including a record number of black belts at a Basics class. What was up?

Class was wonderful, full of energy, fun, and... SURPRISE! When we formed the big circle at the end of class, Sensei was presented with a birthday card signed by everyone in the dojo. Then uchi deshi Liam came out with a huge colorful birthday cake to the delight of everyone present.

It's one of those birthdays that end in a zero. And nobody asked what number it was, because we could see the "Psycho" number she was going to do on that cake and we didn't want to be next. Who cares, Kid. It's not how you feel, it's how you look. And you look Maaahvelousss!



I can hold onto; something I can use; something that always belongs there. Whatever *urawaza* you're confusing with the *omote*, you can always find things to get right regardless of which one it is. Whatever specifics you're called on to demonstrate, I bet you're supposed to keep breathing when you do it. I bet your hips should be connected into it. Whatever the correct footwork is, I bet it's a good idea to keep your balance and your *ma-ai*.

There's an infinite gulf between working on something and getting it perfectly correct. But paying attention to it has always given me some grounding when I have to get up and demonstrate. And it also helps me appreciate that I have something to work on with any technique, no matter how many times I've done it before. If we're doing *taino henko* for the gazillionth time – pretty soon I'll think of some new technical angle, and harass the instructors with question after question, but during the lulls when I'm fooled into thinking I've got it, I can work on *zanshin*, or timing, or reading my partner.

When I first started at this dojo, I was in about the same place studying Shotokan Karate that I am in Aikido now. Eddie has invited me to comment on the comparison – something I find endlessly interesting, so I will indulge a little.

I can see three areas for comparison. The first is cultural. Karate was formalized in its modern incarnation at about the same time O Sensei was creating Aikido. It had developed in Okinawa – a Japanese territory – probably tracing back ultimately to Chinese kung fu – details lost to history. When Emperor Hirohito invited Funakoshi Gichin, a master of Okinawan *Te*, to come teach in Japan, this prompted a codification and formalization of an art previously taught in

secret folk tradition. Funakoshi adopted the same external trappings, from judo, that O Sensei used. Thus, Karate is seen today as a Japanese art.

I have actually found this helpful in a way that's difficult to describe – a certain familiar quality to the thinking style in both arts. It's certainly helpful in more obvious ways: the language, for one, doesn't hurt. For my first *kangeiko*, on the 31 *Jo Kata*, I was the only one who couldn't count to 31 in Japanese – but since I'd been counting to ten for years, I figured it out pretty quickly. On the other hand, the term *onegaishimasu* is applied rarely in Karate, and in a very different context – it comes up in full-on sparring, when people are NOT taking care of their partners.

The cultural trappings as well: the etiquette; the uniforms; sitting *seiza*; or the *sempai-kohai* relationship – these are



Liam tries out a new recruiting technique.



familiar territory. What does bowing mean? Why do we *kiai*? How do you know who to train with?

Of course, many of these accoutrements (even the language, a little bit) have been adopted by other arts, and now seem like standard martial arts tropes. But there are subtler aspects of the same dimension that show up, and familiarity can help smooth out the learning curve.

The second area is technical. This has been a mixed bag. As a brand new student, understanding stances helped me find the right ones – approximately. Now, standards are higher, and my stances show too much Karate that I can't let go of. I am acutely aware of moments when a technique makes me vulnerable, and (usually) how to address it – but during *rondori* I have to use part of my brain remembering not to hit people.

You may be familiar with the distinction in martial arts that some are linear and hard, while some are circular and soft. Guess which words describe Aikido? Shotokan Karate begins as a very linear, very hard practice, but what I discovered was that it grows inevitably softer as the student becomes more advanced. Beginners practice blocks, slamming their forearms into each other to knock punches aside, bruising at first and then toughening up. It was my sensei's sensei who showed me that it could be done softly. I now see that he was blending inside a seemingly confrontational technique.

Knowing how to attack with intention helps your partner's training. At a more subtle level, it also helps your own. The standard Karate straight punch is *kokyu* with a fist: now many *kokyu nage* look to me like a punch with the hand open. In fact, there's probably a Karate strike to parallel every *kokyu* we exercise, and this can help me find the shape of movements more easily.

There is also a level of training that's entirely mental: seeing openings and nuances that aren't happening. Every *atemi* you throw is a chance to feel how it would land; every *atemi* you block is a chance to feel timing, *ma-ai*, and your connection to your partner. There are openings throughout Aikido to resort to strikes, kicks, knees and elbows – we don't resort to these things, but if you look for them, the opportunities are everywhere. When I consider the idea of actually fighting someone with Aikido, I am certain it would end up in such a place.

Although it's just as true in Karate, that to actually get in the fight means you've failed at your first goal.

Finally, the third category, and a belated connection to the beginning of things. Karate has helped me tremendously in finding that foundation beneath technique. Use your hips. Breathe – *kiai*, even. Connect to your partner – find *zanshin* without becoming blind to the world around you. Watch your distance. Stay balanced. Find your center.

I hear sometimes that Aikido only has one technique. Sometimes that it has none. I'm still going to work on learning those details; memorizing where to put my hands and feet and hips and head – and eventually moving past memorization so it just happens. But underneath it all I can feel a bedrock supporting everything. And I'll keep working on that bedrock, too, making it stronger so I can keep building on it. And if I ever end up training somewhere else, doing something else, it will have that same foundation, and I'll keep working on it.

Shodan means “first degree” – beginner. There is so much more to learn. In the old system, long abandoned outside of poetry, this month is *ya yoi* – the month of growth. Very fitting.

Scott McCormick

